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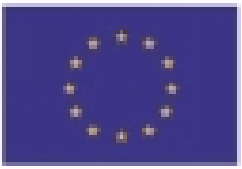

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Roast Chicken and other Gypsy Stories

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Introduction

Sas taj Sas: there once was, there was…

With these words Serbian Gurbeti Gypsies begin a story in their Romani language. This manuscript discusses the performance of narratives as adaptive cultural behaviors among Gypsies in Mačva county, western Serbia. Storytelling is a universal activity and may well be oldest of the arts (Brown 1991). It has always provided a vehicle for the expression of ideas, particularly in societies relying on oral tradition. Key Birket-Smith has even argued that anthropology originated with a group of tribes-people listening to one of its members tell stories about the strange customs of a neighboring tribe (Cruikshank 1992).

The title of this book is the name of one of the humorous Gypsy stories, favorite among many Gypsy informants. I have chosen it because this particular story, in its context, is a direct expression of the basic expectations between Gypsy men and women regarding sex and methods of food provisioning. The plot is simple: a young man has to provide food - a roast chicken - to win over a young woman's love and sexual services. Along the way, in order to be successful, he steals and they both cheat and lie to others - their families and outsiders. The plot describes not only negotiations between the sexes concerning the interwoven world of foodstuff provision, sex and marriage (Symons 1979), but also characterizes the Gypsy way of life: humor and validation of their own sometimes not very noble actions, with which they face life and its obstacles. "Women like meat" (Biesele 1993:1) or as the Gypsies say: "Not even a grandmother would give [it] for free!", describing not only what women and men want and what they do it to get it, but also the notion of "the give and take" by which their community is sustained (Biesele 1993:2) in relation to others.

Many Serbian Gypsies refer to themselves as "smoked Serbs", or just Serbs. Some tribes reject altogether their connections with the Roma/Gypsy people, identifying instead with the tribe/kin group to which they belong. Frequently, they use the European term *cigani* or *zigeuner* as an added element to the name of their kin group. Therefore, the English term "Gypsy" is used throughout this manuscript, except when the Roma refer to themselves as such.

Gypsy and non-Gypsy populations have lived side by side in Europe for centuries and the experience, all round, has been less than satisfying. Gypsies are found all over Europe, with substantial populations in central and eastern Europe. In spite of their longstanding presence in Europe, their integration into European society has been poor (Arayici 1998). They are one of the few ethnic groups which have never laid claim to territory. And, yet, Gypsy history is a story of exclusion and discrimination. Legend, still alive in the rural Balkan countries, has it that

Gypsies manufactured the nails that were used to crucify Christ, and/or that they stole the fourth nail, thus making the crucifixion more painful (Djordjević 1932). Gypsy-hunting and other such persecutions have occurred almost from the beginning of the Gypsy presence in Europe, with a peak in the World War II (Crowe 1996). During the World War II approximately 300,000—600,000 Gypsies were murdered in the Holocaust. Gypsy discrimination continues to this day. Persecution and discrimination is now carried out by governments, communities, and individuals - especially in Eastern Europe and increasingly so since the fall of communism (Erlanger 2000).

Literature on the Roma/Gypsies is vast and diverse, characterized by the absence of an empirical basis to most of the theorizing. Such a body of literature, especially one that emphasizes the exotic and isolated character of Gypsy culture, contributes still more to the present-day misconception of Gypsies and their behavior.

This book is based on the data collected during original fieldwork, carried out over several years (2002-2008), among rural Gypsies in Serbia. Mačva, a rural, agriculturally rich county in western Serbia, is a place where local Gypsy traditions are still alive and which help distinguish between Gypsy subgroups and the

larger Serbian society. I first came to the Gypsy villages of Mačva in the spring of 2002. Data were collected on culturally prescribed behaviors as well as marital and reproductive histories from around 400 villagers in several selected villages of the Mačva area. Some of the examined traits include age distribution, education, socio-economic position, fertility, mortality, parental care, attitudes toward non-Gypsies and other Gypsy groups and several selected oral histories. During my fieldwork, genealogies, accurate as possible, were constructed as an important source of information. Many of the Mačva Gypsies, especially so the older ones, do not posses official birth certificates or other personal documents issued by the Serbian authorities. In this way, many of them are "hidden" from the officials and some of the important trends in their demography remain thus unrevealed. I interviewed informants from almost each household, especially elderly people, to obtain names, genealogical relationships, ages, current residences, and marital unions. Many did not know the exact dates - of their birth, or that of their children, or some other important events - but were mostly able to relate these to some external events or general time periods - a time after World War II, or during Tito's Yugoslavia, after the 1990's war, the Milošević's regime and so on. In spite of this general vagueness, most informants were sure about their exact kinship relationship to others in their village as well as the nature/history of the relationship. These smaller groups - kinship groups among these Gypsies - form the basis of social relationships and lasting social groups. The larger categories - such as ethnicity, country and even religion - are far less important in their daily lives.

Historical sources reveal that these Gypsies arrived in the Mačva villages in large kinship groups (Djordjević 1924). My genealogical study of Gypsies living in several Mačva villages has shown that closely bound and relatively separated kinship groups established residence in the villages over the last 150 years or so. The rural Gypsy populations usually have a "leader of the village" or representative, typically an established older male belonging to the largest descent group who can usually list more than half of the population as his relatives. These influential leaders were some of the first people to greet me, show me around and point out who "the best" storytellers in their villages were. And this is how I collected around 80 tales/traditional stories. The stories are part of a collection made from several different Gypsy groups exhibiting varying degrees of influence from Serbian culture. The stories were told in Serbian, recorded on the tape recorder and later translated into English. I have tried to stay as close to the original versions as possible, editing only for clarity and comprehensibility.

The theoretical approach used in this manuscript to address traditional stories represents part of a growing interest in the significance of story-telling in the evolution of Man. There exists a developed body of work that has examined literature as product of a psyche designed by natural selection: this approach uses knowledge and concepts of the evolutionary perspective to understand and explain characteristics of oral, literary creation and other forms of art (Carroll 1995, Storey

1996, Miller 2000, Pinker 1997). According to this approach, literature and its preceding oral representations should be seen as an extension of an individual's adaptive orientation to its environment, both social and natural. This approach is founded on four major principles derived from the evolutionary perspective: the relationship between an individual and his or her environment is a matrix concept which exists prior to all social, psychological and other concepts; the human mind has evolved through an adaptive process of natural selection; all proximate causes are regulated by the principles of inclusive fitness as ultimate cause; and all representation, including literary, is a form of cognitive mapping (Carroll 1995: 33, Carroll 2002:120-122). The matters of mate choice, mating strategies, female adultery, step-parenthood, cross-cultural patterns, motivation structure and narrative function have previously been examined by evolutionary psychologists, anthropologists and evolutionary-minded literary scholars (Daly and Wilson 1998, Scalise Sugiyama 2001, Scalise Sugiyama 1996, Gottschall et al. 2003, Gottschall et al. 2005, Boyd 1998, Boyd 2000, Storey 1996, Coe, Palmer, Aiken and Cassidy 2006, Steadman and Palmer 1997, Carroll 1999…).

While some of these evolutionary analyses focus on how stories reflect the evolved aspects of human nature, my approach is based on the assumption that narratives, like other forms of communication, can have an effect on behavior. Storytelling is species specific, occurs cross-culturally, and its content shows thematic uniformity across broadly different cultures. A general evolutionary prediction is that the oral tradition covers domains of information that were valuable to survival and reproduction (Scalise Sugiyama 2001, Coe, Palmer, Aiken and Cassidy 2006, Steadman and Palmer 1997). Narratives, thus, could serve as a means of passing on adaptively important knowledge and as models of behavior (Pinker 1997, Steadman and Palmer 1997, Scalise Sugiyama 2001).

Like many people around the world, Gypsies have used oral traditions as a source of knowledge and information on the history of their ancestors, proper kin behavior, economic life, relationships with other peoples, and many aspects of the everyday world. Also, like many people, Gypsies have told stories generation after generation and with relatively little alteration. The alterations that Gypsies have made in their traditional stories reflect their ability to adapt to local conditions and accommodate their own culture. In this way, their stories are analogous to Gypsy music in general, assimilated as it is from their surroundings and the native people present, and internalized within their own understanding (Bellman 1993). Like their extreme musical expressions, many of the Gypsy stories express "deep melancholy, heart-piercing grief, and wild despair" (Bellman 1998: 75). For the Serbian Gypsies, the stories provide identification with and understanding of characters' situation, feelings, and motives. In the absence of written documents, narratives and dramatic interactions involve the audience at an emotional level, promoting empathy and mnemotic device, for recalling content (Biesele 1993). At the same time, Gypsy stories combine instruction with pleasure, especially evident

in their humorous stories, at a very gratifying and thus memorable level. The stories explore a range of successful social conduct, in specific situations - areas such as marriage, kin behavior and sharing and attitudes toward non-Gypsies - and the consequences of good or bad choices are described in many contexts. In fact, Gypsy stories illustrate how oral narratives can deal with universal adaptive problems, while simultaneously offering guides to overcoming these problems in new and unique social environments. And while the details of their stories may change, certain regular trends and challenges remain constant. That is to say, Gypsy stories are traditional stories in which particular elements, especially the main topic, stay unaltered and which are transmitted, in the form of cultural inheritance, from one generation of kin to the next (Coe, Palmer, Aiken and Cassidy 2006).

Also, like many other groups (MacDonald 1992), Gypsies have developed traditions that, at least for a time, served to keep them separate from surrounding peoples. In an attempt to interpret the social significance of Gypsy stories I have tried to relate the stories to Gypsy culture. To paraphrase Dundes, the ultimate goal should be to understand the human nature and not the nature of the oral literature as an end in itself (Dundes 1969: 421).

From the beginning, my fieldwork among the Mačva Gypsies relied heavily on close-up, personal experience and participation where possible, not just on observation. At the entry stage, I tried hard to build trust, aware all the time that I, as researcher-observer, too was being observed and evaluated. The Gypsy women I met turned out to be generous hosts and allies: they were constantly trying to feed me and my young daughter who often accompanied me to the Gypsy villages. The Gypsies were never paid for their services; instead, small gifts for children were presented - usually candies and sweets - and once this food sharing ritual had been established, I was permitted to share their life stories, everyday troubles and traditional narratives.

The ethnographic research I performed employed several kinds of data collection: interviews, filming, observation, and documenting.

As far as the collection of traditional stories, older members of the Gypsy community, especially women, turned out to be veritable treasurers of traditional Gypsy stories. Some narrators were better than others, but when we started to elucidate the stories and their meanings, most would often switch to events in their own life, trying to find within their own lives and behavior a connection with and application of the traditional narratives. In addition, most of the narrators disliked being interrupted, and the audience, including myself, duly respected that wish. Storytelling among Gypsies is a very social activity: the location at which the storytelling took place (the narrator's house or backyard) was always filled with people: family, kin, neighbors and children of all ages attended the event. Sometimes, the narrators would dismiss my questions as being unimportant to their own lives, or to Gypsy culture, and continued to tell the story at their own pace.

Finally, I made my research goals clear to the members of the Gypsy community and obtained their informed consent to the research beforehand. At the end of my fieldwork period, I offered my informants the chance to read the results of the research; but since most of them are illiterate or semi-literate, I ended up reading for hours to them about themselves and the things they have said. So, we laughed together, inspired by some event from their lives or the stories, or their usage of the characteristically black humor, and I realized it was actually the humor and a sense of the shared experience of living in Serbia that created the bond between us. In the end, we all came out with stories to remember and tell.

Throughout this manuscript, contemporary Gypsies are viewed through an anthropological lens with special emphasis on their storytelling as adaptive strategy. The storytelling tradition is presented using selected texts and explaining them in regard to their ethnography. All of the stories share common concepts and are presented in the order of preceding explanations assisting those of succeeding stories.