

General report of the ethno-folkloric research within the project RROMANE PARAMIĆA (POVEȘTI ROME) -

Inventory and conservation of the Roma patrimony in Hunedoara

The research was done from May to October 2015, in the town of Hunedoara, in the Roma community. It was based on interviews on the field. Within the project the research focused mainly on identifying elements of immaterial patrimony which were preserved by the community. The ethnographic research was preceded by a sociologic one, with an introductory character, which would facilitate the field operators focus on the ethno-folkloric interviews.

The researchers received an interview guide with examples of questions concerning the entire cultural landscape of the community. Along the entire research, based on repetitive sequences, we wanted to identify the best informers, who would provide quality pieces of information, significant for the oral culture of the community.

One of the first conclusions of this research was that, in the aforementioned area, the Roma community comprises persons who have undergone a full process of integration and urbanization, especially due to the industrialization of the area. The affiliation to the Roma community is declarative, without a correlation to specific customs or significant differentiations which are associated with traditional peoples. An essential element is – even though a preference to the language used during the interviews was never manifested – both the operators and the informers interacted using mainly Romanian, while the Roma language was used when the operator specifically requested its use: “now could you say something, a wish, for me, for everybody ...in the Gipsy language?”

The ethnical identification of the informers, both towards the appurtenance of a kin and the use of a generic ethnonim showed the use of the terms “Gipsy”, “Gipsy like” more frequently than the terms “Roma”, “Romani”. The word “Gipsy” is not perceived as a deprecating or discriminative term, being used naturally and usual. The incidence of the word “Roma” and its derivate is bigger with informants with a higher education, thus proving a conscientious attempt to modify the perception of one’s identity or group identity.

We could not identify mutations within the spiritual culture of the Roma in Hunedoara since any previous researches in the community are missing. Still, considering other researches already conducted within other communities, we may state that the collective memory of the community in Hunedoara has lost most of the traditional specific elements. The regulatory components, based on customs and unwritten rules were otherwise described with past tenses, having an extremely low real values: “so was the custom”, “so it was done”, “they used to do”, “a long time ago”. The most important component of a cultural identity is the language, learnt within the family, mostly from ones parents. From the information obtained with the sociologic research we ascertained that the use of the official language prevailed, some of the informants telling us that they forgot their traditions even though they still speak the “Romani” language. As for their traditions, the older informants (over 60 years old) relate the loss of their traditions to the improvement of the living or as a form of integration within the majority: “The oldest, yes [they still observe the customs] but the others don’t because they live well, from divinations, gold, silver, they have big houses and expensive cars. They follow the Romanians and they do not observe the traditions. They don’t do that because they are rich, they have everything they need”.

The investigation of the material culture was constrained due to the financial limitation of the project, acquisitions of objects not being planned. Still, during the field research the investigators were not able to identify elements of a live material culture that would prove a certain form of continuity. We could not identify elements of costumes that

would be preserved and passed from generation to generations or crafts that were normally associated with this ethnic group that are still actively practiced. We were not able also to evidence clear clues of preserving in the individual or collective memory of some elements of immaterial patrimony that would link the people of the present with the ones from the past.

We managed to identify during our research several kins, enumerated in order of representativity: Carpatin (Carpathian), Rumungru/Lovar, Fierar (Blacksmith), Corturari (tent makers or tent dwellers), Castar, Căldărar (bucket or metal objects makers), Covătar (wood objects makers), Silk Gypsies. In a much smaller numbers we were also able to identify: silversmiths, goldsmiths, brick craftsmen, gabors (Hungarian gypsies), spoon craftsmen etc. Considering all of these, we must stress the need of a future dialectological research in order to establish whether the appurtenance to the Carpathian kin is still found within the Romani language or is it a strictly declarative one.

Researching the immaterial culture has evidenced the existence of an a-culturalized community, in which “the young ones do not know the old tradition any more, they follow and imitate the Romanians” or “they forgot how our old ones used to be”. Further researches should be able to differentiate between a-culturalization and integration, since, in many cases these cultural losses are similar or identical with phenomena found within the majority community. For example, the modification of marital or pre-marital customs, the equivalation in money of the honesty respectively may be a consequence of integration, under the pressure of the law as well as a form of actualization generated by the willingness to be accepted by the majority.

The losses of elements of immaterial cultural patrimony are found in every aspect of Romani cultural and spiritual life, with some differentiations in rhythm and depth, both according to kin and cultural domain. During our research we were able to evidence both the resemblances between different kins of Roma as well as important differences which should be recognized and presented accordingly by future research.

Holydays and rituals

The Roma from Hunedoara declare themselves Christians, Orthodox or Catholic, who adopted behaviors and customs of the majority population. For important customs we have identified some specifications which are more present and more respected. For example for New Year’s Eve, “only the men go caroling because the woman is not allowed outside after 12 o’clock at night. This is our old tradition”. This interdiction for women is doubled if the clan receives guests, in which case the woman is not allowed to sit at the table: “She is not allowed, but sits with them to chat. [...] The women sit in one place while the men sit elsewhere. For example, if we are ten men and one woman, how is she allowed to sit with us? This is a great shame to the gypsies.” We could not identify this custom to the young families, or any circumstances in which this rule is still observed and also we could not identify a differentiation in rule if all the presets are Romani or when there are other ethnical groups present.

Although the informants mentioned the custom of caroling, we could not identify any actual songs, only vague mentions: “We have very beautiful carols and we sing only in gypsy not in Romanian. [...] We go to our family, to visit friends, both men and women.”

In most of the significant events over the year the most frequently mentioned is the organization of parties, with or without other guests present, in many cases these parties implying the presence of the extended family.

The elocution, only mentioned in the past, is reduced to common wishes, also used by the majority: “you wish them many more happy Christmases together with the family and health from the Holy God”.

The Gabors (Hungarian Romas) still identify some carols with gipsy lyrics but the Ciurari (bucket craftsmen) have a somehow different situation: “On the second day of the New Year Eve [...] the children used to carol in Romanian while the elders used to carol in Romanian and gipsy. Now I don’t know the carol that the elders would sing in gipsy, it was a gipsy carol, sang by the elders, < Uşten Uşten mo romale> (Arise, arise, oh gypsies). This is what the old ones were caroling.”

An interesting phenomenon of cultural mutation was registered concerning the gastronomy involved in customs of the end of the year. Aside from sarmale (stuffed cabbage), roast meat and sour soup they would not cook in the oven “because in those days the women didn’t know how to make pastries and pound cake. Now they learned how to cook everything”.

On Easter there are no more songs or carols, they say “Happy Easter” and “Christ has arisen”. One wishes many more happy Easters to the entire family. Two days before Easter, if one meets a friend down the street, one wishes him “Uncle, may God give you health and many more happy Easters”.

In the case of the Gabors, on Easter the gastronomy is focused on a stew prepared without potatoes: “take two or three onions and cook them in oil until softened, add green onion, then add meat. Let it stew then add twenty eggs, serve when ready [...] I have not eaten I my life lamb stew with potatoes. This is the custom, but there are many customs, some with potatoes, some without.”

A mutation was registered to the Easter gastronomy as well, by the adoption of pastries: “now our gipsy women have emancipated and they also prepare pastries and pound cake and they eat hamburgers.”

At the same time, some manifestations of opposition in the face of cultural transfers or forgoing the traditions may occur, as one informant told us:

“I brought my brother in law, we call them *şogor*, and I gave him a hamburger and he threw it at me and asked me <What are you giving me here to eat?> <It’s hamburger. Eat it, it’s good, tastes like beef salad.> <I would never eat something like that!> he says.

On the other side, the loss of customs and habits are within the larger frame of a-culturalization and giving up on traditions which was registered to the majority population: “they would prepare pound cake, pastries, not like today, they go to the shop and buy them, they don’t cook anymore. They bring them home, put them on the table and they do not prepare them anymore.”

Another important holiday of the Roma community, connected with a religious event, is Saint Mary’s Nativity (8th of September). If Christmas and Easter tend to be integrated in the larger spiritual community, St. Mary’s tends to be held closer “to us gypsies”. Equally, St. Mary’s is considered a passage between religious and lay holidays. The latter (for example “Miss Roma” or the 8th of April – “The International Romani Day”) are also a form of resistance to the loss of customs and values of the ethnical group. Very spectacular the lay holidays are an occasion for the Roma kins to meet and demonstrate their financial capabilities as well as their cultural values to the majority population.

The material culture

The Roma kins, bearing the names of occupations or crafts or the name of a noble who gave them freedom from servitude, are more and more disconnected from their origins. The practice of traditional crafts seems to be more and more associated with a poor financial situation. Only “the poorer ones” still make bricks. As such, the defining elements for some kins, such as the horse and carriage were replaced by cars, or they are only used by the older people: “they don’t have horses and carriages any more, they have expensive cars. Nowadays only the older ones still like to have a horse and carriage”. Generally the crafts are mentioned

as memories, with few who practice them and with a reduced importance for the community and in relation with the majority population.

The a-culturalization phenomenon may have some dramatic aspects as well, especially in the case of the kins which are strongly related to a craft, such as the Gabors. “To us, the gypsies that make water spouts, if this trade doesn’t exist any more, we are lost, both us and our women. We do not steal. Have you ever heard in your life of a water spout maker to embarrass himself? Never. You heard even on the television that the water spouts makers are good people. Other gypsies do whatever king of menial jobs, whatever God help them get, but not us Gabors. If we do not make water spouts then we buy clothes and sell them, but nothing else. Have you ever heard of a gabor to work something else. I don’t think so”.

The crossover customs

The crossover rituals in a human life, birth, baptism, marriage and death are found in today’s Romani life in diluted forms, interrupted by modern medicine and interactions with the town and the majority community.

Such an example of an archaic custom, set upon the individual, is a form of interdiction to the woman who just gave birth: “a woman who just gave birth is not allowed outside the house or to pass in front of men. [...] For six weeks she is not allowed to go to the well, because then she would spoil the water. She is not allowed outside after sundown, she is not allowed outside when the baby’s clothes are being washed, which are also not allowed outside after sundown. This goes on until the baptism. You are not allowed to take the baby outside at sundown because then you would spoil the baby. After six weeks they go to church for a special service, this is what I did for all my three children, because I have three children. This is what I did with my children, I did a special service for me, but I did it to them as well so that I can go outside to go to a shop to buy bread or groceries, but not even like this did I go to someone’s house after the sun was down”. Like in other old cultures, we can observe a mixture of beliefs and profane rules, overlapped by a Christian layer, which would offer some kind of legitimization to social morae. The attempts to identify similar behaviors in younger informants (35 years old or younger) did not provide conclusive information. It is possible they are still observed, especially if the woman is not employed and on a fixed schedule.

The funerary habits are also in a process of dissolution, people forgetting the wails, the chants and even the ritual: “We have the habit when someone dies to dress nicely, if possible buy a wreath and go to the wake, and if money are collected because the family is poor, we help them. [...] We sing songs for the dead, but not just so. We sing a song for the dead at six o’clock in the morning and as well in the evening, and the rest of the time we sing songs with our mouths, with instruments, with an accordion. If the dead is a man [...] the women [start to sing], [...] I don’t know it but there are women who know it and sing it all the way. This was a tradition before, now it is no more, it was lost. Mostly the musicians sing, yeas, they sing more, because people don’t know the song of the dead any more. [they sing] until the priest arrives to take the dead out of the house, this time the one with the accordion sings. After they take the deceased out of the house and the service begins, they don’t sing any more. After the service is finished, on the way to the grave they accompany the dead with music. Until it is covered with earth the musician keeps plying. After that the priest or someone from the family of the deceased announces the people to go to the funerary banquet. The people, the children go to the funerary banquet and there they say May God rest his soul.”

The musical and literary folklore. The dances

The practice of dancing on various occasions, whether private (parties, weddings, baptisms) or public (religious or lay holydays) is still done, with a relatively stable repertoire.

The most frequent are: the Dance of the Bride, Gipsy Bărbunc (men's dance), Ingărdit (women's traditional dance) and a Dance for Pairs.

The repertoire of the musical folklore is in continuous motion, both as themes and approach.

The traditional instruments (violin, cembalo, trumpet, accordion, violoncello or flute) are more and more replaced with electric musical instruments. The repertoire tends to be replaced with one in Romanian. The Romani singers are grouped in bands that play for whoever invites them and is willing to meet their price.

Among the folklore the most forgotten and out of practice are literature, paremiology and divination: "We didn't have women that would divinate. There were women who would make medicine and tea but they wouldn't divinate. Maybe other nations had them but we didn't. Before there were women who would cure people of different diseases, but that was 100 years ago."

Children's folklore

The components of the children's folklore are an important marker of the assimilation process and the cultural transfer between ethnic groups, which implies the indiscriminatory presence of the children in the same environment and space. The children's games tend to be the same, differentiated only by regional or sub-regional names and not by content. The games our informants mentioned are: blindman's buff, catch, geami, hop-scotch, pac pac, the peddler, improvised games (pulling objects which were imaginary given specific significance – the wheel, trough, trunk, boxes), hide and seek, shovel to the hole, țui (a game where they try to hit coins off the ground, similar to" marbles").

The Gypsies' judgment

One of the most important aspects of the Romani culture, interesting to other ethnic groups, and somewhat enveloped in a shroud of mystery, is "The Gypsies' judgment". Beyond the myths that accompany this ethnic group this custom is a kind of council of elders which provides resolution to "honorable" disputes.

In one of the informants accounts (which seems most authentic since they were directly involved) the council was summoned to solve arguments concerning a marriage. The honor of all parties was either kept or paid for: "the gipsy went and reconciled with the father of the bride and from 30,000 it remained to 2,000. 500 each to the judges [...] 8,000 he gave before and 2,000 now [...] and the girl got 10,000, she got 10,000 cash and a little shame... but not shame because she is still a girl <a virgin> because he couldn't place the kerchief upon her head, he didn't sleep with her, he didn't even kiss her."

The delimitation of cases where the gipsy judgment is delimited from lay courts is rather well known and applied. "But now they lost the old habits and they go to court just like the Romanians. I used to know a gipsy who went to the judge in several Romani kins and when they couldn't reach an agreement they were allowed to go to court and be judged according to the Romanian law, because if it is about crimes, rapes or robberies we do not interfere. I things like these the Romanians come and put the guilty ones in prison".

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