

# **The Rromany Ethnic Identity and the Silent Fight against Racism Reflected in the Rromano Folklore as a Manifestation of Resilience.**

## **Some Case Studies on Myths, Proverbs, Old Sayings, Short Stories and Oral Poetry**

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One of Rroma's manifestations of resilience can be identified in the Rromano folklore by two important topics it approaches: the Rromany ethnic identity as a way of resistance to cultural assimilation or acculturation, and the silent fight against racism, most of the times manifested by trying to define and confront the racist attitudes and behavior and to resist against them through a positive ethnic self-image.

To begin with the beginning of everything, the first road to be explored when considering the ethnic identity theme in the Rromano folklore are the myths, *shidimaske paramisia* as we say in the Rromany language. We will take a look to the etiological legends or to the myths that describe how the Rromano people was created and what shaped its ethnic identity.

*Dr. Rajko Djurić*, in his book "*I historia e rromane literaturaqi*" [The History of Rromany Literature], introduces three such myths about the birth of the Rromano people.

*One of these myths approaching the creation of the Rromano people* speaks about a beautiful, happy and rich Rroma country named Sind, where the Muslims' invasion brought war, killed many Rroma and destroyed their country<sup>1</sup>. That is why the Rroma were forced to leave their country conquered by the Muslims and to emigrate to other parts of the world such as Arabia, Armenia and Byzantium. There are three important topics linked to the beginnings of Rromano people addressed in this legend: the certitude of the Rroma collective memory that the Rroma had a country and it was wealthy and full of beauty, joy and happiness; the clear relationship between the Rroma migration and the conquering of the Rroma country Sind by the Muslims, clearly suggesting the Rroma roots in the Indian subcontinent or Bharat kingdoms and the religious issue the Hindus had with the Muslims, and the main directions of the Rroma migration towards areas such as Arabia, Armenia and Byzantium, which are actually mainly validated by the most reliable history researches.

Still in the framework of analyzing the Rroma's mobility, even caused by the conquest of their country, as being somehow linked to the beginnings of the Rromano people, we can observe the *etiological legend of the Beyashi Rroma from Hungary*, still nomads at the moment the legend was collected from their community, quoted in *Delia Grigore's* book „*Curs de antropologie și folclor rrom. Introducere în studiul elementelor de cultură tradițională ale identității rrome contemporane*” [Course of Rroma Anthropology and Folklore. Introduction in the Study of Contemporary Rromany Identity's Traditional Culture

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Rajko Djurić, *Istoria literaturii rrome. I historia e rromane literaturaqi* (București: Universitatea din București – Editura CREDIS, 2005), page 18.

Elements]<sup>2</sup>. The legend speaks about the Roma as being descendants of birds, because they were born as birds, they had a totally free life, flying all over the world, but their life was quite hard, because they had to eat whatever they collected during their endless voyage. One day, after a long time of hunger and thirst, they reached a field cultivated with wheat and their leader got down and started eating wheat grains. Following his example, they did the same, then they went to sleep. Next day, they did the same. Then, the same. Then, the same. And they became fatter and fatter. And they got accustomed with that comfortable life because they had enough food right there, without being forced to fly away to find something to eat. And, more than that, even if they would have wanted to fly, they would no longer be able to do it because of being too fat, lazy and less mobile. One day, the food ended and they woke up with nothing left to eat. And the winter came and it was cold and windy and they had nowhere to shelter from snow and frost. They had to follow the example of some animals, to learn from them how to put grains in pits dug in the ground, and how to build huts made of straw and branches to shelter themselves during winter. Because of working the land, their legs became thicker and thicker, and their wings became arms. They saw this as the end of their beautiful and free life. But they preserved their insatiable wish to travel, at least to move from one place to another, actually as a feeling or as a state of mind expressed like this: “When we pitch a tent in the valley, we want to be in the hill, if we stay on top of the hill, we want to fly in the valley. Only that now we have to get there on foot. We live from day to day, without amassing fortunes, for the simple reason that, one fine day, we will be birds again.”<sup>3</sup>

Using the metaphor of the bird, that symbolizes freedom, this legend actually describes the process of Roma’s sedentarization led by the head of the nomadic community, who was taken as an example by his people. Another example followed by the nomads in order to settle was the one of the other settled beings, from which the former birds borrowed their settled way of life. Nevertheless, even after becoming settled, the Roma still preserved, in their collective mind, the memory of their nomadic life and an endless need to travel, the consequences of this mobile state of mind being a certain relationship with the property: they do not accumulate fortunes and they simply live every day for its own beauty. This brings our thoughts either to the Latin saying *Carpe Diem!* [Enjoy today], originated from Horatius’ poetry („Odes”, I, 2, 8: „*Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero*” [Enjoy today and trust too little tomorrow]) or to the Romano old saying, very much used in many traditional cultures: “*Na-i amen igi kodolestar nashti parivas les, na-i amen tehara kodolestar na janas les, si amen numai ages*” [We have no yesterday because we cannot change it, we have no tomorrow because we do not know it, we only have today]. Taking all these into account, we can draw some important conclusions about the shaping of the Rromany ethnic identity in this etiological legend: the nomadism is linked with the birth of the Roma, who were born as birds and afterwards became humans; the nomadic life is seen as the symbol of freedom, but also as quite difficult to keep, reason for which finally the settled life was the only choice possible; the cultural archetype of the *Rromanipen*, the collective thinking pattern of the Rromano people, includes the

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<sup>2</sup> Delia Grigore, *Curs de antropologie și folclor rrom. Introducere în studiul elementelor de cultură tradițională ale identității rrome contemporane* (București: Universitatea din București – Editura CREDIS, 2001), pages 38-39.

<sup>3</sup> Apud *Pictures of the Gypsies in Hungary in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Budapest, 1993), 6 - quoted in: Delia Grigore, *Curs de antropologie și folclor rrom. Introducere în studiul elementelor de cultură tradițională ale identității rrome contemporane* (București: Universitatea din București – Editura CREDIS, 2001), page 39.

fundamental view about space – the perpetual mobility feeling the nomadic life’s nostalgia (“one fine day, we will be birds again”) – and the fundamental view about time – there exists only the present and it should be lived as it is (“We live from day to day”).

The *last myth* we aim to analyze is, again, one from Dr. Rajko Djurić’s book. This myth<sup>4</sup> speaks about *the way God created the humans, among them the Rromano people*. God is seen as a very familiar person, a craftsman working in clay, who shapes figurines and puts them to burn in the oven in order to make humans out of them. Because God went for a walk and came back too late, his first figurine burned too much, so it became black, this being the ancestor of the black humans. Being afraid not to burn the next figurine, God opened the oven too early, so his second figurine was left unfinished and remained raw or white, this being the ancestor of the white humans. Like in most myths, fairy-tales or other stories, at the third try, seen as the golden one or the victorious one, God kept his third figurine in the oven as much as needed, not too much, neither too little, so this last figurine became as it should be: golden colored, this being the ancestor of the Rroma.

It is worth to emphasize the way of humans’ creation God followed in order to make it evolve: from the mistake of neglecting the humans, going through another mistake of over-caring the humans, finally repairing His mistakes and arriving to what is the best for humans: assisting them to achieve perfection. As for the view on the Rromany identity, this legend proves a high level of ethnic self-esteem because the Rroma are seen as the perfect human beings, born at the third try of God’s creation, after His two failures. This is actually one of the few, if not the only Rromano myth introduced in this study which shows a clear positive ethnic self-image. Most of the other analyzed myths float somewhere between the curse of being nomadic and the pain of losing the nomadic free life.

We continue our journey within the way the Rromano folklore reflects the Rromany ethnic identity by looking at some *proverbs and old sayings*<sup>5</sup>, *purane godimata ai purane vakiarimata*, as we say in the Rromany language.

The first topic linked to the ethnic identity approached in the Rroma proverbs is the racism against the Rroma, that leads to the internalized stigma, also embodied in believing in an immutable tragic fate, but also to fighting against racism.

While the negative stereotypes and the prejudiced behavior leading to racism manifest themselves, the Rromano people is only seeking for respect and consideration: *T-avel o gajo e rromeste and-o kher, rodel mel; t-avel o rrom e gajeste, rodel pakiv*. [If the Gajo comes to the Rrom’s house, he looks for dirt; if the Rrom comes to the Gajo, he seeks respect.]

The anti-Rroma racism manifests itself as lack of recognition and of respect for the Rroma and as cruel exploitation of the Rroma: *O gajo e rromes na pringiarrel, na del leske pakiv, buki lestar mangel*. [The Gajo doesn't recognize the Rrom, doesn't respect him, he only asks him to work.]

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Rajko Djurić, *Istoria literaturii rrome. I historia e rromane literaturaqi* (București: Universitatea din București – Editura CREDIS, 2005), page 15.

<sup>5</sup> Collected in time, from different Rroma communities, by Delia Grigore.

Following the vision about the anti-Rroma racism, there are proverbs fighting it, most of its manifestations being focused on the skin's color that should not be a reason for discrimination and exclusion: *Dikh man akatar k-i buki, ma dikh man akatar k-i morki*. [Judge me by what I do, not by my skin.], but it should be a symbol of equality: *Vi parnes, vi kaless hin lolo rat*. [Both white and black have red blood.] and it can be a reason for Rroma pride: *Te na ulias kali i phuv, na ulias parno o manro*. [If the earth wasn't black, the bread wasn't white.]; *Vi e kale khainiatar si parno o anro*. [Also of the black hen, the egg comes out white.]; *Mai kali e mura, mai gugli avela*. [The blacker the blackberry, the sweeter.].

Another topic linked to the Rroma identity refers to the way the ethnic identity is shaped by the internalized positive stereotypes: joy of life - *E rromeste shai na cialiosa, ta asasa*. [At the Roma, maybe you can't get enough of food, but you can get enough of laughter.], love and talent for music - *Kai rroma, odoi gili shundiol*. [Where there are Rroma, music can be heard.], momentary anger caused by a choleric temperament, but with no wish for rancor or revenge - *Rromani holi sar balval – avel, jal*. [The anger of the Rroma is like the wind - it comes and goes.], focus on emotion and passion - *Sar o rromano ilo, nai p-i sasti phuv*. [Like the heart of the Rroma, nowhere in the world.].

There are also some important features of the ethnic identity strongly underlined in the Rromano proverbs: the Rroma universality or presence everywhere, followed by the recommendation for everybody to be good with the Rroma because they are everywhere: *Te jives and-o vesh, ov lacio e ruventsar, te jives and-o gav, ov lacio e gajentsar, ta kai te jives, ov lacio e rromentsar*. [If you live in the forest, be good to the wolves, if you live in the village, be good to the Gajos, but anywhere you live, be good to the Rroma.], *Kai jas, si rroma*. [There are Rroma everywhere.]; brotherhood as intra-ethnic solidarity and mutual support beyond social status' boundaries: *O rrom, kai savo barvalo te ulias, nivaht na bistrel so si les ciore rromane phrala*. [The Rroma, no matter how rich they are, never forget that they have poor brothers.]; social justice and equality: *Le rrom den pakiv sarkoles, barvaless vai cioress*. [The Rroma respect everyone, rich or poor.]; mutual trust, solidarity and power of the intra-ethnic role models: *O rrom e rromestar sikliol*. [The Rrom learns from the Rrom.], *Kai iekh rrom jal, savore rroma pal leste*. [Where a Rrom goes, all the Rroma follow him.]; sharing thoughts and mutual understanding beyond wording: *Vi bilavengo, janel o rrom so leske aver rrom kamel te phenel*. [Even without speaking, a Rrom knows what the other Rrom wants to say.]; the Rromany language, that should not be a reason for shame or stigma, but for ethnic pride, because it is the mother tongue and the mother is fundamental: *Kon lajal peski cibiatar, lajal peski daiatar*. [He who is ashamed of his mother tongue is ashamed of his mother.], but also the Rromany language as a value because it is spoken all over the world: *Rromane cibiasa jas p-o sasto sundal*. [With the Rromany language you can reach all over the world.]; the way the Rroma play music: emotionally or from and to the heart for the Rroma and technically or to the ears and pragmatically for the Gaje - *E gajeske bashavav e lovenghe, e rromeske e ilestar*. [I play to the Gaje for money, to the Rroma from the heart.], *E gajeske bashavav and-o kan, e rromeske and-ilo*. [I play to the ears of the Gaje, to the hearts of the Rroma.].

Above everything else, the intra-ethnic unity and solidarity are highly appreciated and recommended as they shape the ethnic identity: *Rrom rromesa, gajo gajesa*. [The Rrom with the Rrom, the Gajo with the Gajo.]. Following this, the ethnic dissociation is blamed: *Nai ciacio rrom kon dur e rromendar tsirdel pes*. [Those Rroma who stay away from the Rroma are not true Roma.]. More than that, changing the ethnic identity is not only blamed, but also seen as impossible: *Shai keres tusa so kames, ama nashti te keres tut gajo*. [You can make of yourself whatever you want, but you can't make of yourself a Gajo.] mainly because the feeling, the emotion, the heartbeat of being Rroma: *Vi te kerel pes o rrom ungroške, italoske, hoci-soske, o ilo lesko savaht marel rromane ritmosa*. [Even if the Rrom makes himself a Hungarian, an Italian, or whatever else, his heart always beats in a Rromano rhythm.]. This might be seen as stereotypical, but reflecting more, it is not, judging after the frequency and the intensity of its reasoning.

There are Rroma proverbs that show a highly positive self-image and a strong ethnic self-esteem, the respect being accepted only if the ethnic belonging is its core: *Te man varekon kamel te del pakiv, te del man pakiv sar rromes; te na, man khanci ma te del*. [If one wants to respect me, to respect me as a Rrom; if not, don't give me anything.], its top being the invincibility of the Rroma: *Rromano kokalo na phaghel nikon*. [No one can break the Rromano bone.].

The Rroma folklorist Costică Băţălan, in his collection of Rromano folklore *Rromane Taxtaja. Nestemate din folclorul rromilor* [Gems from the Rroma Folklore], published two short stories “*Kai gele ol Rrom*”<sup>6</sup> [Where did the Rroma go] and “*So kinde ol Rrom*”<sup>7</sup> [What did the Rroma buy] in which the anti-Rroma racism manifests itself through the Gaje’s lack of knowledge about the Rromany language together with their wrong assumption that they know the Rromany language because it is not a real language, but a specific way of badly speaking the Gajikani language. This is the reason for which the Gaje, wrongly interpreting what the Rroma were saying in Rromany language, considered the Rroma to be liars and cheaters. In the short story “*Kai gele ol Rrom*”, the Gaje wrongly understand that the Rroma are going to some villages named Pekia and Ivanda, instead of understanding that the Rroma were baking some pies and they were checking to see if they were cooked (Rromanes „peke”) or still raw (Rromanes „ivand”). In the short story “*So kinde ol Rrom*”, the Gaje wrongly understand that the Rroma are buying nylon, a quite expensive material, so they are rich, not poor as they pretended to be, but actually the Rroma were going to buy some salt (Rromanes „lon”) and what they said was they they no longer have salt (Rromanes „na-i lon”).

Another example for the Rromany language to be highly respected as one of the essences of the Rromany identity comes from an oral history testimony about the Holocaust: a Rrom who was a prisoner in a concentration camp was unjustly accused of stealing something and he was sentenced to death, but, because he took an oath in the Rromany language and the Gaje knew that the Rroma believe in oaths, especially when they are told in their mother tongue, they believed the Rrom that he did not steal anything and they stopped his death sentence. So the Rromany language is seen here as a value that saved the Rrom from being killed for nothing, so as a form of resistance during the Holocaust.

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<sup>6</sup> Costică Băţălan, *Rromane Taxtaja. Nestemate din folclorul rromilor*, Editura Kriterion, Bucureşti – Cluj, 2002, page 45.

<sup>7</sup> Costică Băţălan, *Rromane Taxtaja. Nestemate din folclorul rromilor*, Editura Kriterion, Bucureşti – Cluj, 2002, page 47.

In the same collection of Rromano folklore *Rromane Taxtaja. Nestemate din folclorul rromilor* [Gems from the Roma Folklore], in the oral poetry “*Na dikh-ta ke hom kalo*”<sup>8</sup> [Don’t look that I am black], we can see the leitmotif of the skin color, that, as in the proverbs we have just spoken about, should not be a reason for discrimination and racism or a criterium of judging someone, the only way to judge somebody being his/her heart, pure as a flower and recognized by God as such, this being the only criterium for someone to be respected, including through marrying well.

*Na dikh-ta ke hom kalo:  
Mirro ogi hin parno  
Parno sar e luludi  
De-and-e glaja e parni.*

*Na dikh-ta ke hom kali:  
Numa o Del prigiarel mirro ogi  
Će lelo kodo terno  
Le rromenqro o mai baro.*<sup>9</sup>

[Don’t look that I am black:  
My heart is white/pure  
White/pure as the flower  
From the white glass.

Don’t look that I am black:  
Only God knows my heart  
I will marry that young man  
The biggest among the Rroma.]

In the Rromano folklore collection *Probe de limba și literatura rromilor din România* [Samples of Roma’s Language and Literature in Romania], we take two examples of oral poetry in which resistance is again manifested by a positive ethnic self-image reflected in choosing a Rromni and not a Gaji for marriage because the Rromni takes much more care of her husband and she is more dedicated to the family.

## LII

*Luludi bari parni  
Drago manqe kovi gaji  
Ta mai drago kovi rromni  
Ke na-i sar e gaji.  
Dikh-ta, Devla, kov ćhavo*

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<sup>8</sup> Costică Bățalan, *Rromane Taxtaja. Nestemate din folclorul rromilor*, Editura Kriterion, București – Cluj, 2002, page 171.

<sup>9</sup> Costică Bățalan, *Rromane Taxtaja. Nestemate din folclorul rromilor*, Editura Kriterion, București – Cluj, 2002, page 171.

*Le gadesa melalo.  
Sostar, Devla, na-i munro,  
Te dav les aver thovdo?  
But si shukar ai terno.<sup>10</sup>*

[Flower, white flower,  
I love that gaji  
But I love more that rromni  
Because she is not like the gaji.  
Look, my God, that boy  
With his shirt dirty.  
Why, my God, isn't he mine,  
To give him another shirt, a clean one?  
He is such a beautiful and young boy.]

The black skin color leitmotif is coming back as an advantage for the rrom to fall in love with the rromni, even if it may be seen, at the first glance, as a disadvantage.

LXIX  
*Te-avel kali sar o angar  
Placeal ma laqo mashkar  
Te-avel kali sar i cik  
Placeal ma laqi kushtik.<sup>11</sup>*

[May she be black as the coal  
I like her middle  
May she be black as the mud  
I like her waist.]

And such examples can continue!

As a conclusion to be drawn, the analyzed case studies of the Rromano folklore (etiological legends or myths, proverbs, old sayings, short stories, oral history testimonies and oral poetry), show that, reflecting the ethnic identity and the view on the anti-Rroma racism, the folklore is actually an way of intra-community or internal resilience or resistance to a society that practiced, for centuries, the cultural ethnocide against the Rroma people through both the racism of exclusion, culminating with the Slavery in the Romanian countries (1385-1856) and the Holocaust during the Second World War and the racism

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<sup>10</sup> Barbu Constantinescu, *Probe de limba și literatura rromilor din România*, Editura Kriterion, București – Cluj, 2000, pages 55-56.

<sup>11</sup> Barbu Constantinescu, *Probe de limba și literatura rromilor din România*, Editura Kriterion, București – Cluj, 2000, page 66.

of domination, culminating with the Austro-Hungarian Empire's policies of destroying the Rroma ethnic identity and the socialist regime's systemic cultural assimilation policies leading to almost total acculturation of the Rroma. This proves that the Rroma collective mind realizes that the anti-Rroma racism is the most important cause of the internalized ethnic stigma and the low ethnic self-esteem of the Rroma and the most important obstacle in the way of Rroma ethnic identity's development towards the positive ethnic self-image and the pride of belonging to the Rromano people. Taking this into account, the exploration of the ethnic identity topic in other Rromano folklore species is worth to be further developed in order to understand how the Rroma collective mind refers to and shapes the ethnic identity as one of the most important topics approached.

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