

Našardi Bori and her Stories: Framing Elopement in a Romani Community

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Introduction

The sociocultural heterogeneity of Roma people is closely connected with their geographical diffusion and a variety of religious, linguistic, aesthetic, economic and other factors. In fact, the idea of “Romani marriage” cannot be generalized as a pan-Romani characterizing feature either. The same applies to elopement, which has been occasionally recorded in the literature dealing with Romani marriage patterns. The tangible reality of the fieldwork calls our attention to a particular community encircled by other Roma groups and a larger sociocultural context. The present is an excerpt of the ongoing research, commenced in the late 1990s with southern Gurbets¹, viz. Muslim Roma from Kosovo and Macedonia.² Travelling in a transnational space between their native lands and some of their emigration destinations (esp. Italy), the paper addresses the practice of elopement undertaken by young women and relevant customary regulations. Being the research based on an extensive fieldwork, selected case studies are included as an empirical support to the main corpus of the paper.

Selecting a life partner, selecting a marriage alliance

Marriage is an all-important institution for many Roma. Relying on family consent, the success of a conjugal tie requires no formalizations from external authorities: its “legal force” is conferred by the *abijáv* (*bijáv*) ceremony and related ritual contents, while its regularization is done months, even years after the wedding. The resultant married life is as much acceptable as run in conformity to the in-community prescripts.³

The tradition claims a marriage to be contracted by proposal. In the attempt of ensuring the brightest future to their posterity, the parents use every endeavour to find suitable mates to their descendants as soon as they reach the proper age.⁴ Partner selection commonly predicts no decisions to be taken by the spouses-to-be: their union will be the fruit of inquiries and alliances between the families. Emotions are left no space in this arena: resting on emotions, love (*kamlipé*) is unreliable and must be held under control. Higher level of affection, the so-called “great love” (*baró kamlipé*),

1 The Gurbet community of Western Balkans is defined by its linguistic and territorial boundaries traced by scholars. On these grounds, four main branches are identified: 1. western Gurbet (Bosnia, Herzegovina, Montenegro); 2. northern Gurbet (Vojvodina); 3. eastern Gurbet (Serbia); and 4. southern Gurbet (Kosovo, Macedonia, south Serbia). The Macedonian branch is commonly known by the name of *Džambas*, and the *Džambas* involved in this work are native to north Macedonia.

2 See Lapov (2004, 2008, 2009).

3 See Lapov 2004:89-90, Marushiakova, Popov 1993:184.

4 The marriageable age of 12-16 has been postponed in the last decades, often to the age of majority (18-20). Analogous trends have been observed in other Romani communities (cf. Petrovski 2001:22, Stoichkovski 2002:105, for Macedonia; Marushiakova, Popov 1993:182, for Bulgaria).

is even less appreciated as it induces people to make rash decisions. In truth, God (*Dol*) is the only one who deserves that much enthusiasm.

In the match-searching period, potential partners are under meticulous scrutiny. Although both sides are eager to find a good match, it is seemingly the boy's family who is looking for a girl. This is the point when a mediator, man or woman preferably a relative, jumps in. The girl's background is studied in more detail being a bride from a "good family" (*lačbi familija*) the priority of every household. A person is higher rated if s/he is "strong by family": such a characterization refers to a respectable and influential, possibly well-situated, household. The concept of *zurali familija* (strong family) implies both the status and dimensions of a family in terms of its members and marital alliances, giving it the contours of *bari familija* (big family).⁵

Marriage eligibility depends on multiple factors beginning from one's outward appearance, *tabijati* (nature, demeanour) and *rat* (blood i.e. inner nature, temper). Youths are invited to show their respect to the family, especially to its elderly members, to be hardworking and diligent. Contrarily, hauteur, arrogance, insolence and alike behavioural traits do not make the best portrayal of one's persona. Youths are dissuaded from "strolling around"; however, young men are more privileged with regard to the freedom of movement.⁶

The eligibility criteria apply to both genders. Still, a marriageable girl is subject to a row of demands. Her qualities should be mirrored in her good manners (*lačhé tabijátora*) and good words (*lačhé láfona*). The aesthetic ideal wants her to be *parní* (white; fair[skinned]) with this considered to be an expression of her beauty and inner pureness. She is required to be obedient, subservient, well-versed in cooking, cleaning and other household chores so as to look after her future family. The eyes (*jakhá*) play a great role in defining the human nature, which is why a young woman must use her glances cautiously without being *jakh(v)alí* (ogling, flirty); her eyes should not appear to be greedy nor stingy, while a mediator takes care not to propose a match "under (evil) eyes" (cursed, ill-fated). Since intellectual capabilities must be used with modesty, a *čhej* (girl) is discouraged from being too talkative, shrewd, stubborn etc. Most importantly, she is expected to be chaste, healthy and capable of childbearing.

The said precepts are inherited in an intergenerational education process, during which the girl's character is getting shaped according to the values of the community. It is the responsibility of mothers and other adults to assure an appropriate education to their daughters in order to make them fit for their married life; in reaching their womanhood, the latter are simultaneously trained to mind their status themselves so as to be able, one day, to hand the same teachings down to the generations to come. Such a gender-based education predicts a division by genders and roles to

5 Similar criteria and terminology are in force in diverse Roma groups in the Balkans, being retained by their emigrant segments (cf. Piasere, 1991, for Kosovo Roma in Italy; Lapov, 2004, for southern Gurbets in Kosovo, Macedonia and Italy; Petrovski, 2000, 2001, for Roma in north Macedonia).

6 "The male children are recognized a bigger autonomy and mobility" (Petrovski 2001:26).

progressively take place since a very tender age (6-7). As a result, a male-female friendship, i.e. a relationship without marriage, is unthinkable.⁷

To boot, the obsession with a “good family” and a “white bride” takes matchmakers and parents beyond their immediate vicinity up to the international level. For example: due to a supposed shortage of “good girls”, some Kosovo Gurbets residing in Italy will go to the Tetovo zone in north-western Macedonia to find a suitable bride. The idea behind the “importation” of brides from the homeland or neighbouring localities is that foreign-born girls may not be “good” enough.

All told, a “detail” routinely escapes the attention: the whole process takes the involved, and especially women, through a considerable psychological stress. By eloping, young runaways try to break the chains of the tradition they have been taught theretofore.

Elopement : reasons, forms and organization

Despite the prescripts, the cases of getting married “from love” (*andar o kamlipê*) are not rare. But, what would be the push factors to run away for love? The practice of elopement offers an alternative to arranged marriage: accordingly, the *kamlé* (enamoured, lovers) are pushed to run away in order to escape social norms opposing their feelings, and to induce their parents to accept their choice. Their decision: *te našá(s)!* (let’s run away!) is reflected in storytelling and singing repertoires too: impossible love, secret romance, elopement, “love malady”⁸ and the like motifs are dedicated a particular rank by Roma artists. Along with the opposition to social norms concerning partner selection, economic difficulties are another important reason for elopement.⁹ And its forms and organization are directly linked to these reasons.

Elopement can be previously agreed. This form of contracting a marriage is implemented to avoid high marriage costs (esp. bride price), which prove to be increasing in the place of wedding celebrations: since the act of elopement demands more modest weddings¹⁰, economic reasons push some families to opt for this manoeuvre. In case of prearranged elopements the initiative affects one or both families, or some of their members, rather than the runaways themselves. The involved fix the flight of the couple, usually pretending to know nothing about the secret act. Important detail is that a prearranged elopement may or may not imply the respect for the youths’ preferences, including the selection of their life partners.

7 Similar patterns in education and intergender relationships have been documented in several Romani communities (cf. Costarelli’s works dealing with age, gender and hierarchies among minors in the Kosovo Gurbet community of Florence, Italy; and Piasere, 1991, for Kosovo Roma in Italy).

8 The repertoires of Arli singers include the motif of *mangipáskoro nasvalipe*, lit. ‘love malady’, viz. ‘illness/pain caused by love’ (the Arli being another Roma community diffused in the Balkans).

9 While talking about simulated “bride theft”, Marushiakova and Popov (1993:182) stress that the practice is undertaken to avoid the payment of bride price or to break the group closure.

10 For example, the henna ceremony could be skipped; the first wedding night will certainly undergo changes, esp. if sexual intercourse between the two occurred. Yet, the event’s organization depends on the outcomes of the reconciliation process. If elopement is not motivated by an unpleasant incident, a good deal of wedding customs will be put into practice. The parents will say: “*This is for the youths, not to leave them without wedding.*”

Along with arranged marriage, Marushiakova and Popov identify the practices of elopement and simulated “bride theft” (i.e. abduction) as alternative forms of marriage among Roma in Bulgaria. The practice of “bride theft”, which has gradually become one of the ritual forms of getting married, relies on similar patterns (reasons, organization, support) as a prearranged elopement. Being the act generally simulated, the fact that the girl is “stolen” does not imply that the marriage is contracted against her consent (Marushiakova, Popov 1993:182).

Thereby, whether it is about love or infatuation, these emotions are accompanied by a strong impulse to escape restrictive social norms, primarily to oppose other people’s choices in relation to partner selection. And, Romani women (more than men) are overwhelmed with social obligations and responsibilities that some try to dodge by elopement. In any case, the couple is offered support by relatives: a woman or few, in most cases sister, female cousin or younger aunt; this role is seldom taken by a male relative, mostly a younger brother or cousin from either side.¹¹ Of course, the runaways are provided support at their destination by their hosts, in which case the helpers are preferably relatives as well.

The decision to elope does not lead the enamoured too far: very rarely will they cross the borders of their own neighbourhood or town, maximum district. In fact, many couples “hide” in the boy’s parental house. The space and time dimensions are not essential: what matters is their detachment from the grown-up family members, at least in relation to the girl’s kin. The idea is to stay away for a brief period of time (a day or more) in order to display their marital intentions. And, although they might not engage in sexual intercourse during their enterprise, the two are “condemned” to stay together i.e. to wed. Such an outcome particularly affects the girl who is, on this very purpose, defined as a “*našardí bori*” (runaway bride).

The persona of *našardí bori*

The young woman who decides to elope with a young man of her choice is not released from social norms by their enterprise. She is actually subject to a particular stigma accompanying the act of elopement: first of all, she fled; secondly, she is by doing so no longer a girl but a bride. From then on, she is thought of as a *našardí bori*.¹²

The definition of *našardí bori* implies a dual meaning of being taken away and induced to run away. It is essential to bear in mind all of the possible translations¹³ that the locution incorporates on the occasion of elopement: the girl concurrently becomes ‘taken away, [even] abducted, kidnapped bride’, and a ‘bride who was induced to escape’ i.e. a ‘runaway bride’. In simple language: there is

11 While talking about “bride theft”, Marushiakova and Popov write that the practice is assisted by the boy’s friends, but it may involve girlfriends from the girl’s side (Marushiakova, Popov 1993:184).

12 Along with the form *našardí bori*, the variant *našatardi bori* can be sporadically heard in southern Gurbet dialects, e.g. in Macedonia (other dialects: *našaldi* or *našadi bori*) (cf. Lapov 2004:90). The appellation is rarely recorded in the literature, as e.g. in Šuto Orizari neighbourhood of Skopje, where eloped girl is termed *našaldi bori* (lit. runaway bride) (Petrovski 2002:58).

13 *Našard/ó* (~í f: taken away; abducted; runaway, fled, eloped) is the participle of the verb *našar-* (or *našatar-*, *našav-*, *našal-*: to take or lead away; abduct, kidnap; compel to flee, put to flight; induce or persuade to escape/elope), being the causative of the verb *naš-* (to flee, run away, escape, elope).

no difference if she is abducted or elopes on her own. In fact, another way to define the situation is given by the verb *našli* meaning that '[she] escaped, ran away'.

Such a state of affairs allows to infer that a boy, in principle, cannot run away: his potential "escape" would not be equally judged indeed. On the contrary, the girl's condition is identical in either circumstance and, being it her responsibility, she is to blame for the initiative! In conclusion: the term *bori*, jointly designating her status of 'bride' and 'daughter-in-law', brings the eloper one step closer to her married life.

What responsibilities for a Romani girl?

In consequence of a gender-based distribution of responsibilities, a woman is seen as a bearer of values and duties in relation to her honour and her family's reputation: if men safeguard decisional and physical domains of this dimension, women are its inward custodians.

In this sense, the ideal of premarital virginity makes the girlhood, *čhejipé*¹⁴, an important period in a woman's life during which a Romani girl is expected to guard her physical integrity and good reputation. This is another reason why a *čhej* (girl, daughter, virgin) should be prevented from eloping. She is contrasted by a *rakli* (non-Romani girl) who can be labelled as 'girlfriend, beloved, sweetheart' (with her male counterpart *raklô*). A *rakli* is, in a way, what a *čhej* is not authorized to be. This conceptual and terminological dichotomy between "our own" and "other people's" youths entails no depreciatory or insulting allusions. The eye-catching aspect is that a *čhej* is subject to several social restrictions, whereas a *čhavó* (Romani boy, youngster, son) is never experiencing the same burden.

The good reputation of a young woman is mirrored in her virtuousness which is said to be revealed by her face (*muj*): it is her responsibility to maintain her face "white" (*parnó muj*) until her wedding when she will be initiated to the womanhood as a daughter-in-law (*bori*) and a married woman (*romni*). To prevent them from premarital "love experiences", girls used to be married at the age of 12-15 with slightly elder boys; the marriageable age is generally postponed today, but juvenile marriages (age 15-17) still take place, including the cases of elopement.

A virtuous girl is variously depicted beginning from the adjective *lačbí*, whose connotations range from that of 'good', 'decent, right, appropriate' to 'honest'. To make the notion clearer, it is said that the bride (*bori*) has come 'with [her] face', *mósa*, meaning that she brought her 'chastity' to her new life. On her wedding night, a just married woman is expected to 'come out [as a] girl/virgin' (*ikljól čhej*) or 'to come out with face/reputation' (*ikljól mósa*) (which is proven by displaying a sheet or towel stained with her blood). A bride who proves her physical integrity is defined *parní* – 'white; honest, pure, virtuous' (*parní bori*); the lyrics of Romani wedding songs are illustrative of the idea: "who wants a white bride has to pay." In some Arli dialects (e.g. in Macedonia) she is crowned with the title of *parnemóskiri* (white-faced: [having a] white, spotless reputation). Finally, relying on

14 Practically disused among southern Gurbets, the term *čhejipé* (girlhood, maidenhood, chastity, purity, virginity) has been recorded in other Gurbet dialects.

Islamic terminology, a chaste girl is termed *haláli* (pure, good, honourable; virtuous, chaste, intact, immaculate < Arabic).¹⁵

The burden of dis/honour

While coming of age, a young person is taught the diametrical opposition between the concept of honour and dishonour. The subject is approached in terms of good and bad deeds, implying the formula: honour, good reputation *versus* dishonour, shame.

There is no general term to identify the notion of “honour” in this Romani dialect. In other varieties, the meanings of ‘honour, reputation, respect’ are covered by the word *pačiv* (*pačjiv, pativ*). Being the idea strongly perceived, southern Gurbets resort to figurative expressions or borrowings. A particular quality is ascribed to the *muj* (face; mouth)¹⁶ symbolically denoting ‘honour, reputation, good name’; a parallel term that may imply similar nuances is *čham* (cheek). These semantic shifts, observed in Balkan Romani dialects, rely – in all likelihood – on analogous metaphors in the local Slavic languages. To avoid misunderstandings, one may use the Albanian word *nëra* standing exactly for ‘honour, respect, esteem’ (esp. Kosovo Roma), or other loanwords as the Slavic *ředo*¹⁷ (order), which indirectly can recall the concept.

As far as the honour of a young woman is concerned, it is alluded to by specific terms or figurative meanings. The notion of *čhejipé* (girlhood, maidenhood, chastity) refers to her condition of intact girl.¹⁸ Her *muj* (face) and *čham* (cheek) are back into play: to be precise, the *parnó muj* (white face)¹⁹ is the priority while keeping her honour unspotted.

The moment to show her “face” is given by a woman’s wedding night. And if the bride is not virgin, the marital union is at risk. The fact that ‘she did not come with her face’ (*ní avilí pe mósa*) means that she has not brought her honour. She is *pharadí* (torn/broken i.e. deflowered), to cite only one of defamatory appellations she may be given in this condition which confers her a branding status of *harámi* (forbidden; sinful; impure, defiled < Arabic), and disqualifies her from the possibility to start her married life in a virtuous manner. It will be different if the girl proves that she shared this experience with her intended husband – being still frowned upon, the act is more defensible. On the contrary, if the groom refuses the “accusation” or another name comes out, the final result could be extremely harmful, at least for the girl.

15 Romani dialects abound in terms figuratively touching the sphere of female integrity. Loans like *hasılno* (good, proper, decent, honest < Turkish < Arabic) or *saglámı* (sound, well-kept, fit, proper, decent, honest < Turkish) can be heard among southern Gurbets. In other dialects, the adjective *pačivaló* (-í f) is used in relation to a woman’s virtuous state; southern Gurbets know the form *pačvaló* with slightly altered meanings (honest; sincere; faithful; pious, religious; sinless).

16 *Muj* : face; mouth; the uttered, expressed, spoken [words, voice]; (fig.) reputation, good name, fame; honour, respectability, honesty, integrity; (esp. girl’s) chastity, purity, virginity.

17 *Ředo* : order: 1. succession, sequence, series; row, line, queue; procession; (someone’s) turn; 2. quiet, discipline; orderliness; system, rule(s), regulation, custom (< Slavic).

18 In some dialects (other than southern Gurbet), the word *pačivalipe* is used to mean ‘respectability, decency, honesty, sincerity, faithfulness’ etc., including the ‘virtuousness (of a woman), virginity’.

19 *Parnó muj* : white/light face; (fig.) white/pure/undefiled face i.e. good reputation.

The act of elopement implies the level of seriousness comparable to a premarital sexual experience – “comparable” since everybody treasures the hope that the runaway girl is still a virgin. But, she displayed disobedience to her parents and exposed her family’s reputation by moving away, which altogether introduces the issues of *doš* (guilt, responsibility) and *ladž(ó)* (shame, disgrace). The patriarchal authority shows its effectiveness and the female side turns out as damaged: the male participant is charged with breaking the rules, but it is *she* who should have resisted. As a consequence, the parents will be likewise angry with their daughter imputing *her* with the responsibility (*doš*) of initiative. A wrangle will burst out between the families, which entails stormy objections without leaving insulting remarks and threats out of the field.

Thereupon, the issue of shame (*ladžó*) enters the scene. The situation is particularly detrimental to the young woman who is no longer deemed as *čhej* (girl) but *borí* (bride, daughter-in-law). Her face (*muj*) is defiled (even if no sexual intercourse occurred), and her shame extends to her parents: if the act is read as very serious, her family will be covered with a big shame/disgrace (*baró ladžó, bari ladž*), translatable in sociological terms as a ‘discredit before the community.’ In this way, invisible walls of social stigmatization can be erected around the young woman and her family.

Dealing with elopement: regulation, mediation, reconciliation

First reactions to elopement are always harsh. And the parents, willing to appease their soul, will conclude that their son “*has gone crazy for that girl*” (*dilájlo pála gojá čhortí*), or that the youths “*had fallen in love so much*” (*but manglé-pe, kamlé-pe*) that they eloped with the hope in a life together. What happens next will depend on the relations between the families or communities involved. In general, there are two possible paths that the regulatory process can take: rigid opposition or peaceful solution. In the former case, the hope to regain the eloped daughter subsists: yet, this option is generally simulated rather than actually considered as the runaway and her honour are no longer “retrievable.” As for the second option, elopements (as well as marriages) commonly occur within the orbit of social interaction²⁰ that the concerned are acquainted with so that the peace is generally hoped-for.

Whatever its background might be, the girl’s “escape” (*našipé*) or “abduction” (*našaripé*) is supposed to be settled in a way that would be satisfactory for both sides, at best marriage. Accordingly, a reconciliation process (*pajtipé* in Kosovo²¹), aimed at reaching a peaceful agreement among the families, is attempted. The custom wants the event to take place at the girl’s home which receives a group of male and female guests from the boy’s side; during the gathering, the concerned youths are usually absent. In some groups²², this step can be preceded by a visit of the girl’s mother to the boy’s home in order to verify whether her daughter eloped of her own will, and whether she was determined to stay with the young man of her choice.

20 Marriages are contracted within narrow territorial limits: in most cases, future life partners are from the same or nearby neighbourhood, town or village (cf. Petrovski 2001:23, Stoichkovski 2002:105). These limits may be spread out to the bordering regions (e.g. Kosovo, Macedonia and South Serbia), in which case the involved are usually from groups with similar cultural and religious background.

21 The terminology of peacemaking is derived from exogenous roots: the Albanian *pajti-* is prevailing in Kosovo dialects, whereas the Macedonian varieties have opted for the Slavic root (*s)miri-*.

22 The informant was a Rom from the Arli community native to Skopje (Macedonia).

Any form of serious variance commonly leads to the formation of a kind of people's court: the occurrence is generically called *bešipé* (lit. sitting i.e. gathering, meeting, assembly) or *čidipé* (gathering, assembly). It can also be said that the *gav* (village) or *národo* (people)²³ is gathering: despite their translations, the terms do not indicate the entire village or community but its representatives.

The mediating tradition has developed into a real institution, especially among Kosovo Gurbets: in fact, their problem-solving meetings regularly see the participation of *plešnóra* or special "judges" (pacifiers). As suggested by its name²⁴, the authority has been influenced by the Albanian culture, at least in some of its aspects. A body of *plešnóra* constitutes a peacemaking council termed *čérǵa*²⁵: it is a sort of Romani court²⁶ composed of respectable and neutral individuals in charge of appeasing the parties in conflict. Though such a court can be summoned for various purposes, its intervention is requested for serious cases mostly related to the marriage, e.g. elopement, adultery, repudiation, family disputes and the like.

In order to properly fulfil their duty, the persons entrusted with the mediation should be *baré manuš* (or *baré manušá*, big men i.e. important, respectable, eminent people), or even *májbare manušá* (the most important, outstanding people). These are the people who are esteemed for being *baré romá* (important, respectable people of the [Romani] community). A person involved in such a procedure should display a good level of reliability as *pačavdó manuš* (a man to be trusted: trustworthy, just, honest, correct, respectable man). Apart from these qualities, they are expected to be skilled in the art of rightful judging. Of course, personal preferences yielding subjective and biased decisions are not missing.

Among Kosovo-Macedonian Roma, the elopement-related negotiations are basically run by men while women follow the event with minimum or no participation. The negotiators are members of the involved families who can be aided by other actors, *plešnóra* and/or religious figures, in their capacity of mediating judges. In some cases, the meeting could host female participants: for example, the mother of one of the concerned could stand in for her daughter or son in absence of the respective male voice(s) or in case of specifically women's issues.

23 According to informants, *gav* (village) is the word used in Macedonia and *národo* (people, folk < Slavic) in Kosovo; in reality, both terms are interchangeable in various Gurbet dialects.

24 The word *plešnóra* (*pl(j)ješnára*, *plešnjiá* pl) is derived from the Albanian noun *plak(u)*, pl *pleq* [read: *plech*] (old / grown man; family head; a member of the village council; village chief or judge), or its derivatives: *pleqēni(a)* [*plech'ni-a*, *plesh'ni-a*] (old people, elders; old age), and *pleqēsi(a)* [*plech'si-a*, *plesh'si-a*] (elders; the heads of a village, the class of chiefs or superiors; council of elders or men; peacemaking council; local council or authority; senate); an outdated noun calls for particular attention: *pleqnár*, -i m [*plechnár*, *pleshnár*] (a man elected as a *plak* to deal with the issues of the village; *plak*, a member of the village council; village judge).

25 *Čérǵa* : fabric; carpet, rug for sitting; (fig.) meeting-place, meeting, gathering, council (< Turkish).

26 Comparable institutions have been observed in various Romani communities. The most studied one, characteristic of the *Kalderaša*, *Lovara* and akin Roma groups (including some northern Gurbet branches), is called *kris* (court, tribunal; law; decision, judgement; sentence). If the *kris* and some other forms of Romani jurisdiction have become a regular part of the Romani studies, the practice of *plešnóra* has been dedicated a very little space hitherto (see Piasere, 1983, 1991).

The ultimate goal is to restore relations between the families. Ritual speeches, enriched with instructive statements about married life, follow one another; a part of the talks focuses the impropriety of elopement as solution. Expected to suggest the most appropriate judgement, the pacifiers do their best in mediating (*plješnin i bući*)²⁷, putting the matter right (*lašharén i bući*), and reconciling (*pajtín*) the quarrelling parties. In extreme cases, it is said (e.g. in Kosovo) that they are “appeasing the blood” (*pajtisarén o rái*) in the sense of repairing a serious “blood offence.”

After examining all the details, the pacifiers deliver their judgement. The account of shame (*ladžó*) requires a special settlement: the boy’s father – alone or with other men – lay money (*lové, páre*) down on the tray as a “compensation” for the girl’s honour.²⁸ Sometimes, the amount is only fixed on that occasion and subsequently handed to her parents with other gifts. Despite sizeable variations, the money offer should not be exaggerated as it symbolizes the end of hostilities and the start of wedding preparations. At last, the in-laws break a loaf of bread and share a piece of it along with *šerbéto* (sugar-water): peace in the house and a “sweet” wedlock are wished by this act. After that, the attendees are offered a dinner.

As for the eloped (or differently “disgraced”) young woman, she must be settled, i.e. married, anyway. No ostracism in form of exclusion or similar measures subsists. Potential punishment will depend on the private sphere: its modality (up to possible physical violence) will be inflicted or not according to the mindset reigning in the girl’s family.

Refusal and inter-group elopement

Risks of a marriage proposal rejection are meagre since every family wants its children married. Thereby, the reasons for refusal are very few and include: preference for a particular family to tie the knot of marriage with, or infringement of the group boundaries by entering exogamous, esp. inter-religious, relationships.

Kosovo and Macedonian Roma commonly intermarry: in this respect, marriages within the Gurbet and Džambas communities are cases of endogamy. Contrarily, an attempt to tie the knot with a person from other groups would be deemed as exogamous and usually disapproved. This was the reaction that a young Džambas, Ali, had upon bringing a Sinti girl home. Their move entailed both inter-group and inter-religious (Muslim-Christian) union. Living closer than his father’s folks, four of Ali’s maternal uncles were summoned at his home. The girl was introduced to the guests, whereupon they made their best to discourage Ali from marrying her: “*they [Italian Sinti] are different, they don’t live like we do, they have different ways*” etc. Ali won, and his uncles concluded: “*he’s still young, he’ll change his mind.*” They were right: instead of getting married, the youths split up after some time.

27 Cf. the obsolete meanings of the Albanian verb *pleqësoj* [plech’soj] : ‘to act as a *plak* i.e. village judge, to solve conflicts’.

28 In case of regularly arranged marriages, many Roma groups observe the practice of paying a bride price (*baba(h)áko* in Kosovo and Macedonia) to her parents. In case of elopement, circumstances and inner community norms may produce the opposite: no compensation for the eloped girl being she no longer “pure.”

The strong opposition to marriage constitutes one of those exceptional circumstances that may bring the act of elopement before out-of-community institutions (e.g. social services, tribunal, police). External authorities themselves are often reticent before family issues of a community, Roma in this case, which openly claims its own decision-making structures. Accordingly, an external intervention can be expected in case of infringement of the minimum age for marriage or with cases of domestic violence.

The practice of inter-group elopement can also take the families to external institutions: as in the case of a young Kosovo Rom (age 21), belonging to the Muslim Gurbet community, who brought a girl from a Christian Roma family home. The result: her family reported the act to the police as kidnapping. Nevertheless, the young man was released a few hours later since the girl had not supported the accusation.

Suggestions from religion

Various Roma groups espoused various faiths, and refer to the religion they belong to in order to get answers in relation to their family life, including marriage practices. Many of Roma groups in the south-eastern Balkans are Muslims who are, moving north, gradually replaced by their Christian counterparts. Cultural contours of southern Gurbets shape a Muslim minority, often of dervish order²⁹, under a strong impact of the Balkan sociocultural landscape. Both home and abroad, the community finds itself in touch with other traditions (mostly Christian) which is increasingly affecting their culture and family life.

As Muslims, several among southern Gurbets will insist on looking for a “Muslim” answer to their doubts. Islamic explanations are sought both in the lines of sacred writings or other forms of tradition (Quran, Sunnah, hadiths), and in the intervention of a *derviši*³⁰, *šėjo*³¹ or *hódža*.³² If the former are assumed as tools providing guidance on how to deal with a particular issue, the latter are their living voices who are referred to in their capacity of experts. Thereby, many families, and not only the pious ones, will be glad to invite one or more religious representatives of the community to attend a reconciliation meeting.

The sources of Islamic tradition in Roma’s hands have passed through various cultural, social, linguistic and other filters. Namely, the religious legacy of the southern Gurbet community is an example of minority Islam superposed over the set of Balkan sociocultural patterns which has benefited from the exchange with Mediterranean, Pannonian, East European and Near Eastern cultures. The type of Islam practiced by southern Gurbets was inherited from local Albanians and Bosnian Muslims who adopted their faith from Turks in the past centuries. Consequently, Balkan

29 A good part of Roma groups in southern and central Balkans, including the community of southern Gurbets addressed by this paper, belong to *dervish* (i.e. mystical) orders of Islam.

30 *Derviši* : dervish, Muslim mystic, member of a dervish (Sufi) fraternity or order; (more strictly) a Muslim mendicant friar, ascetic, leading an austere life (< Persian).

31 *Šėjo* (*šého*, *šéhi*) : head of a Muslim religious community or school; head of a dervish order and shrine, dervish chief, spiritual guide (< Arabic).

32 *Hódža* : in Islam: priest; religion teacher; learned person (< Persian).

and Islamic elements are overlapped in the culture of this community, hence the knowledge of original Islamic precepts is not always on hand.

In practice, spiritual representatives – whose knowledge of Islam is variable – could happen to act as members of a peacemaking council. What is more, possible solutions can be perceived or interpreted as Islamic simply because they are being proposed by Muslims rather than being grounded in religious injunctions. The mediators resort to the religious tools at their disposal: yet, the answers rest on their interpretations strongly depending on their sociocultural experiences which are intertwined with their notions about Islam.

Some empirical evidences

The following is a selection of the case studies recorded over the last 15 years, mostly on the international scale between Kosovo-Macedonia and Italy. They present practical application of elopement, including possible variations from its general scheme. Each description is introduced by a heading consisting of geographical and community details of the involved, while their names and particular data have been altered for the purposes of anonymity.

Macedonian Džambas. Gana was 17 when she eloped with a young man of her choice: it took her some 70 kilometres away to reach Ahmed's place. Once the notice had burst out, a gathering was arranged by Gana's family. The *bešipé* (meeting) of some forty people, held at the *tečija* (dervish shrine) in Gana's neighbourhood, was chaired by a *šejo* (dervish chief) whose family has multiple relationships with hers. Gana's father and few men, along with the *šejo*, were sitting in front of Ahmed's family. As it occurred within the community and between families on good terms, the case presented no difficulties. After a sequence of talks and remarks on elopement, the in-laws broke a piece of bread and took some *šerbéto* (sugar-water). In the end, the wedding date and other details were roughly fixed.

Kosovo Gurbet - Kosovo Arli. Hamdi (22) met Mina in a family celebration, and he liked her at once. Having accepted Hamdi's compliments, Mina moved to his place after a while. Hamdi was grown enough to "impose" his liking: initially, some concerns arose on the part of his parents regarding possible reactions from Mina's family; but, any worries vanished as the *bešipé* was fixed at Mina's parental home (located in another town). Hamdi's parents, two paternal uncles and a friend of his father, all with the respective wives, set off in order to pay Mina's family a visit. Once at their destination, the families started the event: the "peace" was reached soon, and the lunch served for everybody.

Kosovo Gurbet - Macedonian Džambas. Hava was 19 with a failed marriage behind; Hašim was 18 with no marital experiences. As their closeness was disliked by the elders, the youths decided to rent a flat. Eager to regain their son, Hašim's parents arranged a *bešipé* at their home a month later: Hašim's paternal grandmother, a paternal aunt with her husband, and a cousin were present at the meeting; on Hava's side – her father and a maternal uncle. Hava attended the meeting, but Hašim did not want to hear about: "*we love each other, and that's it!*" After introductory talks, the climate abruptly shifted into Hava's father's threats: "*I'll take you back home at once...!*" Hava got upset, whereupon Hašim's mother and aunt encouraged her to speak up: "*don't ruin my life again!, it's my*

choice, and I want to stay!” Hava’s father gradually adapted his position up to accept the marriage. But, *“we have some traditions”* – his allusion meant the money for the eloped daughter. The answer of Hašim’s family was categorical: *“we usually pay no money for a bride in our community! She’s ours now, so you should respect the rules of our roof.”* After a brief discussion, Hašim’s relatives reached their pacts, and pledged their word to make the new marriage arrangement as satisfactory as possible for both sides. The couple has been happily married with two children, for seven years now.

Kosovo Gurbet - Macedonian Džambas. Bina and Jakub were 15 when they fell in love. As it concerned two prestigious families of the community, their feeling was not opposed for long: the chance to form a good alliance was too alluring. The youths got married and had a child. Three years later, Bina started displaying her discontent and will to return to her family. The question *“why?”* was met with no answers until it was discovered that she had an affair. The fury arose between the families, and Bina was sent back to her parents. In an exchange of bitter talks during the *bešipé*, Jakub’s father accepted no compromises in relation to his daughter-in-law who had broken the rule. Bina’s father, instead, was advised to keep her away from the neighbourhood so as to avert the risk of further tensions – in truth, the idea was to remarry her in another town. Bina’s second marriage was indeed fixed quickly and abroad. On her wedding day, Bina threatened to commit a suicide, whereupon she was sent back home. At that point, the girl took a radical step: she escaped on her own and reported her family to social services for the treatment to which she had been subjected.

Macedonian Džambas. The following case demonstrates the impact of personal experience mingled with conventionality, and how such a combination may redirect one’s outlook in time. Dehnan was 22 when he brought Nadira (16) to his parental house. A few years later, they moved abroad and had three sons. Likewise founded upon elopement, their eldest son’s marriage was dissolved after 3 years. The second son retraced the path when he was 18: judging by the failure of their first son’s marriage, as well as by their own convictions that had gradually changed, Dehnan and Nadira opposed his choice. But the youths won the battle. To prevent further “mishaps”, Dehnan and Nadira hurried the marriage of their third son: in a way, the boy was penalized for the actions of his elder brothers, particularly the eldest one. Yet, a detail is important: since the second son made a “good” choice, the third one was married to his sister-in-law’s sister – in fact, it was his brother’s wife who arranged the whole event by introducing the idea and her sister to her in-laws who accepted the proposal.

Kosovo Gurbet. Elvira was attending a wedding with her family (with no husband present) when she noticed that one of her daughters was missing. After much searching, Elvira was told that Tahira had left with a group of boys to another town. Elvira wasted no time: with the intention to find Tahira, she took her eldest daughter and few relatives. At the arrival, she started shouting: some women came out and a scuffle begun while other people tried to separate them. This is an example of violent effects that such a practice may produce. What is important here is the triple reading of the incident: viewing it as an abduction, Elvira was ready to report the case to the police (she changed her mind as it was a community matter); the boy’s family kept saying it was elopement by consent; and the girl? – whether because of her confusion, self-persuasion, real consent, or rather for her moral duty to succumb to the circumstances being already “marked”, the outcome was that Tahira eventually accepted the marriage.

Sharing cultures, sharing elopement

Wide-ranging are the visions that Roma people have been attached from the outside: as a sociocultural group, Roma are commonly framed by bipolar representations depicting them as either detrimentally patriarchal or romantically free. Meanwhile, the heterogeneity of their lifestyles is repeatedly ignored. Instead, multiple variables are to be contemplated when dealing with the Romani otherness starting from a geographical diffusion which has brought Roma people in contact with a variety of social, cultural, religious, linguistic, aesthetic, economic and other dimensions.

Once internalized this scheme, it will no longer be surprising that single Romani communities are deeply syncretic. The same applies to the Gurbet community observed in this work which leans on a number of identity layers: the fact that its members are Roma lets us trace their ancestry back to the Indian Subcontinent; more precisely, these very Roma are Muslims of dervish order; they are native to Balkans with offshoots in central and western Europe³³; they also belong to the category which is delineated as “Gypsy” by the outsiders.

In the last two centuries, and especially from the times of the 19th-century romanticism, Roma (alias ‘Gypsies’) have been adopted as an emblem of freedom. The process has generated a multilevel impact on the mainstream cultural production (culminating in literature and cinema) while depicting the “Gypsy” modus vivendi. Concurrently with this imagery, Roma were viewed as being unreconcilable with the world around them: roaming freely, irrespective of frontiers and obligations, fond of music and dance etc. – platitudes easily recallable in the vision of an average European being underpinned by overhasty information offered by lexicons, dictionaries, encyclopaedias and similar tools of mass knowledge dissemination. Having departed from romanticized poems and novels, the stories about “free Gypsies” landed on the silver screen. Such a portrayal has also affected the idea of elopement among Roma.

Thus, Leanca – already promised in marriage – got punished by her relatives for having eloped with a young Moldavian violinist, Toma. Or Rada who – cherishing her own freedom – declined the proposal from a rich nobleman: in truth, she was in love with Zobar, meaning that she preferred a Rom to a non-Rom. The motifs are taken from one of the most productive industries in this arena, the Soviet cinema of the 1970s: Emil Loteanu’s *Lăutarii* (aka *Fiddlers*, 1971) and *Tabor ukhodit v nebo* (aka *Queen of the Gypsies*, 1975) offer classical examples of a cinema engaged in depicting the Romani life spirit. And such an illustration applies to many other Romani girls around Europe in the lines of novels, poems and films.

Elopement has been confirmed throughout Romani communities. Still, the research in this area is rather meagre and the practice is basically studied in the broader frames of marriage traditions. On these grounds, rigid theories on the interconnection between Romani marital practices and other sociocultural patterns were launched. Certain authors (mainly of the 1960s to ‘80s) were inclined to interpret elopement as the Romani way of tying the knot of marriage; others, instead, defended elopement as a non-Romani way of getting married, induced by the process of interaction with other cultures, since the “original” wedding modality would have implied a free partner selection with very little or no ceremonies. Both approaches, promoted by the authors embracing the

33 See Lapov (2004, 2008, 2009).

stereotyped idea of Roma as inborn nomads, are founded upon the formula: nomadism equals freedom allowing for free choice and elopement.

But many Roma groups have never led an itinerant lifestyle. On the other hand, the effects of a patriarchal social structure used to be seen as decidedly extrinsic to the Romani being: the patriarchy – including a settled way of life, arranged marriage and inner judiciary – would have been adopted by Roma (as a whole) in the Near East or Balkans, especially in contact with Islam.³⁴ Yet, it seems utterly implausible that the forefathers of the European Roma were exempt from any form of patriarchy before or after reaching the said regions.

The lack of a wider contextualization was a crucial factor for such a reading of Roma's social history, which has been meanwhile deconstructed by findings of sociological, anthropological and linguistic research in a cross-cultural perspective. As for elopement, it has been largely demonstrated that no links between marriage patterns, lifestyle, existence of inner judicial systems or not, and sociocultural orientation of the given Roma group exist:³⁵ various contexts claim various elements, being their combinations countless.

The idea of marital union is built upon a “give-and-take” (*de-ſle-*) principle, by which daughters are “given” to marriage, while both sides “take” partners. Elopement or fictitious symbolic abduction have been assumed as a way to get married in some Roma and Sinti groups (mainly in western and central Europe). Still, this function of elopement cannot be generalized. In most cases, youths and especially girls are subject to a row of social norms with marriage founded upon the choices of their elders and reciprocal alliances between families.

Besides, the use of elopement is documented all over the territories where Roma identities have developed – Europe, Near East, Middle East, and beyond. Attempts to reconnect the practice to the “Indian” sociocultural orbit prove to be illusory: subcontinental shadows retrievable in the Romani culture of today are too meagre to let such speculations possible. As for the Balkans, that the Gurbet Roma community is native to, elopement have been recorded as a common social practice across the cultures of the Region.

When talking about the phenomenon with Kosovo-Macedonian Roma, it is repeatedly stated that elopements used to be less frequent in the past. Despite this first-hand evidence, a closer scrutiny shows a quite regular frequency of the practice, at least in the last two to three generations. However, elopement has not been admitted to the set of acceptable practices. Another point is that the lack of its normalization has actually created a space for elopement in the milieu bound by customary norms; in other words, the practice became less common in those settings where social control and restrictions have been progressively loosened.

Vestiges of the patriarchal heritage, abiding by a body of obligations and responsibilities, can be clearly discerned in such social behaviours. In fact, elopement and similar practices (e.g. symbolic bride abduction) appear to constitute a social response rather than a custom. The phenomenon has

34 See, for instance, Cozannet (2000, orig. 1973, esp. pp. 92-97).

35 See e.g. Marushiakova, Popov (2007, esp. pp. 72-73).

been moulded in conformity to a surrounding sociocultural environment: as a tile of the Balkan mosaic, the culture of southern Gurbets comprises elements from other local traditions, hence the forms of their family life reflect primarily the habits of the Balkan cultural realm. Marriage patterns (starting from the marriageable age) among Roma reveal their long-lasting contacts with other traditions, namely: marriage customs of Macedonian Orthodox Roma are quite similar to those of the Macedonians; likewise, marriage customs of Muslim Roma have been formed in interaction with local Muslim communities (Stoichkovski 2002:105). It finally means that the familiarity of practices that could be comparatively observed in a Romani community and other social groups (Roma or not) is a reverberation of sharing cultural experiences in a multilateral perspective.

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