

Jelena Čvorović, Belgrade

## What Makes Them Tick

*The Social Significance of Serbian Gypsy Oral Tradition*

### *Introduction*

Gypsies (or Roma) are a population of South Asian stock who migrated to Eastern Europe from northwest India between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries (Fraser 1992). Traditional stories and other forms of oral narratives have been an important part of Gypsy culture and education throughout this period (Čvorović 2006). Gypsies are present in Serbia since the Middle Ages, living within a larger Serbian culture as a minority group. Since their coming to Europe, Gypsies have had to be concerned with how to survive: they have always been an oppressed caste, molested, murdered and discriminated against, and their relative social and economic standing has changed very little in the past century (Hancock 1987; Fraser 1992).

Presently there are approximately 300,000–500,000 Gypsies living in Serbia, in severe poverty, with mass unemployment, poor education and poor quality housing, segregated from the majority (Save the Children 2001). In the past, Gypsies occupied an ecological niche within the larger society. Their interactions with the surrounding population were based on cooperation in trade, but they engaged in relatively little marriages with outsiders. Their endogamy was self-maintained as much as it was imposed. At the same time, Gypsy demographic characteristics greatly differ from those of the Serbian population as a whole: they have high birth rates, death rates are well above the average, and they have also higher infant mortality (Čvorović 2004).

The theoretical approach used in this paper to address traditional stories is part of a growing interest in the significance of narrative in human evolution. The approach differs, however, from most evolutionary analyses of stories in that I focus on cultural variation and change over time. There exists a developed body of studies that examine literature as a product of a psyche designed by natural selection: this approach uses knowledge and concepts of the evolutionary perspective to understand and explain characteristics of oral literary creation and other forms of art (Carroll 1995; Storey 1996; Miller 2000). According to this approach literature and its preceding oral representations should be seen as an extension of the individual's adaptive orientation to its environment, both social and natural. This approach is founded on four major principles derived from the evolutionary perspective: the relationship between an individual and its environment is a matrix concept prior to all social, psychological and other concepts; the human mind has evolved through an adaptive process of natural selection; all proximate causes are

regulated by the principles of inclusive fitness as ultimate cause; and all representation, including literary, is a form of cognitive mapping (Carroll 1995, 33; id. 2002a, 610f.). The topics of mate choice, mating strategies, female adultery, step-parenthood, cross-cultural patterns, motivation structure and narrative function have been examined by evolutionary psychologists, anthropologists and evolutionarily-minded literary scholars (Daly/Wilson 1998/99; Scalise Sugiyama 2001; Gottschall et al. 2003; Boyd 2005; Storey 1996; Palmer et al. 2006; Steadman/Palmer 1997).

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

Like many people around the world, Gypsies have relied heavily on oral traditions as a source of obtaining knowledge and information on history of their ancestors, proper kin behaviour, economic life, relationships with other peoples, and many aspects of the everyday world. Also like many other people, Gypsies have told stories generation after generation and with relatively little alteration. That is, their stories are traditional tales in which particular elements, especially the main topic, stay unaltered and which are transmitted as a cultural inheritance from one generation of kin to the next (Palmer et al. 2006).

Like many other groups (MacDonald 2002), Gypsies have developed group structures that, at least for some time, served to keep them separate from surrounding peoples. In an attempt to interpret the social significance of Gypsy stories I tried to relate the stories to Gypsy culture. To paraphrase Dundes, the ultimate goal should be in understanding human nature, not the nature of oral literature as an end in itself (Dundes 1969, 421).

During several years of fieldwork among Serbian Gypsies, I have recorded about eighty tales/traditional stories from the oral tradition of several different Gypsy groups (Karavlox Gypsies, Gurbeti, Njamci and Cergari Gypsies) who show varying degrees of influence from Serbian culture (Čvorović 2006, 2008). In addition, I conducted historical, cultural and ethnographic research, which has helped to define the basic parameters important to the understanding of a particular local Gypsy tradition and its persistence through time.

I assent that stories in general can have an effect on the behaviour of the audience, and that some of these effects regulate social behaviour, or survival and reproduction. Not all tales, however, have the same impact or function. Among Serbian Gypsies, for example, there are several types of stories: some serve as entertainment only, such as 'scary' stories about the dead and various jokes; others are 'educational' stories, to which the Gypsies refer as their 'school'. Some

stories are a mix of these types. All are enjoyed very much, but I discuss only the latter ones that can be said to have a real effect on behaviour. I examine two traditional tales told among Serbian Gypsies that both reflect past social environments and influence future social behaviour. The first is called *Lena – Losing a River*, and the second *Cut, Cut Her Hands off!* In addition to other evolutionary strategy mechanisms, like genetic cohesion, resource competition, and social barriers, I argue that Gypsies use traditional stories as mechanisms to regulate and manipulate the social behaviour within the group. The stories illustrate how oral narratives can deal with universal adaptive problems, while simultaneously offering guides to overcoming these problems in new and unique social environments.

The stories presented here were collected in the district of Mačva, western Serbia, in the rural settlement of Gornja Vranjska, seven kilometers from the district's capital, the town of Šabac. The majority of Gornja Vranjska's Gypsy population averages around four years of schooling (Čvorović 2008). Many of the Mačva Gypsies work in a black-market (gray) economy, engaging in trade of various sorts, although some make a living as hired farmhands. They tend to marry at an early age, and high fertility is kind of a social obligation. The Gypsies from Gornja Vranjska were Muslims in the past; the other Gypsy groups from the area call them 'German Gypsies', while they themselves claim to have come from Russia.

The Gypsies from Gornja Vranjska assert that traditional tales are still told almost every day, especially to young children and teenagers, as an important part of their education. Many of the children do not attend the local school regularly; most girls drop out of school at the age of eleven or twelve and get married. For many older Gypsies, these stories represented the only form of 'education', in addition of imitating the everyday life of older members of their extended family. Both young and old Gypsies enjoy the storytelling very much; usually, the stories are told by grandparents or older members of the extended family. However, if it happens that a grandparent forgets or omits some details or certain elements in a story, youngsters immediately help out and fill in the parts. The stories are narrated fully, even lascivious parts are told in front of young children, since according to the informants it is only then that the stories are 'true'.

The storytelling analyzed in this paper took place in November 2006, in a beat-up little house owned by Mrs. Nikolić, an elderly female Gypsy, probably around seventy years of age. She had a stroke recently, and lost most of her teeth, but according to her own words, that does not prevent her from telling stories to her great-grandchildren and grandchildren. The room was filled with her relatives including her eight grandchildren; she told the stories in fluent Serbian, which were recorded and later translated into English. The first story she chose to tell is about the ancestor/founder of the group and the group's origin. The story has been narrated over and over again in her family for generations, and many of her grandchildren know it well. The title of the story (*Lena – Losing a River*) refers to 'Lena', which in Romani, the Gypsy language, means 'river':

*Lena – Losing a River*

Our old people say ‘we are travelers’. This story is what they say about the origin of our group, Njamci. Back in our homeland, India, we lost fire. Our ancestors came out to look for the lost fire, and along the way, they lost a river, too. Actually, our old people say that the river moved away, and that is why we are on the move all the time: we look for our fire and river. The river they lost was Lena. It is only our group that calls every river Lena, other Gypsies do not have that word in their vocabulary.

Anyway, our ancestors searched and searched for them, and they reached Russia in the seventeenth century. We never lived in one place, we moved and moved, and sometimes made camps near some river, but it was never the right one, so we had to move again. All old people talked about the river Lena, all the time, everything centred around it – our everyday life, conversation, decisions on how to find it. There were around 200 individuals in our group at that time. Sometimes all of them would travel together, but most often they would split into several *chergas* [wagons] and travel individually, meeting at night at a chosen place. And every person had his or her own chores within the tribe. Our tribe would move and move, and then finally decide to camp for a while near some settlement.

Old women were fortune-tellers and healers. That is how they made money from local [non-Gypsy] people. Old women were also the primary caretakers of our children; they would gather plants to use them in healing ceremonies. Still today, we have one magical plant that is used to stop female [menstrual] bleeding; old women sell it in the local market today, but I don’t know if it really does something. Before, all men were musicians, playing one instrument or another, and made their living by entertaining local people. There was one designated group of young girls who were dancers and served as decoy for the local population [non-Gypsy]. They sold love to the local males, only to earn some money – they were, in fact, prostitutes. A girl like that would be really lucky if she conceived a child with a local man because the man would provide for the child sometimes, with money or some food ... Our little children worked their way through, too: they sold little things, like ribbons or baskets and made some money, too. That is how most of our people live even today: a Gypsy can sell a dead horse and trick a customer anytime!

In Russia, we were illiterate, and without alphabet, of course, but we used some special signs. These signs in the form of engravings or little branches were left along the way, usually by some river. For example, when one *cherga* needed to move along, they would leave these signs for the other *chergas* from the group. The signs explained whom [among the local population] they had afflicted so that the next *cherga* that came along didn’t go to the same houses or people. This was done in order to prevent conflict with the locals; the signs were to point out who was swindled in the local population, how the locals received the Gypsies, if the locals believed in any superstitions or were afraid of things like ghosts or vampires. This is how Gypsies make money out of the locals by petty crime, stealing, and fortune-telling. These signs contained the whole psychological analysis of one settlement, and surely they helped the other Gypsies from the group.

In 1815, seven *chergas* had to run away from Russia, and they came to Serbia. This is how that happened: a young man named Nikola seduced and robbed one white local female, named Olga. She was a countess, or so. He was very handsome, and skillful, and had black hair like a raven’s wing! Olga was also very beautiful and young, and they had a baby. So the locals wanted to kill them all, but they managed to escape. Nikola’s family escaped in seven wagons to Serbia, and they settled in Vranjska

and Mačvanska Mitrovica. When they first got here, they claimed to be Russian princes and princesses, and they started doing everything: playing music, entertaining, trade of all kinds, until they got settled. And they converted to Orthodoxy, to survive. That is why we have the same last name – Nikolić, from our ancestor Nikola who seduced the white Russian aristocrat. Two wagons left afterwards to America, the rest stayed here, and we are all relatives, the Nikolićs.

This story can be classified as a type of origin story that contains ‘true speech’ (Stewart 1997). That is, the informants explained that this and similar stories ‘had to be true’ because they had been learned from the ancestors and retold many times to the younger generations. By repeating the same story heard from the ancestors, whether true or not, these Gypsies create cooperative social behaviour, a form of altruism within their own group, transmitted culturally from one generation to the next. This story accounts for why these Gypsies acknowledge that they are Roma; however, they perceive themselves as culturally different from the other groups from Mačva. Through this story, each generation learns to trace back the origin of their group to Russia and to an alleged ancestor named Nikola, and that is what distinguishes them from all other groups in the area. These kinds of stories provide Gypsies with a device for identifying ‘who is who’ in their social world and with instructions on how to behave accordingly. As one informant put it: “You hear them all the time, from our grandmothers to their children. Each tribe has its own, so we know who belongs to whom.” That is, within Mačva, Gypsy groups still insist on a social separation among categories of kin and there is little cooperation between these categories. Within each category, or ‘tribe’, kinship is the basis of the social organization and hierarchy, and mutual aid and daily economic cooperation is expected between relatives (Čvorović 2006).

The complex relationship between this origin story and historical reality is indicated by the fact that ‘Nikolić’ is a common last name among non-gypsy Serbians. According to the census for the Gornja Vranjska village, there are more than twenty Serbian families with the same name. After Serbia’s liberation from the Turks in late nineteenth century, many Islamic Gypsies took on Serbian last names (Djordjević 1932), which indicate a Serbian ethnic identity and refer to traditional Serbian customs and holidays, in their effort to become better accepted and create dealing relationships with the Serbian majority (Čvorović 2004). The description of the origin of the name of Nikolić in the story is a local variance of Gypsy adaptation to the different requirements of their social surroundings because their ability to make a living has depended upon interactions with their host populations. In Mačva, they abandoned the characteristic Gypsy dress, language, nomadism and religion (Islam) but have retained their pronatalist tradition and social separation from non-Gypsies.

The origin story also has the typical Gypsy setting where Gypsies are traveling musicians and craftsmen who successfully employ a range of behaviours that involve stealing, tricking, and manipulating non-Gypsies. In the story, lying to, stealing from, and outwitting non-Gypsies are presented as socially accepted forms of conduct. With this demeanour, Gypsies managed to survive, reproduce and maintain their separation from the surrounding populations. These forms of

behaviour have become a stereotype for Gypsies. Soon after their arrival in Europe, they obtained a reputation as thieves, fortune-tellers and horse-dealers of questionable honesty (Fraser 1992). To this day, Gypsies are commonly associated with theft, lock-picking, purse-stealing, horse-stealing, casting spells, and witchcraft and trickery in general (Fraser 1992; MacDonald 2002). During their history in Serbia, Gypsies have chosen only particular professions where they were self-employed and which did not call for education (Djordjević 1932; Čvorović 2006). Everywhere, with modernization, they abandoned old occupations in favor of new ones but without compromising their freedom, ethnicity and residential flexibility (Fraser 1992). Throughout their history, stealing from and tricking a *gadje* (non-Gypsy) were considered as socially expected forms of behaviour (Sutherland 1975). In the story, the whole relationship between Gypsies and non-Gypsies is based on such conduct, and the manipulation of non-Gypsies is praised. The Gypsies value being able to obtain money, goods or food from the *gadje* by outwitting them, and the story justifies this stereotype. This story replicates and describes the environment in which the Gypsy ancestors struggled to survive. As a consequence, the narrative and the Gypsy real world are compatible in many constant and predictable ways, and many Gypsies are hence able to use narrative information/knowledge as a model of proper behaviour which helps them to negotiate their social environment in their effort to survive and reproduce.

The next narrative was also told by Mrs. Nikolić. It illustrates how a variant of an international folktale type can be modified to become a story that provides knowledge necessary to pursue goals or overcome obstacles in the current local environment (Scalise Sugiyama 2001). My informants claim the story to be 'of Gypsy origin', unique to this group. The story, however, clearly shows how Gypsy culture and tradition have mixed with non-Gypsy cultures. "This is one horrible story", says Mrs. Nikolić, "this is how it goes, how I heard it from my mother-in-law ... I was only thirteen when I got married, just a child, and I enjoyed the stories very much, but this ones scared me a lot!"

#### *Cut, Cut Her Hands off!*

A long time ago, one master/landlord [a Serb] used to live in this village. He had a big house, land, and a wife. It happened that his wife died; before she passed away, she said: "Here, I am leaving my husband, my house and my slippers. Whichever woman manages to wear my slippers, she'll be the one to inherit from me all of my power, possessions and status." And that's how she left this world, and her slippers. And the slippers were nice, decorated with ribbons and silk and lace. The house maid, one young Gypsy girl cleaned the house every day, and it happened that one day she found the slippers and couldn't resist trying them on, that is how pretty they were. When the landlord saw the Gypsy girl in his late wife's slippers, he started to yell and scream at the girl: "What did you do, you fool, you poor girl? Misfortune will come now, don't you know that your late mistress said whoever can wear those slippers will inherit her and take her place!" The landlord was really upset and unhappy, for the girl was nice and had served him well, but what could he do, he had to punish the reckless girl [for daring to step into his late wife's slippers]. He ordered his servants

to take the girl away and cut off her hands and take out her eyes. So, the servants took the girl to a nearby forest, to cut off her hands, and blinded her by taking out her eyes. Nevertheless, the Gypsy girl was on good terms with everybody, and with the servants, too. Everybody loved her, for she was exceptionally polite, beautiful and bright. So she said to the servants: "We have served together in the house, you are good keepers, we ate and drank together, please don't cut off my hands! Please don't blind me, don't take my eyes out! Please, cut off my hands but leave me my eyes, for how could I live without my eyes and my hands!" The keepers felt sorry for the girl and felt compassion for the poor girl, so they said: "Here's one poor dog here, we'll take her eyes to the landlord instead of your's but we have to cut your hands off." And that's how they did it. They took the dog's eyes and the girl's chopped hands to the landlord. And they said: "Here, our master, are the girl's eyes and her hands; we did everything as you requested, and the girl has been punished." The landlord said nothing.

The girl without hands remained all alone in the forest. All by herself, wounded and scared. She ate only what she found on the ground: chestnuts, walnuts, grass, flowers, only what she could pick up with her mouth. For she didn't have any hands. Then she saw a hollow beech-tree and hid there to sleep. A few days went by, and the girl was all alone in the forest. Then one day, she heard some noise, a horse's stamping, and she managed to crawl out from her hidden place and saw a nice decorated carriage. The carriage was parked in front of a garden full of apple trees, and she said: "I'm lucky, I will have apples to eat!" She entered the garden, and saw that all the apples were hanging really low, and she started to catch them with her teeth, for she didn't have hands. And so another few days went by; the girl without hands ate and slept in this garden full of apple trees.

One day, a young man appeared in the garden; he was a custodian of the apple-trees and the emperor's son, a young prince. The forest and the apple trees belonged to the emperor. The prince immediately saw that someone had been eating the emperor's apples, and asked in a loud voice: "Who is it that dared to eat in the emperor's garden, without his permission? Who left teeth marks on all of these apples? I can see that it is not a wild animal." He got no answer. The next day, he came again to check on the apple garden, and he saw that someone had eaten even more apples – there were half-eaten apples with teeth-marks all over the ground. He became really puzzled and asked again: "Who dares to steal and eat the emperor's apples?" The poor girl without hands didn't say a thing, she just crawled on the ground, biting the apples. And then, the prince spotted her: he saw a beautiful girl with shiny black hair but with no hands! "What are you doing", he asked, "who gave you the permission to eat these apples?" The girl responded: "Oh, my brother, please don't ask me anything, don't ask me who permitted me to eat in this garden, I am so hungry." "What happened to your hands", the prince asked. And then the girl told him the whole story from the beginning: how she served well in one house for years, how she inconsiderately wore her late mistress' slippers and how her landlord had to punish her by cutting her hands off, and how, since then, she was wandering alone, hungry and lonely. The prince felt compassion for the poor creature, and allowed her to stay in the garden. And day by day, she stayed in the garden, and he came to see her. He fell in love with her. The prince brought her some food every day: some bread, some bacon, some water; and he fed her with his own hands. The prince gave the girl his golden ring, to protect her and guard her in his empire. One day he decided to tell his mother, the empress, about the poor girl. He says: "Mother, there is a beautiful girl in our garden, she ate our apples, and I bring her food every day and I feed her." The

empress mother said: "I noticed that you were taking some food from our table, but tell me, son, who's that girl?" The son retold to his mother, the empress, the whole story about the poor Gypsy girl; how she served her masters well, how she made one mistake and how awfully she is punished for her mistake. The mother got angry: "Why do you need a cripple, what good is this girl without hands, for she cannot do any job, will you provide for her and feed her for the rest of her life?" And the son answered: "Listen mother, what do you do? You have servants who prepare food for you, clean and care for you, while you just boss them around. This girl is a good girl, she has worked hard all of her life, and she was punished too harshly. I will bring her home, whether you like it or not." And so he did. He brought the girl without hands before his mother and father. The mother was furious, but what could she do, her son loves the crippled girl, so she allowed the girl to stay in their kitchen, near the hearth with ashes, which is why the girl is called Cinderella. Her job was to wash dirty laundry with ash, that's how they used to do it, in the past. The girl tried and tried to do the washing but she couldn't do it. The girl spent the days with her beloved prince and the nights in the cold kitchen.

And so the winter came, cold and harsh, the stone is breaking, the snow is falling hard. The empress decided that the time had come for her son to find a bride. And so his parents organized many balls, dances and parties, where the most beautiful girls from all over the empire were invited. [At this point Mrs. Nikolić turns to her fifteen-year-old-granddaughter, pointing a finger toward her and says: "You child, listen to this, it is your time now to go to these dances and find a husband, be careful whom you will chose."] But the prince disliked each and every girl. For none was even similar to his dear handless girl, his Cinderella. Finally, his sorrow made him ill. In the meantime, the girl without hands lived modestly, and tried to perform all of the duties given to her. She saw how her beloved man fell sick, and she felt sorry for him. One day she put the gold ring he gave her into one big pot with hot soup. And while the emperor's family was having lunch, the young prince found a ring in his soup. Everybody was puzzled: how did the emperor's ring get into his soup? But the young prince made up his mind, and ordered that the girl is to be brought before everybody and he proclaimed that he will marry the girl without hands or nobody else. The girl was embarrassed, for how could she marry a prince? She had no clean clothes and she didn't belong there. But she had to obey; and she was given nice clothes and made into a clean nice girl, like the ones from the ball. The mother was against the wedding, but she said nothing. Cinderella was very grateful and she promised her prince to bear him many children. She said: "I will give you a daughter with a star on her forehead and a son with a moon on his forehead, and all of their children will have the same signs, and they will form a new empire." And so it was. And the prince seemed pleased for he loved his wife very much even though she had no hands.

Then the time came when the young prince had to join the army and fight in a war that would last for seven long years. As soon as the young prince left, the girl without hands gave birth to two wonderful children: a daughter with a star on her forehead and a son with a moon on his forehead, just as she promised. They were truly like an emperor's children, bearing a sign, the most beautiful twins ever. But it wasn't their fate to remain so: the empress mother hated the girl without hands and her children, for she was not a good mother-in-law. She was very dangerous: she substituted a few puppies for the new-born children; she placed the puppies in the emperor's cradle, and yelled at her daughter-in-law: "Look, you good for nothing poor girl without hands, you gave birth not to human children but to puppies!" And what could the poor girl do, nothing, so she remained silent. And the empress mother wrote a letter

to her only son: "Oh, oh, my son, your wife without hands gave birth to dogs instead to a human child! Can't you see that this is such a shame and disgrace, a misfortune!" And her son replied: "Chase her away immediately, if you are telling the truth!" And so it was. The empress mother chased the girl with her two children away, to wander around the world. She tied one scarf around the girl's neck and put her children in it. The girl with the twins wandered around the world, managing the best way she could, without her hands and with two small children ...

After several years, the young prince returned from the war as a victor. He came home and asked his mother to tell him again about the girl without hands and how she gave birth to puppies. He understood that something wasn't right. He asked his mother: "Where is my wife and where are my children?" And the mother replied: "I sent them away, just as you ordered. I tied one scarf around the girl's neck and placed her offspring there, and so they went off to wander around the world." The prince decided to search for his wife, and took his favourite horse and started to follow the girl's footsteps ...

And the girl without hands, with a scarf around her neck and her two children inside wandered around for days until she reached one lonely house at the crossroads. The house was empty but for one old woman, who lived there alone. The old woman gave her supper, and fed her, and helped her with her children, for she couldn't even bath her own babies, she had no hands. The girl stayed with this old woman for some time, and after some time elapsed, and the old woman saw that the girl was good and honest and sincere, she said: "Listen my child, you have no hands. Get up really early tomorrow morning, before four o'clock and go to this spring which is charmed. Place your arms in the water before the sun comes up, first one and then the other, and when you pull them out of the charmed spring, your hands will come back. And the girl did exactly as the old woman told her to do. And she came back from the charmed spring with both of her hands, grown again. When she came home, she was able, for the first time, to bath and care for her children. They remained in the house with the old woman for some time, and the girl cared for her children, the house and the old woman well. After some time, a lonely rider came to their house and asked if he could spend the night, for he was very tired. He said he had been traveling for years. And the old woman allowed him to stay for one night. The man started to ask if she saw anyone traveling with a scarf recently, but the old woman remained silent. And so he fell asleep. When the dawn came, he was still sleeping, with one leg slinging over the bed; the girl said: "My son, go and help your father, put his leg back to the bed, so he doesn't get stiff when he wakes up." And the boy did so. Then the man slung his arm over the bed, and the girl said: "Go, my daughter, put your father's arm back to bed, so he is not hurting when he wakes up." And the girl obeyed. The old woman made some breakfast, and the man finally woke up. The old woman said: "Eh, my son, it's almost midday, wake up, we still have some talk to do. Who are you and where do you come from?" Now the man is silent, sitting with his head down, saying nothing, just looking at the girl and her children. Then the woman started to talk: "Years ago, one young woman without hands and with two children came to my house, and I took them, and helped them, and then they helped me. This is your wife and these are your children, now take them to your home, where they belong." And the man said: "I recognized my wife and my children, but now she has both hands and before she had none but I still loved her." They both thanked the old woman and decided to go home: on one horse, the prince took his son, and on the other, the girl took their daughter and after a long journey they finally reached home. When they got there, the son ordered that his mother, the empress, must be punished, torn to pieces

by horses. And that the landlord who ordered the girl's punishment was fined a great deal of gold. And that is how it happened. The girl lived happily with her husband and two children for the rest of her life, and the children founded a new empire ...

So, this was the story. That is how I will end up, torn to pieces, when I become totally useless. This is a disturbing story. We have no land of our own, hence this story takes place in a country where we presently reside. This is one very educational story, many young people can learn a proper way of behaviour, how to act and meet life troubles. It is our custom that a young bride must obey and respect her mother-in-law; but if she [the bride] sinned, she must pay for her sins, the same as this empress-mother-in-law – she is rightfully punished! It is the right thing to do – to give up your in-laws, even your parents if they are not good to you.

The story presented here belongs to the international tale-type AaTh/ATU 706: *The Maiden without Hands*. Gypsies narrate it with considerable alterations, made by the Gypsies themselves. The present Gypsy version strongly resembles the Serbian tale *Hadzija's daughter* (Popović 1905, 64–67), although the Christian elements are absent. In addition, the story also includes some of the elements (parts, episodes, motifs) of other well-known folktales (AaTh/ATU 707: *The Three Golden Children*; AaTh/ATU 510 B: *Peau d'Asne*; see also Mot. S 51: *Cruel mother-in-law*; Mot. S 301: *Children abandoned [exposed]*; Mot. S 410: *Persecuted wife*). The middle part of the story could be classified as a variant of an ordinary folktale, made up of several segments of different though fragmented or altered tales, including the motif of the shoe (Mot. H 36.1: *Slipper test*. Identification by fitting of slipper) and the girl's position as a servant which refers to *Cinderella*.

Unlike ordinary tales of the similar type, however, the beginning of the story is a description of the Gypsy social surrounding: the story depicts the way Gypsies understand their relationships with Serbs, where Gypsies are a minority oppressed by the majority. In this sense, the story is a mixture of realism and folktale. In contrast to other variants of the same tale-type, the authority figure who mutilates and harms the Gypsy heroine is not her father (or a brother) but her employer, a Serb. The incest motif (whether a daughter's or a father's projection) present in other stories of the same type (Dundes 1980; Popović 1905) is thus omitted and replaced with the girl's aspiration to marry up. Here, the fact that the late mistress's slippers fit the Gypsy girl signifies identification of the person with the shoes: the Gypsy girl is worthy of becoming the master's wife in spite of her socially inferior background, position and ethnicity.

As in many other stories, we find universals of literary and oral narrative at the macro level: the Gypsies' problems of adaptation concerning marriage and choice of the right partner; repressions of an ethnic group/minority and a hostile social environment; variations at the micro level are: local solutions to these adaptive problems and constraints (Scalise Sugiyama 2003). In the beginning of the story, the Gypsy girl is unmarried, while the story ends with her happy marriage, children and reunion with her husband. This is the recurring motif in oral and written literature: reproductive success, marriage/sexual union and the production of successful offspring is crucial to human concerns and hence to literary works (Carroll

1995, 122). Throughout the story, the girl is portrayed as beautiful, humble, passive and obedient, consistent with the description of female heroines in other folktales of the world that deal with marriage as a central theme (Gottschall et al. 2003). The Gypsy story covers the process of securing the right mate, as well as the consequences of aiming at the wrong one.

It is also clear why the Gypsies have changed the story and how this variation is being produced: owing to social and environmental differences, the means and information relevant to solving adaptive problems differ from place to place and thus produce cultural variation (Scalise Sugiyama 2003). In the interaction with the local environment and their experiences and knowledge of social relations, the Gypsies altered the story to serve their own needs. Until the moment the girl has put on her late mistress's slippers, she was a good servant to her employer; and though she was able to fit in the slippers, and so to succeed to her late mistress, she remains unsuitable – due to her lowly background and ethnicity. Although she was not provoked or encouraged in any way by her master, the Gypsy girl aimed at marrying her master who belonged to a different background, and so broke an unwritten rule of conduct concerning suitable marriages pattern among Serbs and Gypsies. The position she finds herself in – a mutilated outcast – is a consequence of her own behaviour. The punishment is harsh: without hands, the Gypsy girl cannot perform any duties, and can thus not even work as a servant; she becomes totally debased, a useless, crippled and outcast creature, whose survival depends on the good will and mercy of another human being.

This could well represent an allusion to the situation of the Gypsies, or how they perceive themselves with respect to the majority: Gypsies always constituted an oppressed caste. In the Byzantine Empire, they were called *Antiganoi*, meaning 'untouchables' (Hancock 1987). They were enslaved, forbidden to enter churches or to intermarry with whites, and were permitted to exercise only specific occupations. In Serbia, their activities (crafts and entertainment) contributed to the country's economy, but Gypsies were always despised by the Serbs, isolated and considered as people living at the bottom of the social ladder (Djordjević 1932). Even today, many Gypsies complain that whatever they do, it is not good enough for the Serbs (Čvorović 2006).

On the other hand, Dundes (1980, 218) suggests that cutting one's hands is a negative response to giving one's hand in marriage, hence the symbolism is clear. For the Gypsies, the story points to almost any maltreatment by an authority. By substituting an employer of a different background for an authoritative father figure, the Gypsies projected the relationships onto the surrounding majority, the Serbs. This part of the story tells about the obstacles to adaptation that Gypsies face: despised, sometimes tolerated, but never fully accepted by the Serbs, especially as marriage mates, it points to deep feelings of degradation and oppression that Gypsies must have experienced in their interaction with the Serbs.

The girl's subsequent marriage to an emperor, after many obstacles and sufferings, brings about her social transformation from a servant and helpless cripple into a respected woman. What may most strike many people in this story is the Gypsy girl's apparent passivity and her ready acceptance of life obstacles: mutila-

tion, degradation, abuse and slander by her mother-in-law. For the most part, the heroine does not try to take action, complain or try to change her destiny in any way. In addition, unlike other protagonists in variants of the same tale-type, she does not try to draw attention to her obvious physical beauty – on the contrary, she even tries to resist to dressing in nice clothes.

From the story, it appears that the Gypsy girl's only pledge in her pursuit of security is marital loyalty and obedience, symbolized by the ring given to her by the young emperor when they first meet. The emperor had tried to get married with a suitable girl, but could not find the right one, in spite of numerous marriageable young women presented. The Gypsy girl remains humble and silent, and by putting the ring in his soup, reminds him of her availability, submission and patient waiting. These are exactly the behaviours young Gypsy girls are taught before marriage (Savić 2001). Status and security can only be acquired through marriage to a person of a higher status – no less than to an emperor, in this case – and the only thing she has or wants to offer is her fidelity and striking submission. Her husband, the emperor, finally recognizes this and accepts her the way she is. Many Gypsy stories involve three common characters: a Gypsy, a Serb (usually referred to as peasant, master or landlord) and an emperor, who, according to their own words, 'has no ethnicity', but is 'supranational'. It has always been difficult for Gypsies to marry into peasant or any other group with clearly defined ethnic boundaries; on the other hand, in the story, a marriage to a person of higher status, regardless of his ethnic background, is obviously considered a proper marriage choice for Gypsies. In the story, it is significant that the one willing to marry the mutilated girl is none less than the young emperor who has no ethnicity or nationality. This suggests that only a person who is not nationalistic, not jingoistic can accept Gypsies the way they are. The girl's passivity, and her intention not to change her behaviour and appearance might indicate that Gypsies want to be accepted the way they are, without any effort on their part to comply with whichever rules of behaviour are governing the surrounding populations. As an ethnic group, Gypsies have survived relying on their own traditions – cultural behaviour and enhanced reproduction, the aim being to achieve the same effect through behaviour that in the past has contributed to replication.

The proper marriage choice is indicated by the restoration of the girl's hands, which metaphorically refers to the fact that someone appropriate has asked for and been granted the girl's hand (Dundes 1980, 218). The girl's marriage to the emperor points to a preference for hypergamy; because for many Gypsies in Serbia, a rise in social status is only possible through an exogamous marriage (Čvorović 2006). This is also indicated by the words Mrs. Nikolić addressed to her teenage granddaughter, when she interrupted the storytelling, stressing the importance of the right choice in marriage. The importance for Gypsies of marrying up the socio-economic scale is further supported by evidence from Hungary where Gypsy women are more likely than Gypsy men to engage in exogamous marriages (as a way of marrying up), and the survival chances of children from such marriages are better than those of children born to endogamous Gypsy couples (Bereczkei/Dunbar 1997).

Throughout the story, the Gypsy girl stays true to her own passive and subservient acceptance of destiny (her 'Gypsiness') and to her husband, in spite of the great trial she has to endure. When her husband finally finds her, everything is the way it should be, or the way Gypsies would like it to be. Those who have harmed the Gypsy girl are punished, and she finally begins to live happily. In addition, her children, the twins, the alleged ancestors of all Gypsies, create a Gypsy empire. This motif – the birth of twins who create a new empire and who represent the ancestors of all Gypsies – is a recurrent trait in Gypsy stories (Djordjević 1938). For the Gypsies, this particular narrative suggests that the higher one marries up the better chances are for acceptance, survival and reproduction.

### *Conclusion*

Both of these stories concern many aspects of the relationship between Gypsies and other social groups, in the historical past and the present. At the same time, the stories deal with universal adaptive problems, like origin/ethnicity, kinship and mate acquisition. By applying concepts and folk knowledge from their own culture, Gypsies have managed to offer guidelines to overcome these problems in their particular environment. That is, these stories express both human universals and cultural particularities by offering local cultural solutions to adaptive problems. During their evolutionary history, humans have confronted a repeated series of tasks necessary to survival and reproduction, including acquisition of food, resources, recognition, cooperation, mate choice, childrearing, defense and so on (Scalise Sugiyama 2003, 385). Adaptive problems and their solutions are constant across cultures, and human nature has evolved to address these tasks (Carroll 1999). However, humans occupy a wide range of habitats, and a solution that works in one may not be available or adaptive in another. Adaptations are expected to be receptive to environmental differences, apt to adjust themselves to local conditions (Tooby/Cosmides 1992). That is how psychological adaptations interact with local environment to produce cultural difference. The expression of a given adaptive problem varies from region to region, and from group to group, and the differences between the variants correspond to a difference in their environments of origin. That is the reason why Gypsy narratives are always placed in the context of their immediate social surroundings. Unlike many other stories which are usually set in no particular place or time, Gypsy stories share a number of cultural determinants. In both stories, we see how Gypsies have adapted or changed the stories' contents, to fit the local environment and to serve their own needs. The characteristics of their narratives – function, scenery, depiction and cultural variation produced by storytellers – provide the Gypsies with social knowledge and information on local surroundings that during their history have been central to their survival and reproduction.

Furthermore, like many other Gypsy stories (Čvorović 2006), these two tales provide evidence and ways in which traditional stories are used by Gypsies to manipulate and influence the social behaviour of many generations of descendants.

Traditional Gypsy stories remain part of an oral culture, the stories being one of the most significant mechanisms in the preservation and constitution of generations of young people as a separate ethnic group. This suggests the great efficiency and utility of the stories as a form of communication. Many times, these traditional stories warn against the consequences of wrong behaviour, providing at the same time models for proper behaviour and local knowledge on how to pursue goals and describe specific situations that Gypsies might encounter in their lives.

Gypsy stories testify to an evolutionary important way of getting on in the world. Many Gypsies enforce social separation from the non-Gypsies: they tend to stay apart from the mainstream of society by traditional – that is ancestrally encouraged – choice. The Mačva Gypsies receive their ‘socialization’ into their own little community from their ancestors. Close kin, particularly parents, are the primary socializing agents of Gypsy children. Gypsy children have little or no contact with children from other ethnic groups. Actually, for many Gypsies, formal education is the first and most direct encounter with the outside world of the *gadje*, the non-Gypsies. Many Gypsies may be protective and reluctant to send their children to school – outside their family and community – and may fear assimilation. Gypsy parents’ attitudes to non-Gypsy education are further complicated by the fact that at school their children learn skills such as reading and writing which are of little importance to their own community. The situation is more or less the same throughout Europe: the Resolution of the Council and the Ministers of Education on the provision of education for Gypsy and Traveller children estimated that only 40% of European Gypsy children attend school at some point of their lives, the other 60% have never been to school, and that 50%, but in most places 80%, of Gypsy adults are illiterate (Ringold 2001, 26). The *gadje* school, i.e., formal education, is seen as a threat to the history of Gypsies and practices of the Gypsy ancestors, taking away the children from parental guidance and their economic activities. The persistence of ‘Gypsy socialization’ in the form of traditional stories is a sign of the strength of Gypsy traditions and of the parents’ capacity to influence and ‘educate’ their children through the generations. It is therefore no wonder that the recurring themes in Gypsy stories are non-Gypsies and their social environment as the main, unpredictable, and potentially dangerous aspect of the Gypsy’s past surroundings (Čvorović 2006; 2008).

The social isolation of the Gypsies, their traditional encouragement of kinship and endogamy, group differences, and traditional stories as tools for education could be seen as an evolutionary strategy of the group. The Gypsies’ cultural manipulation of isolating cultural practices has resulted in ethnic similarity of disproportionate importance for Gypsies, regulating their associations with others. Among Gypsies, this probably led to a tendency to conceptualize both in-group and out-groups as more homogenous than they really are: as we see from the stories, the stereotypic behaviour and attitudes of the in-group are positively valued, while out-group behaviour and attitudes are negatively valued (MacDonald 2002, lxxx). The stories describe the pattern of Gypsy behaviours, widespread traits that presumably were successful in the past; the narratives thus became a mechanism

of cultural segregation, providing models of behaviour by which Gypsies regulate their social and cultural surroundings (Carroll 1999, 159), and encouraging ways of reproduction in the long run over historical time.

### *Bibliography*

- Berezkei, Tamas/Dunbar, Robin I.M.: Female-biased reproductive strategies in a Hungarian Gypsy population. In: *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London B* 264 (1997) 17–22.
- Boyd, Bryan: *Evolutionary Theories of Art*. In: Gottschall, Jonathan/Wilson, David Sloan (eds.): *The Literary Animal*. Evanston, Ill. 2005, 147–176.
- Carroll, Joseph: *Evolution and Literary Theory*. In: *Human Nature* 6,2 (1995) 119–134.
- id.: *The Deep Structure of Literary Representations*. In: *Evolution and Human Behavior* 20 (1999) 159–173.
- id.: *Adaptationist Literary Study: An Emerging Research Program*. In: *Style* 36,4 (2002) 597–617 (= Carroll 2002a).
- id.: *Organism, Environment, and Literary Representation*. In: *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 9,2 (2002) 27–43 (= Carroll 2002b).
- Čvorović, Jelena: *Evolution and Literary Theory*. In: *Human Nature* 6,2 (1995) 119–134.
- ead.: *Sexual and Reproductive Strategies Among Serbian Gypsies*. In: *Population & Environment* 25 (2004) 217–242.
- ead.: *Gypsies Drown in Shallow Water: Oral Narratives among Macva Gypsies*. In: *Journal of Folklore Research* 43,2 (2006) 129–148.
- ead.: *A Gypsy, Butterfly and Gadje: Narrative as Instruction for Behaviour*. In: *Folklore* 119,1 (2008) 29–44.
- Daly, Martin/Wilson, Margo: *The Truth about Cinderella*. London 1998/New Haven et al. 1999.
- Djordjević, Tihomir R.: *Naš narodni život i običaji* 6. Beograd 1932.
- id.: *Ciganske narodne pripovetke*. Beograd 1938.
- Dundes, Alan: *Comments on Heda Jason: A Multidimensional Approach to Oral Literature*. In: *Current Anthropology* 10,4 (1969) 421–422.
- id.: *Interpreting Folklore*. Bloomington 1980.
- Fraser, Angus: *The Gypsies*. Cambridge 1992.
- Gottschall, Jonathan et al.: *Patterns of Characterization in Folktales across Geographic Regions and Levels of Cultural Complexity*. In: *Human Nature* 14 (2003) 365–382.
- Hancock, Ian: *The Pariah Syndrome: An Account of Gypsy Slavery*. Ann Arbor, Mich. 1987.
- MacDonald, Kevin B.: *A People that Shall Dwell Alone: Judaism as a Group Evolutionary Strategy*. Lincoln, Nebr. 2002.
- Miller, Geoffrey: *The Mating Mind*. New York 2000.
- Palmer, Craig et al.: *Traditional Religious Sacrifice, Cultural Materialism, Costly Signaling, or Descendant-leaving Strategy?* In: *Journal of Ritual Studies* 20,2 (2006) 33–42.
- id./Steadman, Lyle B.: *Human Kinship as a Descendant-leaving Strategy: a Solution to an Evolutionary Puzzle*. In: *Journal of Social Evolutionary Systems* 20,1 (1997) 39–51.
- Pinker, Steven: *How the Mind Works*. New York 1997.
- Popović, Pavle: *Pripovetka o devojci bez ruku*. Beograd 1905.
- Ringold, Dena: *Education of the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe: Trends and Challenges*. In: McDonald, Christina et al. (eds.): *The Roma Education Resource Book*. Budapest 2001, 17–42.

- Save the Children: Denied a Future? The Right to Education of Roma, Gypsy and Travelers Children. United Kingdom/Save The Children Fund 2001.
- Savić, Svenka: Romkinje. Novi Sad 2001.
- Scalise Sugiyama, Michelle: Food, Foragers, and Folklore: The Role of Narrative in Human Subsistence. In: *Evolution and Human Behavior* 22,4 (2001) 221–240.
- ead.: Cultural Variation Is a Part of Human Nature. In: *Human Nature* 14,4 (2003) 383–396.
- Steadman, Lyle B./Palmer, Craig, T.: Myths as Instructions from Ancestors: The Example of Oedipus. In: *Zygon* 32 (1997) 341–350.
- Stewart, Michael: *The Time of the Gypsies*. Boulder, Colo. et al. 1997.
- Storey, Robert: *Mimesis and the Human Animal: On the Biogenetic Foundations of Literary Representation*. Evanston, Ill. 1996.
- Sutherland, Ann: *Gypsies: The Hidden Americans*. Chicago 1975.
- Tooby, John/Cosmides, Leda: The Psychological Foundations of Culture. In: Jerome Barkow et al. (eds.): *The Adapted Mind*. New York 1992, 19–136.
- Vukanović, Tatomir: *Romi (Cigani) u Jugoslaviji*. Vranje 1983.

#### Abstract

For Serbian Gypsies, telling and listening to stories are important traditional behaviours, shared and transmitted among kin generation after generation. This paper discusses two traditional stories told by Serbian Gypsies: *Lena – Losing a River* and *Cut, Cut Her Hands off!* By examining the content of the stories and the social setting in which they are told, it is argued that the tales illustrate how oral narratives can deal with universal adaptive problems, while simultaneously offering guidelines to overcoming these problems in new and unique social environments.

#### Résumé

Pour les gitans serbes, raconter et écouter des contes sont des comportements traditionnels importants, partagés et transmis dans la parenté, génération après génération. Cet article étudie deux contes traditionnels racontés par des gitans serbes: *Lena – la perte d'une rivière* et *Coupe, coupe ses mains*. À travers l'examen du contenu des contes et du milieu social dans lequel ils sont racontés, il est démontré que ces contes illustrent de quelle manière des contes oraux peuvent traiter de problèmes universels d'adaptation tout en offrant des directives pour surmonter ces problèmes dans des environnements nouveaux et uniques.

#### Zusammenfassung

Für die serbischen Roma sind Erzählen und Hören von Geschichten wichtige traditionelle Verhaltensweisen, die Generation für Generation in der Verwandtschaft gemeinsam gepflegt und weitergegeben werden. Der vorliegende Artikel befaßt sich mit zwei von serbischen Roma erzählten traditionellen Erzählungen: *Lena – der Verlust eines Flusses* und *Schlag, schlag ihr die Hände ab*. Eine Untersuchung des Inhalts der Geschichten und des

sozialen Milieus, in dem sie erzählt werden, zeigt, daß die Geschichten illustrieren, wie mündliche Erzählungen mit universellen Adaptationsproblemen umgehen und gleichzeitig Richtlinien für die Überwindung dieser Probleme in neuen und einzigartigen sozialen Umfeldern bieten.

Copyright of Fabula is the property of *Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG*. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.