

# Comment

## Sold like a donkey? Bride-price among the Bulgarian Roma

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Just a few months before the accession of Bulgaria to the EU, a Bulgarian observer in the European Parliament provoked a racist scandal, offending a member of the parliament due to her Roma ethnic affiliation. According to his statement, there are certain places in Bulgaria where one can buy a Romani girl for a given amount of money. I am not going to comment on the political use and purpose of such a letter but, as a scholar working in the field of Romani studies, I would like to discuss the issue of bride-price among Roma in Bulgaria.

The Roma (singular Rom) , most commonly known as Gypsies, are a transborder ethnic minority who live throughout Europe. According to different expert assessments, the size of the Roma population in the world varies between 8 and 10 million, about 70 per cent of whom lives in Central and Eastern Europe. The size of the Roma population in Bulgaria is 370,908 according to the 2001 census, or 4.7 per cent of the total population. Some human rights organizations reject the official statistics and estimate the number of Roma in the country to be about 800,000, or 10 per cent of the population.

The Roma population is not a homogeneous unit. There are several sub-divisions, each of which contains numerous further sub-groups. In Bulgaria, there are five main Romani groups: Daskane Roma (Bulgarian Gypsies), Horahane Roma (Turkish Gypsies), Kalderash (Coppersmiths), Kalaydjies (Tinsmiths), and Ludari (known in Europe as Boyash). There are more than one hundred sub-groups mainly within the Daskane and Horahane sub-divisions. The groups differ mostly on the basis of the spoken Romani dialects but also their religious affiliation and their traditional handicrafts. The groups and even some of the sub-groups are strictly endogamous. However, they are settled and live in close proximity to each other in relatively segregated quarters, often unofficially called 'ghettos'. Thus there is an exchange of everyday practices, beliefs, and social patterns.

Bulgarian studies on Romani culture deal with 'brides' purchases' or 'male right (*baba hak*)'<sup>1</sup> (Marushiakova & Popov 1993: 181) interpreted by some authors as a '*jus primae noctis*' (Cozannet 1973: 121). It is a kind of 'ransom money' (Sokolova 1976: 31) or 'a gift to the bride's father' (Kolev 2000: 62; Tomova 1995: 38) due from the groom's

family. Some publications, not taking into account the influence of the Slavic languages, indicate that the word *daró*<sup>2</sup> is Romani and translate it as 'a bride-price' (Kephart 1987: 162; Sway 1988: 67). The 'Gypsy bride market' is in fact an object of permanent media interest, giving rise to provocative news stories in the press (tabloids and broadsheets) and on television, as well as being misused in nationalistic debates.

Following earlier publications, which treat bride-price among Roma as 'an advantage of the tribal chief toward the young girl' and the 'patriarchal remains of the Muslim past with the possibility for polygamy' (Cozannet 1973: 122), socialist scholarship on the Roma population in Bulgaria has labelled bride-price 'a shameful Islamic custom' (Sokolova 1976: 35). An unsuccessful fight against the practice of bride-price took place in the pages of the official Romani newspaper, *Nevo Drom* (New Way) before 1989. Along with the amount of the cash and the pay in kind, information about the Muslim names of the bride, her father and groom's father was published in short articles. At the same time, a classified survey of the Bulgarian Communist Party found out that bride-price is most typical among the 'former wanderers' (Dimitrov, Chakalov, Dechev, Georgieva & Georgiev 1980: 146), that is, the Kalderash and Kalaydjies subgroups, which are not Muslim but Orthodox Christians. However, the outcome of the survey was not released.

My fieldwork was conducted among the five main Romani groups from 1999 to 2006 in about twenty settlements located mainly in southern and western Bulgaria. I used a large range of data-gathering methods: participant observation, in-depth interviewing, life story interviewing, genealogies, and mental mapping. The Romani concepts below are taken from those studies.

The bride-price tradition in Europe holds an important place in the ancient societies.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the church did not succeed in replacing it in the Balkans (Todorova 1993) and some symbolic elements are still in use among the Christian populations – for example, the filling of the bride's shoe, held by a child (a younger brother or a nephew), with coins and sweets. The Kalderash word for 'marriage' is *surimpe*, unknown to the other Romani groups in Bulgaria. To express 'marriage', usually they adopt some words of the macro-society and adjust them with a proper Romani suffix: *podpishingen*,<sup>4</sup> *prandeme*,<sup>5</sup> *zhenisalyo*,<sup>6</sup> as well as the euphemism *pashlona*.<sup>7</sup>

The Kalderash Roma use the words *daró* or *kaparó*<sup>8</sup> when talking about bride-price, whereas *baba hak* is used mainly by the Daskane and Horahane Roma. The Kalaydjies from southern Bulgaria use the word *kanábaba*. Informants interpret the *kanábaba* rite as 'a payment about the honour of the bride' (m, 52)<sup>9</sup> – understood as virginity and symbolized by *chshayake luludi*.<sup>10</sup> Being virgin 'shows the moral principles of the maiden and her family' (m, 44) and exactly 'that is the dignity of any lass' (m, 34) 'because the purity keeps everything' (m, 40), and 'if she is not virgin ... well, this is very shameful. She should be a maiden' (f, 41). In fact, the demand to be 'decent' (Gay-Y-Blasco 1997: 517) is typical amongst Roma not only in the Balkans; Gypsy women 'had to wait until they were married' (Stewart 1997: 228) throughout Europe.

Bride-price is a kind of compensatory payment given to the girl's family when she leaves her parental home due to the marriage. One of the main social functions of such a payment before or during the marriage is to define precisely the social status of the children born from the union. The goal of the bride-price is to guarantee the patrilinearity regardless of the fate of the marriage (Radcliffe-Brown 1952). The children belong to their paternal kin, and I have recorded several cases in which Kalderash and Kalaydjies women lost even the right to see their sons after a divorce.

The second main function is to secure the young woman against mistreatment in her new family. If she is the subject of bad treatment, she has a right to go back to her parental home, keeping the whole or a part of the bride-price. As the leader of the Kalderash Roma in the city of Petrich explained to me: 'It is a kind of a pledge that if I give my daughter to somebody he is not going to treat my child badly; that he will take care of my child like his own'; otherwise the husband could 'enjoy her for a month or two and kick her out later. We can, more or less, avoid this situation due to the money' (m, 40).

Because of the endogamy, in some Romani sub-groups bride-price does not simply establish the place of the young woman within her new family and determine the status of the children, but also helps keep the wealth of kin within the kin. It often leads to series of bride exchange between two clans on the same economic level and therefore it has a stratifying function in Romani society. In other words, if clan A takes a girl from clan B, sooner or later clan A will try to give a suitable girl<sup>11</sup> to the clan B in order to get back the bride-price paid. However, the exchange increases the bride-price, and if clan A has paid €10,000 they will expect €11,000 for their girl.

In fact, there is no explicit amount of bride-price to be paid. It is always a subject of long and complicated bargaining. Determinants of the bride-price are: (1) the appearance of the bride; (2) her practical skills; (3) the reputation of her family; (4) the wealth and property status of family of orientation as well as of her in-laws; and (5) the level of acquaintance between the two families (distant relatives, friends, neighbours, fellow-villagers/-townspeople, and strangers). Last but not least (6) the economic state of the country matters; the amount of bride-price decreases during financial crises.

Nevertheless, different Romani groups have different attitudes towards limits set on the amount of bride-price. Although the Kalaydjies regard sums up to €1,000 as low, one can find a few cases of €25 paid before step-marriages.<sup>12</sup> The normal sum in that group is about €2,500, but the highest price I know to have been paid is €12,500. The regular amount in the Kalderash community is about €10,000. The lower limit in that group is around €1,500 but the highest is up to €30,000. The regular limits in the Horahane subgroups are set between €100 and €750.

Bride-price is not the only marital pattern among the Roma population. Studies distinguish 'an elopement' (Fraser 1992: 242), 'a kidnapping of a girl' (Clébert 1961: 122), and 'a simulated larceny' (Marushiakova & Popov 1993: 182). All are regarded as strategies which help to avoid group endogamy (Marushiakova & Popov 1993) or bride-price payment (Liegeois 1994; Tomova 1995). Such interpretations are reasonable but not unconditionally valid because a bride-price may yet be claimed. Most often the girl's family refers to the official legislation and blackmails the boy's family with the threat of prosecution and imprisonment (especially if the girl is under 14) because the male side organize and begin the action. However, in most cases the girl has agreed to the action and actively participates. Usually the young couple inform some of their friends that they are going to get married before fleeing the settlement. They stay for between two and fourteen nights with the boy's relatives – most often a married elder sister or an aunt. Then, the boy's mother informs the girl's mother that she got married and both families agree on the wedding details.

To avoid problems arising from ethnographic debates about the confines between the elopement and the kidnapping, or legally speaking from the thin line between 'the agreement' and 'the rape', one can apply another Roman law concept to describe the pattern – *usus*.<sup>13</sup> However, as shown above, the period of premarital cohabitation is

extremely shortened in the Romani tradition (up to two weeks). The Roman terminology is very useful in that respect because it stresses the fact that the social recognition of this pattern comes only and solely through the consummation. The *usus* pattern is most typical among Daskane and Horahane Roma but, though seldom, I have observed it also amongst Kalaydjies. Often, bride-price is absent in the sub-groups where *usus* is practised. Moreover, if bride-price is a general rule in a certain sub-group, then the cases of *usus* could lead to an exclusion of those couples from the family networks, especially if the marriage is considered to be mixed between two groups.

The Roma population in Bulgaria has lived for centuries in the neighbourhood of other ethnic groups. Together with the social changes and totalitarian pressure after the Second World War, these ethnic relations have had a significant impact on Romani cultural traditions. In the villages, Roma adopted the patterns of the surrounding population and nowadays they are in fact the main bearers of some marital practices of the rural communities – a two-stage betrothal, a dowry, and so on. It is important to note that the marital patterns of Daskane Roma, Horahane Roma, and Ludari show a trend towards local determination; they differ from one another not by sub-group identity but according to place of residence. One can observe some regional similarities and differences also in the rites of passage and kinship terminology.

Owing to the increasing poverty of the Roma population in Bulgaria as well as to the liberalization of social values in the last fifteen years, bride-price, together with the other traditional marital patterns, is changing and in fact gradually disappearing. Less expensive civic marriages as well as attempts at integration into the surrounding society by, for the most part, urban Roma communities have played a significant role in that process. In addition, since the end of the totalitarian regime in 1989, evangelical weddings<sup>14</sup> have come into fashion and replaced traditional patterns in some local communities with more modest and frugal celebrations. Nevertheless, bride-price still has a fundamental importance within the Kalderash and Kalaydjies communities in Bulgaria. Indeed, it is the only possible pattern for the Kalderash, though some Kalaydjies groups accept other possible patterns.

As a semi-nomadic community, the Kalaydjies organize group reunions in certain locales<sup>15</sup> at regular intervals. The Kalaydjies use these reunions as sites for premarital meetings and bride-price negotiations, calling them *pazari*, or markets.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, the word ‘markets’ often biases social attitudes towards Roma, and these features of the Romani bride-price pattern are quite often subject to misinterpretation. There are some claims that bride-price is ‘a business’ with an age-old history, which acquires ‘imposing dimensions’ in the democratic context. The successors of the old, ‘rather simple and even well-meant mediators’ are already ‘self-educated dealers allowing of no appeal’ who hold ‘stock-markets’ for ‘a sale-trade’ of ‘gypsy brides’ (Kertikov 2002: 1-2). Actually, ‘dealers’ do not exist in the so-called ‘markets’ and the negotiation between the boy and the girl is nothing like supermarket shopping. Judged by its external features, the event is more like a group picnic. Some extended families sit and chat while other small groups – families or youth – walk around talking with their acquaintances. They discuss mainly travelling routes, the economic crises, and the condition of agricultural crops. In between they gossip about intimate issues – elopements, love affairs, cheating. And finally they discuss which girl or boy is eligible, how much the bride-price is, and how it will be provided.

The Romani culture is a *bricolage* of social borrowings from surrounding populations built on the ground of some preserved traditional values, meanings, and

practices. Bride-price used to be one of the pillars of the Romani culture but, in the globalized context, it has been subjected to change. Nevertheless internal attitudes still vary from ‘twenty-five years ago I was sold like a donkey’ (f, 46) to ‘If the woman, who wants my daughter pays me, if she pays more expensive, it is clear that she is going to love my daughter much more and to give much more care. And if one day my daughter makes a mistake, she is not going to turn her out of the house, because she will be sorry for the money paid’ (f, 44). I believe that the accession of Bulgaria to the EU will further challenge this pattern due to legislation. Decision-makers will have to find an appropriate solution, negotiating between a preservation of traditional patterns and protection against human rights violations.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Father’s right’ – a Turkish phrase.

<sup>2</sup> *Dar* (in Cyrillic ‘Дар’) means ‘a gift’ in Bulgarian, Macedonian, Serbian, and Russian. However, it enters Romani most probably from Romanian, where it exists as a loan-word.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the Roman law concept *coemptio, onis*, f. – ‘to buy off’, possessing all the features of a trade deal.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Got signed’ – a kind of denotation of civic marriage. From the Bulgarian *podpisvam* (to sign) and the Romani suffix for second person plural, past simple tense *-gen*.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Married’ – the word has a similar etymology to the Bulgarian *saprug* (husband), from Italian via Turkish *pranga* – a chain.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Married’ – from the Bulgarian *zhenen*.

<sup>7</sup> ‘They lay’ – with the connotation of ‘made love’.

<sup>8</sup> From Italian *caparra* – a deposit.

<sup>9</sup> Here and below the letter (m/f) indicates sex (male/female) and the number refers to the age of the informant cited.

<sup>10</sup> ‘A maiden flower’ – the blood of the defloration. Daskane and Horahane groups use mainly the word *chshaype*, ‘maidenhood’, while the Kalderash Roma describe it as a *shey bare rat*, ‘the grown girl’s blood’.

<sup>11</sup> Usually spouses have a sixth degree of collateral kinship, but among the Kalderash Roma the marriage could take place among relatives of the fourth degree, despite this being forbidden both by the Orthodox Church and by civil law.

<sup>12</sup> A divorced or widowed woman has the right to get married again. Owing to the fact that she is not a virgin, the bride-price plays rather a symbolic function in such a case, showing respect to her parents.

<sup>13</sup> *Usus, us*, m. – a use. The woman becomes subject to the marital power of her husband if she cohabits with him uninterruptedly for a period of one year.

<sup>14</sup> Understood mainly in terms of the Pentecostal and Seventh-Day Adventist Churches.

<sup>15</sup> There are four great reunions during the year, settled chronologically as follows: in Stara Zagora on St Theodor’s day; in Nova Zagora on Palm Sunday; in Plovdiv on St Peter’s day; and in the Assumption Monastery of Bachkovo on the Assumption. Furthermore there are small weekly meetings every Monday in Plovdiv, every Thursday in Yambol, and every Saturday in Stara Zagora.

<sup>16</sup> From the Turkish *pazar* – a market-place.

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