

MARTOR



Title: *Introduction: Roma Marriage-Making, Between the Constraints of "Tradition" and the "Choices" of Liberalization*

Author: Ana Chirițoiu, Cătălina Tesăr

How to cite this article:

Chirițoiu, Ana, and Cătălina Tesăr. 2020. "Introduction: Roma Marriage-Making, Between the Constraints of 'Tradition' and the 'Choices' of Liberalization." *Martor* 25: 9-14.

Published by: *Editura MARTOR* (MARTOR Publishing House), *Muzeul Național al Țăranului Român* (National Museum of the Romanian Peasant), Romania

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-25-2020/>

Martor (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Journal) is a peer-reviewed academic journal established in 1996, with a focus on cultural and visual anthropology, ethnology, museum studies and the dialogue among these disciplines. *Martor Journal* is published by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant. Interdisciplinary and international in scope, it provides a rich content at the highest academic and editorial standards for academic and non-academic readership. Any use aside from these purposes and without mentioning the source of the article(s) is prohibited and will be considered an infringement of copyright.

Martor (Revue d'Anthropologie du Musée du Paysan Roumain) est un journal académique en système *peer-review* fondé en 1996, qui se concentre sur l'anthropologie visuelle et culturelle, l'ethnologie, la muséologie et sur le dialogue entre ces disciplines. La revue *Martor* est publiée par le Musée du Paysan Roumain. Son aspiration est de généraliser l'accès vers un riche contenu au plus haut niveau du point de vue académique et éditorial pour des objectifs scientifiques, éducatifs et informationnels. Toute utilisation au-delà de ces buts et sans mentionner la source des articles est interdite et sera considérée une violation des droits de l'auteur.

Martor is indexed by:

CEEOL, EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Anthropological Index Online (AIO), MLA International Bibliography.

This issue of *Martor* has been published with the financial support of the National Cultural Fund Administration (AFCN Romania).

Introduction: Roma Marriage-Making, Between the Constraints of “Tradition” and the “Choices” of Liberalization

Ana Chiritoiu

*Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Central European University, Austria¹
ana.chiritoiu@gmail.com*

Cătălina Tesăr

*University of Bucharest; National Museum of the Romanian Peasant; NEC fellow 2019-2020, Romania
catalina.tesar@unibuc.ro*

The notion that Roma marriages are typically concluded by arrangement and among minors is deeply entrenched in popular imagination, and it has not been radically challenged by academic accounts. Indeed, while refuting moralizing overtones around the age and “free will” of the spouses (e.g., Stewart 2018), scholars working with Romani populations have often depicted marriage-making among Roma as an institution that resists change and encapsulates the essence of Romani distinction. To be sure, our own research, conducted among two distinct, but equally “traditional” Romani groups, gave some credit to this claim, while also indicating that marriage-making is a prime venue of social change. The people we worked with ascribed to marriage not only the moral norms that undergird their notion of who they are, but also their aspirations, their wealth, and their affects.

These contradictions inscribed onto the marriage-making processes that we have encountered invited a broader comparative approach. Hence this *Special Issue*, where we have collected in-depth accounts and analyses—ethnographic, legal, and visual—of marriage-making processes among various Roma populations in Central and Eastern Europe, seeking to account for how marriage can be at once a means of change and a vehicle of continuity. Furthermore, we sought to understand how it mediates between affects and social hierarchies, or between individual aspirations and collective moralities, and how it legitimizes such heterogeneous if not

contradictory claims to “identity” as those exposed by so-called traditional groups and by “assimilated” Roma.

Our rationale for taking up this topic is then emphatically twofold: academic as well as societal. In what regards the latter, Roma marriages have long been a contentious topic among the wider public, as periodic “scandals” surfacing in the media amply illustrate. Whether we recall the marriage of Luminița Cioabă, the daughter of Romanian Roma “king” Cioabă, at fourteen, back in 2003, or the most recent incident as this issue goes to print, when two extended families in the east of Romania got into a serial conflict over the separation of a couple, with the local mayor commenting that the source of the conflict was the practice of arranged marriages “specific” to Roma, there is always something “scandalous” about Roma marriages. The same goes for the ostentatious display of wealth, the notion that wives are “bought,” the control of women’s virginity, and more legalistic issues such as “arranged” and “early-age” marriages. While we do not dwell extensively on the perception of Roma marriages among majority populations, and instead favor the emic point of view, the articles collected here confront these misconceptions head-on and dispel them.

Academically speaking, marriages are central to the social life of most Romani populations—not just to the “traditional” groups that have constituted the habitual focus of ethnographies, but also to “assimilated” populations that have been proletarianized,

1) I have done much of the editorial work for this issue during my fellowship at the “Law & Anthropology” Department at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle (Saale), Germany. I gratefully acknowledge the hospitality of the Department and their influence on shaping my thoughts for this piece, and well beyond it.

have embraced a trend of renouncing Romani identity, and have been far less explored ethnographically. Our argument in this *Special Issue* is that, due to its relevance across the diverse populations that self-identify as Roma, marriage-making constitutes an excellent heuristic device to understand the life and values of these populations, as well as their relations to the surrounding world. Certainly, similar values are shared by numerous other societies across the world and are not in themselves specific to Roma; what seems to be specific, however, is how central marriage is both to the Roma notion of themselves as a collective and to their conception of personhood, both in “traditional” and in “assimilated” contexts, and everywhere in-between.

Our issue engenders a comparison, which has been scarcely undertaken thus far (initiated by Piasere 2015, in whose footsteps we follow), between the modes and the roles of marriage among a broad range of populations, from the more “traditional,” kin-based Romani-speaking Gabori studied by Olivera to the quasi-assimilated Lăutari described by Beissinger. All of these instances indicate that marriage is central both to the maintenance of social organization and to social change and mobility. As Racleș shows, groups which see themselves as integrated (“Romanianized”) cite their “free choice” marriage-making as the prime example for their progressiveness and adherence to the majority societal norms. Conversely, self-avowed traditional groups cite their own “proper” marriages as proof that they are true Roma and maintain that it is only through observing this practice that one becomes a full-fledged (Roma) person. Such contradictions indicate that marriage-making is not only a practice in and of itself, a mode of coupling and establishing a family, as Euro-Atlantic modernity claims, but a thoroughly societal process which amounts to nothing less than these populations’ sense of who they are. Indeed, in Roma marriage-making, social reproduction entails not only the material reproduction of the nuclear family, but also the symbolic reproduction of the group of

reference, be they “real” or “Romanianized” Roma.

Because so much is at stake in Roma marriage-making, this process espouses vast societal trends that reflect onto these populations: migration, financialization, ongoing precarization, racialization, proletarianization, and a myriad other phenomena that become most visible at the margins of society because that is where they are most acutely manifest. This claim is perhaps most visible in Mateescu’s historical contribution to this issue, which documents the impact of slavery and its consequences—in terms of residence and interdictions—on shaping marriage processes among the Roma as compared to the Romanian sample of non-slaves.

It would have been epistemologically fruitful if this volume had also included accounts of marriage-making among the populations in the midst of whom Roma live; failing to include these detracts from our comparative endeavor. All the more so since most of the articles gathered here, particularly those in the second section, allude to the cultural and social influences that the surrounding populations exert over the Roma. Yet we believe that the juxtaposition we present here, between kin-based communities and populations with a penchant for “the outside,” remains instructive in grasping the commonalities and contrasts among Roma and non-Roma, constituting an initial step in the direction of this broader comparison that is yet to be undertaken.

Even though popular notions of Roma marriage and scholarly accounts have both essentially maintained that Romani marriage-making is an eminently conservative institution, the articles collected here give only partial credit to this notion and show that marriage is just as well an arena of social change. Specifically, more than half of the contributions to this volume portray those Roma who were largely neglected by anthropological studies,

namely those who “want in,” who have long been absorbed into wage labor, and who have been making visible efforts towards assimilation. In contradistinction to so-called traditional Roma, the former not only conduct their marriages by love and free choice, but also conclude mixed marriages. As Kovai shows in her contribution, the contradictions embedded in the marriages of assimilated Roma reflect the tensions between the reliance on kinship ties, on the one hand, and embracing hierarchical relations and relying on state institutions, on the other.

There is more to this oscillation, however, given that Roma who attempt to move beyond their kin and “integrate” into the majority society will continue to face discrimination and prejudice, while those who choose to stay amongst kin will be less equipped to face the world outside. Beissinger discusses a growing number of marriages concluded with Romanians among the young generations of Lăutari Romani musicians from southern Romania, yet we are not instructed on how enduring are the relations of those who married out with their original Romani families. In this sense, Larcher notes that people who move out of their community by means of marriage are left out of the memory and stories of their families in the span of a few generations. Looking at all these examples, we endorse Beissinger’s contention that the realm of marriage and weddings is paradigmatic for understanding the identity struggles of people whose notion of themselves is to various degrees imposed from the outside.

Secondly, the articles collected here show that, in communities which see themselves as “traditional” and practice “arranged marriages” or marriage alliances, marriage did not outrun change. Quite the contrary: marriage has changed significantly, and Cousin’s contribution documents not only the changes in the practice brought about by the recent migration, but also the transformations that emerged as early as the 1980s. And yet, the notion that marriage is an alliance between extended families, and for this reason it shapes the relations within the wider group, has stayed

the same: at the core of Cousin’s account is the claim that a marriage alliance can put an end to long-time enmity. In his turn, while looking at a kin-based society where those who marry out are left out for good, Olivera analyzes marriage as the realm of regeneration and burgeoning of the community. In time, tinged by modernity, mobility, globalization, etc., marriage has changed in kin-based or “traditional” Roma societies to a similar degree as it has in “assimilated” societies, and its significance and ritual elaboration have shifted accordingly. However, both of these texts indicate that marriage has also remained a political institution, whereby social order and morality are perpetuated and the individual achieves personhood.

Thirdly, we felt it was necessary to complement the ethnographic point of view presented in the first two sections with the legal and the feminist points of view, so as to forge a dialogue between ethnography and social and ideological norms. Having seen how marriage-making works in various Romani groups, how it has changed or stayed the same, what social and moral values it encompasses, and how it brings together social order and affects, we wanted to see how these marriages are understood and tackled by the law, and how feminist activists make sense of them. To this latter end, we invited contributions from Romanian Roma feminists, but they unfortunately declined our invitation. This dialogue is urgent and necessary, as it could contribute to solving an epistemic dilemma that anthropologists have been facing for several decades now, if not more: patterns that arise from “the field” do not align with the metropolitan concepts of activism and political theory. So, when faced with the choice between cultivating the “otherness” of the people we work with and “mainstreaming” them to fit broader concepts and principles, we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place.

This is why we included a section on the visual representation of Roma marriages, where the challenges of representing a discriminated population and/or potentially problematic practices are brought to the fore. As a way to



sample and tackle the representation of Roma, we have included in the issue archival photos alongside photos from our authors' fieldsites to show how dynamic and diverse this representation has been. Lastly, we included a sample of the photos taken by Maria Sturm about underage married Roma teenagers from her album *Be Good* (2016), documenting a world of ingenuity, resignation, pride, tenderness, and deprivation. All of this is to show that Roma marriage-making escapes neat binaries, such as change vs. tradition, individuality vs. collectiveness, freedom vs. coercion, legality vs. morality, and so on. Instead, it serves as a reminder that renewed attention to patterns of continuity and disruption, both spatial and temporal, individual and collective, affective and political, will engender a more nuanced account of worlds that have been understood through their cultivation of distinctiveness, but that have never been truly self-contained.

Olivera's article takes us into the world of Gabori Roma in Romania, a case that is paradigmatic for the so-called traditional, endogamous Roma whose marriages were best depicted by Williams (1984). Marriage alliances prevail among the Gabori, and they are a means of endorsing the social differentiation that the ideology of descent (*viți*) brings about. Yet the ideal shared, albeit not really practiced, by the Gabori is marriage by elopement that articulates with a utopian egalitarianism advocating that any boy could marry any girl, irrespective of their *viți* extraction. Marriages are thus seen as a realm that brings about and resolves the tensions between two contradictory values specific to the Gabor social order, egalitarianism, and hierarchy.

Mateescu analyzes data from the first two general modern censuses in Romanian history, conducted in 1838 in Wallachia and 1859 in Moldavia, to show the extent to which factors such as residence, employment, social status, and freedom (or slavery) have influenced marriage patterns among Roma

and non-Roma with reference to age, choice of partner, number of children, and strength of family ties. While the Moldavian census was taken shortly after the emancipation of Roma slaves, the Wallachian sample mostly included slaves, who coresided with their non-Roma owners. Comparing this data, Mateescu shows that the kinship networks of slaves, albeit numerous, were looser than those of non-Roma, or of the freed Roma of the Moldavian sample. This serves to argue that marriage and kinning patterns are not solely shaped by a "cultural" predisposition and inherent "values," but are instead molded by broader, external institutions and structural situations.

And yet, **Cousin's** contribution touches on something that could be approximated as "values," as he draws on research among a network of Vlax Romani-speaking families originating in southeastern Romania, some of whose members live abroad. It tells the story of a marriage that, albeit fueled by the love and free choice of the young spouses, can only be concluded with the consent of their families. In the context of the two families' ongoing feud caused by a several decade-old murder, the text discusses whether and how alliance ultimately conquered enmity. This is a reappraisal of Lévi-Strauss's classical take on the exchange of women as a means to create alliances and avoid conflicts between groups. Yet Cousin's analysis qualifies the preeminence of men in these exchanges—or what Bourdieu (1977) termed "official kinship"—and proposes that old women arbitrate between men and make the transaction possible. We are presented here with the case of a marriage that combines love and arrangement, showing that the two do not exclude each other. Although the people involved interpret the free choice of spouses as a way of emancipation from old marriage patterns, we learn that the Roma under scrutiny customarily practiced elopement. Although we are not explicitly told in what consists the difference between the so-called "traditional" elopement and the rather modern marriage based on love, we are left to guess that Čoroman marriages have always accommodated a blend of choice—at least by



one of the spouses—with the consent of the families.

Racleș discusses the intriguing case of “Romanianized” Roma who illustrate their quasi-assimilation into the world of non-Roma by referring to the fact that their marriages are based on “love” or “free choice,” as opposed to *other* so-called traditional Roma (whom they see as “backward” or “uncivilized”). However, as Racleș shows, the notion of “free choice” is in fact a bundle of different constraints pertaining to notions of respectability maintained by the surrounding non-Roma. In short, “free marriages” are made to stand for social mobility and transformation. In this phrase, then, “freedom” cannot be taken too literally: rather than connote absolute choice (an ideological construct in any case—see Day 2010), it signals the “Romanianized” Roma’s adherence to a different social code than that of *other* Roma or of their own ancestors.

Beissinger argues that marital and wedding practices among *Lăutari* (Romani musicians) from south Romania are reflective of a hybrid identity that draws on both Romanian and Romani culture. *Lăutari*, as Romani musicians playing at Romanian weddings, vacillate between the two cultures, with a tendency among younger generations to conclude mixed marriages and renounce their stigmatized Roma identity. Much like the people in **Racleș’s** article, *Lăutari* self-identify as “Romanianized” Roma; unlike the former, however, who see the distinction between Roma and non-Roma in rather exclusive terms, *Lăutari* simultaneously deny and embrace, or accommodate, these two diverging identities.

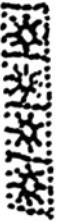
Larcher’s contribution provides an intimate account of the manifestations of feelings of love that surround couple formation, as they co-exist with a moral order whereby the so-called “fear of God,” which promotes reciprocity and compassion, constrains the choices of the youth, and with the parents’ interventions, concerned with issues of family extraction and pedigree. In so doing, it raises the question of the empirical manifestation of the analytical distinctions between marriages by love and by arrangement. A diachronic take on how

people have been marrying in *țișănie*—a neighborhood in a village not far away from Bucharest—where the author himself married and carried out his research, the article reveals changes in the practice that converge in a process of individualization of the youth and a receding role of the parents in the former’s decisions.

Kovai’s article is based on long-term fieldwork in a proletarianized Romungro community in Hungary, where marriages are “free” and often mixed; however, she shows that marriage remains a central institution for the Romungro, encapsulating ethnic and class distinctions alike. The “freedom” entailed by “love matches” is then a way to mitigate structural constraints and to transcend the “Cigány/Hungarian distinction” in an attempt to forge social mobility—if not for the entire group or family, then at least for oneself—while carefully cultivating the kinship resources that one falls back on in situations of precarity.

Nikolova’s article gives an overview of how Romani marriages are treated by courts in Bulgaria. Largely falling under the verdict of “statutory rape” or “underage cohabitation,” court cases involving marriages concluded among Romani minors are often initiated by Roma litigants themselves and, for better or for worse, are judged as “culturally neutral” by courts. Whether the “cultural defense” would provide more accurate verdicts or would further the enclavization of Romani population is of course a topic that remains open to debate between legal scholars, practitioners, and anthropologists, and we are excited to signal this topic here.

Furthermore, we debated the very relevance of our theme with Romani sociologist and feminist **Angéla Kóczé**, in an attempt to forge a dialogue, however candid, between ethnographers and critical Romani scholars. Her insistence to pay close attention to the racialization and to the systemic forces that structure Romani livelihoods and practices is certainly *de rigueur*, but ethnographers have yet to find a way to work these large-scale phenomena into their accounts of daily life “imponderabilia.”



In her feminist essay, **Hașdeu** revisits her long-term ethnographic experience, alongside landmark anthropological analyses of marriage, to reflect on how the “exchange” or circulation of women between households in marriage reflects notions of value in their communities, and how women’s “sorority,” expressed both collectively and individually, might challenge patriarchy and racism.

Then, we interviewed actress **Alina Șerban** about her experience playing Roma characters and seeing them represented in film and theatre, while cinematographer **Ileana Szasz** discussed the ethical challenges and responsibilities of shooting a documentary about Roma, as well as the reactions of the people in front of the camera to her inherent hesitations.

We did not ambition to propose new theoretical developments in this *Special Issue*. While individual articles do make theoretical arguments, as regards the collection as a whole, its *raison d'être* is rather descriptive and exploratory. This is because we feel that received anthropological wisdom has reached an impasse and has remained somewhat too particular and too “vernacular” in relation to the more systemic developments that have shaped Romani livelihoods, practices, and identities in the past decades. It remains to be seen which ethnographic findings remain

valid after “marrying” them to these societal forces. The very diverse contributions that we have collected here announce a change of paradigm in this direction; the shape and relevance of this change relies greatly on the dialogues we can forge not only with the existing literature, but also with parallel approaches to Romani lives and epistemes. At the same time, our endeavor is meant to recuperate the analytical potential of ethnography as a source of analytical concepts with a wider relevance, and to encourage explicit attention to the tension between description and prescription in our accounts. Much about what our interlocutors say about marriage *is* prescriptive and encapsulates a notion of how people *ought* to live—in the same way that popular misconceptions and state regulations regarding (Roma) marriages are inherently moral. Herein lies the common ground where ethnographic, legal, activist, and societal accounts of marriage-making can be brought into dialogue. Insofar as they embody moralities and are part of greater social systems, marriages speak both to the particular and to the relational. This collection of articles shows that the “vernacular” dimension of ethnographic analysis is in a productive tension with the local, national, regional, and the systemic, and that this relation, however contradictory, contested, or transient, is always fraught with moral significance, which makes it at once political and deeply personal.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: University Press. Originally published as *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (Genève; Paris: Droz, 1972).

Day, Sophie. 2010. “The Re-emergence of ‘Trafficking’: Sex Work between Slavery and Freedom.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16 (4): 816–834.

Piasere Leonardo. 2015. *Mariages Romanes : une esquisse comparative*. Florence: SEID Editori.

Stewart, Michael, 2018. “Interprétations du mariage précoce dans le système juridique en Angleterre. Retour sur une expérience d'expertise.” *Ethnologie française* 172 (4): 657–672.

Williams, Patrick. 1984. *Mariage tzigane. Une cérémonie de fiançailles chez les Rom de Paris*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

