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# “What’s the Point of Studying Kinship if You Don’t Connect It to the Broader Power Structure?” A Dialogue

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## ABSTRACT

Angéla Kóczé, one of the leading sociologists associated with the “Critical Romani Studies” direction, and director of the Roma Graduate Preparation Program at CEU, has a dialogue with this issue’s associate editor, Ana Chirițoiu. They discuss points of contention between “Roma ethnographies” and “critical” scholarship, especially with a view to the relevance of marriage and kinship, this issue’s topics, in relation to the broader issues that Roma are facing. Kóczé argues for an approach that pays more attention to the racialization of the Roma and to the structural processes that shape their lives, and criticizes the euphemistic overtones of the term “ethnicity.” She is decidedly against any “romanticization” of poverty and modes of making-do and of approaches that celebrate “cultural distinctiveness.” Instead, she says, we need to understand the processes of exclusion and dispossession that cause some Roma communities to become closed or isolated. Moreover, Kóczé argues that the reliance on kinship and neopatrimonial practices are just as frequent, if not more, in broader society, and would be best understood comparatively and in a more extensive analysis, rather than through a monolithic focus on Roma.

## KEYWORDS

Racialization, othering, exclusion, structural violence, dispossession, Critical Romani Studies.

**Ana Chirițoiu:** I would like us to start from a remark you made at the book launch of Cecília Kovai’s book, *A cigány–magyar különbségtétel és a rokonság* [Gypsy-Hungarian distinction and kinship], from which we are publishing an article in this special issue. You said then that ethnographers of Roma populations are somewhat too fixated on kinship, perhaps to the detriment of other, more urgent topics. Could you perhaps elaborate on this critique?

**Angéla Kóczé:** I can see there is a new generation of anthropologists who try to de-naturalize whatever was taken as commonsensical about Roma, such as seeing the Roma as a homogenous group, with very specific cultural characteristics

and language, and very distinguished from the society around. As I see, your approach is more nuanced: you show that these groups are not so homogenous, there are various groups and traditions that they follow, that even marriage as an institution works differently in various groups, or even within the same group, at different points in time. I think you try to take some steps further from the earlier anthropologists who had a more monolithic zoom.

That being said, I have another observation which comes from my disciplinary stance as well as from my own political stance, namely that Central and Eastern European anthropologists didn’t go through the same kind of decolonization process which went on in the U.S. in





don't have the resources, either material or symbolic, to turn stigma into something to be proud of, but this group does, and I think that's worth understanding.

**Angéla Kóczé:** I understand that's what ERIAC, Barvalipe are trying to do, how to be proud of who we are and where we come from and use it as a cultural capital. Anyway, we need to have more discussions and dialogue and try to understand how we can go further and create some alliances and solidarity in academia. If we want to create a manifesto for a new humanity, we should focus on the commonalities, rather than create new divisions. And we need to stop using Roma as a counter-culturally distinctive icon, either during state socialism, or now during precarious capitalism, showing how wonderfully they can operate on the basis of kinship and support each other without state institutions and redistribution. For me, this raises the question, "Where does this take us?" Basically, this kind of approach is using cultural essentialization to conceal structural racism and violence and claim restitution.

If you look from a macro position, most of the Roma, yes, live under the poverty line, you can check the statistics of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights—more than 80 percent of Roma in Europe live under the poverty line. Meanwhile, ethnographers come and tell us that Roma are wonderfully happy in their devastating situation—and so what? It's painful for me to even talk about it. Sure, kinship is wonderful, people support each other, class is really important, marriage can serve to sustain kinship and promote social mobility. However, we have to put this in a broader perspective and analyze it via the undoing of democracy and the failure of the welfare system in a precarious neoliberal capitalism.

I hope I'm not being too harsh, but it's not just my sociological perspective that compels me to ask these questions, it's also the fact that I am very much attached

to this group and I come from this place, I know what it means to live in structural poverty and carry the accumulation of dispossession. We like to talk about Roma in a very romanticized way, kinship, marriage, clothes with flowers, agency, but there is a profoundly oppressive violent system around us, and somehow that is diminished in this kind of approaches. Yes, it's great that they are "resisting," but that's not going to induce any structural changes, the result is that their kids are still going to lag behind the non-Roma in school, and they will never have the same opportunities as the others who are better off. Of course, I don't want to dismiss their "agency," and how proud they are of their identity, but meanwhile we function in a society which still racializes and minoritizes them, and for me that's much more important. I don't want to dismiss anyone's work, but I feel very strongly about this.

**Ana Chiritoiu:** This is one of the first times when we try to forge an honest dialogue between, let's say, the side of the "ethnographers" and the side of "Critical Romani Studies," so it's quite natural to disagree on many things.

**Angéla Kóczé:** I also think anthropological studies of Roma usually tend to remain on the margins of anthropology within academia, as if we're reproducing this "outsider" position. For me, "Romani Studies" are more about the political economy of racism, the working through the structures of violence and oppression in our society, and how the structures and institutions relate to them. Critical Romani Studies focuses on racism as a relational concept and racialization as a discursive and structural process of hierarchization, inferiorization, subjugation, and oppression. It is a set of practices, structures, and representations based on perceived "cultural" differences that transformed into an intersected structural inequality. These various inequalities, such as race,



gender, class, etc. are intersected in specific temporal and spatial locations. While the linguistic- and ethnographic-centered Romani Studies focus on the linguistic and cultural distinctiveness of Roma identity, Critical Romani Studies interrogate structural racism and deconstruct the culturalist transcript, both of which result in an intersected inequality and justify exclusion.

Academia is not free from the invisible structural racism. If you look around until recently only and exclusively non-Roma have benefited from researching the Roma; receiving grants, being promoted, having platforms, travelling to conferences, and having a voice for talking on a “Gypsy” theme. Somehow it is understandable—although not acceptable—that non-Roma scholars are suspicious of Roma scholars, as if the former never thought that Roma could ever be in the academia. Though, today some minor attempts are being made through the use of reflexivity and dialogue, however, I am still missing this kind of critical reflection pretty much like we are having right now. Sometimes, I have a visceral reaction to research that romanticizes, “beautifies” poverty through a narrow conceptualization. Anyway, I self-identify as a sociologist, not as a “Romani scholar,” that’s my identity in the academia.

**Ana Chirițoiu:** Kinship is one of these thorny issues that have created divisions between ethnographers and critical scholars. So, let’s imagine that you and me, a sociologist and an anthropologist, got a research grant to study kinship among Roma. How would you go about it, in a way that also squares with your scholarship and politics?

**Angéla Kóczé:** Maybe in this day and age I would study the oligarchic kinship of Mészáros Lőrinc<sup>1</sup> or Orbán Viktor, I think that would be much more challenging and interesting, don’t you think? All these family

members who are close to the government are taking advantage of the system and extracting resources from our public goods, public money becomes privatized by various clans in our societies—this is very interesting, particularly in CEE, connected to capitalism. I know you’re interested in Roma, and I think this kind of behavior exists there as well, as a mimicry of the majority society, as a mirror to their acts of corruption. Why would the Roma behave differently than our top politicians? Corruption is a social norm, it is totally authorized and empowered by the political elite and the silent members of our society. So, why are the Roma the ones who shouldn’t engage in it? It would be good to study Roma kinship in connection to non-Roma kinship, nepotism, and corruption. How do the Roma reflect the practices of the majority? This reflection and refraction can be used as an explanatory framework in a comparative project.

**Ana Chirițoiu:** It’s interesting you should say this, because my research proposal for my PhD actually started from corruption, neo-patrimonialism and dependencies, and these phenomena are clearer in a group that is seen as other and is at the margins of society, but there is no question that they reflect back on the bigger society. Except in the bigger society they may be normalized. Among Roma you see kinship working more organically and you understand better why people resort to it and how, and what morality it has, because it’s the ultimate trust bond, then you can see better how it works in the other camp. I don’t think it’s enough to say that Orbán is corrupt, you also need to understand how this corruption works in fact, and how the trust he has from others work, and why he has it.

**Angéla Kóczé:** Yes, if we have a racialized group then our perception is very selective, so we can recognize immediately if the Roma do something which is not OK. Because if a Roma steals a basket of potatoes

1) One of the most prominent members of the Fidesz party and one of the richest men in Hungary, Mészáros Lőrinc is a childhood friend of prime minister Viktor Orbán and the long-standing mayor of Orbán’s native village, Felcsút.

it becomes more visible and maybe it is more relevant for a specific context than these big guys taking the big money without it being traceable—it's so far away from us that it doesn't even seem to matter in our lives. And this has created a lot of conflicts in various localities. Particularly in CEE, if we think about Roma and their internal migration between villages and cities, in the 1990s when they lost their employment and housing opportunities in the cities and were forced to move to villages at the periphery of the country. For instance how non-Roma react to Roma getting social benefits, or if a Roma steals their bicycle, these things have sparked numerous conflicts and meanwhile the big guys are taking much more money, the degree of corruption is unspeakable, but still the bicycle or the social benefits are much more important. By the way, in Hungarian politics, when the bad guys become demonized, rumors appear that they are Roma: now people say Orbán Viktor and János Áder, the Hungarian president, are possibly Roma, it's the kind of talk you hear in the hair salon. That sort of selective attention that makes bad things become associated with Roma works very similarly with other racialized groups. So, going back to kinship, the only way that it would make sense for me is to connect the two, otherwise it's a game: it's really nice this zooming in and studying people up close, but then what's the point if you don't connect it to the broader power structure? I'm missing the context, the outside world, and its relation with that kind of narrow perspective.

**Ana Chiritoiu:** Actually I think the topic of marriage is interesting in this respect, and has a lot to say about the connection between whatever particular Roma group one writes about and the broader context, because marriage is regulated by the state, right? So, it's interesting to look at cases when the state decides not to intervene, or to treat Roma marriage as a cultural exception

from the law, or turn a blind eye to early marriages. And this enclave is created by the state, or by its absence, it's like saying to people, "You guys do whatever you want, because we don't care anyway as long as you stay out of our way."

**Angéla Kóczé:** I think this is tricky, because this is again closing the circle, and leaving Roma in their own cultural confinement or how you want to call it. It's the same kind of logic when the state doesn't want to intervene in domestic violence, because it's an issue in the family, and the police won't come, or if they come they won't be able to protect the woman. I think this is really dangerous, because it reinforces the cultural otherness of Roma, isolating "them" from "us." Some scholars call this a form of "new racism". Basically, it does not rely on the biological racism, but rather it "appropriates the concept of culture" and the "right to be different." Hence, the appropriation of culture undergirds and sustains structural racism.

**Ana Chiritoiu:** On the other hand, pragmatically speaking, in many communities, whether Roma or not, marriage is in fact one of the only means available to women to access a better life and a higher status. And if that is not available then what else is? She would have to be on her own. In more traditional communities, women have to belong, so marriage can be this source of social mobility in a way.

**Angéla Kóczé:** Yes, in a closed society, if you talk about that kind of traditional community. But in that way, they still remain inside that society; inside the society they can have some kind of social mobility, but they're still stuck in that closedness. This is why I would be interested in a broader perspective, why and how did these communities remain closed? What are the mechanisms which promote and perpetuate their isolation? Is there any way to access a "better life"? Yes, that's why education is so important. I emphasize again access



to quality education, also in traditional communities, if education were fulfilling its original role to provide opportunities and create social mobility and a path for a better life.

**Ana Chiritoiu:** Education is a right, and to be protected from domestic violence is also a right, but is it not somehow paternalistic to intervene in these communities and tell them what to do, how to live?

**Angéla Kóczé:** I think it is again a matter of “cultural appropriation” and the “right to be different.” It is better to exempt ourselves under the banner of “cultural distinctiveness” than face the lack of willingness to create structural opportunities. Do you think it is better to live eternally uneducated? I know we’re discussing something which is really tricky and sensitive, but “beautifying” their isolation and “respecting” that they don’t want to go to school saying, “Yeah, it’s great, keep your traditions and your culture”—it just doesn’t take us anywhere. Moreover, we always think in terms of assimilation, on the one hand, and full agency or isolation and “own culture,” on the other hand—but there are so many things in-between! Certainly, if you are not educated and you don’t have an opportunity to get out of that very closed society, you never really know what you aspire to, what your “agency” really is. This is not to deny that everyone has a capacity to decide what they want to do, but that only holds true when you are fully informed and know what your choices are, when you *have* real choices, not when you’re stuck in the same position which does not allow you to see things from any other perspectives.

**Ana Chiritoiu:** The women I worked with seemed perfectly aware that *gadgi* women have better lives and better opportunities, but they also said that living the way they did is what made them who they are—otherwise they would become *gadgi*, they

would no longer be *romnea*. This was frustrating for me, that many of these young women grew up abroad, saw a lot of things, spoke foreign languages, etc., but they still got married back in Romania and were now at the orders of their mothers-in-law.

**Angéla Kóczé:** This is not going to change and go away overnight. We have a long collective experience of subordination, inferiorization, and humiliation—when you’re not loved and welcomed, when you’re pushed into isolation, you build up some kind of protection. Naturally, you want to shield and protect yourself. And maybe it’s better to stay in this closed circle, to protect yourself, because it can be too much mentally, emotionally to go into the *gadgi* world. In my own family, I had a cousin who studied at the university for four years, and after four years she went back to her village and got married to a guy who is in prison now; she has two kids, and she gave up all the studies. She could have finished them.

**Ana Chiritoiu:** But this drives you crazy, no? Both as a woman and as someone who loves her!

**Angéla Kóczé:** Yes. But it’s just so complex. So, the question is: Do you really have that kind of protection, support from home, the kind of collective knowledge that you already received through generations? I think many of us are missing that. Those of us who come from very underprivileged and deprived families—I just don’t know how people do it, this social mobility that we went through. I’m not talking about middle-class Romani elite families who went to universities, but for the first generation it’s a huge step, and you need enormous emotional, social, intellectual, economic support to go and pursue your dream. I see this with our students in the Roma Graduate Preparation Program at CEU, who come from very deprived communities, how hard it is for them—not because they don’t have the capacity to function in an academic context, but because they have very fragile



foundations in their lives. You can fall back any minute. And every minute you have to fight some gestures, gazes or body language that indicate this is not your place. It is a huge emotional drain.

**Ana Chiritoiu:** In light of what you said about racialization and systemic exclusion, in what context, if at all, do kinship and marriage still matter in any sense? And how can we talk about them, with regards to Roma? Do you think it matters at all, for research purposes, or is it something to be thrown out with the older paradigm?

**Angéla Kóczé:** So, thinking about the issues that we are facing in these days and the urgency of political, social, economic crises, the impact of COVID-19 and many other things, for me marriage is not a central theme. I'm sorry to disappoint you. I'm repeating myself but for me this interest in kinship and marriage would make more sense in a comparative approach, this "Roma, Roma, Roma" zoom is not the most important issue. Yes, your approach may be important, and it's more refined and more nuanced than previous approaches, *but then again, what is the purpose?* Maybe if I came from anthropology, then I would be more interested in marriage and kinship. But as it is, when I write about feminism and Romani women, marriage does come up as an issue, but not as a central focus. It can come up around the topic of what kind of conflicts can be created by the political activism of women in a marriage. How does it reflect in their marriage, or how does their marriage inform their political activism? In our edited volume<sup>2</sup> Nicoleta Bițu is talking about that, how her activism was influenced by Nicolae Gheorghe, and how their relationship was based on political activism. But beyond such examples, marriage is not a central issue for me. And also at the local level, in the fieldwork I did at Szikszó, I was looking at what kind of conflicts were created in the family by the fact that these women were politically active

and they became recognized at the political level, so their husbands became somewhat overshadowed by the women. But I am not so focused on this internal dynamic. I don't want to deny that this kind of dynamic in the family influences and shapes or informs their political activism as well, but that's not the main point.

I would emphasize the point that, since the Roma are so often racially excluded from society, it makes sense that the family becomes even more important for them. Our capitalist society focuses on the family as an institution and a source of support, and racialized and marginalized people are always discussed as a "bad family" and as distinctive "communities." So, on the one hand we have worthy *families* as a unit, and on the other hand we have culturally distinctive *communities*—which has a "tribal" overtone. Moreover, the downfall of social institutions, like social and health care, public schools, puts pressure on families, which only goes to show that the family as an economic unit remains important for capitalism altogether, not just for Roma.

2) Kóczé, Angéla, Violetta Zentai, Jelena Jovanović, and Enikő Vincze, editors. 2019. *The Romani Women's Movement: Struggles and Debates in Central and Eastern Europe*. New York and London: Routledge.

