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**“OATH AT THE CROSS” IN ROMA SETTLEMENTS IN
EASTERN SLOVAKIA
(A CONTRIBUTION TO AN ANALYSIS OF ROMA RELIGIOSITY)²**

Abstract: Religious beliefs of inhabitants of Roma settlement in Eastern Slovakia are based on pre-Christian religious models. Although the majority of Roma settlements' inhabitants regard themselves Catholic, Christianity represents a mere facade behind which one can still recognize ancient magic procedures. The “oath at the cross” ritual is undergone by a woman who has been convicted, or held suspicious of infidelity, and it only takes place upon direct request or demand voiced by her husband. At night, the wife has to swear upon Christian cross that she has been faithful to her husband. By doing this, she is cleared of all accusations, and her status of faithful wife is restored. The restoration of the status is the primary purpose of the ritual, after which the matter is closed both, for the couple and the community. Thus, the purpose of this ritual, which bears a certain resemblance to Middle Age ordeals, is not to obtain the proof of guilt or innocence from the highest authorities, but to restore social order which has been threatened and thrown off balance by the fact, or suspicion of, conjugal infidelity.

Keywords: Roma, Gypsies, Religiosity, Oaths, Infidelity, Roma Settlements, Slovakia

Prologue

The following text is based on the outcomes of a long-term field research carried out since 1999 in eastern Slovakia (the county of Prešov and Košice), and it focuses on the character and specifics of religiosity of the Romany se-

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2 The text is based partly on the ideas and arguments presented in Budilová – Jakoubek 2003, 2014.

tlements inhabitants. One of the characteristic features of this religiosity is the fact that its core is still based on magical practices while Christianity only covers it on the surface. Christianity is thus only a kind of facade, hiding a non-Christian or more precisely pre-Christian core. It is this core that is the driving principle of the cultural (sub)system.

We will attempt to document this feature by examining a particular example of a chosen institution, this institution being the ritual procedure of the *oath at the cross*. Even though this practice is commonly known and frequently mentioned in literature, we are of the opinion that most references have so far born the character of a mere positivistic-ethnographic record without an attempt to comprehend its inner nature. Thus, our objective is to explore the intrinsic logic of this institution, which may moreover be helpful in terms of illuminating the whole of the religious system of the Romany settlements inhabitants because in many aspects it may be treated as a model example of a magical procedure concealed under the garb of Christianity. Consequently, this concrete consideration may be in principle generally valid on the structural level.

“The Oath at the Cross”

The institution of the *oath at the cross* solves some transgressions in the social sphere, exceptionally even such deeds as theft or murder, while it is usually employed in cases of adultery, which is why it is sometimes referred to as the “*oath of fidelity*”. It usually concerns conjugal infidelity of the woman, as the man’s marital infidelity is normally tolerated in Romany settlements; however, in specific cases the man may also undergo this procedure upon the woman’s request.

The principle of the act consists in the woman who has been unfaithful to her husband (or who has been accused of it) having to swear at a cross that she *has been faithful*. Normally, she does so upon the request of her husband or under the pressure of the family. The oaths take place at night, the location being a church, a graveyard, a wayside cross, or another public place; the presence of a cross is always necessary. The woman’s hair has to be let down and she must not be wearing anything that might “bind” her (such as rings, bracelets, necklaces...). Some informants maintain that she must be all naked, others that only the upper part of her body must be bare – these details differ with regard to the particular localities. As mentioned above, the oath takes place when the woman is only suspected by her jealous husband of having committed adultery, as well as in cases when her unfaithfulness is apparent and proved.

As the first example, we may consider the oath at the cross at the settlement of Abranovce (the county of Prešov, Slovakia).³ The oaths take place here at a public place where there used to stand a wooden cross, nowadays substituted by a stone one. The last evidence of an oath at the cross comes from the narration of the oldest woman in the settlement, named “Babo”. The central personage of the oath was the sister of this woman; she was born in Abranovce, while her husband came to Abranovce from another settlement to marry her and to live with her here. This woman had an affair with a friend of her husband’s, the act of adultery was proved and generally known. When the husband learned about it, he forced his wife to swear an oath at the cross. Everybody in the settlement including children knew that the oath was going to take place, but nobody apart from the guilty woman and her husband took part in it.

On a full moon night, the woman had to wash and groom herself, let her hair down and comb it (according to our informants, she had to be “cleansed”), then get undressed to the waist and follow her husband to the cross at the above mentioned place. She only wore a light shawl on the way, which she took off when they reached the cross. There she knelt down, embraced the cross, and repeated a stable formula which her husband, standing behind her, dictated. This general formula is in every particular case completed with concrete names of those with whom the woman betrayed her husband (or those with whom she is supposed to have betrayed him), for example: “I, Verona Horvátová, have never betrayed my husband with Josef Mika, František Žiga, nor with Roman Kaleja... which I herewith swear before my husband and before God.”

In this family (as well as in the culture of Romany settlements in general), marital infidelity was considered as something impermissible (see Davidová 1995; Hübschmannová 1999; Lázničková 1999; Žlnayová 1996), which is why it was an extremely sensitive topic to discuss. It was difficult to learn about the oath having taken place at all, primarily because after the event the family behaved as though nothing had happened and did not incline to recur to the issue. According to their own words, the oath had solved the whole affair, and everybody was glad that “We have got over it”. They all knew that the woman had been unfaithful (and also with whom), they also knew that the oath had taken place, but then the thing was not talked over any longer and life went on as if nothing had happened. The inhabitants of the settlement refer to the oath as the process of one’s “cleansing before God”, as to something that has to be done in order to “get it all back”.

3 A. Světlíková, anthropological field research in Abranovce (the county of Prešov, Slovakia), 2000, personal report.

We have chosen the second example – an oath which took place in a church in the village of Rožkovany (see Hajska – Poduška 2008) – because its main role was played by a man; for this reason it is an exceptional case, however typical in terms of its structure. The reason for the oath to take place was the man’s conjugal infidelity. This time, also, the issue was generally known, but for numerous reasons (the most important of which was probably pregnancy of the woman) a solution had to be found. The whole family (settlement) of this man condemned his behaviour and put him under pressure to which he resigned, himself declaring that “it must be so”. The oath was sworn in the church, without witnesses, and the married couple swore to each other that *they had been faithful to each other in the past*, and further, that they would be faithful to each other in the future under the threat of sanctions. During conversation with the inhabitants of the settlement and with the woman concerned, and as a reaction to subtle allusions to the fact that the man really had been unfaithful (and his oath had been actually false), people always laid emphasis upon the fact that “the most important thing is that they have said to one another before God that they were faithful to each other (and that they will be in the future as well)”, that is – as well as in the previous case – the fact that the oath had taken place and that life could tread the beaten path. All participants considered the issue to be solved.

References to oaths at the cross can be found in scholarly literature, too. For instance, Arne B. Mann mentions them in his study of gypsy weddings, where he writes: “An important reason for dissonance in a marriage, and possibly for the break-up of the co-existence is conjugal infidelity. Whilst infidelity of men is usually tolerated (though not approved of), infidelity of women is strictly condemned. In this context, it is interesting to mention the habit of the oath of marital fidelity, which is spread amongst the gypsy inhabitants all over Slovakia. The suspicious man compels his wife to swear an oath; it usually takes place at night, at a cemetery (Markušovice, Revúca, Žeh a), in a church (Markušovec, Sp. Tomášovec), at a cross in the village (Abranovce), at the open space in the settlement (Bystrany, Markušovec), or at home (Štrba). The woman gets undressed to the waist, lets her hair fall, must not be wearing any jewellery (earrings, clips), kneels, crosses her forefinger and middle-finger on both hands (Markušovec) and at a cross or a picture of a saint (Markušovec, Štrba) swears that she had not been unfaithful to her husband. The oath is carried out without witnesses, only in Bystrany the [...] marshal was invited to be present. After this oath (which often has the form of a curse that the woman calls upon herself), *the man believes his wife*. The oath described was recorded by E. Davidová in Trebišov in the late Fifties, recently by H. Bílková in four villages of the county of Martin” (Mann 1989: 117 italics added).

It should be mentioned, though, that some authors exploring the topic of the oaths of fidelity understand them in a very different way from the way in-

dedicated by the above shown examples and our commentary. According to these scholars, this institution is “used ... to refute *or confirm* the suspicion ...” (Kováč, 2003: 142, italics added), consequently, it is a sort of “a test of fidelity” (*Ibid*, 142), the result of which is certain and indubitable, for “no Romany ... would ever think of swearing a false oath”, because, if he did so, “the consequences for his further life ... could be disastrous” (*Ibid*, 138). Even though one cannot fail to notice that the cited author does not mention in his study a single example of the oath which had *proved* the committing of adultery, and the only example of this procedure described in detail (triggered by the fact that a woman was suspected that the baby she was expecting was not conceived by the man with whom she lived (or wanted to live); this man initiated the oath to take place) ends with words: “[the woman] said that it [=the child] was his” and the man “believed her” (cf. the above quoted formulation by A. B. Mann “after this oath ... *the man believes his wife*”), without raising any doubts about this oath (it seems that the author has believed it, too), we do not want to impugn by any means that oaths of the sort documented by M. Kováč take place in Romany settlements. We are convinced, though, that then it is a “non-traditional” variation, which has appeared as a result of contamination by the worldviews of the majority society. This form of the oath pre-supposes the conception of a universal, “objective” and unbiased truth, which is not natural in Romany communities, these being enclaves of traditional society (as opposed to modern, civil society) with kinship as the principal organisational factor (cf. e.g. Jakoubek 2003: 152-159), which influences even the conceptualisation of the truth, lie, or justice.⁴ In such communities, “truth” is not a value independent of the interests of the group (family), and at the same time it is not a category neutral in terms of values (truth must also be “good” in terms of benefits of the given kin group). This kind of correspondence is shown by our examples, while this correspondence might be one of the arguments supporting the hypothesis (inevitably requiring further research and justification) that the nature of the above mentioned oaths in Abranovce and Rožkovany⁵ is representative of the original type of this procedure, whereas the conception documented by M. Kováč represents a novel variation, corresponding in the given case rather with the process of transformation of the whole social organisation of Romany communities towards the model common in the majority society of Slovakia.

4 Regarding the question of the conception of truth in the culture of Romany settlements, cf. Jakoubek 2004, chapter 6.18 „Rodina a pravda“ (The Family and the Truth); also cf. Gurevich 1972, ch. “Na prave strana stroitsja...”.

5 We came across a structurally identical case in Chminianske Jakubovany (the county of Prešov, Slovakia).

The Oath at the Cross and God’s Judgement (the Ordeal)

Oaths, in broad varieties of forms and transformations, are an institution used by numerous ethnic groups in most diverse parts of the world (cf. e.g. Lévy-Bruhl 1923, chapter VIII. – *Ordeals*); with regard to the territory described, it is also essential that it is a pre-Christian institution, which used to be part of older legal systems (Procházka 1958: 169–180) and which was later, as one of many pre-Christian institutions and legal customs, incorporated into the legal system of the early Medieval Christian state. The original basis of this practice consisted in the utterance of a particular formula, the function of which was to cleanse the guilty person of the denunciation. Christianity at first adopted the institution of the pagan oath, filling it with new content (the most apparent change consisting in God being established as the appellate jurisdiction); later, though, oaths were substituted by “God’s Judgements” – ordeals.

In the Middle Age, ordeals were often used – similarly as oaths before – to solve disputes which could not be solved by means of employing human argumentation only; decisions were achieved in procedures which were considered to be the demonstration of the will of God. “God’s Judgement (ordeal) is a legal institution which long time ago helped to decide about the guilt or innocence and about the rights of the culprit, if he was not able to supply any other evidence.... If God’s Judgement turned out positive for him, he was claimed innocent; otherwise he was condemned...” (*Ott v slovník naučný* 1997: 52). Ordeals were clearly based upon the conviction that a dispute, an argument or an unclear problem would be decided by a supreme, supernatural power, “their aim was to delegate the decision from the human judgement to supernatural instance” (Klabouch 1967: 316). One must accept its decision, because it is made by an infallible authority and its verdict is binding. So, spreading of ordeals is closely linked to the process of christianisation, whilst the process of extruding the pagan oaths was supported by the Church, “under whose influence ordeals were supposed to substitute pagan oaths” (Procházka 1958: 177). Later, ordeals became a circumstantial institution of the Christian law, and pre-Christian oaths – along with the whole of the pre-Christian legal system linked to them – were gradually extruded and replaced by them.

One can also easily conclude from what has been noted above that Christian ordeals became common later than the procedure of swearing oaths. The fact that Christian ordeals replaced the original oaths may thus be used to support the hypothesis that the “oaths of fidelity” date back to the old, archaic legal system of the ancestors of the recent inhabitants of Romany settlements, *which has not been adopted from the majority society* of the given territory, because at the time of arrival of the ancestors of the recent Romany people in this territory (14th century), oaths had already been replaced by ordeals (not

everywhere, for sure; this *hypothesis* has to be proved, refuted, or at least given more precision by means of further research).

In this sense, the oath at the cross may be considered to be a part of the original legal system of old Romany communities, while the cross – nowadays virtually the core of the definition of the practice – is added later and represents *merely extrinsic* attribute, which seems to have substituted objects filled with magical powers, such as stones, trees, animals, streams or weapons (cf. Procházka 1958: 174). And exactly these magically viewed objects, not God, were supposed to guarantee the validity of the oath; apart from them, though, it was also faith in the magical power of words (nejasno, i ne mogu da preformulišem jer ne znam šta su hteli da kažu. Samo sam je obeležila, ništa menjala). As we have seen in the example of the oath in Abranovce, its principle consists in the fact that a certain given formula is uttered (“I have never betrayed...”); its uttering itself restores the broken order and brings back the original state of affairs. Truth is not looked for, God or other “truth guaranteeing” institution is not asked questions.



Although ordeals gradually replaced the pre-Christian oaths, these practices are substantially different in their principles; and this difference can be very helpful in demonstrating the specific nature of the oath. It was the objective of ordeals to solve a dispute, find a culprit, and deliver a judgement. The basic motive in this case was to find the truth, even though the method is not in accord with modern western reasoning or “regime of truth” – with help of supernatural powers. In contrast to that, the sense of the above described institution does not lie in providing evidence, revealing the truth, or deciding about guilt and innocence; rather, it consists in restoring the (social) order, which was impaired. Typical examples are again the above described oath at the cross in Abranovce or the oath in the church in Rožkovany – the guilt had been clear from the very beginning and proved so that the goal of the oath was not to find the truth, but cleansing the woman (man) as well as the whole of society from guilt, and consequently, restoring the original state of affairs. The woman (man) swears that she (he) has been faithful, and from then on, she (he) is viewed by her (his) husband (wife) and the whole community as a faithful wife (husband). Neither punishment nor truth is the issue desired, but introducing the correct state of things (cf. Copans 1996: 61). The most important thing is *that the oath takes place at all*. The aim of the oath in Abranovce was by means of performing the procedure to restore the social status of the woman as a faithful wife. Innocence of the wife is understood here as social status – not as a quality corresponding to the “true” state of things cf. Horský – Seligová 1997: 75).

The oath at the cross has survived to the present day as an archaic, pagan practice based on the magical power of words thanks to the fact that it assumed Christian garb, making use of Christian rhetoric and symbols. That this institution has not got anything in common with Christian faith (apart from the outer impression given above all by the presence of the cross) is clear at first sight; moreover, if one were to imagine a Christian variant of the procedure, it would probably have the form of profession of sin and begging for forgiveness (that is: "I have committed adultery..."). Nevertheless, in Romany settlements one can observe a model of quite an opposite character – the woman (man) swears that she (he) *has been faithful*, and she (he) is then also viewed as such. In the Christian perspective, this formulation must necessarily be considered as a *lie*, which, however, is certainly not the viewpoint of those who carry out this practice. It proves apparent again that the example of this institution can be used to demonstrate the different conceptions of truth in both kinds of communities.

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We are convinced that research carried out so far, usually focused on describing of extrinsic manifestations rather than on hidden, non-visible mechanisms and structure, has been in many aspects led astray in its conclusions by the presence of the described Christian symbols and utterances.

Usually, when religiosity of the Romany settlements inhabitants was examined, one drew on the *a-priori* pre-supposition that the main component of this religiosity nowadays was Christianity, with some other elements whose character can be described as left-overs from the ancient times. These are often referred to as rudiments or relics of the "original" Romany religiosity and scholars then commit themselves to documenting them as the only recorded elements of the old faith. We are of the opinion that this conception is wrong. In spite of the fact that most of the manifest *elements* of the Romany settlements inhabitants' religiosity are of Christian nature (apart from the described exceptions), Christianity is only an outer "facade", behind which there is concealed the "traditional" (pre-Christian) *structure* of their religious system, or the inner logic of the individual institutions, whose character is overtly archaic.

We have shown that despite the fact that the manifestations of the Romany settlements inhabitants' religiosity make use of Christian rhetoric and symbols, they are archaic magical procedures whose character is in conflict with Christianity. Thus, reflecting the outcomes of our so far research, one can argue that however ready the Romany settlements inhabitants are to adopt Christian symbols, rhetoric and acts, they rigidly retain their "traditional" type of religiosity, which is deeply magical. So, it becomes apparent that the basis

of research of (not only) Romany settlements inhabitants’ religiosity must first of all involve determination of its overall character, because the nature of the individual elements is to a high extent characterised by the context in which they find themselves and in which they function. Romany settlements inhabitants’ religiosity does not seem to be determinable from the fact that it contains a vast majority of Christian elements, as the *meaning* of these elements is only given by the horizon on which they become visible. And we are strongly convinced that this horizon is still fully magical.

Conclusion

If we put aside the extrinsic, manifested aspects of Romany settlements inhabitants’ religiosity and concentrate upon the unconscious structure of the religious system, as a part of given culture, which is concealed from the bearers of the system themselves, we will find the conscious declarations of our informants, along with their reflections of this topic, no longer paramount and even relevant (we do not wish to say, though, that they are not relevant in other discourses, for instance in discussion of national political issues). Thus, we come to analyse a paradoxical situation when the inhabitants of Romany settlements eagerly declare their Christianity (and loyalty to the – mainly – Catholic Church), but deny it in their religious practice. These facts can be documented by means of examination of procedures and techniques involving Christian elements.

For example, baptism is not understood in Romany settlements as the act of accepting a new man/woman into the Christian community, erasing the first sin from him/her, and imparting the grace of God upon the baptised person. In their conception, baptism is a magical way of protecting a child as well as an adult from bad powers, which abide in Romany settlements in huge numbers, according to the inhabitants. These powers include above all *mule* (apparitions, ghosts of the dead⁶), feared both by children and adults – a *mulo* can “give fright” (in the Romany language *mukhel dar*), paralyse one so that they cannot speak nor move out of fear. For this reason, older children (but also adults) are afraid to go out alone at night, for small children the light must be on all night. The parents of babies fear that their child might be stolen by a witch or by a *gulidaj* (a supernatural creature, the ghost of a mother who died during the delivery and who goes about to steal and exchange the babies of other mothers⁷). We have also come across a case when people were worried

6 See cf. Davidová 1988: 100; Mann 1988: 198; Palubová 2003: 28–33; Raichová 1999.

7 Čajánková 1954: 291; Žiga 1988: 173.

that if a child is not baptised, it may die soon.⁸ To protect children from these dark powers, a number of various measures are taken, such as binding a red ribbon around the neck, laying a comb or a pair of scissors under the pillow (Čajánková 1954: 291; Žiga: 1988: 173; Mann 2003: 87–89), or putting on the sleeping gown inside out.⁹ Clearly, the baptism is a *functional equivalent* of such magical measures¹⁰. These magical acts, however, *do function* from the point of view of those who realise them – there is substantial evidence (in pre-popperean diction “verification”) that if you bind a red ribbon around a child’s wrist or put them the shirt on inside out (or baptise them), there is nothing can harm them, they will stop sobbing, or they will recover from their illness (and on the other hand, there is a lot of evidence that children who had not been baptised died for this reason or that they got bewitched – of course, in the latter case baptism worked as remedy). Several of our informants have met a *gulidaj*, who wanted to steal their child (the *evidence* of her visit consisted in the fact that the child had fallen out of a swing or that the child had his cap pulled down over his face), one informant even physically fought with her. So, the inhabitants of Romany settlements are no dreamers nor do they suffer from hallucinations – on the contrary, their behaviour is subject to their own almost pragmatic criticism and non-functional practices are abandoned. Effectiveness of these practices, as well as real existence of the above described creatures, is proven – it is all real because it works.

Using holy water is also very much liked in Romany settlements, for the same reasons as baptism or putting a knife under the pillow – holy water protects one from dark powers like the *mule*, or from the powers of Nature, which frighten Romany people. It often happens that inhabitants of Romany settlements urge priests (not only Catholic but also Evangelical, who do not use holy water at all) fill their PET bottles with holy water. This water is then used for instance during storms, when the whole dwelling place is sprinkled with it so that it is not hit by a lightning, or when a member of the family died recently and as a *mulo* keeps coming back to visit his or her relatives (for this reason, also burning candles can be used).

- 8 In this case, as well as in the cases to follow, we draw upon the outcomes of field research carried out by the authors in Chminianské Jakubovany (the county of Prešov, Slovakia) in 1999–2002; see Budilová – Jakoubek 2008.
- 9 All sharp objects are able to chase negative powers away. The objective of wearing clothes inside out to confuse these powers and thus to draw their attention away from the child. According to Milena Hübschmannová, Romany nicknames – *aver nav* (the second, other name) – have the same function, cf. Hübschmannová 1998: 65.
- 10 Therefore also – if it does not function, if it does not have an effect, *it can (must) be repeated*. If a baby does not stop to crying, if baptism does not restore its health, it is clear that the act failed and the baby must be baptised *again*.

In this case, also, the described procedure works – the *mulo* ceases to return, the storm is over (or at least the house is not hit by a lightning). With regard to this evidence and a number of verifications, the behaviour of the Romany settlements inhabitants has to be considered – in the frame of given cultural system – as extremely “logical”, or better to say “rational”¹¹. So, even though this behaviour may seem – if considered in the light of the norms and values of the majority society – absurd and senseless, within the framework of the Romany settlements culture it consists of procedures justified by experience and time, and, consequently, relevant to the every day reality.

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11 Here we touch an issue of already many times substantiated fact of existence of more (culturally determined) “rationalities” of which that one, born in Greece (Vernant 1962) is only one of more possible variants (see cf. Gellner 1992).

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**“OATH AT THE CROSS” IN ROMA SETTLEMENTS IN EASTERN SLOVAKIA
(A CONTRIBUTION TO AN ANALYSIS OF ROMA RELIGIOSITY)**

Summary

In the Romany settlements in eastern Slovakia, we can nowadays still find the institution of the “oath at the cross”. This practice is employed primarily in the questions of marital adultery and its principle consists in the act of swearing an oath (“I swear that I have been faithful to my husband/wife”), which is carried out at night by the woman/man accused of adultery. The man/woman accepts this oath and, as a consequence, the woman’s/man’s status is restored as that of a faithful wife/husband. That is the actual sense of the ritual and the whole issue is then closed, both for the couple and for the whole community. It is a traditional practice, with regard to many tokens a relic of an ancient Romany legal system. If we put aside the extrinsic factors of the oath, such as symbols, which have been contaminated by Christian tradition, we can see that the gist of the procedure is fully magical. From this fact we conclude that under the level of visible Christian elements, there persists a concealed structure functioning on magical principles and forming the actual – because determinative – core of the Romany settlements inhabitants’ religiosity.

Keywords: Roma, Gypsies, Religiosity, Oaths, Infidelity, Roma Settlements, Slovakia

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