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A Matter of Attitude: Gypsiness and Style in Zece Prăjini (Romania)

This paper is about musical Gypsiness,¹ creativity and morals. Its immediate setting is a small Gypsy village in central Moldavia, where I have been doing fieldwork for the past six years. Some of the facts and conclusions presented here might be applied more generally to a broader area, but not without some caveats. For the time being, I shall restrict myself to the villagers' opinions, and to their interactions with the surrounding Romanians.

Some 600 people live in Zece Prăjini. All of them are Gypsies, apart from four or five Romanians who came to the village through marriage. Most of the men are or have been at some point professional musicians and at present day music is the main source of financial income for the village. Instrumental music is the most important sort, and is performed either in brass bands or in smaller amplified ensembles.

The Prăjinians claim to play, and listen to, "Romanian" music. This is quite understandable since most of their patrons are Romanians from the nearby villages. When Prăjinians perform for other Gypsies (in the village or somewhere else), they also consider the music they play to be "Romanian". In principle, there is no such thing as "Gypsy music" in their community. However, the villagers also say that Gypsies have better musical taste than others, and tend to present themselves as "connoisseurs" of music. So even if the same melodies are played both for *Rroma* (Gypsies) and *Gaje* (non-Gypsies), the villagers talk about two performance styles: *Gajicani* and *Rromani* (which are the adjectival forms of *Gaje* and *Rroma*).

¹ I use "Gypsy" (the English word for "Rrom") and "Rrom" (the Rromani word for "Gypsy") as synonyms. I am fully aware of the fact that "Gypsy" has been associated with negative connotations in English literature, but I think that avoiding it would merely mean an implicit acceptance of this pejorative burden. In Zece Prăjini people speak about "Rrom" in Rromani and "Țigan" (Gypsy) in Romanian.

In this paper, I will focus on their definition of these terms. First, I present some musical examples, then the metaphors used by the villagers to describe them. I continue by focusing on one of these metaphors – “intelligent stealing” – and conclude with some brief remarks on the moral attributes of Gypsy musical identity in the context of Romanian folk morals.

Rromani vs. Gajicani

The distinction between *Rromani* and *Gajicani* is primarily stylistic. In theory, any tune can be played *Gajicani* as well as *Rromani*. As a musician from the village put it for me:

“Let me explain something to you. There is no big difference between the music the Gypsies listen to and the one the Romanians listen to. The rhythms are the same, but Gypsies know better than the Romanians what music really is. They want just perfection itself. They want better quality; that harmony be harmony, soloistic part, soloistic part [whispering] when it is quiet, quiet [regains his normal voice] when it explodes, explosive. Music done with taste. That’s it.

(...) What, in Dagâța [nearby Romanian village] ... in Dagâța, I play also *sârba*, no? *Sârba*. Romanians dance also on *sârba*. In my village, when there is a wedding or when someone comes [to play] ... isn’t it also *sârba* that he plays? Don’t they also dance *sârba*? Maybe the same *sârba*, but improved” (Costică).²

Indeed, one sometimes hears the same tunes played for Rroma and for Gaje audiences. “*Sârba de la Zece Prăjini*” is one of these “double-identity” tunes.³ The first variant (▶ AUDIO EXAMPLE CD/19) is performed in a

² *Hai să-ți dau eu o explicație. Între muzica care o ascultă țiganii și muzica care o ascultă românii ... sau le place la țigani, nu-i mare diferență tată. Ritmurile sunt aceleași(?), numai că țiganii știu mai bine ce-i aia muzică ca românii. Vor perfecțiune întruchipată. Vor mai bine făcut. Armonia să fie armonie, partea solistică partea solistică, [șoptește] când e lento lento, încet, [revine spre tonul lui normal] când e să explodeze explodeze. Muzică cu gust. Asta este.*

(...) *Ce, la Dagâța ... la Dagâța când cânt sârbă, nu? Sârbă, joacă sârbă românii. În sat la mine când e o nuntă sau când vine[cineva să cânte] ... nu tot sârbă cântă? Nu joacă tot sârbă? Poate aceeași sârba, dar făcută mai bine.*

³ Double-identity is a term used by S. Rădulescu (2004). Her extensive research shows that all over Romania, Gypsy music is primarily defined by Gypsy musicians

rather *Gajicani* style and the second (☞ AUDIO EXAMPLE CD/20) in a rather *Rromani* one, by two brass bands from the village.⁴ I will discuss their differences later.

However, not all the tunes are suited for double identity. In practice, some melodies are always played *Gajicani* and some others always *Rromani*. "Hora lui Maricel" for example (☞ AUDIO EXAMPLE CD/21), is a typically *Rromani* tune that I have never heard performed for Gaje. The performance presented here is less danceable, but rather designed to be listened to. The *ifon* (small tuba) contributes much to it, and it is worth noticing that the band always invites Maricel (the *ifon* player) when it performs for Rroma, and never when it is hired by Gaje. The recording was made during a wedding in the village, thus a *Rromani* one. The second example (☞ AUDIO EXAMPLE CD/22) was recorded during a Romanian party: the feast of the patron saint of Buruienești.⁵ It is a fast, lively tune, well suited for energetic dances: a typically *Gajicani* melody, according to the Prăjinians.

I will not characterize the difference between the two styles from a musicological point of view but instead focus on the metaphors used by the villagers to describe them.

Metaphors

As can be seen in table below, Gypsiness is characterized by terms related to personal fancy (*moft, stil*), wit (*ciorănie, șmecherie*) and sweet carefulness. In contrast the *Gajicani* style evokes childish straightforwardness, brutality and lack of care. All in all, *Rromani* suggests control and manipulation of the tune, whereas playing it *Gajicani* would mean to merely leave it raw, "as it is".

As noted before, from the Prăjinians point of view, *Gajicani* and *Rromani* are not two equivalent aesthetic choices: Gypsies are supposed to have better musical taste than Romanians. One could say that if *Rromani* is a

as a performance style rather than a repertoire (see also Rădulescu 2003).

⁴ Since the melody is quite long, only the first part of each variant is presented.

⁵ A Romanian village some 40 km away from Zece Prăjini.

“style”, from a Prăjinian point of view, *Gajicani* looks more like a “lack of style”.

<i>Rromani</i>	<i>Gajicani</i>
With caprice/style (<i>cu moft/stil</i>)	Simple/straight (<i>simplu/drept</i>)
With wit, smartly (<i>ciorănitico/șmecheritico</i>)	Childishly/stupidly (<i>copilărește/nebecitico</i>)
Careful, patient (<i>cu atenție/răbdare</i>)	Messy/noisy (<i>hurluială, vraiște, gălăgie</i>)
Sweet (<i>dulce</i>)	Harsh (<i>dur</i>)

Metaphors for *Rromani* and *Gajicani*

Amongst the ideas connected with the *Rromani* style, *ciorănie* and *șmecheria* are the most remarkable. They are more or less synonyms and designate a domain where the Prăjinians think that Gypsies excel.

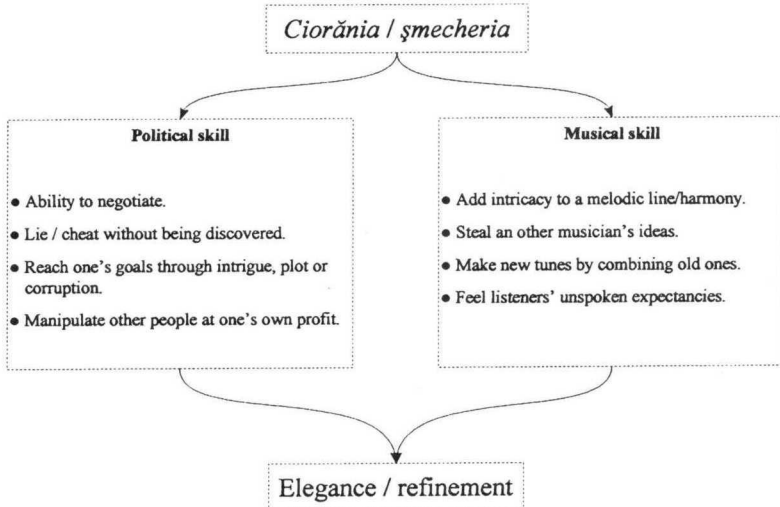
Intelligent Theft

According to the villagers *ciorănia* is based on the *Rromani* root *cior* (“thief”). But instead of simply meaning “theft” (which would be *cioripe*), *ciorănia* is described as “intelligent theft”. *Șmecheria* is a Romanian word, that could mean a “trick” or a “stratagem”.⁶ It also has a slightly immoral connotation.

To put it briefly, *ciorănia* / *șmecheria* is a kind of unconventional political skill. Of course, nobody thinks that Gypsies have a monopoly on “intelligent theft”, but the villagers believe that Gypsies are especially gifted in this kind of behavior. And there is more, since this attitude is valued in the village. “Simple” stealing or lying is viewed as mere violence (and as such deprecated), but “intelligent theft” is treated more like a political skill and conveys a sense of elegance that elicits respect, or even admiration. This would not be the case in the surrounding Romanian villages, where all kinds of immoral behavior are condemned (at least in theory): there, no one would talk about an “elegant” way of stealing. In Zece Prăjini, steal-

⁶ The dictionary relates *șmecher* to the German word *Schmecker* – a person with a refined taste (cf. [Academia Română] 1998).

ing, cheating and lying are also immoral behaviors but this immorality can be balanced by refinement, elegance and cleverness. Thus, comments like “he’s a really dangerous man, a really big thief”,⁷ are implicitly positive.



Ciorănia / șmecheria: meaning network

As an example, *ciorănia* is typically involved in bargaining the price of a wedding performance, but also in playing the least possible during the wedding itself, while getting the most money from the audience, and the most food and drinks from the patrons.⁸ Of course, a well-known, widely spread stereotype links Gypsies to this kind of behavior. But far from denying it, people in Zece Prăjini are eager to accept and even to confirm it.⁹

⁷ *Uo si periculoso haptumen! Baro cior si adalka!*

⁸ Pettan (1996b, 2002:245) describes various such techniques, on the edge between music and diplomacy, used by the Gypsies from Kosovo to extract money from their audiences.

⁹ This is true at least in their discourse. In their behavior, “intelligent stealing” does not necessarily appear as preeminent as they present it. The positive evaluation of this kind of attitude has also been noticed by Stewart (1989:89, 1997:19) and Kertesz-Wilkinson (1997:107, note 15) for Hungarian Vlach Gypsies, by Pettan (1996b, 2002:245) amongst the Gypsy professional musicians from Prizren, by Silverman (1988) amongst American Gypsies, and by Formoso (1986) for the Manuş and Sinte from the south of France.

In a musical sense, *ciorănia* is an ability to reproduce what others play, but also a personal imagination, or an ability to tailor the music to the specific performance context. The Prăjinians use the same words – *ciorănia* / *șmecheria* – to qualify both the attitude towards the others and the attitude towards music.¹⁰ They present the latter as a mere musical facet of the overall competence: one needs *ciorănia* in order to outsmart the other musicians, and to impress refined audiences (which usually results in more money, food, drinks etc.). Musical wit is conveyed by all kinds of personal variants and virtuositities, its most obvious examples being the melodic and harmonic caprices.

“Sârba de la Zece Prăjini”: first bars (after introduction), as played by the trumpets; inside the frame: elements of *ciorănie*

The second variant of “Sârba de la Zece Prăjini” (⇒ AUDIO EXAMPLE CD/20) displays some typical *ciorăni* (inside the frame in above transcription). These are not necessarily seen as such individually: it is rather their accumulation that conveys the impression that the musicians play *ciorănitico* (in the “thieves” way), that they try to “get the most out of it”.

From an external point of view, musical *ciorănia* could be interpreted as mere professionalism. But for musicians, as for their audience, this taste for complexity is a matter of ethnic belonging. Everybody knows that

¹⁰ It should be stressed that in Zece Prăjini, *ciorănia* and *șmecheria* are not supposed to be restricted to the relations with the Gaje. This has also implications in music, since villagers do not characterize *Rromani* style as “truthful”, as other Gypsies do (see for example Pasqualino 2002, or Stewart 1989).

there are exceptions to the rule (some Gaje like complex music, some Rroma like simple tunes), but unless these exceptions are discussed as such, people simply use the ethnic words (*Gajicani* and *Rromani*) to speak about the two distinct musical styles.

Sometimes, they also use the word *lăutărește* ("in the professional way") as a synonym for *Rromani* ("in the Gypsy way"). But, the corresponding synonym for *Gajicani* ("in the Romanian way") is then *folclor*. The two equivalent oppositions are thus *Rromani* vs. *Gajicani* and *lăutărește* vs. *folclor*, and one can hear comments such as: "He can't play *lăutărește*, just *folclor*",¹¹ where a "professional" music is implicitly opposed to a "folkloric" one. This association between professionalism, ethnicity and folklore may be the key to a broader understanding of the villagers' sense of musical Gypsiness.

Technical Aptitude and Moral Attitude

One can easily understand why the villagers would talk about the cleverness of a performer. They consider a great deal of the skills needed to play well – reproducing, inventing or remembering tunes for example – as gauges of mental aptitude, linking them to cleverness. But when they talk about music and musicians, the villagers do not use the words that simply designate "cleverness" or "intelligence". *Ciorănia* and *șmecheria* both convey a sense of intelligence but also, in addition, a sense of something not-so-legal, something on the edge of honesty. One could say that, by adding this moral touch, the terms do not refer only to a simple aptitude but to a more general attitude, a way of being. Why would these musical operations be qualified from a moral point of view? To understand this conception, one has to consider it in the context of a very widespread discourse about the purity of folklore.

To put it briefly, in Romania – as in many ex-communist countries – rural traditional culture tends to be presented as folklore, a part of national identity supposed to be the raw expression of the "natives".¹² This

¹¹ *Nu poate cânta lăutărește, numai folclor.*

¹² For a general discussion on folklore as a political manipulation of tradition, see for example Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) or Thiesse (1999). On folklore in Roma-

idea has been spread by mass media and schools at least since World War II and is now deeply rooted in Romanians' consciousness. Folklore is seen as a "collective creation", not conceived by individuals: the best individual musicians can do is to "interpret" its tunes, while the worst is to spoil them. The purity and authenticity of folklore is threatened every time individuals play *with* it instead of simply playing it. The probability for corruption increases when these individuals are not "natives", for example when they are Gypsies. Two main stereotypes are common in this respect about Gypsy musicians: they are excellent performers, praised for their technical skills and their imagination, but for the same reasons, they have also been seen as corruptors of folklore.¹³

The Prăjinian discourse about musical Gypsiness combines these two ideas: *Gajicani* is seen as raw, straightforward music with no style and no individual investment. *Rromani* is style complication, caprice, whim, fancy, and care. From an external point of view, the latter features could certainly be interpreted as mere professionalism. But since they originate from Gypsy individuals, and not from the "Romanian nation", they can also be viewed as corruptions. Thus terms like *ciorănia* or *șmecheria* are used by the villagers to designate the attitude that creates "style" or its equivalent: musical Gypsiness.

The intentions attributed to the performers appear to be more important in determining musical identity than the purely musical features. The set of intentions understood as "typically Gypsy" by the villagers derive from a very widespread stereotype about Gypsies. The stereotype is usually negative, but the Prăjinians redefine it in a positive way. For this, they do not seek to deny its alleged moral aspects but simply to link them with skill and refinement. They accept the idea that Gypsy music is corruption, theft (and so on), but explain that these attitudes are the key to good, efficient music making. In music as in daily life, the two communities manage

nian politics, see Boia (1990, 1997). On music and politics during the 20th century in Romania, see Rădulescu (2002).

¹³ Pettan (2002) describes the same discourse about Gypsy music in Kosovo. He also shows elsewhere (Pettan 1996a) how Gypsies manipulate musical identity in complex political contexts.

to preserve relatively non-conflicting relations, despite their clear-cut segregation.

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SAŽETAK

Pitanje stava: Romstvo i stil u Zece Prājini (Rumunjska)

Zece Prājini romsko je selo u središnjoj Moldaviji. Većina muških stanovnika profesionalni su glazbenici. U njihovim esteskim osvrtima na glazbu važni su termini *rromani* (romsko) i *gajicani* (ne-romsko). Međutim, prilično ih je teško precizno definirati: ponekad se odnose na identitet glazbenika, ponekad na slušatelje, ponekad na strukturu melodije, a ponekad na stil izvođenja. Da bi se razumjela i obradila takva višeznačna koncepcija, moramo uzeti u obzir kako sami seljani doživljavaju "romstvo" u svakodnevnom životu.

Prema njima, Romi pokazuju osobitu sposobnost za ponašanje koje metaforički nazivaju *ciorănia* – "inteligentna krađa". Ukratko, *ciorănia* je politička vještina. Omogućava im da što bolje iskoriste određenu situaciju, služeći se manje-više nekonvencionalnim metodama (laganjem, laskanjem, prijetnjama, ucjenama itd.). *Ciorănia* se upotrebljava i u glazbi, a odnosi se na određeni tip variranja kojim glazbenici iskazuju svoju tehničku vještinu, maštu i svukupnu glazbenu inteligenciju. Seljani izričito povezuju dva značenja (glazbeno i izvanglazbeno), objašnjavajući da je riječ o istom stavu i pristupu u različitim domenama. Smatraju da su Romi osobito nadareni za *ciorăniju* i naglašavaju je kao jednu od svojih glavnih razlika u odnosu na neromske susjede (*Gaje*).

Taj stereotip ima i svoje glazbene posljedice. Veći dio repertoara može se svirati i Romima i ne-Romima. Glazbenici međutim napominju da za ne-Rome treba svirati "jednostavno" i "izravno", dok za Rome treba "petljati" i "mozgati" melodiju i time pokazati *ciorăniju*. To se prije svega postiže promjenama stila izvođenja, no budući da su određene melodije prikladnije za "petljanje" od drugih, razlike se očituju i u repertoaru. Premda izražen u etničkom smislu, romski je "identitet" stoga zapravo složeni sklop etničkog samodefiniranja, profesionalnih vještina i izvedbenog konteksta. Njegova se srž otkriva kao specifičan stav, kakav se očituje prema glazbi i prema drugima.