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THE TIME OF THE CHALICE: OF MARRIAGES, ANCESTORS, AND SONS AMONG GYPSIES IN TRANSYLVANIA

Abstract

Ethnographic research among a Gypsy population from Transylvania, the Cortorari provides me with insights for advancing the theorization of Gypsies' attitudes towards temporality, and the understanding of their survival as a group. Contrary to other Romany people who are uninterested in the material world around them, and whose attitudes towards time are informed by a presentist orientation, the Cortorari convey a strong commitment to the ownership of some objects of wealth and status, namely the chalices. Practices related to the possession of chalices reveal a stance on time which accommodates pulls towards the past, the present, and the future. Coming from the ancestors, chalices circulate as male heirlooms, and are central to practices of marriage. What is critical about chalices is that, on a temporal dimension, they secure permanence and immutability. I look at how different kinds of time, memory and historicity relate to each other and are weaved into the social reproduction of the group.

Keywords: Gypsies, Cortorari, chalice, practices of marriage

Half-way through my Ph.D. fieldwork, my landlord's family experienced unprecedented grief. For a week or so neither my landlord nor his wife or his mother could have a wink of sleep all night or have a bite of food all day. I had seen them before anguished and participated in their repeated sorrows over the threats their co-parents-in-law made either to end the advanced pregnancy of their younger daughter or to break her marriage altogether. Yet these were plights whose resolution was obtained in the short term as they were linked to different dimensions of the person such as her body or her gender. This time the higher intensity of their anxieties mirrored the intricacies of a much longer term predicament, one that reaches beyond the individual lifespan. The time had come for their thirteen-year-old son Greg to bring his bride into their household and to

sleep with her and subsequently procreate, as other Cortorari boys of his age normally do. All the adults were worried that Greg was infertile, a judgement they made based on the dimensions of his genitalia, and I have addressed the question Cortorari's proclivity for associating maleness, masculinity and the capacity to procreate with the 'development' of sexual organs elsewhere (Teșar 2012a: 128f.). Greg's parents' and his grandmother's worries about his stunted penis were constitutive of the shared dread of the extinction of their family as Cortorari consider the son to be central to the reproduction of the family. Greg's grandmother's words are telling here: "Had it [being infertile] happened to one of the girls, it wouldn't have been a dead end. Whereas if the boy is childless, we will have worked in vain our entire lives...Knowing we have carried on with our lives with no heir on whom to pass our *averea* (wealth)?" The Cortorari notion of wealth is based on the possession of particular material items, chalices, and the old woman's worries are centred on the chalice that her family possesses: "Our *taxtaj* (chalice) would be worthless! This would be the absolute worst of the worst, I would better hang myself."

Most of what Cortorari do and think, dream and worry about, talk and not talk about is driven by the imperative of marrying their children, seeing them married and have children of their own thus becoming grandparents, the ultimate indicator of a fulfilled life. Cortorari's obsession with processes of growth and replacement of generational cycles and their unrelenting awareness of life's linear progression from birth to death, punctuated by the transition from an age-group to another, along with their commitment to possessions creates an image of them which appears to be at variance with orthodox anthropological depictions of Gypsies as living in a timeless present (Stewart 1997; Gay y Blasco 1999; Williams 1984: 164), celebrating impermanence and disregarding material possessions (Kaprow 1982). This is not to say that Cortorari's sociality is completely inconsistent with how other Romany populations construct their sociality. In most aspects of their everyday life, Cortorari could have been easily likened to other Gypsies described by the literature, in as much as they did not save for tomorrow, they "reaped without sowing" (Day *et al.* 1999: 4), they behaved thriftlessly and men especially squandered money on gambling; their actions, even their stints abroad for economic purposes, were for the most part impromptu; they did not make commitments and did not record the passing of the time, and overall they appeared to be worlds apart from their peasant neighbours who sweated over ploughing the land in the summer to provide for the winter. Generally speaking, in the

choices they made in regard to their livelihoods and to time spending, they faithfully complied with common scholarly representations of Gypsies.

Underpinning the orthodox anthropological accounts is the idea that Romany people live in the short term which "they transform into a transcendent escape from time" (Day *et al.* 1999: 2). Gypsies' presentism, along with their peculiar attitudes towards work, person and community, was tackled analytically as an active response to their marginal position (Stewart 1997; Day *et al.* 1999). Romany figurations were presented as constellations of equal and autonomous individuals who ideologically deny hierarchies and bonds and the processes of reproduction pervasive in European households and, at the same time, actively disengage from material objects and property. Just as Carsten's (1995; 1997) Malays on the Langkawi fashioned themselves as persons related to each other through everyday practices of commensality and dwelling, Stewart's (1997) Hungarian Roms were preoccupied with celebrating fictitious 'brotherly relations' which were constantly invented in the here and now, through drinking, gambling and singing, and through rhetorical negation of their involvement in bodily reproduction. Stewart notes that "The idea of reproduction was not so much rooted in an ideology of descent and inheritance of character as in an ideology of nurture and shared social activity" (1997: 59).

Gay y Blasco (2001) furthered the interpretation of the Gypsies' present-orientedness by addressing their approach to the past. Unlike neighbouring European populations who make extensive use of communal memory in discourses to forge their imagined ethnic identities, Gypsies appeal to personalized ways of remembering deceased individuals and show no interest in an alleged collective past. This is related to their particular mode of social organization, which downplays notions of 'community' at the expense of 'commonality' (Gay y Blasco 1997), which is interrelatedness created in the present. Gypsies' presentism is far from being only the flip-side of their encapsulation by non-Gypsies; it is also a reflection of their own notions of belonging and personhood. Gay Y Blasco's attempt to merge social structural marginality with internal values was preceded by the publication of Williams' monograph (2003 [1993]) which provides a more detailed and subtle account of the Gypsy chronotope. In a nutshell, the Manuš, the Romany population described in said monograph, by living among the *gaže*¹ and depending for their persistence on the relationship with the *gaže*, express their distinctiveness through the respect they pay to their dead², as encapsulated in practices

of reminiscing and obliteration (see also Tauber 2006). The Manuš know two kinds of durations: one which is associated with the individual Manuš, 'made up of the ephemeral, the precarious, and the irremediable' (Williams 2003: 22) –which I infer to be 'the timeless present' of the British authors mentioned above –, and another one which "pertains to the perennial, the immutable (...). It is felt through the absolute loyalty to the deceased' (*idem*), and which bears on the realm of the 'community'".

Williams' account provides the key to proving the co-presence of two allegedly incommensurable attitudes towards time among the Cortorari, one pertaining to the individual and the other one to the kinship. In the introductory vignette, I suggested that the short term was associated by the Cortorari with the individual and that the longer term denoting continuity was associated with relatedness and the replacement of developmental cycles. It is beyond the scope of this article to inquire into the myriad complex ways in which these two temporal dimensions entwine all the more so as this has been beautifully described by Williams. Instead I shall focus on what Williams labelled the 'perennial' time and how Cortorari elaborate it culturally, not only through a specific treatment of the past, but also through thoughtful consideration of the future which transpires in their preoccupation with the perpetuation of relatedness. Following Fortes' (1970) initial call for greater attention to practices of kinship over a stretch of time, which became the kernel of Goody's (1971) developmental cycles, I look at how Cortorari conceive of the growth and replacement of generational cycles in conjunction with their notions of personhood, and how their conceptions articulate with a specific stance on time.

Little attention has been paid to how Gypsies approach and represent ideas about generational reproduction, coupling, and marriage. Gypsies' conceptions of the (female) body as polluted and hence their reluctance to face the physicality of reproduction through other means than symbolical (Sutherland 1975: 250ff.; Okely 1983: 201ff.; Gay y Blasco 1999: 87ff.; Stewart 1997: 204ff.) led to a tendency to side-line the idiom of the reproduction of relatedness in Romany scholarship. One noteworthy exception is Gropper (1975), who underscored the focus on marriage as an essential feature of Romany figurations. Hers remains a unique voice in addressing questions regarding the life-cycles of individuals and in emphasizing the need to consider the dynamics and changes entwined with life-histories instead of clinging to the static analysis (63). Williams (1984) dedicated a whole monograph to marriage among the Parisian Kalderash but the thrust of his book is the Levi-Straussian exchange of women (1969)

and subsequently the deployment of horizontal relations. Bearing some affinities with the work on Gypsy marriages – which remains nonetheless underrepresented within the literature –, my article aims to complement such work by addressing marital practices within a broader timeframe.

First, I will approach Cortorari marital practices as uneasy processes unfolding over many years, revolving around becoming and transformations of subjectivities, and punctuated by the birth of children and the transfer of marriage payment in several instalments. Underlying the creating and strengthening of marital bonds is the idea that an individual attains full personhood once she becomes a grandparent. The future orientation of relatedness is articulated both through the local category of *neamo* and through the flow of chalices. The *neamo-s*, aggregates of people comprising the dead and the living, and named after a deceased kin appear to prioritize descent over alliance in people's talk. Yet a closer look at the practical manifestation of *neamo* reveals its capacity for action in marriage arrangements. Similar indeterminacy and boundary transgression between inheritance and alliance characterize the flow of chalices which, despite being circulated from father to the son, is constitutive of marriage practices. I show that Cortorari's engagement with chalices, which they consider to have been passed down from their forebears to them, does not map onto the folk idiom of ownership - as encapsulated in ideas of denying others any rights in one's property - and in so doing prioritizes proprietorship over connectedness. On the contrary, possession of chalices intimates Cortorari's preoccupation with creating interrelatedness both in the present and in the future.

1. Introducing the Cortorari

An ex-nomadic³ Romany-speaking population, the Cortorari – a name given to them by their Romanian neighbours,⁴ which has no equivalent in their own language -, lives nowadays scattered among a few villages in central Romania, Transylvania. They stand out due to their very colourful dress: women wear predominantly red ankle-length checked skirts and flowery scarves on their heads, and men sport black velvet trousers and velour hats. They believe to be all relatives of different degrees of closeness and they intermarry. They derive their livelihoods from an assortment of ways, combining men's copper artefact manufacture with women's pig husbandry, and begging abroad which is practiced irrespective of one's

gender. I carried out my research in the village with the largest population of Cortorari living together in approximately eighty households, e.g. more or less 700 people. Here, the Cortorari's presence is conspicuous not only due to their brightly-coloured attire, but mostly due to their mansions under construction, painted in lively colours and decorated with metal turrets. Although they are fully embarked on the ploughing of money into the continuous shifting of their houses' architecture and decorations in accordance with the latest innovations in construction materials (see Teșar 2016), Cortorari – the older ones more readily than the younger – make nonetheless a blunt distinction between wealth in houses, which they consider to be of a transient nature, and ceremonial wealth consisting in specific enduring material items, *taxtaja* (chalices)⁵. The latter are concealed from sight and are kept in the custody of Romanian peasant neighbours. Despite their material absence from everyday sociality, chalices permeate people's affectionate talk and orient people's activities. Like Weiner's (1992) inalienable possessions, they are withheld from exchange outside the notional community – where they are constitutive of practices of filiation and marriage.

Marriages, arranged by parents and grandparents for children in their early ages, are central rituals which provide the terms in which Cortorari understand and organize gender differences, mundane political affairs and economic exchanges. The impressive diversity of possible matches is divided– in Cortorari discourse – between two broad ideal categories of marriages: *tokmeala pe skimbate* (marriages through exchange [of daughters]) and *tokmeala in particular* (discrete or side marriage). For the sake of brevity, I translated here the native concept of *tokmeala* as marriage, but, I will discuss this later, *tokmeala* not only conveys the idea of bargaining, haggling or negotiating but it also expresses the idea of the changing nature of persons and relationships in time. *Tokmeala pe skimbate* normally entails the writing off of the marriage payment and further, in case of the dissolution of one marriage, the breaking off of the other. *Tokmeala in particular* evinces a one-way flow of the bride and of the marriage payment, from wife givers to wife receivers. The marriage payment, which consists of both cash and a trousseau, *zestrea*, resembles dowry, yet does not map neatly onto the normative model of the hierarchical agricultural populations (Goody 1973), in as much as the cash component of it is not used as an endowment of the bride but as a pool of resources by the groom's family.⁶ Cortorari negotiate the amount of the cash 'dowry' in relation to the monetary value attached to the groom's

chalice. Yet, I suggest here and develop the idea later, the transaction, for which the idioms of exchange and reciprocity fail to account, is represented both as a sequel of former transactions and as a premise for future transactions. These two ideal kinds of marriage conceal a myriad of practical marriages (Bourdieu 1977:33ff.) – some negotiated through exchange yet accompanied by a flow of money (which is requested by one of the parties on grounds of a greater value attached to their chalice in respect to the chalice of the other party), and some other concluded by the unidirectional flow of the bride, yet with no cash ‘dowry’ tendered.

Not unlike other Romany-speaking populations (see Gropper 1975; Olivera 2012) Cortorari identify themselves as *ame al roma* (we, the Roms). *Al roma* are people born to *roma* parents, who intermarry and whose belonging in its fullest sense is conterminous with fatherhood and motherhood respectively. To infertile men and women, who subsequently remain single⁷, belonging is not denied: they are still ours (*amarendar*), yet they are somehow incomplete persons, given that they do not fulfil the life career one ought to: being born and then bred to attain both proper cultural competency and ‘anatomical’ maturation and, once the person’s body is ready for sexual intercourse, move into the groom’s parental house, if one were a girl, or bring a bride into one’s parental house, if one were a boy, produce progeny of their own and thus attain parenthood, and then as parents, having their children’s marriages arranged by one’s own parents and ensure that one’s children bring forth their own children. The transition from parenthood to grandparenthood is considered the apex of personhood, the highest achievement one can dream of in a lifetime.

Cortorari think the idiom of their society in terms of connectedness and express it through the local category of *neamo* which comprises the living and the dead. Relatedness is encapsulated in a continuum of overlapping bonds which concomitantly tie people together as brothers, sisters, aunts, cousins, husbands and wives, parents-in-law and co-parents-in-law, parents and grandparents, and keep out those who are not or could not be connected to one of the *roma* either by birth or by alliance. It is continuously experienced and created through participating into each other’s life (Sahlins 2013), by means of reciprocal help and support, exchanges of goods and salutations, emotional expressions of suffering and joy, and even enmity and grief (cf. Gay y Blasco 2005). A great deal of cultural elaboration is attached to commensality in the creation of relatedness. Commensality, while expected for people from different generations living under one roof, with only one exception which I shall mention in due time, is also an

essential feature of the creation of affinity. The proposal to enter marriage negotiations and consequently start the production of affinal bonds takes the shape of invitations to commensality which from then on will be ritually performed on special occasions, such as the Orthodox Easter and Christmas, or on the occasion of one of the parties' returning home from abroad. A reversal in the constitution and expression of relatedness through partaking in commensality, which intimates the celebration of the capacity for life and growth, is displayed at death, when the kin constitute themselves by means of denial of the symbols of fertility (see Bloch and Parry 1982). At funerals the extant of the deceased person's web of relatedness comes together. People express now kinship with the dead through abstention from eating from the ritual alms (*pomeana*). Moreover, women unbraid their hair, women's braids being otherwise symbols of femininity, and men and women alike observe long periods of mourning, which involves renouncing their brightly-coloured red clothes for darker ones, not washing their bodies for as long as six weeks, and above all, refraining from dancing and making marriage arrangements. Compliance with these precepts is a matter of negotiation and choice; however, the choice whether to pay or not to pay one's respect to the dead is constitutive of the subjective evaluation of the distance of one's ties to the dead.

2. On the Process of Marriage

The *roma* do not have a word for marriage, they take (*lel*) and give (*del*) daughters, or they throw (*šutel*) women in alliances and in so doing the two parties, namely the extended families, become 'fastened' to each other (*panden pes*) and commit themselves to a series of exchanges of gifts and services, and to the performance of commensality and of the respect shown to the dead. Marital bonds are not fixed and irreversible, which means that the threat of becoming 'unfastened' (*pytel pes*) continuously hovers over them. Ideally, they are made to endure solely by the birth of a son to the new couple. Moreover, marriages are not a-yes-or-no proposition, they are the result of long-term negotiations carried out in secrecy, involving concealment and disclosure of pockets of knowledge about the distribution of chances on the marriage market and also abilities to interfere with other people's arrangements and break them, coupled with the mastery of persuasion skills as conveyed by the local expression of *janel politika* (to know the politics). Intentions to create affinal relations

between two families are publicized through *tokmeala* (negotiation, bargain, and by extension, marriage arrangement), celebrations with live music and energetic dances, where enormous quantities of alcohol and pork are consumed, all paid by the organizers, more often than not the girl's family, and coming close to several thousands of Euros. *Tokmeala* intimates the creation of the *xanamika* (co-parents-in-law) relationship between the two families. *Tokmeala*-s are arranged by grandparents for their grandchildren in their early ages and even when the latter are still in their mothers' wombs (see also Gropper 1975: 141). There is a yearning among *roma* for organizing *tokmeala* for young children, motivated by the parents' wish to secure a future marriage for their children. When challenged, the *roma* acknowledged nonetheless that it was unlikely that a *tokmeala* arranged for children with an age gap as big as seven years, to be seen through to completion, i.e. to produce two actual spouses. The *roma* conclude and break off *tokmeala* on a whim, and in so doing, they continuously create opportunities to manifest as *roma*, i.e. people with a proclivity for dance, pork, alcohol, speech and bargaining, and above all, people who constitute themselves through marital bonds. Sometimes overlapping with *tokmeala* and other times a separate event, the wedding ceremony (*abiav*) – which can nonetheless be altogether left out in times of money shortage or during mourning periods – is the ritual sequence that dramatizes the formation of a couple, legitimized through the spouses' first bout of sexual intercourse. Similarly to *tokmeala*, the *abiav* takes the form of a Pantagruelian feast; however, in contradistinction to the former, the groom and bride take the front stage as main actors of the ritual which takes place, in turn, at their respective parental houses.

The formation of a couple starts with the removal of the bride from her parental home and her relocation into the groom's parental home.⁸ Living together communicates the likely success of the marriage process. Displacement and relocation are seen as an undertaking through which the bride (*e bori*) becomes accustomed to the routines of her marital household. She arrives here as a stranger who needs to be domesticated; however, it is not uncommon for the bride to fail to adapt to the demanding domestic chores⁹ or take a dislike to her in-laws' lifestyles and as a consequence return to her parental household, with a new *tokmeala* being subsequently arranged for her. The prospect of such decisions of bridal relocation, which are nonetheless highly dramatized by the two families who openly blame each other in the streets either for mistreating the girl or for her misbehaving, are even more openly frowned upon if the spouses have slept

together (*soven k-o than*). This is so because the *roma* place a great value on the girl's virginity (cf. Okely 1983: 203; Sutherland 1975: 226f.; Gay y Blasco 1997; Gropper 1975ff.). The girl's virginity is an important asset for her parents on the marriage market. It makes room for negotiations of the cash 'dowry' to the benefit of her parents, whereas the loss of virginity might attract an increase of the marriage payment. Not even the bride's giving up her virginity can guarantee the endurance of *tokmeala*, which is under continuous threat from various contingencies, including disputes between the couple's extended families or frictions between the spouses. A serious menace to the strength of marital bonds is posed by the birth of a daughter to a new couple, and all the more so when her birth follows a first-born daughter. I witnessed the plight of my landlord's youngest daughter whose second birth was yet another daughter. For not only did her parents-in-law threatened to have her a late-stage abortion during her second pregnancy, but they also warned they might break the marriage, if she gave birth to a second daughter. Throughout my stay in the field, there was an air of impermanence hanging above her marriage. At times, it seemed to fade away in light of the stability granted by the *tokmeala pe skimbate* of which she had been part. The arrangement was that her brother Greg would marry her sister-in-law. Should one of the two unions concluded through exchange of daughters dissolve, it generally entailed the dissolution of the other. This precept acted as a safety net for Lina's marriage, which nonetheless started to come apart once the possibility of Greg's being infertile entered their parents' minds. The elaboration of marital bonds and the constitution of the spouses as *rom* (married *roma* man who fathered) and *romni* (married *roma* women who mothered) to each other (see Tesár 2012a) is tightly linked with their living together and attaching a permanent character to the cohabitation. A new daughter-in-law is constantly coming and going between her marital house and her parental house, and the causes of her displacement are diverse; when she falls ill she is to be looked after by her parents, and the same goes when she becomes pregnant. A lot of the time, her livelihood is being provided for by her parents, who give her pocket money and even food for her whole marital household. The lack of smoothness of a *bori's* gradual incorporation into her marital household articulates with the timing of the cash and the trousseau 'dowry', both being transferred in several instalments: the bulk of the former is generally paid on the occasion of the birth of a son, while the latter, on the occasion of the marriage of her daughters. Until a new-daughter-in-law comes in the household, the latest comer is excluded

from commensality. The articulation of the idioms of the house with commensality and generational cycles is thus constitutive of the negotiation, arrangement and strengthening of the marital bonds. People become kin, that is, complete people, through eating and living together in the present, intermarrying and having children and grandchildren in the future. The future-oriented kinship transpires both in the manifestation of a local category of relatedness, the *neamo*, and in the *roma*'s engagement with ceremonial wealth—to which I shall dedicate the remaining of this article.

3. *Neamo*: A Category of Relatedness

The *roma* who arrange their children's and grandchildren's marriages express relatedness through the local category of *neamo*,¹⁰ aggregates of people, both dead and alive, connected through both cognatic and affinal ties, lacking manifestation on the ground, and emphasizing patrilineality. All the *roma* claim to belong to an overarching and overstretching *neamo*, a polysemantic term that merges the idioms of common ancestry, upbringing, and endogamy. Then, inside this broad *neamo*, they distinguish several narrower *neamo*-s (imagine them as branches growing from a common trunk) which are named after a male ancestor who lived only four or five generations removed from the Ego. Webs of relatedness overlap across different *neamo*-s in such a way that a person can claim belonging in more *neamo*-s at the same time. The *roma* are not interested in policing borders of these *neamo*-s, they are rather preoccupied with making shifting claims of belonging in one or another. People believe that a *neamo* generator passes on to those belonging to that specific *neamo* personal characteristics, either physical, such as complexion, eyes and hair colour, physiological, such as bodily reproductive capacities and predilection towards certain illnesses, or moral, such as industriousness, skilfulness, propensity towards drinking etc. (cf. Olivera 2012: 206ff; Williams 1983: 164ff.). All these ideas suggest a subtle and complex speculation on *roma*'s kinship temporal orientation. We are confronted here with the possibility of the *roma*'s overvaluation of inheritance and descent (contrary to Gay y Blasco 2001; Stewart 1997). Yet, taking a closer look at the practical manifestation of *neamo*, these ideas recede before us making room for the future-orientedness of *roma* relatedness. We shall see that the category of *neamo* conceals under the appearance of the pre-eminence of ancestors, who have not however lived as long

ago as people claim they did, the concerns with marriage and the future as central to *roma* relatedness.

According to the *roma*, people can fall into two categories of morally different *neamo*-s. In their evaluation, they distinguish between: *neamo*-s *lašo* (good *neamo*) to which *al barvale* (the rich) belong and, *neamo žungalo* (bad *neamo*) to which *al čora* (the barehanded) belong. As a matter of fact, more often than not the latter (the barehanded) are better off than the former (the rich). How is then a person's belonging to one of the two categories acknowledged? When I tried to obtain from *roma* explicit statements about how they assess one's inclusion in either of the two differently morally evaluated kin categories, a witty old man gave me an explanation worth quoting. Half-jokingly, half-seriously, he suggested that I should carry out what was left of my research asking people this single question, "Where is your ID issued?" The old man challenged me to assess the answers people could give to this question. "If one doesn't know where he was born", the man continued, "I can assume he was born in the forest. He is thus *vešalo* (son of the woods), or *čoro* (barehanded)". Conversely, if one can say where he was born and who are his parents, it means that he belongs to a *neamo lašo* (good *neamo*). The *barvale* (rich) are the *roma* who know their relatives, both alive and dead. Here affluence is tantamount to one's breadth and depth of interrelatedness. However *neamo* belonging does not influence everyday interaction. There is only one realm of social life where *neamo* categorical distinctions become meaningful for social action and this is the politics of marriage transactions. There are several issues at stake when a marriage is arranged, the health and the physical fitness of the spouses weighing heavily, in conjunction with the negotiation of the amount of the cash 'dowry' and the value elicited for the groom's chalice. In women, *roma* appreciate long and thick hair, a curvy body and a straight posture in walking. The grooms should be handsome and well-built. In order to persuade each other of the spouses' qualities, they appeal to the personalities of their alleged ancestors, subsequently representing the spouses as belonging to specific *neamo*. When it comes to negotiating the amount of the cash 'dowry', the category of *neamo* offers a lot of space for manoeuvre. *Roma* belonging to a 'bad' *neamo*, who are better off than those claiming belonging to a 'good' *neamo*, are eager to pay large 'dowries' to marry their daughters up. People talk bad of such marriages, and 'the rich' morally condemn their peers who 'took daughters-in-law from the barehanded' and thus demeaned themselves. Some argue that this is quite a recent practice and they scornfully talk of those who were corrupted by

money. Yet there is hardly one who did not conclude a marriage with the 'have-nots'. If challenged on their marital choices, they would maintain that *sa roma san vi kakala* (they are also *roma*) and they would even praise their money-making abilities and the comfort of their houses, and the outmost decorum with which they behave. Moreover, in conversations with people about the state of the marriage market in the past, they would acquiesce they have always concluded marriages between 'upper' and 'lower' *neamo*-s. It thus becomes obvious, when looking at the choices one makes when asserting belonging in a particular *neamo*- that this category of relatedness, which allegedly draws on a vertical expansion of kin ties, offers a space for manoeuvring into arranging marriages. It thus reveals the forward projection of *roma* kinship, an idea which transpires in practices and representations of the possession of chalices, as well.

4. Roma's Wealth (Averea), their Ancestors and their Relatives

The presence of the *taxtaja* among the *roma* and the rhetoric surrounding them present an image of the *roma* which is closer to medieval European nobility (cf. Olivera 2012). In *roma*'s discourses, the chalices remind of heredity regalia and the baffling plots weaved around them: machinations for stealing, killings and fights among brothers, matrimonial strategies for keeping them within the family, and even the idea of inherited rank. But does the entanglement of chalices with the *roma*'s lives account for the *roma*'s overvaluation of descent and inheritance, idioms which were said to be played down by the Romany populations (Gay y Blasco 2001; Stewart 1997)?

If asked, *roma* locate their strong desire for chalices and their obduracy not to part with them in the heirloom qualities of these items. The rhetoric which accompanies the flow of chalices is abundant in tropes of the past. They come from the ancestors (*al phure*), they are *demultane* (from the old times), and they have allegedly been in the possession of *roma*, 'since the beginning of the world'. The factual truth is the following: objects made of silver or gilded silver, manufactured by craft guilds from Transylvania during the 17th-18th c.,¹¹ the chalices came into the possession of *roma* no later than the beginning of the 20th century, as far as I could retrace their biography (Kopytoff 1986). Yet, the *roma* show no interest in recollecting the precise date of their purchase, which they present as having happened in an immemorial, mythical time. In so doing, they pass under oblivion the

historical facts which would be of interest to an art collector. If challenged in their accounts on the origin of these cherished objects, and this is done rather by referring to a specific object than to all of them, the *roma* would remember the story of the purchase of that particular chalice. The time of the purchase is always unimportant and what is recounted is the purchase as an exceptional event fraught with encumbrances. Almost all the stories of the purchase of different chalices shared two features, namely how their previous possessors were exceptional heroic characters; and how the objects were so expensive that the buyer had to incur debts to other *roma* in order to be able to tender the purchase price.

Though the *roma* still buy chalices today, at least two transactions being concluded during my stay in the field, people consider that chalices can gain value only with time spent in the possession of the *roma*. The number of chalices to which the *roma* could gain access is hypothetically huge – and I am referring here to such objects sold at auctions or by the Romanian Romany Gabor Gypsies (see Berta 2013). However, the chalices available for purchase do not make the object of people's strong desires, because they consider that an item becomes priceless only once it has changed several *roma* hands. *Roma* make a qualitative distinction between *taxtaja romane* (Romany chalices) which have a name (referring to a previous possessor or the circumstances in which they were bought) and *taxtaja kinde* (recently bought chalices). The *romane* chalices are valuable because they are imbued with the histories of the people. The *roma*, especially older men and to a lesser degree their female peers, take great delight in recalling the elders who bought the *taxtaja* and who passed them down. This might happen on an ordinary day, when they take refuge from the torrid heat of a summer afternoon under the shade of a tree, or at a funeral or wedding, towards the inebriated end of the ceremony. On such occasions, their talk becomes impassioned and precipitated, accompanied by screams and shouts. The speakers put on quite a show as they throw themselves at the audience, their very performance bringing the ancestors to life and granting them authenticity. They are said to have fought snakes, forged money, ransacked rich houses, outwitted lawyers, crossed the country, tamed dragons, befriended influential *gaže*, and to have been jailed or to have hanged themselves (see also Olivera 2012: 206). The story told about each and every such ancestor differs from one story-teller to another and so does the extent of the knowledge that one has about one or the other ancestor. Figments of the living's overheated imagination, the dead become real and their life stories true, no matter how different they are

compared to previous accounts, they never fail to convince. There are other occasions, in the confines of one's household, when these stories are narrated by the old to the young, in a low whispering voice which commands the trust of the audience in the truth of the speech. But does the value of chalices reside in their being invested with life histories and, furthermore, does the *roma's* attachment to them denote their interest in descent, inheritance, and genealogies?

In a somewhat counterintuitive move, I will argue that the answer to this question is no. The attachment to chalices is not to be explained by way of an alleged overvaluation of descent by the *roma*. Moreover, we will see that chalices do not sell – not necessarily because these items fall into a particular moral domain of inalienability to which particular Melanesian gifts belong (Weiner 1992), but for other reasons to be discussed below. In making these claims, I rely both on other authors' ethnographies and mine and demonstrate that the stories about the ancestors are used to create the fame of objects, and to create relatedness among the living.

When the *roma* appeal to extra-ordinary characters, allegedly their ancestors, they forge a mythical aura around these objects, an aura which contributes to their fame and legitimizes their value. In people's talk, chalices appear ranked, yet the valuation of objects is done idiosyncratically. Sometimes age added value to them, other times, the volume and size of the objects mattered, and yet other times, their shape and decorations were praised. Previous possessors and their sensational adventures shrouded these items in mystery. The stories about them are part and parcel of the process of value creation, one that is strenuously and continuously carried out by the chalices' possessors. Elsewhere (Tesăr 2012b: Chapter 5), I show that though chalices appear to have a will and power of their own, it is in fact their possessors' *agency* and energies which produce the power of the objects. In this respect, they can be easily associated with Marx's fetishes (see Graeber 2005: 13). It is my intuition that had there been no chalices among the *roma*, the latter would have nonetheless remembered their ancestors the same way they remember them as possessors of chalices. There is evidence to support this idea. Firstly, there are the elders who are recalled as *neamo* generators; often these ancestors and their descendants were not possessors of chalices. It might also be that chalices are insignia of good *neamo-s*, yet there is no causal link between possession of chalices and the moral category to which a *neamo* belongs. The proclivity for the commemoration of exceptional ancestors is widespread among Romany populations described by various

ethnographies (Olivera 2012: 206ff; Williams 2003: 31ff; Sutherland 1975: 181ff). Secondly, the occurrence of chalices does not evince a lengthier genealogical memory for Cortorari than for other Gypsies. Not unlike other Romanies, the length of the *roma*'s genealogical memory is limited to four or five generations at the most (cf. Gay y Blasco 1999: 142; Williams 2003: 11), which is a short stretch of time given the speed at which generations succeed one another, the early-age marriages and the short lifespan of the individual.¹² The scholars who approached Gypsies' practices and representations related to the presence of the dead among the living unanimously contend that the personalized ways of reminiscing ancestors could not articulate an interest in the past and descent per se, claiming instead that it is a means of creating relatedness among the living (Williams 1984: 164; Gay y Blasco 2001: 639). Through stories about the ancestors, the living constitute themselves in relation to the dead and, moreover, as kin. While I agree with these scholars, I would like nonetheless to push further this line of reasoning and suggest that among the *roma* the personalized way of remembering the ancestors, with its lack of focus on an objective past characterized by temporal markers, intimates a process of relatedness focused on creating connections among the living and producing children and grandchildren. This will become apparent in the discussion of practices related to the possession of chalices. I suggest that by remembering their dead, the *roma* not only constitute themselves in the present, but also create the future.

5. The Pledge of the Chalices in Matrimonial Transactions

Chalices are normally passed on from the father to the youngest son when the latter begets a son. The possession of a chalice is not modelled on the Western folk idea of property as a relation between a person and a thing, but rather as different kinds of social entitlements (Hann 1998) that different people hold in the same object, in a manner reminding of the feudal law (see Macfarlane 1998). A chalice belongs to an entire line of male descendants, both dead and alive. The rhetoric of flow and movement in which I chose to couch the social life (Appadurai 1988) of chalices has pride of place in people's discourses, and is rather at variance with the static nature implied by their materiality. The chalice does not actually change hands as it is permanently kept tucked away in the houses and granaries of Romanian peasants. Therefore, the lexicon of possession of the chalice abounds in sensorial expressions: one is entitled to see one's

chalice, to touch it or to hold it in their hand. Moreover, one is entitled to bring out and display one's chalice, and this happens on life-cycle occasions, such as marriages or funerals. It is generally the oldest man among the living possessors of a chalice who is entitled to do so, i.e. the grandfather who has the final say in the orchestration and distribution of rights (*dreptul*) in a chalice. Nowadays, *roma* use birth control and possessors of chalices don't usually have more than one son. Conversely, in the past, when the *roma* begot more children than they do today, they were faced with the onerous task of negotiating the inheritance of a chalice among two or more brothers and the conflicts between them were not few; these conflicts remain unsettled to this day, being pursued by their descendants. The non-heir brothers were granted shares (*partea*) in money from the chalice by their parents, and this money was usually invested in a house where the non-heir brothers would move once married. However, there is the shared belief that the compensation share is not commensurable with the value of a chalice, the actual value of the object always being higher than its value in money, and not only non-heir brothers but their descendants as well consider themselves entitled to never-ending claims to compensation. One way of circumventing one's indebtedness towards siblings is to take a bride from a descendant of the non-heir brother without requesting a cash 'dowry'. The conclusion of such transactions always has moral overtones as the preservation of wealth within the *neamo* and the determination of the parties to the transaction not to let the wealth go to strangers are both praised. Conversely, the heir might conclude a marriage with outsiders and in so doing, he surrenders rights in the chalice to the bride's *neamo* in exchange of the cash 'dowry' tendered by the latter. Such transactions entail future (cousin) intermarriages between female descendants on the bride's side and male descendants on the groom's side. Although highly berated (especially by the siblings of the heir) and talked about as a scandalous breach of an unwritten moral law, such transactions involving a payment in cash occur frequently and were also concluded in the past. They bring money which can be passed on as compensation shares, and even the chalice-deprived brothers (and their descendants) rejoice at the sight of it. The idiom of gift exchange and reciprocity is defective in explaining the transaction in which rights in the chalice are exchanged for cash 'dowries', given that the *roma* represent each marriage as a sequel to a previous one and in so doing, they adhere to a broad temporal perspective (Bourdieu 1977: 6) on each marital transaction.¹³

Given this, it becomes obvious that possession of chalices is not a matter of private property and does not overlap with the phenomenological and experiential owning/ownership. The chalice is an indivisible good in which more people simultaneously hold varying rights. Rights, compensation shares, debts are passed on from one generation to another, linking a person to numerous others. It is therefore hard to avoid the conclusion that the refusal to sell is not necessarily grounded in an alleged moral value attached to these items as heirlooms, but rather in the fact this particular piece is imbricated in services and debts, or has other liens attached to it (cf. Guyer 1993: 250).¹⁴ But the question remains, What kind of asset is the chalice? The material presented suggests that while cherished as containers of people's history, chalices are desired not for their heirloom-like qualities, but for their ability to embody the premises of marriage and interconnectivity. I purposefully left for the end of this article the description of one more marital practice involving the chalice, which adds further to my argument.

We have seen that dissolution is the one thing that constantly looms over a marriage. The bride's side is normally in an inferior position in respect to the groom's side and the potential breaking off of a marriage would bring more harm to the former than to the latter. Were a bride released from marriage after losing her virginity, she would theoretically be less likely to remarry successfully unless her parents would be willing to pay a bigger 'dowry'. To prevent any of these misfortunes from happening, the wife gives usually ask to get hold of the groom's chalice as a guarantee for the endurance of their daughter's marriage. The chalice is pledged (*zalog*) for the daughter-in law. "I gave a chalice and I took a daughter-in-law", the spouse takers gloss the transaction, while the spouse givers say that "[their] chalice is placed in our trust". As temporary possessors, the wife givers cannot use it to arrange marriages and they cannot display it as they please. Conversely, divested of their chalice, often not being even allowed to see it, the groom's side is not able to arrange new marriages, their actions and agency are suspended. Temporary possession of a chalice ends with the birth of a son to the new couple as the ultimate guarantee of the matrimonial bonds against any threats of dissolution and as the premise of a new generational cycle.¹⁵

Economically speaking, the desire of a brother to keep the chalice for himself and consequently pay compensation shares to his brothers seemed clearly irrational. Likewise, one's eagerness to pay a large 'dowry' for marrying one's daughter to a possessor of a chalice seems shocking. Money

is circulated among possessors and non-possessors at great speed and in big amounts - as 'dowries', as compensation shares, as bails- to get back the pledged chalice - and, in the short-term, people do rejoice at the sight of gains or mourn their losses, as the case may be. Yet placed in a broader temporal perspective, the financial gains and losses fade away when compared to the internally culturally elaborated value that is marriage. Annoyed by my constant queries about chalices, a *roma* man summed up the value of chalices better than I could have explained it: "Cătălina, do you know what a *taxtaj* is good for? It brings a daughter-in-law and binds the co-parents-in-law."

6. Concluding Remarks

My paper shows that both possession of *taxtaja* and the manifestation of the category of *neamo* endorse rather paradoxically not a past-oriented kinship in which a person's identity is forged in conjunction with genealogies and past ancestors, but a forward projection, as expressed in the imperative of marrying one's children and grandchildren. Although the lexicon which describes the flow of chalices abounds in tropes of the past and similarly the category of *neamo* bears resemblance to a descent-oriented kinship, they index no less than a future-orientedness of *roma* relatedness. This is connected to notions of personhood whose driving force is the transformation of parents into grandparents. Although the latter orchestrate the distribution of rights in chalices and the flow of these objects, the motivations behind their actions suggest a preoccupation with ensuring the meaningful replacement of generational cycles. The timing of the inheritance of chalices along with the timing of the 'dowry' are marked by the production of children. This article opened with a vignette about the worries of my landlord family about their son being infertile. Were he childless, the family's chalice would be worthless, Greg's grandmother warned me. What better way to convey the idea that the value of chalices does not reside in their history, but in their ability to guarantee the process of marriage which I showed to last over many years and to be contingent on the production of progeny.

Most ethnographies of Gypsies linked the reproduction of their identity with the performative nature of gendered personhood embedded in a present-oriented temporality. Gay y Blasco's (1999) Gitanos' sense of belonging was given by the individuals' compliance with a set of

moral expectations as to their gender, subsumed under the 'Gitano law'. Likewise, Stewart's (1997) Roms created themselves as persons dissimilar to *gaže* by means of performing activities divided internally along gender lines: men realized their full potential as men at the horse market and at celebrations, whereas women as homemakers. In all these accounts, the generation aspect of personhood is rarely addressed. My article has argued in favour of integrating the idioms of age-sets and life-cycles into depictions of personhood. In so doing, I suggest that bodily reproduction is germane to understanding the process of the Gypsies' social reproduction which I showed to be a temporal phenomenon which allows for the future-orientedness of relatedness to converge with what other authors celebrate as the present-orientedness of the individual.

Roma's conceptions of personhood echo to a certain degree those of the Tallensi described by Fortes (1987). Showing concerns similar to *roma's* about the succession of generational cycles, in as much as the Tallensi individuals, while being highly sensitive to the gender difference which prescribed both contrasting 'jural' entitlements and different domestic and ritual demeanours (262ff.), were fashioned as persons gradually throughout their lifespan, punctuated by life cycle events. Full personhood was achieved by Tallensi only at death, when one joined the ancestors who were "the dominant supernatural agencies believed to control human existence" (258). And here comes the crucial difference between the Tallensi and the *roma*: the kinship of the former is past-oriented in as much their lineages and descent groups are the expression of a generative source, while the kinship of the latter is future-oriented in as much as the *roma's* ancestors become performative arguments supporting the strength of a particular *neamo* and the value of a particular chalice, both of them instrumental in the arrangement of a marriage.

Marriages are the central stage of *roma* sociality. The *roma* make and break off marriages at a whim, and there is almost no room for accurately predicting their conclusion or dissolution. When approached as a sequence in time, bracketed off from previous and future events which fashion the transformation of selves and relationships, practices of marriage appear to map onto ideas of living in the present. Yet when addressed in conjunction with the idiom of personhood and consequently placed into a larger temporal perspective, the marital practices evince the *roma's* preoccupation with the future as the main orientation of the time of relatedness.

NOTES

- 1 General denomination given by Gypsies to non-Gypsies.
- 2 Olivera (2012) advances a similar argument as in relation to the endurance of Romany figurations. Whereas Williams (2003) considers that the respect for the dead is what makes Manuș ontologically different from the *gaže* (on the existence of whom the Gypsies' resilience is contingent), Olivera locates the advent of his Gabori in their conception of the *baxt* (444).
- 3 Cortorari were forcibly settled down at the outset of the communist regime in Romania.
- 4 The word Cortorari is derived from the Romanian equivalent of tent and literally translate as Tent-Dwellers.
- 5 For a detailed description of the same class of objects among Romanian Gabor Roma, see Berta (2013). Berta translates the vernacular term *taxtaja* as 'beakers', though I find the word 'chalices' to be a more accurate translation.
- 6 cf. Sharma 1884.
- 7 Women are much more likely than men to remain single, given that if a husband happens to be infertile, his wife could be impregnated either by another man or by artificial insemination, a practice which is not disclosed beyond the gates of the couple's household.
- 8 Only if no son is born to a family, the groom will move into the bride's parental household.
- 9 All the domestic chores fall on the latest arrived daughter-in-law.
- 10 The category of *neamo*, which is glossed as *niamo* by the Gabor Roma (see Olivera 2012) and which originates from among Romanians - who have nonetheless a representation different from the Gypsies' -, as *neam* (see Mihailescu 2007), bears similarities with the category of *vici/vitsa* (Williams 1984; Sutherland 1975; Gropper 1975).
- 11 They were purchased by the *roma* either from the *gaže* or from the Gabori Roma.
- 12 *Roma's* average life expectancy is 60+.
- 13 One should not imagine that the highly schematic flow of chalices (and rights in them) which I outlined here would be the result of a super rational schema on which Cortorari fashion their marriages. We have seen that marriages are unstable and processual, that despite the impressive bargaining (in money and chalices) surrounding them, they are ultimately the result of negotiations carried out among the spouses in regard to their cohabitation and their match. The two broad paths along which chalices flow, i.e. in-marrying for retaining wealth and contracting an outside marriage, are indeed explanations people give for their actions and they do inform actions; and are imbricated in marriage negotiations; but they are also people's outcomes of choice for marriages which had been concluded for different reasons than keeping the chalice or giving away rights in it.

- ¹⁴ The *roma* had other forms of heirlooms, some buttons (*bumbi*) which were women's heirlooms and which they sold with no regrets. This suggests the idea exposed by Stewart (1994) that far from being morally condemned, money is constitutive of Gypsy sociality.
- ¹⁵ When alliances concluded through the pledging of a chalice dissolve before the new couple brings forth a son, the groom's side redeems their chalice in exchange of a sum of money (which might be provided by a new pair of wife-givers) and which I call 'bail'.

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