

The Roma sorceress in 18th century Hungarian sources

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Abstract: 18th century sources confirm the observations of cultural anthropology that Roma women played an important role in the sustenance of their families. In a gatherer lifestyle, their primary task was to get food. However, the social environment strongly restricted gathering therefore they had to apply different techniques. From among these, the most important one was the activity relying on beliefs which formed the image of the 'Roma witch' for the surrounding society. It is important to note, however, that these beliefs were always those of the surrounding society and not those of the Romas themselves as otherwise, they would not have worked (similarly to the way Roma musicians played the music of the surrounding society and not that of their own community). In accordance with this, witchcraft (fortune-telling, binding or loosing love ties, the ability to see treasures, etc.) was also a service provided almost exclusively by women. And as the surrounding society (or at least, a part of it) had a demand for this service, it also became possible for its providers to get into areas closed for them, where they could continue the 'gathering' following from their lifestyle.

Keywords: Roma women, beliefs, witchcraft, gatherer lifestyle.

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Male-dominated public administration, creating the sources about the Roma in the 18th century, could not imagine that society might be organised differently from their own and the role of women in it might differ from what it regarded as normal and natural. This is the reason why, for example, those making surveys were only interested in the occupation of Roma males. However, the occupation of the men – according to them, the heads of the families – was by no means equal with the way of making a living. For example, this is revealed by a survey conducted by Tolna county in 1766, which mentions about several Roma males recorded as blacksmiths and musicians that they could make a living because their wives begged.¹ This remark corresponds to what we know from the research of modern sociology: the subsistence of the families depends on women's work.²

¹ Hungarian National Archives (MNL), Archives of Tolna county, Documents of the assembly of Tolna county, IV. 1/b. 1766. fasc. 4. nr. 713.

² For example, Michael Stewart associates the concepts 'work', 'accumulate' and 'household' with women. See STEWART, Michael: Daltestvérek. Az oláhcigány közösség és identitás továbbélése a szocialista Magyarországon. In: *Szociálpolitikai értesítő*, 1994, Vol. 2, p. 239.

Accordingly, our sources do not directly reveal much about Roma women and their role fulfilled in their group. The decrees also only mentioned their clothing, and in this respect, forbade them to use a certain, sheet-like piece of clothing which was occasionally called *köcöle*.³ With regard to the Indian origin of the Roma, some researchers like to compare this clothing to the colourful and valuable sari, but it is much more likely that we are concerned with such a piece of clothing that occasionally protected against the weather, but also served as a means of carrying things – and in addition, it gave rise to the name *lepedős cigányok* ('Roma people wearing sheets').

The documents of lawsuits supply many more data about Roma women, as well. It comes to light from these documents that the authorities very frequently accused the women of adultery or fornication, which could put them in a bad light if we did not know that in the overwhelming majority of the cases, it only meant that in this period, in contrast with the authorities, the Roma did not consider it necessary that the church should confirm their cohabitation. It is also interesting to see that there are hardly any lawsuits where Roma women were accused of killing their child or causing its death (I have encountered just one such lawsuit, and it appears from the indictment issued in the case that an accidental mishap must have occurred and the young Roma woman showed such great grief that not even the public prosecutor insisted on a severe sentence).⁴

From our aspect, the most interesting group of criminal procedures provides insight into what kind of techniques Roma women applied to obtain the necessary goods. Owing to a part of these techniques, the Roma were considered to be wizards. Let me give two quotations as an introduction to set the spatial and temporal frame for what I intend to say.

„During this time, many people went there in order to admire the wife of the duke who was able to tell fortunes. And she said what the person would achieve in the course of life, whom he would love, and how many children he would have, whether he would have a good wife or a bad one and the like. She told the truth to a great many people and only a few people who went there for fortune telling left without something being stolen from them. The women went to the city and citadel, intruded into the houses, some went to the shops and selected what they would steal on the following occasion.”⁵

³ TÓTH, Péter: *A magyarországi cigányság története a feudalizmus korában*. Budapest : Bölcsész Konzorcium, 2006, pp. 123-125. See also NAGY, Pál: *A magyarországi cigányok története a rendi társadalom korában*. Kaposvár : Csokonai Vitéz Mihály Tanítóképző Főiskola, 1998. pp. 198-205.

⁴ Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic (MV SR), State Archive in Levoča, Archives of Szepes county, Penal court documents.

⁵ HEIZINGER, János: Fejezetek a cigánykérdés alakulásáról. In: *Fejér Megyei Történeti Évkönyv*, 1978, Vol. 12, p. 159. The event happened in 1422. and in Bologna.

„... It was stated that 7 unknown Roma women came to the village headman's courtyard in Pola at three in the afternoon one week ago yesterday. From among them, 5 are in custody here; 3 of them stood in the door of the room; the fourth one rattled with a stick in the courtyard and drew the attention of the witnesses to herself; the fifth one was begging from the witnesses while the sixth was standing at the side of the street, and during these tricks, the seventh sneaked into the room, opened a chest with a crowbar and stole a considerable amount of money from it without the witnesses having noticed it. – The witnesses entered the room, getting through the many Roma women, and found that the pan that had been on the top of the money box was placed on the ground. – Immediately they lifted one end of the chest and found that it was lighter than before. At once one of them ran for the owner and called him home; when he arrived home, he discovered that a notable amount of silver coins and banknotes was missing from the box. Immediately he and four others ran after the thieves and caught them and many others the other day. 71 florins in silver coins was recovered but 129 florins was not. The witnesses recognized the Roma people...”⁶ – A similar case in Abaúj county well illustrates the general character of this latter procedure and mode of entering a house. In this, a Roma group consisting of 30 persons from Zemplén county visited many villages with four wagons and ten horses in February 1830. „They ran into the houses in large numbers, surrounding those inside with all kinds of requests, card reading and fortune telling” thus capturing their attention stealing a lot of money in the meantime (it is interesting that they did not steal all the money anywhere but always just a part).⁷

The events described in these two quotations are separated by 400 years in time and several hundreds of kilometres in space. The characters are Roma women, men are hardly present at all. The distance in time and space suggests that we are concerned with a phenomenon that can be generalised. It is the essence of both events that women distracted people's attention by fortune telling and magic, and stole valuables this way.

⁶ MNL, Archives of Zala county, Court documents: Processus magistratuales, IV. 14/n. 1831. fasc. 30. nr. 93. The event happened in 1831. and in territory of Zala county. See also KÁLLAI, Ernő – MAJTÉNYI, György – MIKÓ, Zsuzsanna – TÓTH, Péter: *A magyarországi cigányok/romák. I. kötet: A kezdetektől a 19. század közepéig*. Budapest : Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, 2022, pp. 359-362.

⁷ MV SR, State Archive in Košice (SAK), Archives of Abaúj county, Court documents. fasc. 41. nr. 21. – It does not strictly concern this topic but it is worth noting that from among the offenders, seven people were imprisoned while the others were sent back but as there were a lot of shabby and naked children among the latter, a cart and two horses were left with them, and they were given money as transport cost so that they should not be forced to steal on the way.

It seems that Roma women acted in a way to gain the reputation of witch. At least, a lawsuit in Abaúj county in 1778 indicates this, in the course of which five Roma women from Abaújkér were accused of killing the village headman with poisoned spirits. According to the witnesses heard then, one of the accused boasted that „*she has a stick, such that if she has it with her, lawmen will not catch her, and she also has such a herb that she need not fear anything.*”⁸ However, a surgeon from Kassa (Košice) did not find any trace of poison and also identified the suspicious substance found in a box with the women as just Turkish pepper (piper Turcicus).

Based on this, we would expect that there were frequent witch trials in which Roma women were culprits – interestingly, however, there were scarcely any such lawsuits. In fact, we know of only one classical witch trial in Csongrád county where the accused and most witnesses were surely Roma people and the same myth elements came up that we can also find in other witch trials.⁹ Several cases in which women were accused of magic (and never men) differ from this classical witch trial at a glance in that the accused never resorted to their magic in their own interest, but always at the request of others.

In his poem entitled *A bajusz* ('The moustache'),¹⁰ János Arany listed those with almost sociological accuracy to whom a Romani group, arriving in the village, could offer their services:

*Where does a rich widow live
Who can be richly fleeced?
In which house is there a lass ready to be married off,
Sári, Panni, Zsuzsi or Kató,
madly in love with some young man?
Because she will really madly pay for fortune telling!
Whose belongings were damaged,
And thus needs a prophet...
Who would like to become rich,
Easily obtain money:
Digging where he put nothing:
Or even if he put it there,
the deposited treasure is gone
In the meanwhile?*

⁸ MV SR, SAK, Archives of Abaúj county, Court documents. fasc. 7. nr. 19.

⁹ SCHRAM, Ferenc: *Magyarországi boszorkányperek. Vol. I.* Budapest : Akadémiai Kiadó, 1970, pp. 280-297.

¹⁰ ARANY, János: *Összes költeményei. Vol. I.* Budapest : Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1973, pp. 258-259.

Love magic had the main place among these services. The surrounding society often demanded it from the Roma. So for example the court of Szabolcs county sentenced a Roma woman named *Judit Istenadta-lelkű* from Csobaj to whipping and expulsion from the county because she had made a threadball at the request of a girl named *Erzsók Gönczi*, who wanted to win the heart of a coachman named *Jankó Szabó* and get him to marry her. The girl buried the threadball in the horse dung in the proper way; however, the selected young man started to swell up because of the raw thread in the ball and his swelling abated only when the Roma woman dug out the threadball and started to loosen it.¹¹ In a similar case, a Roma woman was brought before the city court of Miskolc in 1787. She had to get a husband with magic to dare to trust his wife, who was said to be profligate, with his earnings, which he kept locked up, once again. According to the complaint of the husband, the young Roma woman would have achieved her goal with the following „craft”: she dug a hole with the tools she had asked the wife for, put the pieces of clothes she had also requested in the hole, and made fire above them to smoke the clothes. However, she actually sold the clothes worth nearly 20 florins she had received partly to a clothes dealer and partly in the market. Then she burnt all kinds of dirty rags and claimed that those were the remains of the clothes that had become burnt while being smoked.¹²

In the last years of the 17th century, a Roma woman, – who even had no name, but was only mentioned in the sources as „the elder sister of *János Czigány*” – foretold sometimes using a snail and sometimes using a hen’s egg, to a woman from Kecskemét who was worried about her husband in Turkey that the man was in good health. The witness statements also revealed that in addition, she could find lost and buried money and could also achieve with witchcraft that the child to be born should be a boy and that formerly childless women should give birth to children. According to a witness, the Roma woman „was given a lot of things” for the latter by a woman who trusted in her.¹³ From another lawsuit in 1686 against the same Roma woman, it also becomes clear that she advised a harmed woman to fill a living frog with millet, then

¹¹ SCHRAM, Ferenc: *Magyarországi boszorkányperek. Vol. II.* Budapest : Akadémiai Kiadó, 1970, pp. 318-321.

¹² MNL, Archives of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county: Archives of the city of Miskolc, Documents of council, IV. 1501/b. IX. nr. 527. The truth is that the Roma woman defended herself saying that the complainant’s wife told her to sell the clothing for some commission. This may as well have happened so as it would fit the picture drawn up by the husband about the profligate wife. However, from our aspect, it is not so important to reveal the truth but the fact that it was possible to accuse a Roma woman of such a ‘trick’, and the court took the charge seriously, that is, they thought it to be credible.

¹³ SCHRAM, *Magyarországi boszorkányperek. Vol. II...*, pp. 458-459.

boil it in a cooking pot and she would get compensation for the damage done to her.¹⁴

Thus, Roma women using magic could help in just such matters, which were extraordinarily important for contemporary people. Although the number of the lawsuits revealed so far is relatively small, an order of the Royal Council of the Governor in 1802 shows well the general character of the demand. Based on complaints from Abaúj county, it called attention to Roma people who were wandering all through the country under the pretext of fortunetelling and finding hidden treasure and deceived simple people.¹⁵

The case of the wife of *Cigány Melák*, against whom the magistrate of Bihar county started a criminal procedure in 1752, is the best example of how the discovery of buried treasure happened and what kind of earnings this meant for the sorceress who was able to find it.¹⁶ According to the records of witness statements, this Roma woman went to two houses in Berettyóújfalu and offered the women at home to find the treasure hidden in the plot. It is really remarkable how she won the trust of the women: at one place, she asked for and got a black hen and a coin, which she hid in the throat of the hen immediately and of course took the hen; in the other place, she started to dig and displayed some moldy coins as if she had found them then and there; in this way, she wanted to prove her abilities. From the money she 'found' this way, she left one coin each in both places, with the instruction that they had to be taken to the church on Sunday to be offered in the name of God. She clearly wanted to strengthen their trust in her – and also wanted to gain time for herself because, as she said, they could not receive the treasure until the offer had been made. Another thing that built trust in her was that she had an instrument for seeing and finding treasure „*which was the size of a small plate, it was yellow and had a shiny handle*”. The inhabitants believed her in both places and gave her everything she asked for: for example in one place, a neck-piece embroidered with silver, a white bodice, a clasp with a bead, a pillow case, a bedsheet, a shirt, a hose, a pound of pepper, hemp and flax, butter, cash, a new sack, a mosquito net – altogether worth about 24 florinss (this sum, as we can know it quite precisely from other lawsuits, was equal to the price of three or four horses which the Roma

¹⁴ IVÁNYOSI-SZABÓ, Tibor: *A kecskeméti magisztrátus jegyzőkönyveinek töredékei I. (1591–1711). Forrásközlemények I.* Kecskemét : Bács-Kiskun Megyei Önkormányzat Levéltárának kiadványa, 1996, p. 129.

¹⁵ MV SR, SAK, Archives of Torna county, documents selected by archivist Pavol Salamon.

¹⁶ MNL, Archives of Hajdú-Bihar county; Archives of Bihar county, Court documents, IV. 6/b. fasc. 1. nr. 54. Ed. BESSENYEI, József: *A magyarországi boszorkányság forrásai. Vol. I.* Budapest : Balassi Kiadó, 1997, pp. 138-140.

traded in the market). The buried treasure was of course not found. The Roma woman fled the next day and was caught in Debrecen by accident. Thus we can see that this kind of treasure finding was really an *occupation* for the Roma women practising it. Those who practised it had suitable tools (and those were not only actual tools but also psychological devices: they relied on the desire of their victims for treasure and in a way cleverly took into account their superstitious and religious character) and it meant a (not bad) way to make a living.

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What kind of conclusions can we draw from these stories?

First, no such data are available about men but solely about women. Consequently, it can be boldly stated that we are concerned with a characteristic occupation which only Roma women pursued. It is also clear from the size of donations that could be collected by means of pursuing this occupation that witchcraft or magic power was really lucrative compared with other characteristic occupations of the Roma and thus served as a realistic base for the subsistence of the group. Therefore, we can prove the claim of modern sociology quoted above in this way with historical methods, too.

Finally, how can we place witchcraft by Roma women in the system of the way of life and characteristic occupations of the Roma that we can reconstruct with the help of related disciplines?

Without entirely subscribing to it, Michael Stewart quotes the idea which, in his opinion, appears in the writing of several authors investigating the Roma economy, according to which the non-Roma are natural resources for the Roma and the Roma exploit them as other people utilize the resources of nature.¹⁷ It is worth carrying on this idea because, in principle, every occupation of the Roma, among others, those of women, as well, can be deduced from this. The same sociologist, already quoted, also points out that „*The occupations which the Roma proudly mention and expressly feel their own includes foraging, begging, doing business and stealing.*” Then, he adds that ‘*no sharp borderline divides foraging and other forms of obtaining things, namely begging or stealing.*’¹⁸

Based on this, we can conclude that foraging is the simplest use of the natural environment (certainly, the most interesting example of which is panning for gold because it was practised as an occupation). At the same time, in the social environment of the Roma, foraging is nothing but theft. Because the surrounding society opposed and punished this almost

¹⁷ STEWART, Daltestvérek. Az oláh cigány..., p. 24. The authors referred to by him in this respect are Leonardo Piasere, Judith Okely, Anne H. Sutherland and Matt T. Salo.

¹⁸ STEWART, Daltestvérek. Az oláh cigány..., p. 132 and 134.

everywhere, various strategies and techniques became necessary. The most obvious of these is collecting goods which had already become unnecessary for the surrounding society. Some of these were directly usable for the Roma – for example the meat of dead animals – while others demanded some processing; namely, the Roma had to make a product out of them which the community demanded to some extent – this can explain for example the craft of the blacksmith, horsekeeping and carving tubs.

However, those necessary goods which the surrounding society does not give up should be asked for (and this is the explanation for begging) or the Roma have to give some consideration for it. This consideration can be a product, (for example, some forged work or woodwork, whose materials, however, are never bought, but are rather the result of foraging). But a service is also possible, for example, tinkering, or playing music which is most demanded by the surrounding society: it is the result of this demand that Roma musicians form the layer of the Roma most integrated into the surrounding society.

And at this point, witchcraft practised only by Roma women comes to our attention again and from a double aspect: on the one hand, it can be considered to be a service for which there was real demand from certain elements of the non-Roma community (though not as high a demand as we can experience in the case of playing music). In some way, we can talk about vulnerable elements who are made vulnerable by jealousy, love, greed, the desire for something, or simply just curiosity. They really demanded this service and they were sometimes willing to pay a high price for it (I have to remark here that it may not be by chance that from this point of view, witchcraft for Roma women is quite comparable to music for the men: since musicians usually played in pubs where people could be very vulnerable – or, from another point of view, they could be generous and irresponsible.)

However, on the other hand, witchcraft and offering it was also a strategy at the same time with the help of which – relying on human weaknesses again – the Roma got the opportunity to enter peasants' houses, which were, in most of the cases, otherwise strictly inaccessible for them (or they were even 'visited' by the household). And there they could freely collect the necessary goods, just as if they were in natural surroundings.

So does the above-quoted sociological observation about the blurring of the borderline between foraging and other forms of obtaining items such as theft makes sense.

The authorities judged witchcraft as deception of people, from whichever aspect we consider it, and therefore it was strictly forbidden. It is

not accidental that we meet with those occurrences just in criminal lawsuits, just as it is no coincidence that in the first half of the 19th century, Roma women were already engaged in occupations acknowledged by their surroundings (such as string making, broom making, bonding and so on), at least according to the conscriptions.

Finally, it can be concluded that the belief system we can reconstruct from the criminal lawsuits against Roma sorceresses has nothing to do with that of the Roma, and here, the comparison with Roma people making music is obvious, but one can always get to know about the beliefs of the non-Roma surrounding society with its help.

Zhrnutie

Cigánske čarodejnice v prameňoch z 18. storočia

Historické pramene z 18. storočia potvrdzujú zistenia kultúrnej antropológie o dôležitej úlohe rómskych žien pri zabezpečovaní svojich rodín. V súlade so spôsobom života zberačov bolo ich úlohou zaobstarávanie potravín. Spoločenské prostredie však výrazne obmedzovalo zberačstvo, preto sa museli uchýľovať k rôznym technikám. Najdôležitejšia spomedzi nich bola činnosť založená na poverách, ktorá pre spoločnosť stvorila obraz "cigánskej čarodejnice". Dôležité je však poznamenať, že tieto povery boli zakaždým poverami spoločnosti, nie Rómov: ved' inak by ani neboli fungovali (podobne ako cigánska muzika hrá hudbu danej spoločnosti a nie svoju vlastnú). V súlade s tým bolo aj čarovanie (veštenie, odklňanie a zaklňanie láskou, schopnosť vidieť poklady) službou, ktorú poskytovali takmer výlučne iba ženy. A vzhľadom k tomu, že spoločnosť (alebo minimálne jej časť) si túto službu žiadala, umožnilo to jej poskytovateľkám preniknúť na územia, ktoré im boli inak neprístupné, a tam v zmysle svojho spôsobu života pokračovať v zberačstve.