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Gypsy Dragon: an Evolutionary Approach to Narratives*

This paper will attempt to explain Serbian Gypsy oral narratives by applying concepts drawn from evolutionary psychology. The Gypsy story will illustrate how various narrative characteristics are used by Gypsies to employ social knowledge on local surroundings to better serve fitness solutions.

Key words: Serbian Gypsies, oral tradition, evolution

Introduction

The storytelling should be of a great interest to evolutionists, in their effort to explain human behavior. Narratives, just like other forms of communication, can have an effect on behavior. Storytelling is species typical, occurs cross-culturally, and its content shows thematic uniformity across broadly different cultures. A general evolutionary prediction is that the oral tradition covers domains of information that were valuable to survival and reproduction (Scalise Sugijama 2001, Coe, Palmer, Aiken and Cassidy 2006, Steadman and Palmer 1997). Narratives, thus, could serve as a means of passing on adaptively important knowledge and as models of behavior (Pinker 1997, Steadman and Palmer 1997). If traditional stories are taken as tools by which ancestors try to affect the behavior of descendants over time, these stories should be of even greater concern because the effect of the story itself will influence the frequency of the story in future generations (Coe, Palmer, Aiken and Cassidy 2006). Traditional stories, by explicitly teaching the consequences of social behavior, transmit social knowledge. The past events described in the stories, whether true or alleged, anticipate future consequences. A traditional

* This paper is the result of project no. 147021: *Anthropological research of communication in contemporary Serbia* by MN RS.

story that affects the behavior of those who listen to and retold it in a way that increases their fitness will tend to become more frequent in future generations, while a traditional story that has the effect of reducing fitness will tend to die out over the generations (Steadman and Palmer 1997:348). The outcome will be mostly apparent when the stories influence behavior crucial to human survival and reproduction. The extent to which the behavior encouraged in traditional stories will lead to descendant-leaving success in the future depends upon the similarity between future environments and those of the past.

Gypsies are present in Serbia since the middle ages though their social integration is still poor today. All the way through their history in Serbia, the Gypsy groups have relied heavily on oral traditions as a source of obtaining knowledge and information on history of their ancestors, proper kin behavior, economic life, society in which Gypsies live, relationship with non-Gypsies, and everyday world. Their stories are told generation after generation and with little alterations (Cvovrovic 2006). They are traditional stories in which particular elements, the main topic especially, stay unaltered and which are transmitted, in a form of cultural inheritance, from one generation of kin to the next (Coe, Palmer, Aiken and Cassidy 2006).

Background

Already there exists a developed body of work that examined literature as a product of a psyche designed by natural selection: this approach uses knowledge and concepts of the evolutionary perspective to understand and explain characteristics of oral, literary creation and other forms of art (Carroll 1995, Storey 1996, Miller 2000). According to this approach literature and its oral preceding representations should be seen as an extension of the individual's adaptive orientation to its environment, both social and natural. This approach is founded on four major principles derived from the evolutionary perspective: the relationship between an individual and its environment is a matrix concept prior to all social, psychological and other concepts; the human mind has evolved through an adaptive process of natural selection; all proximate causes are regulated by the principles of inclusive fitness as ultimate cause; and all representation, including literary is a form of cognitive mapping (Carroll 1995; 33; Carroll 2002:120-122). The topics of mate choice, mating strategies, female adultery, step-parenthood, cross-cultural patterns, motivation structure and narrative function have been examined by both evolutionary psychologists, anthropologists and literary scholars (Daly and Wilson 1998, Scalise Sugiyama 2001, Gottschall 2003, Boyd 2005, Storey 1996 Coe, Palmer, Aiken and Cassidy 2006, Steadman and Palmer 1997...).

Since their coming to Europe, the Gypsies main concern was how to survive and outwit life obstacles. All through their exodus and the past, they have been enslaved, molested, murdered and discriminated against, and their harassment continues still today (Hancock 1987). In the Balkans, Gypsies always considered being "an oppressive caste", and their social and economic standings change very little in the past century (Fraser 1992). The large numbers of Gypsies came to Serbia with

the Turkish army, in the 1300, and presently there are approximately 300.000-500.000. Gypsies, who are held to occupy the lowest place in the society (Vukanović 1983, Save the Children 2001). Today, most of the Serbian Gypsies live in severe poverty, with mass unemployment, poor education and poor quality housing in Gypsy settlements segregated from the majority. Since their arrival to Serbia, Gypsies have been relatively cooperative in trade, but have restrained in marriage with outsiders. Their endogamy was self-maintained as much as it was imposed, and although some intermarriage with Serbs occurred, for the most part, Gypsies stayed ethnically pure. Many times, the narratives appear to be the only education that the young Gypsies receive due to their general segregative practices such as low school enrolment, settlement segregation and preferred endogamy. In Serbia, Gypsies live isolated in Gypsy *mahala* (settlements) or villages surrounded by the Serbian majority, with restricted contact limited only to economic dealings.

The Gypsy Dragon, Gypsy and emperor's daughter

Once upon a time, long, long time ago, in one far and away place, there lived a dragon who constantly kidnapped and ate young girls. He took what he wanted, always, food, crops, cattle, women, houses, children, so the locals decided they have to do something about it. Since the dragon snatched at random, the people decided to make some order in his demands and stealing: they made a list who is to give what and how much of whatever the dragon wanted, and whose daughter will be given away, to the dragon. So, one by one, all daughters disappeared, until there was none but the emperor's daughter. And that emperor is like every emperor, he wanted to save his child despite that he didn't do anything for his peoples' daughters. He made a proclaim which stated that whoever manages to save his child will be rewarded with a great reward: half of the empire will be given to this man and in addition, he could marry the emperor's daughter. The emperor would do anything, just to save his daughter. However, no man was brave enough to apply for this task except one poor Gypsy. The Gypsy worked in the fields, sometimes, for his godfather [a Serb] and attended his cattle but he wasn't satisfied with his life and job. He also made cauldrons to sell. It was a hard job, and he did it only to survive. Plus, he stole some chickens, from his godfather to feed his family; the Gypsy thought that the godfather wouldn't even take notice that only few chickens are missing- he has so many, so why not? But alas... and he wasn't in such a good relationship afterwards with his godfather. Anyway, he decided to apply for the task, and told his godfather about it. The godfather was curious, wasn't the job he gave him good enough? But the Gypsy replied: Yes godfather, thank you, but I am bored with my life, and this acute poverty, and I don't care anymore to live like this, it's better to die. But the godfather said: But what will happen to your family and your nine children? The Gypsy said: I don't care anymore, soon, they will leave and abandon me, and go their own way, never to look back. That's our Gypsy way, to be

travelers and to travel all the time. Maybe they will find a better place to live. All in all, I decided and no one's gonna stop me. He said hello to his family, blessed his children and went to the emperor, to apply. He didn't look back at his children, as they will never look back at him again. The emperor laughed and laughed when he saw who applied to be a savior of his precious child, but he didn't have any other choice, so he agreed to the Gypsy proposition. He offered to the Gypsy a sword, knife, an ax, or some other cold weapon, but the Gypsy refused. The Gypsy had his secret weapon all along, but didn't want to reveal his under wraps, so he went on to some cliff, to wait for the dragon to make an appearance. And the dragon came: huge, ugly, with big nozzle and smelly, and laughed at the Gypsy: You are the one who dares to say he'll beat me over! You are just a Gypsy lowlife, you fool, get out of here before I eat you alive along with your dirty clothes! The Gypsy saw the kind of trouble he is in, and said: You are so much stronger than me, I'm just a poor Gypsy, but let me tell you a story, it's kind of a riddle actually. You are so big and smart, you will surely guess it. Amused, the dragon followed. And the Gypsy asked: Why it is that the roast chicken is the favorite Gypsy meal of all times, in all places, everywhere? And the dragon thought, and thought about it, but could not think of an answer. And then the Gypsy told him a story of why it is that the roast chicken is the favorite Gypsy meal of all times, in all places, everywhere: It happens everywhere- one young Gypsy man and his step-mother were in love very much. His father married a very young woman, he had many wives before, but has chased them away, and kept just this one, young and beautiful, and so there you have it, it happened because it could happen in such situations, and they started to see each other secretly, in a nearby forest, to make love and enjoy each other. They could not meet in public for their love was forbidden, but forbidden fruit...Still, there was one condition: the Gypsy was suppose to bring her a roast, nice chicken, every time they meet, if not, she refused to be with him. And he did so, many times, and she got many nice chickens. And that is how they meet, many times, to make love! When you have a roast chicken, they you have everything, it doesn't matter if you have money or not, or your background, nothing matters. And that is why Gypsies everywhere love roast chickens, when you have it, then everything is allowed, even your father's wife! The Gypsy finished the story, and the dragon started to laugh, and laugh, and laugh so hard so he was trembling and shaking, and the whole ground was trembling, for he was so big. In a moment, while he was still laughing and shaking, the dragon lost his balance...and puff, puff, he went down the cliff! And that is how the poor Gypsy killed the dragon. He didn't succeed in defeating the dragon because he was brave and skillful, but because he managed to trick the dragon for he was witty and foxy. That is our famous Gypsy wittiness- being able to trick! And so, the Gypsy appeared in

the Emperor's castle as a victor, and he was greeted with joy and gratefulness- after all, even he was just a Gypsy, he managed to save the emperor's daughter and the empire. Now, the time has come for the emperor to fulfill his promise: the Gypsy is to marry his precious daughter. But the mother empress was strongly against it- how will you, the emperor, give our daughter to marry just a Gypsy with nothing and nobody? And the emperor too, wasn't pleased at all. But he gave his word, in front of everybody, so what could he do? Then, he said: if my daughter is to marry this man, a Gypsy, let him stay here with us, it's better to have one Gypsy living with us, then that he takes our daughter to wander around the world, like all Gypsies do. Or, to take her to his Gypsy castle which he doesn't have, because Gypsies do not have palaces and castles, they are travelers, and they wander through the Earth forever. And the emperor said to the Gypsy: you will live here, in this part of our palace, and I will give you my daughter, and you will have whatever you want, just do not take our daughter away, to your wonder-world. But, the Gypsy, as any Gypsy, looks at the window, and saw one piggery, empty, dirty, and said: there, I will live there, that is good for me. The emperor cried: you fool, why would you want to go and live in a piggery, like a pig, here I offer you nice bed, soft pillows, palace and servants! But, the Gypsy wants only that piggery and nothing else. He laid down on the floor and enjoyed himself. The emperor and his wife started to cry, and to beg, how will one emperor's daughter to live in a piggery; but the Gypsy didn't care at all, he couldn't care less about what they were saying. He wanted his piggery, and that was it: if the emperor's daughter wants to come and live with him in that piggery, fine, that OK with him, if not, he doesn't care, and thought: at least, I could rest before I continue my wandering. However, the emperor's daughter came to live with the Gypsy in that piggery; she respected her father's word. In the morning, after they slept, the emperor came to an idea: he will offer a job to the Gypsy that will take him away from his newly wed wife. And he said to the gypsy: Here, just say what is it that you want to do, here's the whole army, take it, and command it, go to war, learn, travel... The emperor would do anything just to get rid of the Gypsy. And the Gypsy agreed to the job, and headed to take the army. They traveled and traveled, and finally they reached one forest. And it was a huge beech tree forest, and the Gypsy thought: what a nice trees, good for making distaff, I'll take some, maybe I will need it one day. And he started to cut some young braches. His soldiers were confused: what the hell he is doing, and then they decided to do the same: each and every soldier took one young branch until there was no forest left. And they continued their journey until they reached one river, with no bridge, what will they do now, they cannot cross water without a bridge? The Gypsy thought: why do I need a stick when I cannot cross the god damned river, and he throw off his stick, and all the soldiers

did the same, copying the Gypsy. And they stopped the river all together, with their sticks, and, there you go, they made a bridge! And they crossed the river and came to the other side, to the emperor. The emperor asked his army: tell me, please, how did it go, how was this Gypsy? And the army said: Wow, he is so clever and literate, we cut off the whole forest and made a bridge to cross one river, and he was the one to think about it, how to do it; he knew that there's no bridge, and that cutting the whole forest is the only solution, he manages his brains very good, for he is so good! Thanks to him, we have crossed the river and made that bridge. The emperor gave him big award, and the Gypsy's whole family gathered around him, to praise and admire him, everybody except his godfather, the Serb. The godfather told him: you didn't deserve any of these, for I know you. And the Gypsy became sad, and went to his piggery in sorrow. In the morning, when he woke up, he saw that the road is created by itself that connects his piggery with the emperor's palace, and on one side there are some roses and on the other there are some violets. The Gypsy was amused, and said: Oh, this smells so good! The next morning, when he woke up, he saw that huge bunch of grapes have aroused, covering his piggery; he ate and ate grapes until he was full, and then he realized that he deserved it all.

Discussion

And although a human universal activity, unlike other forms of art, narrative is highly goal-oriented: a narrator may use narrative to manipulate an audience's representation of the social and physical environment to serve his/hers own fitness needs (Scalise Sugijama 2001. So, the question: in the story, which behaviors are encouraged that have presumably helped Gypsy ancestors to survive and reproduce in the past? Which behaviors we find addressed by these guidelines?

The story depicts how the socially powerless and disadvantaged Gypsies lacking real skills could trick and outwit the socially stronger, that is, an authority be it an emperor or a member of a surrounding majority, or a dragon that may symbolize all these. For this reason, this story could be related to the trickster tales that contain teaching strategies and participate in building a given group stereotypes. The Gypsy trickster character is neither good nor evil, tricks, but also he provokes compassion. The story is a mixture of realistic and folk tale elements; we find the Gypsy being dependant on his godfather of a different ethnicity, their relationship described as not equal, at the Gypsy disadvantage. The Gypsy is presented as a deceiver and a trick player: he is able to turn any situation around, sometimes just because he is lucky. The stereotype of Gypsy behavior is evident: the trickster is presented as a clever, mischievous man, who tries to survive the dangers and challenges of the world using trickery and deceit as a defense. As he is socially weaker and petty than the more powerful minority or any given authority, the Gypsy trickster is unable to win any direct confrontation. The Gypsy trickster

makes his way through a hostile environment of non-Gypsies out to defeat and deceive them -not by his strengths and virtues but by his wit, luck and cunning. In this story, the Gypsy character represents a stereotype of customary Gypsy behavior. This stereotype on the Gypsy character is evident in historical records. When they first appeared in Europe west of the Balkans, Gypsies presented themselves as Egyptian kings, and also posed as Christian pilgrims under leaders holding impressive titles. This was "...the greatest trick ...on western Europe in the early 15th century", played by Gypsies, who managed to assure protection from high government officials, and so took advantage of the Christian piety of the age (Fraser 1992:124). Soon, Gypsies obtained a reputation as thieves, fortune tellers and horse dealers of questioning honesty. Similar description of Gypsies as thieves and tricksters, in subsequent centuries, derive from many independent sources throughout Western Europe (MacDonald 2002). The stereotype included colorful dress, different ethnic group, fortune tellers, beggars, musicians and other artisan occupations. The stereotype associated Gypsies with tricks and deceiving: theft, lock-picking, purse-stealing, horse-stealing, casting spells, and general witchcraft and trickery. Indeed, throughout their history, Gypsies have chosen only particular occupations where they were self-employed and did not require education. Fortune telling has remained a Gypsy niche all the way through their history until the present. Even with modernization, when they abandoned old occupations in favor of new, they did not compromise their freedom, ethnicity and residential flexibility (Fraser 1992, MacDonald 2002, Cvorovic 2006). For many Gypsy parents, formal schooling is not seen as a priority and Gypsy children attend school at much lower rates than the surrounding population, remaining so even more separated and not being socialized into the non-Gypsy world (Cvorovic 2005). For the general Gypsy population, high fertility is kind of social obligation. Low education, less rule following, higher fertility, and neglect of children make Gypsies a group which tends toward a low-investment reproductive style (Cvorovic 2004). All these behaviors, along with an emphasis of deceiving and tricking the non-Gypsies are presented in the story. In a real life, as in the story, contact with the non-Gypsies is restricted to specific kind of relationship, mostly economic exploitation and manipulation for advantage (Sutherland 1975). In everyday life, for Gypsies, stealing from non-Gypsies is not considered immoral, and lying, tricking and extracting are socially expected forms of behavior. In the story, the whole relationship between the Gypsy and non-Gypsies are based on these behaviors, while manipulation of non-Gypsies is being approved. The Gypsies value being able to obtain money, goods or food from the non-Gypsies by outwitting them, and the story justify to the stereotype. The encouraged behaviors, proven by the story character to be successful, are stealing, tricking, and manipulating non-Gypsies, and on the other hand, low parental investment, having no educational or other skills but what the nature has given, and relying on luck alone. These behaviors probably represent a model of behavior that was successful for the Gypsies in the past. With that same model of behavior, Gypsies not only survived but have left descendants who did the same. The story also tells about the adaptive obstacle that Gypsies face: despised, sometimes tolerated, but never fully accepted by the surrounding majority, especially as marriage mates, it points out to deep feelings of degradation and oppression that Gypsies must have experienced in the inter-

action with their host populations. Even today, many Gypsies complain that whatever they do, it is not good enough for the Serbs (Cvorovic 2006).

Conclusion

It is probable that everyday events and experiences that Gypsies had with non-Gypsies influenced the creation of this type of Gypsy stories. Ever since their first arrival in the Balkans centuries ago, their main concern was how to survive and outwit obstacles in life that included persecution, enslavement and harassment. The cultural tradition, including narratives, and reproductive strategy that Gypsies employed might be the answer to life conditions they met and lived in. The Gypsy narratives may be wittingly created to meet the particular knowledge needs of local habitats, including means on how to outwit non-Gypsies. Also, the stories were a likely outlet to relieve conflict and oppression that Gypsies must experienced as minority group: their narratives mold and influence their belief system on themselves and others, shaping the behavior at the same time.

The history of hardship and discrimination of Gypsies and their stories, point out to that other humans, non-Gypsies and their surrounding social environment appear to be the main, unpredictable, and latent dangerous aspect of the Gypsy past environment. On the other hand, Gypsy social isolation is also partially self-imposed: their isolation and marginalization may result from the traditional refusal on the part of most Gypsies to accept and become a part of the larger hierarchy of their host populations (Cvorovic 2004). Their cultural manipulation of segregative cultural practices has resulted in ethnic similarity of disproportionate importance for Gypsies, regulating their associations with others. Among Gypsies, this probably led to a tendency to conceptualize both in-group and out-groups as more homogeneous than they really are: as we seen from the stories, the stereotypic behavior and attitudes of the in-group are positively valued, while out-group behavior and attitudes are negatively valued (MacDonald 2002). Gypsy narratives so became a segregative cultural mechanism, providing models of behavior with which Gypsies regulate their social and cultural surroundings (Carroll 1999:159).

The stories describe the pattern of Gypsy behaviors, widespread traits that presumably were successful in the past. Gypsies are just replicating the behavior of their ancestors- a particular tradition- who not only survived with that same behavior, but left descendants who did the same and furthermore, lived to tell the story. These stories are aimed at promoting proper/ successful behavior in upcoming generations, as long as there is enough similarity between future environment and those of the past. The Gypsy "situation" has not changed much: the poor conditions of their living, education and income and future prospects are unlikely to improve, based on their long them past. The Gypsy "problem", their high rates of teenage pregnancy, large number of children, unemployment and delinquency remain constant variables in their demographics since their coming to Serbia (Cvorovic 2004). Most Gypsy informants say that they follow no specific rules of behavior other than the ones they learned at home. All Gypsies agree that the stories have an educational point, even if they enjoy very much the narration as a form of entertainment.

Gypsy traditional storytelling could be called a kinship strategy, following a parental model of influencing the behavior, especially the social behavior, of children and even distant descendants (Steadman and Palmer 1997, Basso 1990). As one Gypsy concluded, sadly: “We have nothing left from the olden times: our ancestors left us nothing but some stories, poverty and sorrow”.

The Gypsy narratives are always put into the context of their immediate social surroundings and environment. Many times, these traditional stories warn about the consequences of wrong behavior, providing at the same time, models for proper behavior and local knowledge on how to pursue them and describe situations that the Gypsies might encounter in their lives. Gypsy stories so became means by which adaptive problems of most importance to survival and reproduction are ritualized and articulated in a replicated reality of their oral tradition. Like other forms of art, these stories for the Gypsies became “...indispensable for personal development, for the coherent internal organization of ideas and feelings, and for the organization of shared experience that makes collective cultural life possible”. The recurrent theme and emphasis of the Gypsy traditional stories on social behavior and relationship with non-Gypsies implies that this has often been the situation.

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Јелена Чворовић

Прича о циганском змају: еволуциони приступ наративима

Кључне речи: Српски цигани, орална традиција,
еволуција

Овај рад представља резултат антрополошке примене метода еволуционе психологије и теорије на проблематику социјалне и репродуктивне стратегије ромске популације у Србији, с нагласком на моделовање образаца понашања као на битан елемент сваке такве стратегије.

Предмет овог рада јесте бихејвиорална нормативистика имплицирана једном ромском причом/наративом, а циљ успостављање везе између социо-културних образаца понашања и стратегија одржања заједнице у разноврсним историјским, друштвеним, културним и економским условима. Главни јунак – Циганин у обрађеном наративу показао је све оне особине које и иначе Цигани¹ негују као свој адаптивни механизам, али и начин живота од кога нерадо одустају – лукавство, преваре, крађе, номадски начин живота, сиромаштво, бедан социјални положај, необразованост, бројно потомство итд. У свему томе, Циганин као јунак приче успева захваљујући својим особинама трикстера, тј. довитљивошћу, преварама, сналажљивошћу и лукавством. Другим речима, наратив с једне стране, верно одсликава друштвену стварност Цигана у Србији, како у прошлости тако, рекло би се, и у садашњости, док с друге стране преноси потомцима модел успешне адаптације и опстанка. Анализа показује да дотична прича не само што пружа објашњење циганског начина живота, већ га и потврђује и шта-више позитивно валоризује.

Такође, разматра се значај наратива за истраживање популација које поседују искључиво оралну културу, као и значај наратива за еволуциону антропологију, и истиче се да они служе не само преношењу знања које се сматра значајним у оквиру неке заједнице, већ и као преносници модела пожељног понашања.

¹ Етноним *Цигани* се овде користи, јер испитаници сами себе тако називају.