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Keywords

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The Role of Marriage in the Socio-Economic Life of Gypsy Community

Ivi Daskalaki

The Importance of Marriage

I was told once by a Gypsy man of around thirty years of age, while I was helping his family during the preparation of his niece's wedding that: "The only interesting thing that the Gypsies have to show is marriage." Indeed, as the man's words reveal, and somebody who has lived closely with the Gypsies easily picks up, marriage constitutes a crucial nexus of socio-economic and cultural processes, in which material flows are embedded in marriage relations.

Gypsy marriage mobilises economic activity within a context of intra-community relations and alliances, while at the same time, it activates a whole set of cultural practices that keep the socio-economic structure of the community together. What's more, marriage as a multi-dimensional process constitutes the vehicle through which the socio-economic intra-family networks operate within a specific framework of ethics and an informal code of Gypsy morality. The protection of women's virginity, as well as the practice of endogamy that characterise the majority of Gypsy

marriages are central to the ongoing functioning of these networks.

Interestingly, marriage or a prospective marriage engages community members in a cyclical investment process that signifies a long-term commitment to economic and social support. In other words, it triggers a whole set of economic and social strategies and alliances based on sets of reciprocal relationships. This socio-economic activity takes the form of money recycling and investment that indicate the existence of a strong socio-economic bond among different Gypsy families. Such bonds constitute the basis for the creation of extended supportive networks that operate mainly at two different levels: a) at the level of the extended family unit, between different generations, b) at the community level, among different extended families. Consequently, supportive networks that are generated and reinforced through marital alliances frame, on the one hand, the relationships within Gypsy community itself, while on the other, they shape the socio-economic activity of this community within the wider society. In this respect, these networks of supportive relations substitute the dominant institutionalised non-Gypsy forms of social support¹, which Gypsies are excluded from. The specificity of these strategies and their attributed characteristics constitute the basis on which Gypsies negotiate their relationship with the non-Gypsy society and position themselves within it.

¹ Such as the welfare state benefits.

Working Out the Marriage Plan: The Development of Marital Alliances and the Money 'Loaning' Project

From the moment of their birth, children trigger a complex set of actions by their parents and families that aim at creating a stable network of relationships that will help them to face the consequences of their marginalisation. As soon as a married couple has their first child, female or male, they have to organise and follow a strategic plan of money investment, or *daneio* ('loaning'), as Gypsies themselves call this process. This long-term investment process takes the form of wedding gifts to the children of close relatives, friends and community members and plays a double role. In the first place, it creates a reciprocal relationship between the recipient family and the one who gives it - or rather 'loans' it - who will automatically expect in return a 'pay-off' at their own children's wedding. Secondly, it establishes intra-family alliances and reinforces community relations. Anthropologists and other social theorists² (Malinowski, 1922, Mauss, 1954, Polanyi 1957, Levi-Strauss, 1969) have long stressed the role of reciprocity in establishing and strengthening social bonds. The words of Alexis, the elder male head of one of the three extended families of the settlement, illustrates the obligatory nature of the gift by stressing the reciprocal aspect of the money 'loaning' process:

"It is a 'loan' Ivi, not a present. You take a loan from the bank - we take it from relatives. You save money in the bank for your children, while we loan money to relatives' children to start up their lives and we anticipate one day to take this money back from them on our children's wedding day."

² According to Mauss (1954), 'the gift' in archaic societies constituted a form of transaction that defined reciprocal relationships and substituted state supportive mechanisms. Polanyi (1957) viewed the system of gift exchanges as a core institution of the social structure, where gifts become means of power control in various aspects of social life. In the study of kinship and marriage exchanges of valuables (Malinowski, 1922) and women (Levi-Strauss, 1969) entail the symbolic affirmation of different social groups' interdependence.

In addition, this continuous socio-economic activity that is prompted by wedding ceremonies reflects the primacy that is given to investment in the children's future as well as the way and degree Gypsies adapt their work and relations to their children's needs. And Alexis' wife, Evgenia adds:

"People say, oh! Look at the Gypsies they are not as poor as they seem to be because they spend so much money on their weddings. But they don't know that we work all our lives like dogs to put this money down for relatives' children. We have to move our ass and find a way to do it otherwise we are nobody here. All our children have to start their lives is this money. You...your children are educated, you can easily find a job but what about them? We do it for our children and for our family name."

It is common practice for parents to organise their economic activities in such a way that enables them primarily to support their families on a daily basis, while at the same time they can intensify their work in order to cover their children's wedding expenses or the gift for an upcoming relative's wedding ceremony. Indeed, parents not only have to plan their work and savings for their children's wedding preparations but also, as has been described, they have to put down money for the weddings of relatives and family members in the process of intra-community money recycling. Interestingly, such a process that is vitally linked with children's interests would engage all the members of the family. This means that both parents and all brothers and sisters take part in its accomplishment, even if it is not their turn to get married, according to the parent's working/marriage plan for each child. This applies to female children as well as to boys, although the girl's contribution would not be as important as the boys'. This is because a girl is occupied with household activities (which is the priority in her life at that stage), and secondly, because she has to invest a lot of money in her dowry, the so-called *proika* in Greek, soon before her wedding.

Parents with more than one child have to organise a good working plan early on for each child. Normally, and if everything goes as planned, parents marry their children by order of seniority. For example, at the time I conducted fieldwork at the settlement, Michalis, a father of four children (a daughter of twenty one, a son of seventeen, another son of sixteen and a third son of fourteen years of age) had long ago prepared a plan that would enable him to marry his children, whose age difference was small, so that the period between the eldest child's wedding and the youngest one's, would be relatively short. However, depending on the circumstances, parents with female and male children who are close in age may give priority to the female's wedding.

A more thorough examination of the marriage process and its association with the socio-economic organisation of Gypsy life sheds light on the difficulties faced by Gypsies to accumulate money and invest in housing. In fact, Gypsy families, especially those with many children, find it extremely difficult to collect the money needed to buy land or build a house. This is because the biggest sums of money produced through familial working activities, apart from the everyday household expenses, are invested in the form of wedding gifts for relatives' children. Michalis, for example, at the age of 40 had a permanent job as a legal vendor in markets and is thought to be well off compared to other male family heads in the settlement. Michalis had not yet managed to finish building his house on the land that he had bought with his own wedding money around twenty years ago. Property acquisition is more likely to happen, if it happens at all, when all the children of the family are married and the parents are informally dismissed from the 'money loaning' process.

It is true that as soon as parents have all their children married, they tend to gradually distance themselves from both the 'money loaning' process and, subsequently, from the intensive rounds of participation in wedding ceremonies. Varvara, the elder female head of the Petridis extended family, justified to me her reluctance to attend a relative's wedding party:

"No, you go, have fun, you are going to like it you'll see! Why should I come? All my children are married, there is no need for me to come...actually... I've done my duty for a long time and

I'm tired. Now, it's only a trouble for me."

The other female head of the Christopoulos extended family, Evgenia, told me that normally September is a time when Gypsy families have earned a lot of money from the summer seasonal trade and, therefore, many weddings take place then. However, she didn't really care much about weddings herself because she and her husband didn't have any obligations to their relatives.

"Even if we want to go to the party to have fun, to eat and drink it's different for us, we don't have to work so as to put down money for them. It's just fun, like my husband, you know he goes sometimes to weddings in order to drink with his friends."

In contrast, she explained to me how worried she was about her son, Michalis, who had to attend three weddings in a row while he had to work at the same time in the morning:

"I'm worried about him, it's been three weeks now that Michalis is going to these wedding parties and stays awake all night long but the next day he has to go to work at 5:30 in the morning. It's both very tiring and expensive, but he has to do it because Thomas' wedding is coming soon. It's not nice if somebody gives money to your child and you don't return it to his."

However, the gradual distancing from the wedding processes does not apply when a close member of the family gets married. In fact, both elder women took an active part and contributed substantially (in terms of money and effort) to the weddings of their grandchildren that took place the year of my fieldwork. In such cases, participation in weddings for a parent with married children constitutes either an affirmation of a very special bond and a specific form of attachment with the couple, or merely a form of socialising.

Putting money down for a relative's wedding not only has an economic importance for the future of the married couple as well as for the

future of his own children, but it also establishes respectful names and, simultaneously, reinforces family reputations. When somebody (most of the time the head or representative of the family) offers a lot of money for the wedding of a relative's child, he or she will consequently gain the praise of the community members and will automatically enhance the whole family's prestige. In return, as we have seen, the family will be expected to collect big sums of money at its own children's wedding.

The association of gifts of money with family reputations triggers the fortification of familial economic activity before an upcoming wedding. Families work hard in order to give as much money as they can to the couple, always depending on the quality of relationship they want to build with the bride's or groom's family within the framework of alliance-making strategies and, simultaneously, gain a good profile within their community. Michalis recently gained the growing respect of the members of the settlement immediately after they saw the money he put towards the wedding of a relative. His generous gesture was extensively discussed and positively commented on within the settlement the day following the wedding.

The family representatives of the bride and groom openly announce the gifts of money³ so that everybody can know the exact amount that each family member gives for the couple. In most cases, the names of those making a big financial contribution would be especially mentioned and applauded by the family representative, who will accompany his words with characteristic promises of friendship and loyalty to each other's families. However, close relatives are not only supposed to put money down for the married couple during the wedding but also to contribute to the founding of the couple's household as well as to offer them gifts of golden jewellery.

For the bride, the process of familial contribution to her household foundation starts long before her wedding or even her engagement. In fact, it starts at birth but is intensified before the wedding. Close relatives from the extended family unit (parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts) frequently buy any kind of household items small or big that they think worth adding to the girl's dowry. The girl herself normally buys the items she likes

with the money she earns, if she works. Such items can be purchased in festivals, where the majority of Gypsies trade and buy a variety of goods, from stores, or from vendors who visit the settlement. In fact, Gypsy dowry items constitute an important and extremely lucrative sector of the wider Gypsy economy. The dowry components are kitchen items (multiple sets of dishes, glasses, cutlery, bedding, towels, clothes, table-clothes, and other household items in general) collected in astonishingly big quantities. As Evgenia described:

"You should have seen my granddaughter's dowry when she got married! Her father knew a lot of traders and whenever he liked something he bought it in dozens of pieces. Athina has innumerable sets of glasses, dishes and cutlery of different quality, shape, and design, which of course she hardly uses!"

The groom's family contribution to the founding of the couples' household takes a different form. The groom's parents are expected to buy the bedroom furniture and the wedding-night bedclothes that will be exhibited to the relatives the first day of the wedding, while close relatives will usually buy pieces of furniture or electric devices for the couples' new household.

Along with the financial contribution to the couple, both in money and in kind, the close relatives of the bride and groom (the members of their extended families) usually offer them gifts of golden jewellery, also at the wedding celebration. Such gifts entail a more opaque symbolism than the gifts of money or the contribution to the founding of the household. Presents of golden jewellery constitute an affirmation of a close kinship bond between the bride or groom and members of her or his extended family that exceeds the socio-economic element of the Gypsy wedding, or what Alexis described as the money 'loaning' process (see above). In effect, jewels and the ability to wear them indicate a more profound and personalised aspect of this relation than that embedded in the flows of money or in the impersonal character of household items.

The Wedding

While I was conducting fieldwork, two wedding celebrations took place in the settlement.

³ Gifts of money are given at the wedding party after the religious ceremony.

The seventeen-year old Thomas from the Christopoulos extended family married the sixteen-year old Anthi from Pireaus, and the twenty one-year old Elpida, the eldest granddaughter of the Petridis extended family, married the twenty-two-year old Kiriakos from the settlement of Spata. Not only did I attend the three-day celebrations of the two weddings, but also I took an active part in the extensive preparations that preceded these. Both weddings took place during the first two weeks of September while preparations had started as early as May and intensified during the summer.

Apart from the wedding preparations lasting at least three to four months, the Gypsy wedding consists of three main phases or stages that in total last for a week. At the first stage, there is the display of the dowry (*ta proikia*) by the bride's family and the making of the bed (*to krevati*) by the groom's family that take place in the houses of the couple's families. The second phase consists of the pre-wedding parties, held separately for the bride and groom's relatives. The third phase comprises the church ceremony and the post-wedding party involving all sides. Each phase is indicative of the way and degree the close family, the extended family and relatives, as well as the wider Gypsy community engage in the wedding process. For example, in the first phase *ta proikia* and *to krevati* are both prepared and celebrated mainly by extended family members and close relatives. In the second phase, there are two different versions of pre-wedding parties, one for the bride and one for the groom. Both parties are prepared by extended family members and are held for each family's relatives and friends respectively. The wedding ceremony and the post-wedding party constitute the celebration in which both families' relatives and friends, as well as the wider Gypsy community take part.

The wedding celebrations, in most cases are as luxurious as can be afforded by the couple's parents, who want to show their appreciation to their family and friends for both their attendance and support. It is worth noting that apart from the gifts of money they make to the couple, Gypsy families invest time and energy in the wedding preparations of a close family member, with the same expectations that money investment generates. One day, this help will be reciprocated at the wedding preparations of their own child.

The Wedding Preparations

The wedding preparations in the settlement started in May with the booking of the church for the religious ceremony and the nightclub for the post-wedding party. In June, Elpida kept herself busy with the selection of the wedding dress while Thomas bought his wedding clothes. In the middle of July began the process of internal and external renovation of Elpida's and Thomas' family houses. In fact, their houses had to be repainted internally and externally and the inner structure had to be modified. For the purpose of her dowry display, the furniture had to be removed from Elpida's family home, and stored in a warehouse until after the wedding. Similar renovations were made in the main room of Thomas' house that would become the bedroom of the newly married couple for a time after their wedding.

As the time of both weddings got closer, the male members of the two families had to transform the common yard of the settlement into a convenient area for an open-air celebration. The last two weeks of August were hectic. Male members of both families, young and old, were busy constructing the dancing area, the stage for the D. J, and the common kitchen where women had to store the food for the guests. Female relatives were busy decorating the inside of the houses as well as planning and organising the food preparations. A few days before the weddings the whole settlement looked like a construction site and I couldn't believe how this mess could change within the limited time we had left. However, everybody assured me that everything would be ready on time.

The First Day

As the preparations continued, I was advised to go home and rest for a couple of days and come back for the first phase of Thomas' wedding, which in Greek is called *to krevati*⁴. It was actually the day that the close family of the groom as well as the members of the settlement participated in making the wedding bed and the decoration of the couple's bedroom. That day, my participation proved to be extremely useful, since I was familiar with the similar non-Gypsy Greek version of that custom. I gave them some input and I made suggestions about the decorative style

⁴ There is a similar non-Gypsy Greek custom under the same name that precedes the wedding ceremony. In the non-Gypsy Greek version *to krevati* is the day that the bride and groom's close female family members make the couple's bed so that relatives and friends can pass by and offer money or jewellery for the couple's happiness.

of the bedroom that they seemed to appreciate very much. In fact, everybody agreed to leave - in the previously heavily decorated room - just the new bedroom furniture, decorated with the embroidered wedding bedcover and the new curtains. The only things we added were a couple of family pictures on the walls and two huge vases with colourful flowers on each side of the bed. Thomas' mother and grandmother offered drinks to those who were helping with the preparations while music was playing loudly in the settlement.

The first phase of Elpida's wedding, *ta proikia*, took place a week later, and mainly kept the female members of the settlement preoccupied with the display of her dowry. When Elpida, a few weeks before the display, invited me to see her bedding and towels, I was surprised at how many packets she had stored in her grandmother's house. She had, among other things, more than 100 bed sheets, around 100 towels and 50 bedcovers. The great number and variety of her dowry pieces - ranging from bedding and towels, kitchen and household items, as well as clothes - were exhibited in every single part of the walls and every corner of her parents' house and were decorated with colourful ribbons. Her family offered drinks to relatives who called in during the evening to see *ta proikia* and congratulate the bride and her parents.

The Pre-wedding Celebrations

Following the first phase, a couple of days later, the second phase of the weddings took place in the settlement. It was Thomas' and Elpida's pre-wedding parties for his and her family relatives respectively. Here, I will describe Thomas' pre-wedding party, which preceded Elpida's one. Despite my worries, all the arrangements in the common yard were completed successfully in time for Thomas' party. The wooden structures the men had built over the previous days had been wrapped in glittering paper and decorated with colourful lights. Chairs and tables for around 300 people decorated with flowers were put around the dancing area and the D.J.'s stage was set up, equipped with a rented stereo and sound system. The D.J., who was Thomas' younger brother Theodoros, was on the stage selecting the latest Greek hits, sung mainly by famous Gypsy singers. Women stored the food they had cooked for their guests in the kitchen, built in a corner of the common yard especially for the occasion of the wedding. All female members

of the settlement had given a hand in the preparation of an assortment of dishes such as a variety of salads and fruits, baked potatoes, and some *mezedakia* (dolmas, prawns, and meatballs) that accompanied the main course. The main course comprised of lamb roasted on the spit by the male relatives of the groom. Interestingly, as soon as the guests arrived, the women of the family left the kitchen and went down to the dancing stage to dance with the groom. After the first couple of songs, the elder male members of the families started serving the guests with food and drinks that were coming in amazingly big numbers. Women did not get involved in serving food and drinks during the entire night.

In the middle of the party, women brought the wedding dress that Thomas' family had bought for Anthi and displayed it on the stage. The young unmarried girls of the family danced, holding the wedding dress one after the other, while the older women danced around them. At the same time, the men brought around the dancing area the furniture that had been bought by close relatives for the couple's household. A family representative announced on the microphone the family names of the donors while displaying the particular piece that they had given. After dinner, at around 1 o'clock in the morning, all this furniture had to be transferred to the family's vehicles and taken along with the wedding dress to the pre-wedding party of Anthi, the bride. At this party, the wedding dress had to be handed by Thomas' parents to the bride's family and the furniture items had to be displayed to their guests and then taken back once again to the groom's house. The guests at Thomas' party went on dancing until the groom's family had returned to the settlement. The groom, stayed behind because, according to the custom, he was not 'allowed' to see his bride before the church ceremony. This is how Marina - who on her own initiative thought it would be useful for me to become familiar with the wedding processes - described the pre-wedding celebration at Thomas' wedding over dinner:

-Marina: "The parents of the groom have to buy the bride's wedding dress and the bedroom furniture for the couple and we [the close family members] buy the rest of the furniture, which tonight will be displayed to the relatives and friends of the groom. Do you know that now there is a similar celebration at

the bride's house with her relatives?"

-Ivi: "Yes."

-Marina: "Do you know that they are bringing the wedding dress now here in the middle and the groom's family will dance around it and then we are going to take it together with the furniture to the bride's place?"

-Ivi: "No, I didn't know that, so are you taking the bedroom there? To Pireaus?"

-Marina: "[laughs]. No the bedroom will stay here, where are they going to sleep? From Monday [the actual wedding day], Anthi will have to sleep here, in her parent's in law, she has to forget her home... They are taking the furniture just to show it to her family and they'll bring it back here, those things [points at them to me], the T.V., the sofa, and the rest of them, these are all gifts from us!"

-Ivi: "So, everybody is going the bride's celebration?"

-Marina: "Only the close relatives, but you are staying here to take care of my baby girl because I want to go down to Anthi's place! O.K.?"

-Ivi: "O.K."

A few days after Thomas' party, a similar celebration took place at Elpida's. The main difference between the male and the female pre-wedding party was the reverse process of handing the furniture and the wedding dress. For instance, at Elpida's celebration, it was she who danced with her female and male relatives until around 2 o'clock, when her parent's-in-law family arrived with the presents and the wedding dress. As soon as they arrived in the settlement, accompanied by a dozen cars, they kissed and hugged the bride and her parents, offered a basket of flowers to them, and handed over the wedding dress. The dress was received and taken to the dancing area by the virgin female members of the family, who, as Thomas' young female relatives had done, again held it one after the other while dancing.

The bride's family led Elpida's parents-in-law to the dancing area to dance a couple of songs together, surrounded by the dancing circles of men and women and then they went all together to take pictures with the bride in front of her dowry.

The Religious Wedding Ceremony and the Post-wedding Celebration

Once the bride receives the wedding dress from the groom's family the couple is ready to proceed with the religious ceremony, which normally takes place two or three days after the pre-wedding party. Thus, the ceremony in the church does not seem to have the same importance for the community as the earlier celebrations and the post-wedding party. During my fieldwork, discussions I had about the upcoming weddings rarely had to do with the church ceremony itself. The guests, relatives and friends are not expected to be present at the church ceremony but they are definitely expected at the wedding parties. It is mainly the close family members that accompany the groom and bride to the church.

Although this specific community is very faithful to Orthodox Christianity and its associated ceremonies, the incorporation of a religious wedding into the Gypsy traditional wedding cannot only be explained by the concept of religious faith. Nor is the concept of marriage itself enough to explain the role of the religious ceremony in the wider Gypsy wedding process. Indeed, neither their Christian faith, nor the validity of a Gypsy marriage depend on or presuppose the church wedding ceremony. There are a few cases of couples, who are considered married according to the Gypsy standards, but have not gone through a religious wedding. Sometimes, such couples might decide to get married in church at some stage. This is common in cases, where legally under-age members of the community want to get married, and the church will not give its consent. Increasingly, however, over the last decades, obtaining the official paper that states the marital status of a married couple has been considered essential⁵ for the future life of the couple and its children.

This explains why the vast majority of community members, and especially the younger generations, sooner or later decide to get the official acknowledgement of their marital status.

⁵ Gypsies have increasingly recognised the importance of the official acknowledgement of their marital status for obtaining a variety of benefits from different state institutions.

Clearly, they prefer to do this through a church rather than a civil wedding. Both younger and older generations have the same preference. Elpida told me once that she would never want to marry in the municipality even if she was wearing the wedding dress. Her grandmother Varvara admitted that she could not even envisage "how this can be called a wedding". But although the church ceremony has added a religious and ritualistic element to the Gypsy marriage with a practical usefulness, it does not seem to evoke any particular associations with the complex web of social relations and material exchanges associated with marriage within Gypsy community. And it is presumably for this reason that it does not attract the same interest from the community members as the rest of the wedding phases.

The post-wedding party follows the church ceremony on the same day. Both Thomas' and Elpida's parties took place in Khalkida, in a nightclub, famous for its post-wedding celebrations, 100 kilometres away from Athens. This nightclub became the centre of many of my discussions with Elpida's and Thomas' family. "It's the biggest place in Greece, it must take 2000 people, very luxurious with a huge stage for the band and very nice food, you haven't seen anything like that" Thomas' grandmother, Evgenia, told me. What is more, Elpida's uncle, Theofilos, explained to me why most of the 'good' Gypsy weddings take place there: "It's because it reaches the standard of wedding we like, you'll see and you'll tell me." Indeed, I didn't have to wait until Thomas' and Elpida's weddings to see the place because in February I was invited by Theofilos and Katerina to attend the post-wedding party of a relative, who lived outside the settlement. Varvara and Evgenia insisted that although the distance from the settlement to the nightclub was quite long it was worth it for me to go because this was supposed to be, according to them, an "authentic Gypsy wedding". But Evgenia was particularly preoccupied with me travelling at the back of her son's truck in the cold:

"We are used to driving all this distance to go to relative's weddings and staying awake all night long, we do that very often, but I'm worried about you, it is going to be a long and tiring night for you."

I said I didn't mind since I had Marina and Giorgos with me to talk and laugh during the journey. Evgenia gave us a couple of bedcovers and pillows in order to make ourselves comfortable in the back of the truck, took off her scarf and tied it around my neck and kissed us goodbye: "Oh God!! I'm not going to sleep until you are back!"

As soon as we arrived at the club, after our long but pleasant journey, the first thing that impressed me was the large number of trucks and cars parked outside of the club. And the place was in fact huge, around 3000 square metres, with hundreds of tables surrounding the central stage, very luxurious, and with excellent food and service.

The whole post-wedding celebration is like an interesting puzzle of traditional 'Gypsy' and modern 'non-Gypsy' features of wedding celebrations. The selection of a luxurious nightclub for the post-wedding party indicates a shift from the traditional community celebrations within Gypsy settlements to a more modern, public and not strictly or exclusively Gypsy setting. The cutting of the wedding cake or the opening of champagne can be additionally characterised as 'modern' influences. As in most similar cases, it is the older generation who can confirm this conflation. Grandmother Evgenia asserts that although this modernised way of celebrating a wedding is very impressive, it has changed the traditional Gypsy wedding considerably:

"In the past, post-wedding parties that used to take place mostly in the settlements were more spontaneous. You didn't have to wait for all these processes, the food service, the cutting of the cake, the champagne, the dancing of the couple and the best-man, the gifts of money – that, believe me, take a lot of time. Nowadays, there is not much time left for the guests to dance...you arrive at the club at 11 o'clock and you have to stay awake until 6 o'clock in the morning in order to get the chance to dance. I don't know, but if you are not dancing, what the hell are you celebrating?"

On the contrary, Marina believes that the post-wedding party is both luxurious and entertaining:

"What do you think of the place? I always have fun here. I like it a lot! This is a proper celebration! You know most of these singers in the band, don't you? They are famous! They love coming to this place, but again they take a lot of money for that!"

The guests start coming around 10 o'clock and around 11 the live band starts to play. When the bride and groom enter the ballroom at midnight and greet each other's relatives, they go up to the stage to dance the first dance alone and the second with their best-man or best-woman. Then, follows the dance with their parents and other close family members. As soon as the meal is served and finished and the cake cut, at around 3 o'clock in the morning, there starts the process of announcing gifts of money and of jewellery. In the following extract from a dialogue between myself and Marina, she depicts some important features of the Gypsy post-wedding celebration:

-Ivi: "What about all these people, were they all invited?"

-Marina: "Anybody who hears about the wedding can come. Do you see [pointing at them] these families over there with the Turkish Gypsy clothes? Look at their funny clothes! They are *Tourkogyftoi* [Turkish-Gypsies]... They just came for the food and the drinks... because the food is delicious and they can drink as much alcohol as they like!!"

In this dialogue, Marina makes it clear that post-wedding celebrations are open to the wider Gypsy community as a gesture of hospitality and generosity that is mainly affirmed through the offering and sharing of abundant quantities of food and drinks. But she also implies that a guest's simple presence does not necessarily mean a special bond with the

couple's family if it is not accompanied by a reciprocal relationship in the form of a wedding gift. This absence of special bond is additionally exemplified by particular cultural differences such as variations of the dressing code⁵ among different Gypsy groups.

Gifts are announced through a microphone while music is playing and everything is being recorded on a video tape. In that sense, everybody can hear and see each family's contribution to somebody's wedding. While gift announcements take place the guests can dance on the stage. Normally, if a relative or a friend of the couple's family dances on the stage, the family members 'throw' money at him or her for participating in their children's happiness. Anna Lidaki (1997), in her extensive account of Gypsy marriage in Ano Liosia, asserts that the 'throwing' of money on to the stage for the dancers demonstrates better than anything else the special relationship that Gypsies have with money. In fact, wasting something so valuable such as money - symbolically expressed through the gesture of throwing - manifests the way Gypsies use money in order to affirm interpersonal and familial relationships and establish family names. The money thrown to the stage is later collected by the children, who love undertaking this role and, who then, hand it over to the band.

The money that relatives put down for a wedding can add up to a large sum, enough for a couple to start up their life together. In general, the total amount of money invested in the couple's future ranges from 25.000 to 100.000 Euro. The amount of money invested by each family varies significantly depending on the family's economic condition and the kind of relationship they have or want to build with the couple's family. However, it can start from 100 Euro and reach up to 2000 Euro. In most cases, the first priority for the newly married couple is to buy a car, the essential tool for their working activities. At the same time, they might well invest in a quantity of trading goods that they are going to sell in the markets and will enable them to set up a small family business. Alternatively, the man might decide to keep on working with his father for quite some time before he takes this

⁵ The difference between Turkish-Gypsy and Greek-Gypsy clothes is mainly visible in women's dressing. Although both female groups should cover their legs with long clothes, Turkish-Gypsy women wear long and loose fitting dresses or baggy skirts and loose blouses, while Greek Gypsies wear long and tight skirts and tight blouses.

more independent route. Finally, it's becoming more and more common for newlyweds to invest their money in a plot of land that can either be resold in the future, or where one day they can build their house.

Getting Ready for the Marriage: The Transitional Period

Young boys and girls get the chance to meet and flirt at the wedding parties, which they attend with their parents. In fact, children of all ages take an active part in wedding preparations and are present at all phases of wedding celebrations. The pre-wedding party enables children and youngsters to meet with their close friends and cousins while the post-wedding event gives them the chance to meet new people as well as make new friends. Wedding parties can also be the ideal settings for a promising relationship because both male and female youngsters, but especially girls, have considerable space and freedom to express themselves.

Although little boys and girls can express themselves completely in their own way, youngsters have to behave almost the same way as the grown-ups. Specifically, while small children up to the age of eleven or twelve can play and gather separately from their parents, youngsters have to sit with their family at the dinner table and behave politely. However, youngsters find significant space for interaction in the dancing area. The dance brings the young unmarried girls, who can easily be spotted because of their specific way of dressing⁶ and their bright make up, to the centre of attention. Young boys grasp the opportunity to show their preference for a particular girl. As soon as a young boy sets his eyes on a young girl and feels that he receives a positive response from her, he expresses his choice to his parents, for them to make the first approach to the girl's family. Alternatively, the parents may understand the young boy's preference for a specific girl themselves and take the initiative to discuss it with him. Usually, the parents of the two youngsters discuss such an issue informally on the occasion of a wedding party, and later on, the boy's parents will visit the girl's house in order to gain her parent's formal consent. It is, however, important that the girl's parents will not proceed

to the formal giving of their word, unless she agrees as well.

Flirting does not only happen among older children above the age of twelve but is also common among small children. The four-year old Xanthi, for example, confessed to me that she and her second cousin, who lives in a nearby settlement, fell in love while playing together during a relative's wedding party. She asked me "not to mention anything to her mother" because she felt it was not the right time for that. As in Xanthi's case, smaller children may have specific preferences for a prospective partner but would not go so far as expressing them openly, at least not until they feel their parents will give their consent.

The age suitable for a young boy and girl to get engaged varies considerably, and mainly depends on the personality and character of the young person. It also depends on the way his or her parents view the engagement. There are both boys and girls that might get engaged as soon as they reach the age of ten or twelve but for most parents the most suitable age for engagement would be around thirteen to fifteen years old. However, in cases that a boy insists he wants a specific girl or when a girl wants a boy who has proposed to her, their parents may give their consent sooner. In addition, an early engagement may take place when parents notice a strange attitude from the child such as aggressiveness, drug addiction, disobedience, distraction, etc. During Elpida's pre-wedding party, the nine-year old Anestis flirted openly with the young daughter of a family from Khalkida. According to his mother, Katerina:

"Since he kept on dancing with her throughout the whole night and he says he wants her, it's better to get them engaged so that he will calm down a bit, otherwise he is going to drive us all crazy here!"

Early engagement not only has a supervisory and training purpose for the girl but also plays a role in promoting the success of the marriage. By accepting the engagement proposal from the boys' family, young girls and their families agree to go through a transitional period until the wedding, which in some cases can be quite long. Throughout that period, the daughter, initially in the company of her mother but later alone, will spend a few days of the week at her parents-in-law's house. Apart from the learning of

⁶ Young unmarried girls usually wear tighter and more fashionable skirts and blouses than the married ones.

household tasks, these regular visits aim to give the future couple time to get to know each other better and bring them closer to their future domestic environment. This transitional period has an additional purpose with a psychological effect both on the parents of the girl and the girl herself. Indeed, it is helpful to the parents who soon after the marriage have to face the displacement of the daughter from their home and family and to the girl who suddenly would have to change both her living environment and her position in the family.

Marriage can be an extremely painful - consciously and unconsciously - process for the Gypsy families that have daughters as well as for the girls themselves. From the time of the birth of a baby girl, parents know that, sooner or later, she will have to leave her home through a symbolic procedure that indicates the end of the parent and child biological bond. After marriage the girl belongs to the family of the husband and has to be obedient to them. They also know that their daughter will have to work hard to prove her abilities and gradually gain the acknowledgement of her new family. In addition, parents always have the hidden fear that their daughter might not be treated the way they wish by her parents-in-law. All this explains why parents and all the extended family seem to be 'softer' with their girls and tend to spoil them more than the boys. Moreover, it is especially female members that admit how difficult and painful it is for them to be separated from their daughters and they are not ashamed of showing their suffering openly.

Although close family members try to come to terms with this separation long before this actually happens, the tension escalates as the wedding day comes closer. At the peak of the wedding preparations mothers or grandmothers might not be willing to talk to anybody or they may cry constantly. The most dramatic scene, however, takes place at the post-wedding celebrations. Although the wedding is supposed to be the most important celebration in a child's life, when it comes to the family of the bride, especially the mother, or the female members, they are suffering a great loss. Indeed, at the two weddings that took place in the settlement, it was obvious that Elpida's family members were experiencing completely different emotions from Thomas' ones during that day.

Virginity

"To make you understand how important our granddaughter's proof of virginity was for our family, I'll tell you something: When Athina and Xenophon finished what they were doing in the bedroom after their wedding party I took the bed sheet...and I was kissing it in front of everybody crying and thanking my little girl for making us all proud in the family."

For Evgenia, the elder female head of the Christopoulos extended family, as well as for the vast majority of Gypsies, virginity is associated with the *emprakti apodixi timis*, which means the proof of morality in practice⁷. *Timi* in Greek means literally 'value' but associated with virginity the term has a clear connotation with honour, dignity, honesty and 'purity'. Often Gypsies contrasted the 'purity' of their women with the 'non-purity' of the modern non-Gypsy Greek women who tend to lose their virginity before their wedding and, therefore, are called *atimes* (without 'value' or 'honour'). The boundary between Gypsies and non-Gypsies, as Okely (1983), Sutherland (1975, 1977), Stewart (1997), and Gay Y Blasco (1999) have demonstrated for the English Travellers, the Californian and Hungarian Rom, as well as the Gypsies of Madrid, is basically phrased in moral terms. From this perspective, virginity undeniably entails implicit as well as explicit connotations of a specific morality in the wider framework of Gypsy ethics. This is similar to what Gay Y Blasco (1999) describes in her work on the Gypsies of Madrid as the performance of a sexed personhood that both men and women constantly have to enact in order to manifest their "Gypsiness". But while on the one hand, Gypsy morality is premised on a notion of a fragmented relationship between the 'moral' Gypsy and the 'immoral' non-Gypsy Greek society, on the other, this morality seems to reflect a subjectivity constructed in response, or resistance to, the Gypsy marginal position within Greek society (Okely, 1983, Stewart, 1997, Gay Y Blasco, 1999). In their everyday speech, however, Gypsy parents continuously express the wish that their

⁷ The idea of the proof of morality in practice a few decades ago used to be very popular among the non-Gypsy Greek society especially in the rural areas.

daughter or son would marry a non-Gypsy Greek man or woman respectively.

The following dialogue that started with a joke made by the Gypsy women to a young non-Gypsy male - the representative of a Greek NGO who visited the settlement in order to discuss with us their resettlement options - but ended up with the women being irritated, offers an interesting insight into these contrasting elements:

-Evgenia: "Did you know that Ivi is engaged with one boy from us and they are getting married soon?"

-NGO repr.: "Really? That's great!"

-Elpida: "Yes, tell the mayor not to start the eviction until mine, Ivi's and Thomas' weddings in September! We cannot leave now we have to get married first! And we'll find you a nice girl of ours to marry. You said you are not married, eh?"

-NGO repr.: "No, but I don't want one of your women because I'm particularly looking for a rich bride."

-Evgenia: "Yes, Yes, You might find one of yours with money but our women, young man, have *timi*...excuse me, but do you prefer a rich woman with a hole like this big...?"

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned ambiguity, the centrality of virginity in Gypsy ethics indicates an interconnection between ideologies of gender, honour, and sexuality and vested with a moral aspect practicality that facilitates the development and reinforcement of relationships of support that are sustained in Gypsy marriage. The proof of women's virginity is of extreme importance in this endogamous community since, on one hand, the choices of finding a partner are limited and on the other, looser sexual practices would threaten the stability of the intra-family socio-economic construct. Notwithstanding, virginity seems to be important not only in endogamous but also in some exogamous societies, including rural Greece a few decades ago. However, the proof of virginity among the

Gypsy community seems to serve a different objective: to signify symbolically the gravity that underpins the network of supportive relationships. And this difference is primarily reflected in the whole process of protecting virginity. Indeed, the rural Greek idea of protecting virginity was associated with a set of rigid practices of keeping women completely untouchable and therefore away from any kind of contact with men until their wedding. The Gypsy idea of protecting virginity applies only to the particular aspects of intercourse that could jeopardize it.

In other words, looser sexual practices would have not permitted the development of the strong intra-family bonds through the cyclical process of money investment on the behalf of the children. The proof of virginity, but most importantly, the whole process and ideology of its protection, constitutes the basis on which intra-family marital alliances will be built and fortified. In effect, the proof of the girl's *timi* represents a gift of dignity, honesty, and respect towards primarily her family, the man's family, and those who contribute to the couple's future. At the same time, the protection of the young girl's virginity from her fiancé and future husband becomes proof of honesty and respect towards the woman and her family. At the community level, it represents the importance of this newly forged familial bond, a lifelong relationship, on which relatives are called upon to invest in. The proof of virginity emphasizes the importance and uniqueness of this informal contract, signifying the criteria of honesty and purity that underpin this process. The loss of a woman's virginity on her wedding day, the same day that the money investment process takes place, has a highly symbolic meaning. These parallel procedures - both symbolically and practically cannot be repeated in somebody's life. That is the reason why a possible second marriage will not be done in the way described above.

Indeed, if a second marriage does take place, it will generally be between a Greek-Gypsy man and an Albanian-Gypsy woman and it will be done in a conventional (without an open wedding celebration and the money 'loaning' process), sometimes, even in an extremely fast process. In such cases, however, we see that the label of Gypsy identity itself is not enough to mobilise and legitimise this whole set of economic and social relations that would be mobilised in a 'typical' Gypsy wedding, because a second marriage would cause considerable disruption to the money recycling process.

Parents are responsible for conveying their children, both male and female, the meaning of the woman's virginity before marriage. At the same time, both the mother and the father have divided their roles as far as the issue of their daughter's virginity is concerned. Indeed, the mother has a more formative and advisory role to play, while the father plays a stricter and more intimidating role in guarding her virginity. Young engaged girls often pointed out in our discussions the way their parents drew their attention to the importance of the protection of their virginity until their wedding day. Elpida illustrates her fathers' preoccupation with her virginity protection as following:

"I've been sleeping with Kiriakos in the same bed at least half of the days of the week for more than six years but my father still keeps telling me every time I go there to be extra careful to stay virgin and not dishonour the family name on my wedding day".

However, the virginity issue is not just a private discussion between parents and the female child but a central issue that, given the opportunity, is discussed openly in the community in front of the children of both sexes since their very early years.

As soon as a young Gypsy girl becomes engaged she and her fiancé should be careful in protecting her virginity under the discrete supervision of the parents of both parties. With the engagement, the girl's parents entrust their daughter's virginity to the fiancé and the boy's parents entrust the dignity of their family to the girl. During the engagement, the young couple can experiment with those sexual practices that won't jeopardise the girl's virginity. In fact, the couple is permitted to sleep together initially a few days a week and later on more often in the boy's house. But the young engaged couple might lose control and accidentally cause the loss of the girl's virginity. This it is not rare⁸ and is the case of Theodoros and Lena, both sixteen years old, who had been engaged for at least two years.

⁸ Especially, if for a variety of reasons the couple has to stay engaged for a long time before they get married.

Around a year ago they lost control and Lena lost her virginity. As Theodoros described:

"The big accident happened after a wedding. We were drunk and... back home you understand eh? Big mistake but what to do now? We lost control... I think it's my mistake ..."

It is interesting that while Gypsy moral values draw their effect from a set of extremely strict practices, at the same time, they grant considerable space for the possibility of human error. Primarily, it is the engagement itself that functions as a protective shield of the Gypsy moral code in the event of an accidental loss of a girl's virginity to her fiancé. Even in the extreme case that a couple, who is not engaged has sexual intercourse resulting in the loss of the girl's virginity, the elopement of the couple and the negotiations between their families and themselves that follow this event and normally end in a marriage, function as a means of restoring both the familial bond and as a way of resolving the crisis.

Endogamy

The endogamous character of this particular Gypsy community seems to be more circumstantial than deliberate. Endogamy constitutes this particular aspect of Gypsy life that is constructed and reconstructed on different grounds according to different circumstances. As already noted, in spite of the representation of a fragmented moral relationship between the Gypsy and the non-Gypsy community, Gypsies frequently express the wish that their children should marry a *balamo(i)* (non-Gypsy Greek), although they are also rather aware of the socio-economic boundaries that limit the chances of that significantly. In fact, marriages with non-Gypsies were more common some decades ago, when the divide between the poor and illiterate non-Gypsy population and the Gypsy population was less rigid, especially in the countryside. In contrast, Greek Gypsies can hardly come to accept the intermarriages, even though they do take place, between their men and Albanian Gypsy women (granted, however, the moral framework of both communities is premised on similar ideas and practices).

In the settlement, Kostas, the male head of the third extended family had actually a non-Gypsy Greek father and a Gypsy mother but had

always lived the Gypsy way of life. He was always proud of both his parents but he blamed his mother for bringing him up as a Gypsy. According to him:

"I was brought up with Gypsies and that's why I live like a Gypsy now because if you live with them you cannot do anything in your life, you can not escape from *gyftia* (Gypsiness), you become useless like us here".

The fact that he was the child of a mixed marriage between a Gypsy and a non-Gypsy Greek seemed to be underlined continuously by his children, grandchildren and the rest of the community. Kostas was aware that such a situation was unlikely nowadays: "We are poor and illiterate, who is going to marry our grandchildren?" It is true that in spite of the parents' wishes to marry their children to a non-Gypsy Greek, they know this is very unlikely to happen, mainly, because of the unbridgeable gap between the two societies.

What is more likely to happen, nowadays, is a marriage between a male Greek and a female Albanian Gypsy. This is the case of the thirty five-year old Giorgos, the Greek Gypsy who married the seventeen-year old Albanian Gypsy, Marina, as soon as he separated from his Greek Gypsy wife. For the parents of this mature man, calling their relatives for a second marriage and going through the money investment process for a second time would be disgraceful. A poor Albanian wife, whose parents would not ask for a wedding celebration because they couldn't afford the cost of the parties and the dowry, seemed to be the best solution. His mother, Evgenia, put this in the following words: "Eh, since his first marriage failed we said with my husband we'll find a poor girl from the street, we'll take her home and make her our child". However, Marina, the new bride, admitted that her life in the settlement "is still very difficult" because of her Albanian origin. And, although she made an amazing effort to learn Greek with a perfect Greek accent and changed her Albanian name into a Christian one by getting christened in the church, she was never accepted by the community. The wedding between an Albanian Gypsy woman and a Greek Gypsy man has the same validity for the Gypsy community as a common Gypsy

wedding, however, the woman's position in the family would be much tougher than a Greek Gypsy's one. Albanian women are thought to be second-class wives that in the absence of any other choice serve a particular objective: to cover the disgrace of a failed marriage.

As the examples reveal, it is the analysis of the wider socio-economic framework that should be related to the way Gypsy endogamous practices are activated and amended under different circumstances. The practice of endogamy for the Gypsies has been proven to be a flexible practice that can be loosened or intensified depending on the responsive tactics of the community to external factors. That explains why a few decades ago mixed marriages between Gypsies and non-Gypsy Greeks were more usual than today, while today the intensification of endogamous marriages enables the construction of a more solid and effective networks to overcome the increasingly competitive socio-economic circumstances. What is more, the Gypsy community has to face the fact that intermarriages between Albanian Gypsy women and Greek Gypsy men constitute a substituting solution for those cases that a failed marriage causes major disruption to the money investment process.

This analysis showed that the socio-economic networks are activated through marital alliances, underpinned by the money investment process. And it is endogamy that facilitates this process. In fact, endogamy enables the fortification of attributed characteristics as well as the reinforcement of the whole set of structural and functional relationships that contribute to the establishment of a 'Gypsy' cultural identity that can be projected through specific socio-economic practices within the wider social context.

Conclusion

To summarize, this analysis has offered insights into the ways Gypsy marriage produces and reinforces a complex dynamic process through which a number of diverse and important socio-economic and cultural features of Gypsy life intersect and are sustained. At the centre of marriage practices lies the attempt of parents to secure their children's future in an insecure environment, living as they do at the margins of Greek society. The content and characteristics of the different phases of a Gypsy wedding shows the amount of time, money, and effort that need to be invested both by the members of the couple's families and the wider Gypsy community. In this sense, the wedding process constitutes not merely

an affirmation of the joining of two people, but rather an expression and consolidation of wider community relations of support. This set of relationships that is fortified by reciprocal exchange through the money 'loaning' process, constitutes an effective support system, substituting for those social institutions and services in the wider society to which Gypsies are denied access because of their marginal position.

Endogamy and virginity are crucial to the success of these marriage-bound practices. Endogamous marriages ensure the continuity of the complex cycles of investment and support. However, we need to be extremely cautious when stating the centrality of endogamy in Gypsy marriage. In the first place, there is the clear preference of Gypsies themselves to marry their children with non-Gypsy Greeks - at least in their everyday speech - as well as there being examples of successful marriages between Gypsy and non-Gypsy Greeks that prove the viability of non-endogamous marriages. Secondly, endogamy as a common practice seems to be intrinsically associated with the marginal position of the Gypsy community within Greek society. In this sense, rather than seeing endogamous practices as a responsive tactic to attempts of assimilation underpinned by ideologies of difference, as Mary Douglas (1966) and other theorists have suggested, it is more useful to see this practice as resulting from their conditions of marginality.

The value attributed to women's virginity provides a medium through which concerns for mutual respect, honour, and integrity can be articulated and expressed. Apart from the culturally embedded notions of purity and integrity that women's virginity conveys, the proof of virginity - as it is openly manifested at the wedding ceremony - entails a symbolic affirmation of the honour and respect that underpin a number of different interpersonal and interfamilial relationships (child/parent relationships, the relationship between the two families of the couple, as well as intra-familial reciprocal relationships of support). Interestingly, however, the preservation of a woman's virginity does not exclude some form of sexual interaction since the young engaged couple is actually expected and gradually encouraged to sleep together during the transitional period of their engagement. This ambiguity is primarily reflected in the event of an accidental loss of virginity. Such an event will mobilise a number

of mechanisms with a highly symbolic character (elopement, intra-familial negotiations) that aim at the restoration of the reputation of the couple and their families and the re-establishment of relationships of respect.

This work has shown how long-term projects are realised outside of the boundaries of the state and the formal economy through ideologies of gender, sexuality and kinship. Simultaneously, non-mainstream ideas of long-term investment for the future, underpinned by reciprocal relationships, are manifested in the lengthy wedding celebrations, where luxury, abundance of goods, consumption of food and drinks and the 'throwing' of money constitute what the contributors of the *Lilies of the Field* have called a sharing of "an expansive hospitality and sociality" (Day, 1999:12) that exceeds reciprocal relationships. What is more, marriage and its associated ideologies of gender and sexuality, the practice of endogamy and concerns of honour lie at the centre of a socio-economic process through which the Greek Gypsy community is not only imagined but also realised. And the wedding celebrations become the specific point in time and space where Gypsies enact 'Gypsiness' at the present (Gay Y Blasco, 1999) in order to experience a shared sense of autonomy (Stewart, 1999) as an active response to the conditions of marginalisation.

It seems that all the aspects that characterise Gypsy marriage - intra-family social networks and economic alliances, endogamy, virginity, and a shared sense of 'Gypsiness' - are in a constantly changing dialectical relationship with the projection of their position in the wider socio-economic arena. From this perspective, Gypsy marriage has played an important role in defining and redefining characteristics attributed by themselves and others to the community that can consequently serve as flexible negotiating tools in processes of adjustment and transformation within the wider society. Marriage, then, and its interrelated practices should be viewed as aspects of a dynamic transformative process that is dialectically related to the wider social context. As the man quoted at the beginning of this paper suggested, Gypsies consider marriage as the ultimate expression of 'Gypsiness'. But marriage is not a static tradition. As a strategic response to shifting and variable external conditions, marriage and thus performance of 'Gypsiness' can only be understood in relation to non-Gypsy Greek society.

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