

LÁSZLÓ FOSZTÓ

Taking the Oath Religious Aspects of the Moral Personhood among the Romungre

Introduction

This article focuses on the construction of moral personhood among Roma in Gánás¹, a Transylvanian village (Cluj area) where Roma coexist with Hungarians. Gánás has around 1300 inhabitants, a third of whom are Roma², with the remainder primarily Hungarian, though there are also a few Romanian families. Land-owning villagers are referred to as *gazda* and they are exclusively Hungarian. Roma form a clear cut social and ethnic category, and they have maintained complex socio-economic relationships with wealthier villagers. In the village there are several herds consisting of buffaloes and cows owned by the Hungarians and herdsman are most typically recruited from amongst the local Roma population. Other Roma find employment as day labourers during the labour intensive spring hoeing, summer haymaking. In addition to these occupations, up until the recent

1 This contribution is extracted from a chapter of my dissertation which is based on fieldwork among Roma in Cluj area, Romania. I carried out fieldwork between June 2003 and September 2004. The research was supported by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany. All names of places and persons are pseudonyms.

2 They call themselves Romungro (pl. Romungre) and are referred as 'magyarcigány' (Hungarian Gypsy) by the local majority. Roma also employ the term 'magyarcigány' when referring to themselves in the presence of an outsider. They speak their distinct dialect of Romani and members of this commu-

past there was another occupational category dominated by Roma. A handful of families were musicians who earned a living playing at village celebrations and rituals, particularly during the winter season. Today, music has been largely abandoned as a substantial source of income among local Roma. Those musicians who perform revitalized and increasingly popular renditions of traditional folk songs are increasingly from ethnically Hungarian families. Most inhabitants of the village are members of the Reformed (Calvinist) Church, irrespective of ethnicity. There are also handful Baptists families and a small Pentecostal assembly also emerged more recently among the Roma.

The local majority (i.e. the Hungarians) dominate most of the public celebrations and the Roma tacitly accept their subordinated position during these celebrations contributing to the homogenous appearance of the local community. Nevertheless Roma have a marked sense of community intimately connected to a distinct sense of personhood which is particular to them. This sense of personhood is also intimately linked with religious ideas. My analytical focus on the construction of personhood is motivated at the one hand by ethnographic observations about the salience of moral considerations and practices emphasising the autonomy of each person among the Roma, on the other hand by a theoretical puzzle: how Roma maintain their distinct sense of community in the midst of a village which appears as *Hungarian* to the outside world. I suggest that Roma tacitly accept their role in the maintenance of homogeneous appearances of the local community because their approach to *community* is different from that of local Hungarians. Paloma Gay y Blasco argued that an “awareness of each other as moral beings” underpins the Gitano community of Madrid (1999:41). Comparable to the case discussed by Gay y Blasco the Romungro of Gánás maintain their community through a symbolical emphasis on the moral personhood of each member of the community, while at the same time never subordinating individual people to the community as a whole.

In this article my primary concern is to analyse the construction and transformation of personhood through ritual. I concentrate on the case of a life-crisis ritual: the oath. I point to similarities and contrasts with the process of religious conversion, which forms the central topic of another discussion.³ The reader should bear in mind that the practices presented herein should be seen as elements of a broader set of symbolic techniques through which the social world of Roma communities is controlled and transformed.

The structure of this article is as follows: first, I discuss aspects of an emic view of language among the Roma of Gánás. I then present the practice of oath taking. I offer a detailed analysis of the linguistic aspects, social organisation, and religious imaginary surrounding oath taking.

3 I interpret religious conversion as a process of transformation of the personhood. The impact of the conversion narrative (a ritualised form of autobiography) on the personhood is comparable to the oath

The “Weight” of Words

I carried out a household survey in the Roma settlement on a sample of 25 families and included a section on language use in the questionnaire. I was aware that most of the respondents were fluent in three languages, and I wanted to inquire into the role of language use in the construction of Roma identity. In order to grasp this, I prepared the following set of questions: What language do you speak: in your home / on the streets with the Roma / in the village among the Hungarians / in the city? I standardised situations according to formal social contexts that organically distinguish language use, thus ending up with a variety of language settings such as “at home”, “in the village”, or “in the city”. Misi, my host, who was my local adviser, insisted that this question made no sense. Contrary to his opinion my expectation was that answers to this question would reveal how language is linked to social contexts and social identities. I expected to show that stigmatization and adaptation to local norms would influence language use. As a consequence, I thought my results would show that the most intimate language for Roma is Romani, which would be spoken at home or within the Roma settlement. I hypothesised that Hungarian would primarily be spoken in the village, which is majority Hungarian. I expected that Romanian would be spoken in the city. My hypothesis was that an emphasis on speaking one’s *own* language as much as possible would contribute to the maintenance of a strong sense of Roma identity, as is the case with Hungarians living in Romania. I anticipated that this would be valid for the Roma as well, even if the contexts in which Roma could use their *own* language would be more narrowly circumscribed due to social inequality and stigmatisation. So against the advice of my host I asked the question.

The most common answer I received was that people speak “as needed/properly” (Rom: *Dav duma sar kampel.*). At first glance this answer might seem to confirm my hypothesis by showing that adaptation to context and social expectations determines language choice. However, I soon came to realise that what my respondents meant was something different from what my hypothesis had led me to presume. On the one hand, respondents did not attach the same importance to the connection between group belonging and language as formal lexical and grammatical structure of signs (*la langue*, as Saussure calls this structure) as I did. On the other hand respondents believed that it is important to use language properly; to speak in a manner germane to the situation, but that these situations could not be standardised, as I had done in my questionnaire, because they are not “outside” but “inside” speech. This is why Roma occasionally speak all three languages within the course of a single conversation *in Romanes* (in the Roma way). When narrating an event in which they had exchanges with an outsider, respondents

Romani only to describe and comment on the situation. This is, according to local standards, part of the proper narrative and necessary for telling a true story.⁴

Nevertheless, respondents attached importance to differences in dialect between different Roma groups. They distinguished sharply between groups who “talk like us” (Rom: *del duma sar amen*) and those whose speech is *mintjenitjikon* (from province of Muntenia). These distinctions, above and beyond directly observable phonetic and grammatical differences, had moral aspects as well. Respondents criticised the Vlach Roma because “they change their words” in the sense that they allegedly break promises and live by cheating others. Romungre are aware that the Vlachs consider them to be *dille* (fools) and that the Vlach ridiculed their dialect for being *kashtale*, or coming from a “wooden tongue” (from the Rom: *kasht*, “wood”).

These observations pointed to the specific approach taken by the respondents towards speech that focuses on the problematic relationship between the speaker and his words, instead of illuminating the link I had constructed between groups and languages. I slowly came to understand why my question was not working as my host had predicted would be the case. Initially relying on an abstract construction of language and a set of standardised “exterior” situations, over time I started to realise where the real “weight” of the words was for the people with whom I was working. Their attitude suggested that they imply a strong connection between the speaker and his/her words. Words, which are “his words”, are linked to the speaker; and the only accurate way of recounting what was said is to repeat the same words in the same way. This is the ideal, and Roma attempt to stick to this ideal as much as possible. The actual words originally uttered act as a limiting case upon the retelling of past conversations. Even when one speaks to somebody (like a *bori* “daughter-in-law” coming from a Roma group living next to a Romanian village) who wouldn’t understand the original Hungarian words, the imperfections implied by the realization do not harm the existence of the ideal. The “perfect reconstruction” of others’ utterances is an important part of the rhetorical ambitions of speakers.

If one attaches this importance to the words of others, the same is true for one’s own words. Words uttered once can stick, providing him or her with a lifelong nickname. A speaker can be ridiculed for his or her recurrent expressions, phrases, and mistakes. Other words can come back to haunt the person who originally spoke them. He or she may face public challenge to repeat exactly what he or she said in a particular situation. Someone who feels libelled by unjust gossip can start a “private investigation” to reconstruct the words that were said in order to publicly challenge the gossipier, forcing the slanderer to face the consequences.

4 Andrea Szalai (1998) describes a similar practice found amongst the Romanian speaking Bovash

Ethnographers of Roma have described the unique forms of speech found amongst this ethnic group. For example, Michael Stewart discussed details the phenomenon of “true speech” (which is a particular way of singing) among the Vlach Roma in North-Eastern Hungary (Stewart 1989). I believe that it is not an exaggeration to speak about the existence of distinct “genres of speech” in the Bakhtinian sense of the word (Bakhtin 1986) among the Roma/Gypsies. In the following I turn to an analysis of one particular ritual speech form: the oath.

A Life-Crisis Ritual: The Oath

At the beginning of my fieldwork among the Roma, in a suburb of the city of Cluj, Lina, an elder *Romni* born in Gánás told me a story about her son-in-law (Rom: *zhamutro*) Mihai, who, under pressure from his family, had tried to quit drinking some years before. Rita, Mihai’s wife, was Lina’s younger daughter and Gabi her elder. Because I was aware of the details of her family relationships and the wider social context, she talked to me more like an insider. The section below is a translation from the original transcript of a longer interview. Lina spoke primarily in Romani, using Romanian and Hungarian only when quoting utterances that were originally in these two languages, or when addressing somebody who spoke that language in her account (as is the norm discussed above). During our discussion I also used Romani, and occasionally Hungarian or Romanian, but for a different reason; at the time of the interview my fluency in Romani was not always strong enough for me to express my full intentions and ask my questions clearly.

“He [Mihai] took the oath (Rom: *colaxardjas*), and on the first day of Easter he had three crises, three times, one after the other; one at eight in the morning when the people were in the church, another at noon, and then at six in the evening. In the evening he almost jumped on Gabi. Out of the window [...] He saw a door instead of the window. And as Gabi was lying in bed, then the bed was there, she was sleeping there under the window and as she was in bed, he jumped right on the bed as he tried to jump out of the window. Gabi pushed him back. ‘Oh, Mom! He jumped right on me! Oh, Mom!’ She was scared to death. Rita wouldn’t stay beside him because she was scared of him so much. She ran from him to the End of the World.

One day we were going to collect rose hips. And he had a deciliter of brandy before at the Vama [pub]. And I was asking him all the time while we were collecting the hips: ‘Mihai, are you all right? Aren’t you sick?’ ‘No!’ And again, ‘Aren’t you sick?’ ‘No!’

buying it next to the bridge, there took from us the *Gazho* (non-Roma) the hip. While we were inside I just saw him shivering and then he fell to the ground. Bum! 'Oh, Lord!' It was just a few steps from the water. He almost fell into the *Somes* [a river]! I ran after the *Gazhi* (non-Roma woman/wife): 'Ma'am, can you give me a bit of brandy? Mihai fell down!' She and her husband know him. 'I have no brandy!' she said 'I have none!' I told her: 'He fell on the ground and I can't run to bring it for him [...]' Her *gazho* also told her: 'Come on, give him a small glass of brandy (Rom: *pähärel de țuica*)! The guy fell down, give it to him, woman!' The *Gazho* opened his [Mihai's] mouth and gave him water. I wiped his face with my apron. He was full of blood because he had chewed his tongue. I threw away the apron; I would never wear it again. I threw it into the river. But Rita would not even touch him. 'No, God forbid [...]'

Me: But, wasn't it St. John's evil (Hun: *nyavalyatörés*) and not the oath?

It happened because of the oath. After all this, Rita took him to the church and the priest absolved him of it (Rom: *desputridjas*). He read [the Bible] over his head.

Me: When the priest is reading, his head is covered and he kneels before the priest?

Yes, you kneel down before him, and he covers your head, then he reads the Bible over your head. Then you go around the altar three times, then you kiss the cross, of course. Laci, the oath is big! Very, very, very big is the oath. If you know you can't keep it, don't do it. [...]

Me: And the baptism among the converted is that like the oath?

That is also quite big. Haven't I told you what happened to that *Romni*?

Me: She was paralysed.

All her body was paralysed. I told her then; she came out from the water, it was three hours after she was baptised, and she started to speak obscenities and curse (Rom: *charravel thaj koshel*). She was saying things that shouldn't be said; she cursed God (Rom: *le devles koshleas*). Oh, God! And when she came, she went directly to the pub and had a beer and she drank. I said to her: 'What are you doing *Romni*, now when you have just gotten out of the water?'

By the time of this interview, I had already heard about several instances of misfortune and cases of severe illness attributed to divine punishment (often connected with oaths); therefore I had some familiarity with the phenomena. I was aware that both the breaching an oath and perjury are seen as major offences attracting God's anger. By the end of my fieldwork it became apparent to me that many Roma with whom I maintained close contact during my fieldwork had sworn oaths at some point during their lives, driven by problems related to family relations (most frequently suspected infidelity between

nocence in an action seen as reprehensible, or when challenged by direct accusations of involvement in such actions. Swearing an oath is considered a rather dangerous gesture, not only to the person who swears it, but also to his or her family members. Oath taking remains a widespread practice.

I was struck by some of the parallels between oath taking and imagery surrounding religious conversion. On the one hand, in the cases of religious conversion I came to know, the personal decision to convert was influenced by a desire on the part of the converted to be healed from severe illness, overcome alcoholism, or attempt to regain family peace. The consequences of apostasy, or "falling down" (Rom: *telepelel*) from faith, are similar to those that follow the breach of an oath. This observation drove me to the idea that both oath practices and conversion can be interpreted as alternative means of controlling and influencing individual behaviour and social structure. I tried to test this hypothesis, discussing it directly with several people. These results of this attempt remained inconclusive because some of my informants (converts, typically) simply denied the parallelism or comparison. Others agreed that the oath (Rom: *e colax*) and baptism among the converts (Rom: *o bolipo maskar o pokaiti*) are comparable, concurring that both are powerful and potentially dangerous if not properly respected.

Structures of the Oath

In order to make sense of the story of Mihai I analyse the linguistic structure and social organisation of the oath, then discuss features of the religious imagery surrounding the ritual.

a) Linguistic structure

In my analysis of the linguistic structures of oath taking I do not provide a morphological analysis; rather, I focus on the performative aspect of linguistic utterances. I must note here that I never witnessed an oath ritual among the Roma during my fieldwork. These acts are rather personal and consequently not open to the wider public. I repeatedly tried to reconstruct the text of the oaths, and, based on descriptions and mimetic utterances, the structure of the oath seems to consist of two basic elements: a clear announcement of the purpose of the oath, and a prescribed divine punishment if the purpose is not attained (a curse). Defined in one sentence oaths are conditional self curses.

A view of language and speech as an integral part of general human behaviour has existed in social anthropology since Malinowski published his works.⁵ According to

this perspective, language cannot easily be separated from other human behaviour and social structure. Utterances are not merely statements or representations of the “world out there”, but instead create and transform the human world. J. L. Austin argues (1976 [1962]) that ritualised utterances, which he labels “performatives” (like promises, marriage ceremonies, etc.), are social acts that create, reinforce, and transform social bonds and obligations. They can only be valid under specific sets of conditions this is vague, and they become “hollow” when not implemented in the social world. From such a perspective, the practice of oath taking is a typical performative linguistic act that functions to create a social expectation that the oath taker will abide by the terms of his or her oath. The future oriented nature of oaths is evident, though there is an additional retrospective dimension. Oaths can be used to assert that the oath taker’s past behaviour is congruent with the present utterance. In this manner, the oath has an affinity with the reinforcing and emphasizing gestures and exclamations, (e.g. *Te merav!* “Let me die!” [if it is not true]), that are parts of everyday discourse. Nevertheless these exclamations are less formal and less elaborated in the aspects I discuss below.

That oaths are simultaneously past-, present-, and future-oriented is a remarkable feature of the linguistic act, even if the actual content of any single oath needs not explicitly address each of these temporal orientations, as the linguistic content of oaths is explicitly past-oriented or future-oriented. The invalidation of oaths is seen either as perjury or as breach. Enforcement and punishment, however, can only be future-oriented. Invocations of retroactive, past-oriented punishment are only used in jest (e.g. an old man whose parents died long ago might exclaim: *Let my father die!*; Rom: *Te merel munro dat!*).

That some oaths may be revoked reveals a further temporal dimension of the ritual. Only future-oriented oaths can be revoked by a reverse ritual, while past-oriented oaths seem to be irrevocable. The temporal validity of the future-oriented oaths is also more flexible: the validity of these oaths can be contingent upon the occurrence of a certain future event or “fulfilled” by performing the action prescribed by the oath. They can be also intentionally limited to a certain time period. In the case of past-oriented oaths the validity criteria (truth of the word) is not subjected to temporal limitations. A present utterance has performative power in the social world of the speaker because the claims about past actions cannot be modified in the future without undermining the validity of the previous statement. The following table summarises the main features of the oath; the structure of its temporality, its validity criteria, the conditions under which it may be revoked, and the conditions of enforcement or punishment.

rial Lecture by Stanley J. Tambiah (1968). For a brief discussion of Malinowski’s theory of language see

	Past-oriented oath	Future-oriented oath
<i>Validity criteria</i>	Truth of the word	Respect for the word
<i>Time limit of validity</i>	Unlimited	Can be set / fulfilled
<i>Case of invalidity</i>	Perjury	Breach
<i>Possibility of revocation</i>	Not possible	Possible

Figure 1: Table summarising the performative features of the two types of oath

It is apparent from this structure that perjury is a more serious offence than the breach of the oath; it is always possible to revoke a future-oriented oath in order to avoid future punishment, even the conditions set forth by the oath have already been violated. There is no such possibility in the case of perjury.

b) Social organisation

By being more formalised, oaths are different from everyday curses. Oaths are accompanied by gestures (kneeling etc.) and require the involvement of an outside institution, namely the church. The church may simply provide the setting for oath taking. However, I was told by my Roma informants that they often request the assistance of an Orthodox priest (Rom: *xlahitjikon rasaj*, meaning literally “Romanian priest”). At the performance of the oath, in addition to the person swearing the oath, the ceremony should also be attended by a third party who witnesses the act. No outsiders are present. Though family members or the larger community may be aware of the event, they are not involved.

Ethnographers have described cases in which oaths were used to arbitrate social conflicts. Oaths are often used to settle tensions between rival males. Michael Hertzfeld (1997) analyses oaths between Cretan mountain shepherds; in cases of suspected animal theft the conflicts among these (non-Roma) shepherds settled if the suspect swears in front of an icon on his innocence. Ethnographies of Roma communities have also described the practice as connected to conflict mediation in competitive relationships between males over economic strategies or disputes connected to marriages contracted involving “brideprice” (Gropper 1975, Sutherland 1975, Salo & Salo 1977). Amongst some of the Roma groups the willingness to swear is generally sufficient, and is usually viewed as providing enough credibility for both parties (Salo & Salo 1977:60). In most cases discussed by the above authors oaths are past-oriented and involve what Michael Herzfeld terms a “structural nostalgia” of reciprocity (1997:Chapter 6). By this, Herzfeld identifies an ideal of male solidarity and equity that is often contrasted with more formal structures (e.g.

this perspective, language cannot easily be separated from other human behaviour and social structure. Utterances are not merely statements or representations of the “world out there”, but instead create and transform the human world. J. L. Austin argues (1976 [1962]) that ritualised utterances, which he labels “performatives” (like promises, marriage ceremonies, etc.), are social acts that create, reinforce, and transform social bonds and obligations. They can only be valid under specific sets of conditions this is vague, and they become “hollow” when not implemented in the social world. From such a perspective, the practice of oath taking is a typical performative linguistic act that functions to create a social expectation that the oath taker will abide by the terms of his or her oath. The future oriented nature of oaths is evident, though there is an additional retrospective dimension. Oaths can be used to assert that the oath taker’s past behaviour is congruent with the present utterance. In this manner, the oath has an affinity with the reinforcing and emphasizing gestures and exclamations, (e.g. *Te merav!* “Let me die!” [if it is not true]), that are parts of everyday discourse. Nevertheless these exclamations are less formal and less elaborated in the aspects I discuss below.

That oaths are simultaneously past-, present-, and future-oriented is a remarkable feature of the linguistic act, even if the actual content of any single oath needs not explicitly address each of these temporal orientations, as the linguistic content of oaths is explicitly past-oriented or future-oriented. The invalidation of oaths is seen either as perjury or as breach. Enforcement and punishment, however, can only be future-oriented. Invocations of retroactive, past-oriented punishment are only used in jest (e.g. an old man whose parents died long ago might exclaim: *Let my father die!*; Rom: *Te merel munro dat!*).

That some oaths may be revoked reveals a further temporal dimension of the ritual. Only future-oriented oaths can be revoked by a reverse ritual, while past-oriented oaths seem to be irrevocable. The temporal validity of the future-oriented oaths is also more flexible: the validity of these oaths can be contingent upon the occurrence of a certain future event or “fulfilled” by performing the action prescribed by the oath. They can be also intentionally limited to a certain time period. In the case of past-oriented oaths the validity criteria (truth of the word) is not subjected to temporal limitations. A present utterance has performative power in the social world of the speaker because the claims about past actions cannot be modified in the future without undermining the validity of the previous statement. The following table summarises the main features of the oath; the structure of its temporality, its validity criteria, the conditions under which it may be revoked, and the conditions of enforcement or punishment.

rial Lecture by Stanley J. Tambiah (1968). For a brief discussion of Malinowski’s theory of language see

	Past-oriented oath	Future-oriented oath
<i>Validity criteria</i>	Truth of the word	Respect for the word
<i>Time limit of validity</i>	Unlimited	Can be set / fulfilled
<i>Case of invalidity</i>	Perjury	Breach
<i>Possibility of revocation</i>	Not possible	Possible

Figure 1: Table summarising the performative features of the two types of oath

It is apparent from this structure that perjury is a more serious offence than the breach of the oath; it is always possible to revoke a future-oriented oath in order to avoid future punishment, even the conditions set forth by the oath have already been violated. There is no such possibility in the case of perjury.

b) Social organisation

By being more formalised, oaths are different from everyday curses. Oaths are accompanied by gestures (kneeling etc.) and require the involvement of an outside institution, namely the church. The church may simply provide the setting for oath taking. However, I was told by my Roma informants that they often request the assistance of an Orthodox priest (Rom: *xlahitjikon rasaj*, meaning literally “Romanian priest”). At the performance of the oath, in addition to the person swearing the oath, the ceremony should also be attended by a third party who witnesses the act. No outsiders are present. Though family members or the larger community may be aware of the event, they are not involved.

Ethnographers have described cases in which oaths were used to arbitrate social conflicts. Oaths are often used to settle tensions between rival males. Michael Hertzfeld (1997) analyses oaths between Cretan mountain shepherds; in cases of suspected animal theft the conflicts among these (non-Roma) shepherds settled if the suspect swears in front of an icon on his innocence. Ethnographies of Roma communities have also described the practice as connected to conflict mediation in competitive relationships between males over economic strategies or disputes connected to marriages contracted involving “bri-duce” (Gropper 1975, Sutherland 1975, Salo & Salo 1977). Amongst some of the Roma groups the willingness to swear is generally sufficient, and is usually viewed as providing enough credibility for both parties (Salo & Salo 1977:60). In most cases discussed by the above authors oaths are past-oriented and involve what Michael Herzfeld terms a “structural nostalgia” of reciprocity (1997:Chapter 6). By this, Herzfeld identifies an ideal of male solidarity and equity that is often contrasted with more formal structures (e.g.

Courts are considered uncontrollable and dangerous also by the Roma in Gánás because punishments are harsh (i.e. months in prison even for a petty-theft). But in contrast to the accounts cited above, the oaths I have heard about were more typically linked to gender problems. In this respect the social organisation of the oath shows more similarity with the situations described among Hungarian speaking Gypsies in Transylvania (Pozsony 1993) and Vlach Roma in Hungary (Rézműves 1998). In these communities oaths are most frequently used by couples to test accusations and suspicions of infidelity and illicit sexual contact, or enforcing promises to stop drinking or smoking. In other relations the suspicion of theft is the most common motive. Oaths are considered to be powerful, but perjury and breach of oath is not rare. Rézműves (1998:28) argues that in the case of the Vlach Roma even if the community might be aware of perjury (she gives examples of cases of known adultery), the oath still serves to make peace between the couple. In addition to pacifying domestic relations oaths also provide a means through which cases of intra-Roma conflict may be "prosecuted" independent of official legislation.

It is important that the problems that are "cured" by an oath are linked to a male peer-group. The friends of a Rom (Rom: *o barati*) are often viewed with suspicion by his wife (even if she does not say so openly) because they are the company with whom the husband drinks and plays cards. Playing cards is the most common way of gambling even though casino-machines have recently been installed in many pubs in the city and electronic gambling places have opened. Though the family budget is ideally administered by the wife, the husband may borrow additional money to spend on his friends or may hide part of his income. In addition to excessive expenditures on alcohol and debt, because of gambling a man's peers can influence the husband to involve himself with prostitutes (Rom: *kurve*). Romnija call any other women who "give foot" (Rom: *del punro*) to their husbands prostitutes. In cases of illicit sexual relations women are more often blamed for not resisting the man's advances than males for persistence. Even the wife of an adulterous husband might publicly say "The male is a male" (Rom: *o mursh hin mursh*) in order to protect her *rom*. At home this permissive attitude towards male transgressions is far not as recognised as in public. Several cases of violence in families I came to know were caused by "the big mouth" (Rom: *vas o baro muj*) of the wife who reproached her husband for, among other problems, his infidelity.

After a man has been on a long drinking binge or after he has racked up a large gambling debt, the wife may decide to take her husband to the church and ask him to swear an oath. The husband usually consents because he feels guilty and is under the treat of being left. The oath ruptures the solidarity of the peer-group of males. Once one swears to quit drinking, he can no longer regularly congregate with his male peers. Non-attendance

come the object of ridicule if he drinks by himself in secret (Rom: *pel garudes*), moreover breaching an oath risks divine punishment for both the oath taker and his family. I heard of several instances where partly due to such fears and in order not to exclude the Rom from his male peer group, a more "realistic" approach was taken. The husband swore not to drink more than a certain amount ("he swore on two beers"), and the time limit of the oath was tied to a certain coming event (e.g. "until Christmas", Rom: *zhik Kolonda*), after which he would be allowed to again celebrate the holiday freely.

If the oath is not properly observed both parties may determine that it is too risky to stick to the terms of the oath. If the children were included in the formula of the curse involved, the wife may urge the husband to give up the oath. In such cases the services of a priest may again be requested. In simple cases praying over the head of the oath taker is enough to invalidate the oath. In more difficult cases the priest will recommend fasting on certain days (e.g. three Tuesdays) and "will shout into the church" (Rom: *chigardel ande khangeri*) the name of the person during three Sunday services.

c) Religious imagination

The oath is unimaginable without the presence of an enforcing divine authority. The question: "Na daras de o gulo Del?" (Aren't you afraid of the kind [literally "sweet"] God?) is often heard in everyday conversation and arguments when the speaker calls for a moral stance from his interlocutor. A more explicit question can be: "Na daras kò Del trazonel ando tro shero?" (Aren't you afraid that God thunderbolts your head?). This question is used in arguments when one of the involved parties is convinced of the insincerity or dishonesty of the other and wishes to publicly express this conviction. In addition to the threat of lightning strikes other explanations are more often invoked why one should be afraid of breaking an oath. Such cautionary tales can be found in stories about misfortune, sudden horrifying death, and severe illness attributed to divine punishment.

It is important to note that both chronic illness and simple accidents, even if fatal, are rarely attributed to divine punishment. There must be some element of horrifying event in death or "meaningful" disease to be connected to divine punishment. Paralysis following a stroke (Rom: *naphel balval*, literally "bad wind") and mental disturbances are most commonly explained as consequences of perjury or breach of oath. In both cases, the bearer of divine punishment suffers damage to his or her health that inhibits him or her from fulfilling important tasks intimately related to his or her personhood. The circumstances of deaths which are attributed to divine punishment are harder to define. One particular death that occurred not long before I started my fieldwork was directly attributed by most of the Roma with whom I spoke to the circumstance that the mother of

contained several elements of a divine punishment: A *Romni* in her thirties took an oath “on the head of” her three year old daughter, vowing that if she was involved in a theft, she would “collect her daughter’s brain into a newspaper”. Several months later when she was crossing the main street of the neighbourhood holding her daughter’s hand, a car hit her daughter. Her little head was smashed. The mother was uninjured.

This sudden and horrifying accident can be interpreted as a consequence of the oath because several elements of the imaginary surrounding divine punishment were united. Swearing ‘on the head’ is a regular formula implying that dangerous words such as curses and oaths can “fall upon” somebody (Rom: *pelel pe leste/late*). The head of a person is seen as the most likely receptor of divine punishment. It is important in this case that while the oath was uttered by the mother, the person exposed to risk was the daughter. This is rather common: risking the most beloved in order to prove innocence, because everyone would agree on the greatest value of the children. The implicit assumption here is that the real punishment lies in the suffering brought upon the survivor for having broken the oath. This particular accident involving the mother and daughter is of this sort, as the mother was not harmed in the accident.

The idea of the punishment “falling upon” somebody contains an element of arbitrariness: an oath or a curse can fall upon several members of a family some of whom might even be innocent and unaware of what is happening to them. This circumstantial insecurity is an important element of the image divine punishment and provides a reason why one must be very careful in provoking it. The circle of the potential target persons is limited to the close family members. In most cases the oath is even more precise and will “fall upon” only a certain person, or will “fall back” on the person who took the oath. I learned of a case of a Rom who suspected his wife of infidelity. Although his neighbours and relatives ensured him that this was not the case, he was firm and requested that she take an oath. The couple had two small children, and the wife was very much afraid for them, but finally she agreed to go to a church in the city. She took an oath, and in the same year her husband suffered a series of accidents; he fell down from a cart, and even broke a leg, in addition to other misfortunes. The explanation given by members of the community for the man’s misfortunes was that (as he was a well known adulterer) the oath had fallen upon his head.

God (Rom: *o Del*) is seen as a complex being who is both “kind” (Rom: *gulo* “sweet”) and merciless. If one adds the element of arbitrariness that is attributed to divine punishment, in some cases the imagery becomes even more troubling. But this is only so for the analyst who seeks to demonstrate some theory. For Roma the same religious imagery can even account for conversion, loss of faith, and predicts consequences of such actions. The

is also present in the imagery surrounding oaths. This line of argumentation is frequent to explain this-worldly success of dishonest people. The following example, which I take from a published autobiography of a Romni from the same group I studied, demonstrates how the joy of being lucky in cards can be overshadowed by the threat of punishment looming over the family:

“Sorin [the husband] had been sworn not to play cards. He borrowed money from his brother, played cards and he won. We went home. He says to Kati [the wife]: ‘Kati, I did something wrong.’ ‘What have you done?’ ‘Oh Kati, I don’t want to tell you how much wrong I have done.’ ‘You, what have you done?’ ‘Well, I have played cards. But I won!’” (Könczei & Lacatus 2002:113)

The conditions for validity of the performative utterance, the imaginary surrounding it and its impact on social relations of the oath taker can be summarised as is shown in Table 2. below. The junction between the social structure and the personal identities is realised through ideas and practices of the moral personhood. The maintenance or transformation of the moral personhood is intimately connected with religious ideas and rituals.

<i>a. Conditions of validity</i>	<i>Past-oriented oaths</i>	<i>Future-oriented oaths</i>
<i>General invalidity</i>	Perjury	Breach
<i>Past behaviour, and its relation to the words</i>	Immutable	(only in past-action oriented oath)
<i>Requirement regarding future behaviour</i>	(only in future behaviour oriented oaths)	Change for the better
<i>Temporal validity</i>	Unlimited	Limited
<i>Possibility to revoke</i>	Not possible	Possible
<i>Self transformation</i>	None (enforced continuity)	Partial (rejected habits)

b. Social Relationships

<i>Create new</i>	No	No
<i>Peer- group</i>		Rupture
<i>Family bounds</i>		Reinforce
<i>Pressure / support group</i>		Family

c. Religious ideas

<i>Divine agency</i>	Witness	Punisher
<i>Personification of the Divinity</i>	The kind God ("o gulo Del")	God ("Del")
<i>Spatial metaphors</i>		God is above ("opral")
<i>Divine action</i>	God sees ("dikhel o Del")	God beats, hits ("marel, trazonel")
<i>Personal receptor</i>		On the head ("po shero")

Figure 2: Conditions of validity for the performative utterance and its impact

Conclusion

In this article I presented and analysed the practice of oath taking among the Romungre. Swearing an oath is considered a rather dangerous gesture, not only for the single person involved, but also to his or her family members. Nonetheless, oath taking remains a widespread practice. Drawing on a social anthropological view of the nature of language I considered the oath as a particular utterance with a strong connection to and impact on the immediate and broader social world of the speaker, as oaths make strong claims about certain past actions or create future obligations. I formulated a working hypothesis about the possibility of viewing oath taking practices and religious conversion in a common comparative frame. In this article I developed an analysis of oath taking, looking at its linguistic structure, social organisation, and the religious imagery surrounding it.

One conclusion that can be drawn from the preceding discussion is that most problems usually "cured" by oaths emerge from family conflicts and their impact is focused on the closest family bounds. In this sense, oaths protect the oath taker from social alienation. The practice involves an emphasis on the importance of the personal connections and the value of trust and solidarity inside the local community at a time when these virtues are increasingly scarce in the broader society. A *Rom* might say in the heat of an argument, "Let my small son die!", or a Romni addressing her mother and wanting her words be taken seriously might say, "Mother, let me see you dead!". Although such everyday curses might first seem to threaten the lives of others, the main person exposed to such risks is he or she who utters the curse. The same is true to a greater degree in cases of formal oaths. The person who utters the curse-formula which endangers a family member is threatened because most horrifying is not to perish in person but to be stripped by the beloved by awful death as a consequence of the discrepancy between one's own words and deeds. The ideal of the moral personhood prescribes the unity of the speech

References

- Austin, J.L. 1976 [1962]. *How to do things with words?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bakhtin, M. 1986. *Speech genres and other late essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Gellner, E. 1998. *Language and Solitude. Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gay y Blasco, P. 1999. *Gypsies in Madrid: sex, gender and the performance of identity*. Oxford, New York: Berg.
- Gropper, R.C. 1975. *Gypsies in the city: culture patterns and survival*. Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press.
- Herzfeld, M. 1997. *Cultural intimacy. Social poetics in the nation-state*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Könczei, Cs. and Lacatus, I. 2002. *Ilonka néni*. Cluj-Napoca: Editura Fundației Pentru Studii Europene.
- Pozsony, F. 1993. A háromszéki magyarajkú cigányok vallásos hitélete. (In Barna, G. (ed.), *Cigány néprajzi tanulmányok* 1. Budapest: Magyar Néprajzi Társaság. p. 76-80.)
- Rézműves, M. 1998. Az eskü szerepe az oláhigány néphagyományban. E colax ande romengi tradicija. (In Bari, K. (ed.), *Tanulmányok a cigányságról és hagyományos kultúrájáról*. Gödöllő: Petőfi Sándor Művelődési Központ. p. 19-30.)
- Salo, M.T. & Salo, S.M.G. 1977. *The Kalderas in Eastern Canada*. Ottawa: National Museums of Canada.
- Stewart, M. 1989. "True speech": Song and the Moral Order of a Vlach Gypsy community in Hungary. *Man*, 24:79-102.
- Sutherland, A. 1975. *Gypsies: the hidden Americans*, London: Tavistock Publications.
- Szalai, A. 1998. Az etnonimák mint az etnikus identitás szimbólumai a beás nyelvhasználatban. (In Bari, K. (ed.), *Tanulmányok a cigányságról és hagyományos kultúrájáról*. Gödöllő: Petőfi Sándor Művelődési Központ. p. 69-80.)
- Tambiah, S.J. 1968. The Magical Power of Words. *Man (N.S.)*, 3(2):175-208.