

## FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS ABOUT THE ROM/ROMA, SINTI, KALE, MANOUCHE AND ROMANICAL CULTURES<sup>1</sup>

**SANTINO SPINELLI**  
(Associazione Nazionale “Thèm Romanò”)

### **Sommario**

*La popolazione romani si distingue come un ‘infinito antropologico’. Una miriade di comunità differenti ma affini formano una nazione transnazionale e paradigmatica senza territorio e senza Stato. Con oltre ventidue milioni di persone, le comunità romanès sono distribuite in tutti i continenti: circa dodici milioni sono presenti in Europa. La popolazione romani è costituita da cinque gruppi principali che hanno nel loro interno una moltitudine di comunità variegata: rom/roma, sinti, calé/kale, manouches e romanichals. Questo articolo analizza come la lingua romani rifletta il romanipen (identità), cioè la storia e i valori etici e morali del popolo romani..*

**Keywords:** Rom, Roma, Romani culture, Romani language and identity

The Romani<sup>2</sup> population is distinguished by its anthropological continuum arising from its myriad of different, and yet similar, communities, which form a transnational and paradigmatic nation that is territory-less and stateless. With more than 22 million people, the Romanès<sup>3</sup> communities are spread across every continent: around 12 million are presently in Europe. The Romani population consists of five main groups, with each group comprising a multitude of varied

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Kevin Regan-Maglione.

<sup>2</sup> Translator’s note: There is a lack of standardisation in referring to the Romani people in both spelling and capitalisation. When possible, the translator has attempted to mimic the original orthography – for example, following the author’s decision to write Romani with an accent.

<sup>3</sup> Translator’s note: *Romanès* is another term for the Romani people, often written without an accent and at times uncapitalised.

communities: the Rom/Roma, Sinti, Kalé/Kale, Manouche and Romanichal<sup>4</sup>.

The Romanì language contains the Romanì people's *romanipen* (identity), history and ethical and moral values. Everything that is not intrinsic to the Romanì language is superfluous to the Romanì culture and to the *romano them* (the Rom world). Based on this assumption, many sociocultural manifestations and every aspect of the Romanì existence may be explained. Through an understanding of the language, it is possible to explain the values, culture, ethics, mindset, character, behaviours and sentiments of the Rom/Roma, Sinti, Kalé/Kale, Manouche and Romanichal. Therefore, language is reliable mirror for the *romanipen*, one that can provide all the information necessary to explain a thousand-year-old transnational population. Every term in the Romanì language encompasses a variety of meanings; some linger on the surface while others are buried in endless layers of significance. Romanì culture may be held in 'high', 'medium' or 'low' esteem, depending on who is scrutinising it and the purpose of the research. Many confuse the Romanì culture with detrimental and harmful effects provoked by discrimination. Even some social phenomena are upheld as cultural models and thus distort the truth.

Historical, economic and social events have influenced the Romanì population and its culture, so much so that these diverse communities are the conveyors of various traditions that have become unifying anchors for what is, in reality, an immense and complex cultural mosaic. Romanì culture and ethics are reflected in every aspect of life and within the actual Romanì language. Even to this day, the culture and ethics are passed on mainly through oral tradition, despite many books having been published in recent decades and the language having been standardised on an international level.

The Romanì culture is many-sided and abundant with infinite facets that exhibit this culture's richness to this day. Romanì culture is reflected in a multitude of dialects, which in turn impart Romanì

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<sup>4</sup> Translator's note: *Rom* is masculine and *Roma* is feminine in the Romanì language. The term *Roma* is not widely accepted by the Romanì people; *Romanì* is recommended to refer directly to the language and culture. *Sinti* refers to the Romanì people found in Central Europe. *Kale* (also spelled *kalé* and *kalo*) may refer to either the Romanì people in Wales or the *gitano* Romanì people in Spain, Portugal and Southern France. *Manouche* (also spelled *manush*) refers to the Sinti people in France. *Romanichal* refers to the Romanì people in the British Isles, also known as Travellers.

folklore, Romanì art, Romanì traditions, Romanì ethics, the numerous Romanì beliefs and every other cultural manifestation the Rom/Roma, Sinti, Kalé/Kale, Manouche, and Romanichal have acquired during their endless journey over the centuries. Fairy tales, stories, legends, tales and accounts are told in Romanì language *paramiša* and are usually recounted to the younger generation by the *phure* or *papu* (the patriarchs or grandparents)<sup>5</sup>. The narrators, or *paramišar*, share their stories for many reasons: to instruct their youth, to distract the listener, to amuse, to entertain, to reveal a truth and to put listeners on guard against mortal dangers. Proverbs and sayings, like riddles and jokes, are expressions of Romanì wisdom (*romano barvalipen*) that has been acquired across the centuries and is the product of the vicissitudes of experience.

The concept of time in Romanì culture is punctuated by nature's rhythms and is structured in relation to life events (births, holidays, weddings, funerals, family needs, trips, etc.) and financial practices. The present is always more important than an uncertain future and a past that has already passed away.

In the Romanì language, the day (*dives*) is divided into *javìn* (morning) and *rat* (night) and the seasons are divided into *angle o nilaj* (spring), *nilaj*<sup>6</sup> (summer), *angle o vend* (fall) and *vend* (winter). Time (*vext*) is perceived as an endless continuity that is divisible according to the sun's observable movements and according to certain climate and meteorological conditions (*kir, ćir*).

Some simple and basic concepts in the *romano them* are shared by every group and Romanès community. These concepts, which are simultaneously cultural, ethical, linguistic and psychological, are Indian and Asian in origin but have been augmented with Western elements. They have not altered substantially despite distances and the passage of time because the Romanès communities, as a consequence of their constantly precarious life conditions caused by repressive policies, have

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<sup>5</sup> Translator's note: The Romanì *paramiša* (sing. *paramiši*) are tales, stories or fairy tales performed during a storytelling gathering that are based in oral traditions, which contain typical formulas with repeated subjects, points of view and content.

<sup>6</sup> Translator's note: The term *linaj* is used instead of *nilaj* in the Romanì dialect of the Rom settlement in Italy (which arrived there in the 15th century).

never been able to develop a philosophy or outlook on life that is not based on basic needs or survival.

The Romani culture's authenticity is reflected in the Romani language, which is characterised in turn by a constant duality (*dujpen*). This dichotomous view leads to a division in every aspect in life according to the opposing concepts of *baxt* and *bibaxt* (fortune and misfortune), *pativ* and *laz* (honour and shame), *śušipen* and *mellipen* (pure and impure), truth (*čhačhipen*, *čhačhimos*) and falsehood (*xoxanipen*, *xoxaipen*, *xoxaibé*, *xoxaimos*). These concepts are intimately interconnected and based on the law of cause and effect. A relationship exists between 'action' and 'result', and individual actions reflect on the one who carries out the actions and on the *familje* (family) to which that person belongs. The results of actions are manifested either in the form of enjoyment or pleasure or in the form of suffering. The human being is a result of their own actions, words and choices. Every single person's destiny (*baxt*) is marked by their behaviour. These concepts exercise a great influence on reality, whether it be individual or collective, and represent guiding criteria of ethical and moral values (*romani kris*) that are essential to the community. They regulate all actions and behaviours of each individual, which, in turn, determine life's joys (*baxt*) and suffering (*bibaxt*). The ultimate goal is an individual's psycho-physical well-being, which is achievable through right choices, a correct approach, suitable actions and appropriate speech. This underlying dichotomy (*dujpen*) in every aspect of life (*živipen*) causes each Rom, Sinto, Kalò/Kalo, Manouche and Romanichal to clearly distinguish themselves from non-Rom people and to divide the world (*them*) and existence through opposing elements: good (*mištipen*) and evil (*nafel*), men (*murš*) and women (*zuvl`ă*), the old (*phure*) and the young (*terne*), good (*lačho*) and bad (*bilačho*, *nafel*), useful (*lačho*) and useless (*bilačho*), small (*tikno*) and big (*baro*) and so on. This dualistic vision of the universe covers each aspect of existence: from personal hygiene to the human body, from food preparation to health, from herbal medicine to magic.

There is a strong belief in signs of things to come, a lot of superstition and a great deal of fatalism in the *romano them*. Opposing concepts are generally connected to two spiritual entities, *Devel* (God) and *beng* (devil), and to the forces of good (*mištipen*) and evil (*nafel*). These are also linked to the two entities of destiny, *baxt* (good fortune)

and *bibaxt* (misfortune), which intervene in life to regulate, discipline and condition every aspect of existence. One is always in pursuit of the truth (*čhačhipen*) of things and of emotions that keep negativity and falsehoods (*xoxanipen*) at bay. This process necessitates a dimension of physical and moral purity (*šušipen*) that pushes back and exorcises every damaging and contaminating (*mellipen*) entity. Hygienic norms and purity are very important and accordingly are rigorously followed. Therefore, the *romano them* is much more complex and profound than what has been superficially demonstrated by the interpretations provided so far by so-called experts.

The term *baxt* is derived from the Persian 'baht', which means both *happiness* and *fortune*; these meanings are inextricably linked and are therefore interchangeable. The term *baxt*, in turn, includes many psychological nuances, many positive emotions and many meanings that are profoundly linked to one another: 'fortune, truth, destiny, fate, positivity, well-being, harmony, success, enjoyment, joy, pleasure, delight', but above all 'happiness'. Each person accepts their own life conditions as an unavoidable fact inasmuch as these conditions are connected to the person's own existence (*živipen*). The *baxt*, with all its positive implications, plays a fundamental role in the daily realities of the Romanì, everyone is incessantly preoccupied with it from the cradle to the grave, and their *baxt* is connected to everything that is successfully achieved. The Romanì people trust in their *baxt* and, ever faithful to it, embody hedonism, or in the words of philosopher Herbert Marcuse, *the polar opposite of rational philosophy*. Satisfying both pleasure and immediate gratification is an essential element to the harmonic development of an individual. The pursuit of pleasure and future happiness is always uncertain and evokes apprehension, which makes life exhausting. Romanès communities have lived a perpetual situation of precariousness, and because the future holds no certainty, they are tied to the pleasures they can experience and enjoy from moment to moment. It is useless to worry about what you do not have: it is better to enjoy immediate pleasure and try to be happy (*baxtale*) with what you actually have. From authenticity (*čhačhipen*) to pleasure and life. Adverse destiny or misfortune (*bibaxt*) leads to deceit and falsehood (*xoxanipen*) and can make every hope of a happy life in vain (*baxtalo živipen*). So, it is better to take any pleasure or immediate well-being, like joy (*baxt*) and liveliness (*saben, sabbé*), that can be seized

in the present (*živipen*) and shared with loved ones (*familje*). Even a love for music (*bašadipen*), singing (*gili*) and dance (*kelipen*, *kelibbé*) can satisfy an immediate pleasure (*baxt*) and render emotions and satisfaction as authentic. You can be happy (*baxtale*) even with very little and, most importantly, from moment to moment. This is the philosophy that the Romanì people have practised across time, since their exile from India to the present day. It is no coincidence that their philosophy is condensed into the most used and typical Romanì salutation/greeting: *But baxt ta sastipen* (may you be lucky/happy and healthy). This is said to wish a relative or friend the health and psychophysical well-being that make everyone and everything healthy and fortunate, or happy and satisfied, without worry and anxiety; this wish expresses the desire to make this into a real, profound and actual reality. So, on the one hand *happiness, satisfaction, delight, joy, enjoyment, fortune, success, ecstasy, well-being, harmony, prosperity, positivity* and *truth* are expressed and built into the term *baxt*; on the other hand, *unhappiness, dissatisfaction, failure, malaise, melancholy, disorder, negativity, bitterness* and *falsehood* are expressed by the same term with the prefix *bi-* (literally 'without'), which performs a single function: to contradict or to negate the concept that the word contains. *Bibaxt* literally means 'without fortune, without happiness, without satisfaction, without success, without well-being, without harmony, without positivity, without truth' and is therefore translatable as 'misfortune, unhappiness, dissatisfaction, failure, malaise, mess, negativity, falsehood'.

The two words *baxt* and *bibaxt* are profoundly connected to one another, and they outline the two internalised contrasting and opposing worlds. They are connected by reciprocity and by the fact that one brings out the concept of the other. It is a dualism that permeates every aspect of life and every feeling. It is a dichotomy that the Romanì people are often unaware of, but that they live by continually, from moment to moment.

Also linked to *baxt* are the concepts of spiritual origins, like good (*lačho*), beautiful (*šukar*, *šukuar*), true (*čhačo*), concepts that are intimately connected and linked to the realm of purity (*šušipen*), which is itself the essence of goodness (*lačhipen*, *mištipen*), beauty (*šukaripen*) and truth (*čhačhipen*).

As previously mentioned, one of the fundamental values of the Romanì population is honour (*pativ*), whether personal or that of one's own family. It is strictly linked to social prestige (*pativalipen*) and related to a sense of shame (*laz*). Honour is deeply felt within the Romanès communities (*romano them*). An action, a conversation, a behaviour or an event that heightens the prestige and honour of a one's own family member is felt with pride by the entire familial group. And, vice versa, a negative action, behaviour, event or discussion of one's own family member is perceived as a shame to all the closest family members. The concept of *laz* includes the modesty and decorum that must be expressed in any public circumstance; thus, any public display of private feelings or romantic affection is absolutely prohibited.

Members of the diverse Romanès communities are very careful within the Romanó world to maintain the elevated sense of honour that guarantees respect and positions of prestige (*pativalipen*). Personal reputation (*pativ*) is carefully managed within Romanì society and is proudly defended. Social prestige is maintained through irreproachable behaviour toward other members of the *familje* (family) and toward one's community. Traditional and moral norms (*romanì kris*) and Romanó etiquette are scrupulously monitored within the community and guarantee respect, cordiality, conviviality, solidarity and hospitality. Solidarity (*phralipen*) gives, above all, immense prestige to the individual and to their own family: it is a duty, for example, to participate in a funeral or hurry to someone's sickbed. Not participating in the funeral of a member of the community or, even worse, the funeral of a member of one's own *familje* is reason for great shame (*bari laz*) or loss of social prestige (*pativ*).

Every individual within a Romanès community carefully avoids being criticised (*kušado*) or mocked or bringing shame (*laz*) to themselves. In this way, honour (*pativ*) and shame (*laz*) become social elements of approval or disapproval, of respect (*pativalipen*) or disrespect (*kušiben*).

The two fundamental concepts of pure (*šušpien*) and impure (*merime, marime, mellipen*) are connected through this dualistic life view. The vast number of terms that exist and are utilised in the Romanì language to distinguish the concepts of pure and impure underlines the preoccupation of the various Romanès communities with 'dirtiness' and 'cleanliness', whether physical or moral. The difference between 'pure'

and 'impure' is identical to the difference between life (*živipen*) and death (*meripen*), between truth (*čháchipen*) and falsehood (*xoxanipen*). This difference's foundation is predicated on the fear (*traš*) of death (*meripen*) and of sickness (*nasvalipen*); both are considered to be impure elements (*melale*). Impurity (*mellipen*) and contamination are closely related. Members of many Romanè communities are therefore always in pursuit of real, actual things that are meaningful and achievable and give honour and immediate happiness. It is an instinctual and psychological pursuit that embraces emotions and the unconscious.

Words, behaviours and actions with positive implications that honour an individual and provide joy and satisfaction are connected to the concept of purity (*šušipen*). Qualities connected to the realm of purity include respectability, personal hygiene, cordiality in social relationships, modesty, manners, helpfulness and sympathy. In contrast, the concept of impure (*merime*, *mellipen*) is connected to all of the negative qualities, actions and behaviours that make an individual unworthy of respect: indecency, immodesty, rudeness, incest, adultery, homicide, vulgarity, incompetence and idleness.

The root of the word *učo* (*šušo*) can be traced to the Sanskrit *učita* and can be translated as 'pure, excellent, magnificent, noble, honourable'. The concept of *učo* (*šušo*) is directly connected to the concepts of *šušipen*, *šukar*, *Ōukaripen*, *šušar-*, *sunakaj e sunakajpen*. *O šušipen* ranks among the first of Romanè society values. This simultaneously includes many aspects of life with a heavily positive connotation: purity, virginity, personal hygiene, moral hygiene, incorruptibility, honorability, decency, respectability, reputation and modesty, and it is closely linked to the concepts of *pativ* (honour) and *baxt* (happiness). Purity (*šušipen*) and moral beauty, a beauty that goes beyond the physical (*šukuaripen*), are intimately linked and have to do with the feminine realm. Women must remain virgins until their wedding as physical purity (*šušipen*) suggests a moral purity that, within Romanè culture, is a guarantee of beauty (*šukaripen*), appeal, prestige (*pativalipen*) and honour (*pativ*). What is pure (*šušo*) is therefore beautiful (*šukar*) and true (*čhácho*), but above all, it is uncontaminated (*šušo*).

Within their own communities, every young man (*terno čhavo*)<sup>7</sup> chooses the most beautiful (*šukar*) bride, meaning the most reputable (*šušī*). There is a close relationship between beauty (*šukaripen*), preciousness (*sunakajpen*) and gold (*sunakaj*), all terms that are tellingly derived from the same linguistic root. Women of the diverse Romanè communities prize adorning themselves with many gold necklaces, which also serves to improve one's 'purity' (*šušipen*) and 'beauty' (*šukaripen*), because precious metal (*sunakaj*) is pure (*šušo*). Gold performs the apotropaic function of exorcising forces that are malignant (*nafel*), negative (*bibaxt*) and deceitful (*xoxanipen*). The verb *šušar-* (to clean, decontaminate, make pure) is continuously present in daily language.

Sperm is a pure substance, both for its fertility and because it gives life (*živipen*) and therefore contrasts to death (*meripen*). Other pure elements are milk (*thud*), breast milk, fire (*jag*), the sky (*svato, them*), water (*pani*), breath (*dox*), exhaling (*phurd-*), red objects. All products of any kind of metal forged with fire (*jag*) are pure given that metal is a pure element and fire is an element that purifies.

As shown earlier, in the Romanè language *učo* includes the concept of 'beauty' (*šukar*) and this connection between 'pure' and 'beautiful' transpires not only in the Romanè language but also in aesthetic and ethic understanding as well as in food practices. As a matter of fact, the term *učo* is often used as an attribute to the noun *aro*, which means 'flour' and is usually connected to food<sup>8</sup>. Anything that may be ingested or used within the body must be pure and not contaminated. Great attention, then, is directed toward food but also toward silverware, plates and dishware. These objects are washed separately and carefully. When a Rom woman cooks, she must put on *i fald* (apron) so as to separate the food from her body, especially from the intimate parts. The non-Rom housewife's apron has the completely opposite function of keeping her clothes clean.

Members of the Romanè communities trace a clear distinction between the internal and external parts of the body. Skin (*morti*) and hair (*bala*), due to their contact with the outside world, accumulate dirt

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<sup>7</sup> Translator's note: In the Romanè dialect of the long-standing Rom settlement in Italy, this expression has become: *čhavò tamò*.

<sup>8</sup> Translator's note: In the Romanè dialect of the Rom settlement in Italy, the word is *varrò*.

(*mellipen*) and are therefore impure (*merime*). The internal part is kept pure and unviolated. Orifices represent the point of demarcation between the internal parts (*andral*) and the external ones (*avri*). This influences social and human behaviours beyond the realm of food (*xaben*): an individual's social status fundamentally depends upon the state of the body's incorruption (*šušipen*), which in turn depends upon what enters the body. How certain foods (*xaben*) are considered ritually pure comes from the Indian caste system. Members of the same *jati* (a socioeconomic group from the caste system) can eat together without running the risk of being contaminated, but they can be contaminated if they eat with members from other *jati*. To this day, amongst Romanès families, the custom of not eating off a plate or with silverware used by an outsider is still in force; that dishware is thrown out or destroyed. Only people whom the host knows well are invited to share their meal. The attitude of mistrusting and act of slandering (*ziungale lava*) one's neighbour and the need to triumph and have a preeminent role, which are typical of some Rom/Roma, Sinti, Kalé, Manouches, and Romanichals, are also derived from the caste system. These are ways to outperform others and to protect oneself.

Prohibited food (*bibaxtalo xaben*, *ziungalo xaben*) during fasting (*divesa bi xaben*), such as when in mourning (*kalipen*), usually includes meats (*mas*) and other animal products, like milk (*thud*), eggs (*vare*) and cheeses (*kerala*). Muslim Rom (*xoraxane roma*) do not eat pork (*balo*), while snake (*sap*) is not eaten in any Romanès community because it is a negative symbol (*melalo*, *bibaxt*, *nafel*) in Romanì cultural cosmology. The connection between impurity (*merime*) and misfortune (*bixbat*) is demonstrated by the fact that for some Romanès communities in England, in Austria, in the United States and even in the Balkans, merely mentioning the name of some animals, birds or reptiles, such as *o sap* (the snake), is thought to bring bad luck (*bixbat*, *nafel*). Many communities do not eat horsemeat out of respect for an animal that has a strong symbolic value in the Romanì culture.

At the table during meals, the positions of prestige (*pativalipen*) of every family member are evident. Customarily older men or the patriarchs (*phure*) are served first, followed by younger men (*rom*), older women (*phuræ*), younger women (*romnæ*) and lastly children (*čhavore*). Adults do not eat if others of their age or gender have not been served first. It would be equally rude to not offer something to a

guest or to not wish them: *Te xas sastimaça* (literally, 'may you eat heartily', translatable as 'bon appetit'). Eating together (*khetanes*) and sharing a meal (*xaben*) is a sign of sincerity (*čhačho*) and mutual respect (*pativ*).

Some foods in particular are considered to be beneficial (*lače*) or lucky (*baxtale*). Foods of this kind, called *baxtalo xaben*, are the ones with strong flavours: chili, black pepper, mustard, chili peppers, garlic, lemon, pickled food and salt. It is possible to notice a certain compatibility to the culinary culture of the Rajputs of Rajasthan. They divide their food into hot and cold foods with a specific way of consuming them and an appropriate designation for these foods in a daily diet. These foods have a direct relationship to general health (*sastipen*) and well-being (*lačhipen*).

Romanès communities, also like the Indian Rajputs, categorise sicknesses (*nasvalipen*), at least the ones that are considered absolutely impure, according to whether the sicknesses are in direct relationship to the community's activities. Advice about illnesses is sought from a *drabarni* (an expert healer woman who is also a palmist), which is the equivalent of the *slana* in the Rajput culture. Often, it is the oldest Romanì woman who serves as the *drabarni*. For example, amongst the Italian Rom, the *drabarni* removes the evil eye by dripping some oil into a plate full of water while repeating a ritual incantation and making the sign of the cross. The connection between healing and divination can be quickly explained: the root of *drabarni* is *drab* which means 'medicine' and is also the base for *drabaripen* (divination). *Drabarno* is the term commonly used to indicate a 'spiritual advisor'. The Indian Rajput believe that sickness can occur by either not observing laws or not respecting the Gods. Another cultural practice that can be seen in both the Indian Rajput and the Romanì cultures is the belief that sickness (*nasvalipen*) is spread by a female spirit. This negative entity in the Romanès dialects is called either *xoxajni* or *čhoxanì* (almost like a witch).

The most impure element par excellence is death: *meripen*. This term also means 'war', and it is precisely because it is impure that the Romanì people have never declared war on anyone.

Other elements that are considered 'impure' are suicide and blood. Suicide is almost nearly nonexistent in Romanès communities because life (*živipen*), which is pure (*šušì*), no matter the situation, is

always worth living. In the different Romani language dialects, the words that are connected to the idea of the impure are *mel*, *melalo*, *merime*, *mellipen*, *marime* and *magardo*, and they stem from the Sanskrit root *vmrī*, which means 'death', 'world of the dead', 'to kill' and 'to annihilate'. The concept of *meripen* (death) is found in many forms and in many dialects: *meripe*, *meriben*, *merribbé*. The idea of the impure (*merime* or *mellipen*) is therefore closely linked to death and sickness (*nasvalipen*) and means contamination as well as impurity. This also influences certain behaviours. For example, to define a mean, arrogant or rude person, Rom Italians who have long-established settlements use *mardò*. This adjective derives from the verb *mar-*, which means 'to kill, to murder, to hit', but its participle is what allows it to be translated as 'the murdered dead, killed, beaten'. In other dialects of the Romani language, we find the term *mudar-* (to kill, to annihilate, to extinguish). This means that a 'dead' person is bad in the sense of being 'impure' and a bringer of 'evil curses' (*biláčhipen*, *nafel*) and 'unfortunate tragedies' (*bibaxt*). This is why they are afraid (*traš*) of the dead (*mule*). Totally different from this is the consideration and attitude in regard to their 'own dead', for whom the Romani population have a real and private worship. There is a clear separation between the 'insider' dead, of one's own family and community, versus the 'outsider' dead, who are perceived as ghosts. This idea also lends itself to the dualistic viewpoint that we have considered so far.

The verb *mukh-* (to leave, to liberate, to free) is connected to the verb *mudar-*, which implies a separation and a state of affliction and has the same root as *mulo* (cadaver, dead, deceased).

Simple impurity is expressed by the noun *mel*, whose adjective *melalo* means 'dirty' in the moral sense. Ritualistic impurity can be provoked by words, by actions or even by objects. For example, it is an impure act to point at a cemetery, dump or urinal.

The Romani population also divides animals into pure and impure. For example, dogs (*zukela*) and cats (*cicaja*) are impure because they lick themselves.

Birds, because they are contaminated by atmospheric forces, are generally impure (*merime*). Birds that are black and crows in particular (*kale čilikle*) are believed to be heralds of death (*meripen*) and of misfortune (*bibaxt*).

Some groups of the Rom/Roma in the Balkan territories, so as to not risk contamination or impurity, do not eat certain chicken parts, like the feet (*pre*), head (*šero*), wings (*kakh`ă*) and entrails (*por`ă*). The Finnish Rom do not eat chicken meat at all, while Italian Rom do not eat the chicken tail (*i pori*). This winged animal's impurity comes from the fact that chickens peck at the ground, which is an impure place.

There are two verbs in the Romanì language of Rom Italians that are closely connected: *maxurin-* and *mejar-*, which literally mean 'to make impure, contaminate, to make dirty'. The first term refers to the realm of morality and is also correlated to food, while the latter is intrinsic to the realm of the material and physical. Basically, they are synonyms for 'to pollute, to corrode, to infect, to mar, to stain, to dishonour', and they suggest an emotional or physical disruption of sanitary practices or of individual or traditional values. The concept that the two words express is in clear contradiction of the word *šušar-*, which means the exact opposite, or 'to clean, to render pure, to decontaminate'. *Maxurindò* or *melalò* (dirty, impure, contaminated) food should absolutely not be ingested, tasted or touched, and it is *zung* (literally 'disgust', in the broad sense of 'contamination, repugnance'). It is no coincidence that a physically 'ugly' boy is described as *zungalò* (disgusting, repugnant), or rather 'contaminated' or 'impure', and is the exact opposite of *šukuar* (handsome), which is a synonym of 'pure' and 'uncontaminated' (*šušo*). The words *maxuripé*, *merime* or *mellipen*, translatable as 'contamination, pollution, impurity', have a major influence on the moral, psychological and spiritual domain and are lived or perceived as a deprivation of dignity (*pativ*). If food has been contaminated, materially or morally, this will somehow contaminate whoever eats it. This happens if, for example, the food falls on the ground; if it is touched by a 'dirty woman', whether she is 'dirty' physically or morally (for example a menstruating woman or a prostitute); if in conversation words connected to the food are used in an impure way: *this food tastes like ...*; if during a meal unpleasant smells (*xand*) come in or if hair (*bala*), dust (*puši*), insects (*makæ*) or other impurities (*mellipen*) are found in the food. Food (*xaben*), in that case, is contaminated (*melalo*) or made impure by the mixing in of outside elements or by dishonourable expressions or attitudes, and therefore it cannot be ingested. In every circumstance, it is essential to take the necessary measures to not be contaminated or, in the case of necessary or

inevitable defilement, like giving birth or menstruation for women, to scrupulously follow categorical rules of purification. The ritual rules have a fundamental value in Romanì society and define behavioural limits within their spiritual and social environment (*romano them*) and condition relationships with the external world (*gaćkano them*). Such a distinction first and foremost looks at the human body, but it also extends to the spiritual world, to one's dwelling, to animals and to things. Every aspect of life is distinguished between pure and impure. The sun (*kham*) is considered pure inasmuch as it is an element that emanates heat (*tatipen*) and light (*dut*), which are also pure elements. Even space is influenced by them. The East, where the sun rises, is the expression of life (*živipen*) and is pure (*šušo*); the West, where the sun sets and is extinguished (*mudarelpe*), is impure (*merime*). The day (*dives*) is pure because it is under the sun's influence. In addition, the sun is the propagation and representation of God (*Devel*), and the two words in the Romanì language have the same Sanskrit root, *dyàuh*, whose meaning is 'light, brilliant, blinding, resplendent', like the Romanó *dut* 'light' (in Latin *divus* 'resplendent', *dies* 'day', *Deus* 'God'). In Sanskrit, 'God' is *Deva*, from which *Devel* is derived. In contrast to the day, night (*i rat*) is impure (*melali*) because it is subjected to the moon (*i ćhon*) and darkness (*kalipen*).

Even the human body is subdivided into pure and impure parts: the upper part is pure, while the lower half is considered impure. The waist area marks the border between pure and impure. The important parts from the pure half are the head (*o šero*) and the mouth (*o muj*), while the impure parts are the genital area (*kar, pele, bul, minz*) and the feet (*prne, pré*). The head is pure also because there can be nothing impure above it. The sky, inhabited by the stars and celestial bodies and various spiritual beings (*Devel* 'God' and the Saints), is pure. At the other end of the body, we have the feet, which are considered impure because they touch the pavement and the ground. The latter is infested with various beings and impure spirits (*beng* 'devil', *mule* 'spirits or ghosts', *ćhoxanæ* 'witches') and therefore is itself a source of impurity. For everything else, even in the Christian religion, God and the Saints live in the Kingdom of the Skies and the devil lives in the infernos in the centre of the earth.

The hands (*vašta*) are in a transitory state because they have to perform acts that are both pure and impure; therefore, they must be washed in particular way and continually.

Impure clothes (*melale*), like socks and underclothes, must always be washed in the appropriate way by clearly distinguishing them from the pure clothes (*šušē*), like tablecloths and napkins, which need to be washed separately. All women's clothes during their menstruation are impure, so they are washed with *melale* items in a separate batch.

The place you live in and work in must be kept clean, pure and uncontaminated. Bodily functions must be completed in the appropriate places. The home, the trailer and the camper must all be clean and hygienically acceptable, ready to welcome family members and guests. It is a great shame (*bari laʒ*) to host someone in a dirty and impure place, especially if that person belongs to your community or is your social equal.

Within the *romano them*, the woman is thought to be gifted with the considerable power (*bari zor*) of 'contaminating' (*mejarel*) a man (*murš*) or food (*xaben*) because female sexuality is considered impure (*melali*). The vagina (*minʒ*) is contaminated (*melali*) by menstruation, birth and secretions. Women must pay careful attention not to expose too much of their body so as to not excite men, and they must be careful to not put their body in contact with men publicly. They must, above all, pay attention to their movements and postures, especially the legs since the legs must always be kept tight and closed, never spread open if she is sitting. A woman can never bend over forward from an upright position. Women's clothing, demeanour and behaviour are constantly subjected to public judgement from the entire community. Long ago, it was considered impure for a *romni* to be touched by a doctor or gynaecologist, and that is why women would give birth in a tent with the help of older women; Italian Rom refer to this in dialect as *vastèngre*. A child's birth is necessarily an impure event (*melalo*), and traditionally childbirth took place in isolated tents outside the camp, far from the presence of men. Today all *romniæ* give birth in hospitals. After the child's birth (*biandilipen*), the mother is considered impure (*melali*) for several weeks, especially during the first week. In this period, the woman cannot be in contact with pure elements, perform activities like cooking or washing flatware or even appear in public, especially in the presence of the elderly. After the birth, the woman

usually withdraws from society into her home and generally uses personal silverware for a few weeks. Other women, possibly older non-menstruating daughters, are responsible for taking care of food preparation and cooking. These stipulations were mostly enforced in the past as today the customs are being lost.

Even today, death and the entire sexual realm are taboo (*merime*) in the Romanì culture. One never publicly evokes the name of the deceased, just as the members of different Romanès communities avoid discussing sex.

Amongst the impure elements (*merime*), blood must be mentioned because in the Romanì language it is *o rat*. It is not coincidence that the words for 'blood' and 'night' in the Romanì language are expressed by the same word (*rat*) because they are closely connected to the same concept of impurity (*merime* or *marime*). What distinguishes them is the masculine definite article for 'blood' and female article for 'night'.

This cultural overview clearly shows how state-mandated nomadic camps in no way reflect the cultural and ethical exigencies of Romanès cultures. Instead, such camps serve to control and promote the media-based images and economic and political speculations of the non-Rom vis-à-vis the Romanès people in order to pass off as understanding what in reality shows no understanding at all – the difference between knowledge and deception.