

Article

Roma Housing and Eating in 1775 and 2013: A Comparison

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Abstract: Objectives: We compared housing and the eating habits of Roma. Contemporary findings (2013) were compared with those from the first monothematic work on Roma (1775) depicting their housing and eating habits. **Methods:** Data come from a journal (1775) and from semi-structured interviews (2013) with more than 70 Roma women and men who live segregated in excluded settlements at the edges of villages or scattered among the majority. Data were collected in two villages and one district town in the Tatra region, where data from the 1775 measurements originate. We used classical sociological theory and new ethnography to interpret the obtained data. **Results:** The main findings showed differences between specific social classes then and now regarding housing as well as eating habits, related to both conditions among Roma in the Tatra. The national Roma foods *gója* or *marikl'a* are traditional foods of Slovak ancestors living in poverty in the country. The houses of Roma do not greatly differ from those of the majority. **Conclusions:** We conclude that life strategies of the citizens of poor settlements now are similar to two centuries ago, typical for the culture of poverty in various countries of the world even after the centuries.

Keywords: Roma; housing; eating habits; comparison; 18th century; 21st century; Slovakia

1. Introduction

Roma health was a neglected topic of research for several decades [1]. In recent years, however, the topic of Roma health has come into the spotlight [2-5], sometimes showing what was already known and sometimes coming up with new findings. Roma health includes the low level of recognition and understanding of the minority by the majority, a topic very difficult to study. The very poor hygienic standards in segregated Roma settlements aggravates such a problem [6,7]. Culture should also be studied “under the surface” and history analyzed in sufficient detail [8]. We focus on two issues related to health – housing and eating habits of Roma – and study them from an anthropological and historical perspective.

In the past Roma eating patterns were related to their way of life. Most Roma worked in craftsmanship, in agriculture or as ancillaries in the households of wealthier families [9-11] studied nutritional patterns in 300 9-13-year-old Roma children and suggested that the classic Roma diet did not include fruit and vegetables and that milk and dairy products intake was very low. They evaluated these as highly unhealthy habits in an ethnically specific population. Hancock [12,13] stated that the majority population makes a fundamental error in its judgement: Roma culture is

confused with the concept of the culture of poverty [14]. Preparing food in Roma has always been a woman's work [15], as has been raising children [16,17]. Current studies, however, perceive significant changes in the status of men and women in the Roma community. These changes could possibly be explained from the "non-functionality of the men", contributing to the emerging potential for emancipation of Roma women [18].

The housing of Roma has been discussed by authors from Slovakia and from abroad [19]. 2011). Horváthová [20] depicts Roma housing in ancient history. Their dwellings were mostly caravans, marquees and tents, usually made of canvas and constructed in the shape of a cone. It was possible to keep a fire in the front or back part of the tent in such a way that smoke could get out. These Roma housing facilities were replaced by huts after the Second World War [21]. The Košice Governmental Program, declared on 5 April 1945, proclaimed rejection of discrimination because of racial and religious reasons. Despite that statement, state policy stimulated hidden or open forms of forced assimilation. Act No. 74/1958 "on the permanent settling of nomadic persons" permanently restrained the movement of the traveling portion of the Roma population (Vlachike Roma). In the same year, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia issued a resolution whose aim was "the consistent assimilation of the Gypsy population" [22]. The Roma were forced to live in the blocks of flats in housing estates or at the edge of municipalities, i.e. in accommodations provided by municipalities. Since then, Roma ethnic groups in Slovakia have practically lived in segregated settlements, separated communities or scattered in towns.

Thus far, a comparison between contemporary data with that of the past [23] on eating habits and housing (focused on segregated settlements, separated concentrations, and Roma living in towns) has been lacking. In this study we compared the eating habits and housing of Roma in 1775 and in 2013. Our research objective was to analyze the content of the first work that was issued gradually in 1775-1776 in a Vienna weekly [23] and to seek the parallels between the past and present situations in the context of the processes of cultural changes of the Roma living in the region under the Tatras.

2. Methods

We focus only on a part of sociocultural norms (eating and housing) according to a reductionist definition of culture [24] in the context of health. The field ethnographic investigation was preceded by thorough anamnesis of the semi-structured interviews. The culture and the obtained data were interpreted in the intentions of symbolic anthropology [25] and the literal genre [26].

2.1. Samples

The Atlas of Roma Communities [27] states that there are 402,840 Roma living in Slovakia; this is 7.5% of the total population, far more than the 2% (105,700) from the most recent Census 2011 [28]. In our study almost all Roma openly reported themselves to be Roma and did not have any problems talking about cultural specifics.

We described the three groups as dwellers of integrated, separated or segregated settlements. Regarding ethnicity, we worked with the Rumungre Roma living in the east of Slovakia [29]. In field research conducted in 2012-2013 we interviewed more than 50 people, conducted two focus groups, made more than 1,700 minutes of recordings and took more than 250 photographs. The semi-structured observations and interviews took place in the natural environment of the dwellers of the three types of settlement. The data were collected in three localities of the Poprad district: a segregated settlement, a separated concentration and the town itself, where the Roma live integrated among the majority population (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1 Slovakia, showing the city of Poprad (red rectangle) Source: Slovakia – Central Europe (2016) [30]

2.2 Data collection

Data were collected through field ethnographic research. This focused on a detailed, in-depth analysis of sociocultural norms and ideas of the Roma on eating and housing, the dwellers of the separated communities and segregated settlements. Ethnographic research should include a stay in the field [31-33], which is an inevitable activity leading to detection and recognition of social practices. We stayed in the three mentioned sites: the town part, the separated community and the segregated settlement. The field work was conducted in the summer months of 2012 and 2013. Developing trust in the settlement dwellers happens step by step. In 2012, therefore, field work included all-day visits to the segregated location. Only in 2013 did we decide to stay directly in the respondents' places. We were able to collect and compare individual sociocultural norms and ideas in the selected localities with those stated by Augustini more than 200 years ago [23]. The ideas and opinions of significant authors of classical sociological theory (e.g.: Weber [34]) and symbolic anthropology [25] inspired us in the data interpretation.

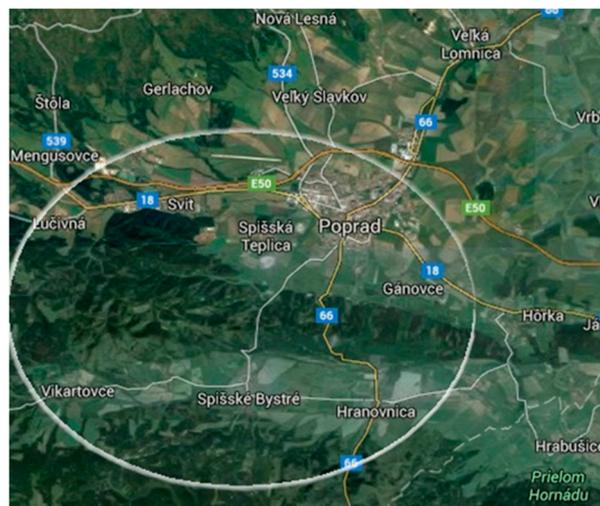


Figure 2 Data collection sites (Poprad, Spišská Teplica, Hranovnica, Spišské Bystré, Vikartovce) Source: Authors

2.3 Analyses and reporting

Reporting will take place along the two main variables, eating and housing, and in both the situation in 1775 from Augustini's publication [23] will be described first and then the 2013 situation from own experience. The general scheme of the ethnographic analysis is clearly structured and consists of setting the research objectives and characteristics of the culture (new ethnography); of analysis of the topics and their interpretations: topic 1 (eating) – interpretation 1, topic 2 (housing) – interpretation 2. Data on contacts, informants, transcription, family trees, places and diaries were used to interpret the topics. In this way we derived conclusions from the data.

3. Results

Our results are presented through the direct statements of the interviewees. The information is not modified. We considered it very important that the informants could express themselves in their own words, by literal depictions – translated by the authors – of their everyday reality. The text below depicts the scope of eating habits and housing in the two compared historic periods.

3.1 Roma food and eating 1775

Augustini's contribution was not only a depiction of the living conditions of the Roma in Hungary in the 18th century but also a breaking down of the stereotypes about them and the criticism of contemporary reports about this national minority. He writes: "*None of these accusations, at least in our times and in Gypsies in Hungary [Slovakia by that time was part of Hungary – authors] were proved either by our experiences or their own experiences*" ([23] translated by authors). One of the most important facts from that period in the context of eating was the differentiation of this community and the rejection of generalizations. Roma who earned a living by their own hands were significantly different from others: "sometimes they eat bread, too" [23], but they did not bake it themselves, because they did not have adequate conditions in their dwellings to do so. If the wealthier families could not procure meat, they ate mostly flour dishes that they prepared in warm ashes directly in the hearth. Contemporary texts unambiguously show the diversity of the Roma community, particularly specific clans in wealth or poverty. This difference was reflected in the way of obtaining food and the quality of eating. While the rich families normally ate bread and meat, the poor had to settle for the consumption of carrion. Roma did not eat horses for they were important for their life (travelling), and they used only the skin of dead animals for fur.

Contemporary documents from that period also described the very popular use of tobacco, which was not sniffed but smoked. Roma women, however, seemed to prefer chewing tobacco and consuming tobacco leaves and stems. Roma men smoked through long wooden pipes, so that they could savor this rare herb with every breath. The greatest and much appreciated gifts for the Roma were wooden pipes soaked in tobacco that the Roma gradually consumed, and thus staved off hunger. Roma could last for more than a day with just a piece of the pipe or a tobacco leaf working without bread or other food. The everyday beverage was water. Roma could not afford wine; therefore, they preferred alcohol, which they could get drunk from faster and cheaper. Schnapps was a must-have drink at all family parties. According to Roma, the best days of their lives were those when they could get drunk.

3.2 Roma food and eating now

In the present Roma community, food is a measure of wealth and poverty. It is also used to express love to children, guests, family or unknown wayfarers. Success of the breadwinner is measured by the amount of food he is able to procure: "*I have earned and brought five full bags!*" (36 years old, male). For the father, children and their mother, the nicest periods are when they are provided with everything they need for their life. However, it is not unusual that a Roma buys tens of kilograms of flour on the days when receiving benefits. After several days, when savings are spent, a family mixes flour with water and makes the most modest food, so-called marik'a. Marik'a is thin bread, made of flour, water, soda or a bit of baking powder, salt and it is formed and put on the oven,

normally from one side. *“And then when children come to school in the morning and we ask them what they have eaten, they say marikľa”* (45 years old, female).

For Roma the best food is *riska* (cutlet, schnitzel) with potatoes. *Flaky* (elsewhere also called *gója*) is considered a Roma specialty and their national food [35]. *Flaky* consists of a skin filled with grated potatoes, pieces of meat (if the family has it), flour, eggs and spices (salt and pepper). The skin is filled with this mixture, and then it is boiled on the fire. It is a really old recipe – the food of people working hard in the fields every day – the food of poverty. Many from the majority population stopped making and eating *“flaky”*, but the Roma were used to make it. The legend about famous *flaky* might have appeared because of this. The poor Roma neither stored food nor had food supplies: *“You have to eat it; otherwise we will throw everything away! Our habit is to throw away everything that has not been eaten”* (31 years old, female). Roma did not have refrigerators in the huts as a consequence of not having electricity. Sometimes a car battery is used for the TV or a bulb. There are some refrigerators in the settlements, but they are used for storing food rather than keeping it cold.

Both eating habits and consumed foods are astoundingly similar in both compared periods. Unambiguously, they represent life strategies of people living in poverty and not a traditional character of the Roma culture. One of its most significant features is hospitality, not food itself. The above mentioned *gója* is an old traditional food of the peasants and poor Slovak farmers. *Marikľa* (flour mixed with water baked on a fire) is a symbol of poverty of the poorest families in the community. Also nowadays, Roma are used to consuming food from dead animals, dogs and even horses. The foods of the wealthiest Roma families do not differ from the common Slovak foods at all. Family parties or ceremonies, however, are significantly richer in food choice in comparison with the majority.

3.3 Roma houses and housing 1775

Roma in Hungary and Transylvania settled solely in the places that were selected for them to live in. Augustini [23] mentions the towns of Sibiu (now Romania), Debrecen (still Hungary), Bystrica, Prešov and Košice (now Slovakia). These groups of the Roma lived mostly by a settled way of life. The nomadic groups of the period around 1775 included the Moldavian (*Lach*), German-speaking Roma and the *Lyngurars*. Nomadic Roma lived in tents. They liked those dwellings the most because they enabled them to move from one place to another very fast. They travelled often but never far away. Usually they stayed near the county where they were born. In the cold months they built winter dwellings, buildings dug in the ground, supported by logs and lined with straw. The entrance faced the south or the east. When the weather became warmer, they pulled down the dwellings and lived in tents again. The autumn is a sad period for them; on the other hand, the spring is one of the happiest ones. It is expressed by the Roma proverb: *“After Michal [29th September], no grass ever grows, even if you pulled it out with the pincers; after Juraj [24th April], however, it sprouts so strongly that you cannot hammer it away”* [23].

3.4 Roma houses and housing now

The Slovak literature depicting the housing of Roma differentiates between integrated, separated and segregated settlements [27, 36,37]. This differentiation indicates the heterogeneity of the Roma community in general, not only regarding housing. Most of the Roma living ‘integrated’ live in blocks of flats and family houses in parts of a town – in our case Poprad. Roma and poor families of the non-Roma majority live next to each other. The living conditions are rough; there are often multi-member families squeezed into the small “flat units”. In villages like Kravany Roma live concentrated at the edge of the municipality, a separated settlement. In the separated and segregated localities, houses for three Roma social classes exist. Members of the high class live in common brick houses, not different from the houses of the majority; the middle class also lives in the brick houses, but they are more neglected and crowded; and the lowest class lives in modest wooden huts. This is an image of poverty in the 21st century. After entering them, one is astonished particularly by the relative cleanliness of the interior, notwithstanding the garbage and mess outside. Many brick houses, wooden huts and sheds, considerably different qualitatively, can be seen in the settlements.

In the present, Roma do not build any tents or winter dwellings. This is the most significant difference in comparison with 1775. Similarly to eating, housing is also a status issue. Rich Roma live in brick houses which differ only slightly from the households of the majority population. The exceptions are the colors bordering on kitsch – garden statues or vastly decorated facades. This is mostly a demonstration of a higher social status in the settlement or separated locality. Despite the fact that only a few houses are connected to the municipal sewer system, all of them have a toilet and bathroom connected to municipal water supply. The wooden huts, however, do not have the above-mentioned facilities. Thus, families with children living in such accommodations face a great risk of many diseases. The ghettos in towns are characterized by the monotony and homogeneity of concentrated poverty, which does not know any ethnicity (common social housing for both the Roma and the Slovaks).

4. Discussion

Our objective was to compare the food and housing of the Roma community of Eastern Slovakia depicted in *Zigeuner in Ungarn* (1775) with the present (2013). We found that the food and eating habits have not greatly changed over the centuries. An exception is the consumption of horses, which was a taboo in the past. The poor consumed – and still consume - food of low quality, eat irregularly and often go hungry. The Roma food presented as traditional was the food of poor Slovaks in the past. The eating habits and food of rich Roma does not differ from the eating habits of the rich majority population. Furthermore, we found that the detailed description of construction of the winter dwellings and tents is an important historic material, which, however, does not correspond with the housing today. Similarly to eating, housing is also a demonstration of a social status in the Roma community. In the rural settlements, simple wooden huts can be found in segregated settlements and brick houses can be found particularly in separated settlements – parts of villages that are mostly inhabited by Roma families. The town living quarters and housing can be considered as the town ghettos fully occupied by poor citizens with no cultural differences.

4.1. Eating

We found differences in the consumption of carrion. Augustini [23] states that the Roma consumed carrion because of their opinion that “*meat of an animal killed by God must be better than meat of animal killed by the hand of a man*”. Further, he states that horse meat is not eaten by the Roma because of a certain reverence to horses. This reference, however, has disappeared in the third millennium. There was a case in Richnava where the local Roma stole and ate a horse [38]. In the present environment of the settlements under the Tatras we found only dog fat used for treatment of airways and lungs. It is an expensive “export commodity”. It is used as an ointment but sometimes it is also eaten in small amounts as grease. Eating habits bring an important link between the food of poverty and traditional Roma foods (particularly *gója* and *fl'aky* or *marikl'a*). Our ancestors knew these foods and consumed them normally. In rural areas, they are known and popular among older people. Drinking alcohol and smoking in the Roma community are not significantly more widespread than in the majority. Eating habits and food of the Roma in the time when Augustini lived and the present have not been previously compared by any authors. The life strategies of the poor Roma are the same even after more than two centuries. They focus on the present and bare survival.

4.2. Housing

The biggest change in housing is the change in the nomadic way of life. Roma have stopped using tents and building provisional winter dwellings as described in detail in the Augustini's work. The Roma in Slovakia no longer have any reason to live in tents or to build winter dwellings. One of the most discussed issues of the present is the legality of the grounds where their dwellings are built. After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, the original owners started to claim their lands in course of restitution. This resulted in tensions, when the Roma families living in the same place since the 1950s were forced to leave the land. Our intention, however, was to describe housing two hundred years

ago and to the present, which has not yet been discussed by any researchers. In our opinion, the causes of changes in building and character of dwellings were the events from the above-mentioned 1950s, when the Act No. 74/1958 [39] on the permanent settling of nomadic persons restrained the movement of the Roma. Today's social stratification can be seen in great detail. In the present, the houses and huts mirror social stratification of the Roma community (brick houses – the rich, wooden huts – the poor). Poor Slovak groups, including the homeless, as well as poor Roma concentrate in emergency housing facilities in areas defined by the authorities of villages and municipalities (Poprad). The local areas in the neighborhoods of the village (Kravany) consist particularly of brick houses similar to those of the majority population. The population of segregated settlements lives mainly in wooden huts which do not meet any hygienic standards (Hranovnica).

4.3. Strengths and limitations

We compared the previously unanalyzed scope of eating habits and housing from a historical perspective. The study was conducted directly in the environment in the north-east of Slovakia, where Augustini lived and worked in the 18th century. The study was based on long-term field data collection which analyzed many other habits and traditions in addition to those herein presented and is a part of a longer study report [33, 37]. However, the results cannot be generalized for the whole Slovak Roma population. A specifically defined geographic area was analyzed, and the idiographic approach in social sciences was used.

4.4. Recommendations

The problems of reproduced poverty accumulated in segregated Roma settlements have not disappeared even after two centuries. On the contrary, they tend to increase. All attempts to improve food aid for poor Roma communities have failed. In the present, the only sources of aid are municipalities, which founded community centers and provided field social work. The work of both of these types of institutes (community centers and field social work) has also been conducted unsystematically – one project is merely replaced by another project. Responsibility has been transferred to social workers, who cannot be the only players in the field of aid. The challenge for politicians should be the creation of a social security system that would provide systematic aid and would thus meet the basic needs, including housing and eating. Therefore, the objectives of any social system should include attempts to create an effective combined system providing aid for persons living in poverty.

Despite several high-quality study reports and analyses mentioned in the introduction to the paper [1,6,7], in the conditions of Slovakia there is a lack of research studies that would deal with the eating habits and nutrition values of the poor in the settlements. Therefore, future research projects, including multidisciplinary teams consisting of social scientists and health professionals, should focus on analyzing needs in the area of eating and housing in the settlements. In addition, the above-mentioned political measurements should be thoroughly re-evaluated by multidisciplinary academic teams. Such data might make food and housing aid more effective, since it has so far been unsystematic in Slovakia [40].

5. Conclusions

An immediate impulse for Augustini to write his monograph was the radicalization of opinions of part of the Hungarian public to resolve the Roma issue in the country. He believed *“that resolving the problem was not in expelling these people, but in knowing them, which would allow creating the conditions for their new way of life as similar as possible to life of the majority of the population”* [41, p. 4]. These words from 1775 are up-to-date challenges for Slovakia today, too. Radicalization of the political scene in the recent days justifies the famous phrase: those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it. That's why it is necessary to show the Roma culture, which has been tied with the Slovak culture for almost seven centuries.

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