

*Mihaela Preda, Iuliana Vijulie,
Gabriela Manea, Alina Mareci*

The Customary Identity of the Coppersmiths Clan in Oltenia: Between Tradition and Modernity

Abstract

The coppersmiths' uniqueness as a Roma clan is given by their traditional crafting legacy, as they themselves acknowledge. They are one of the more conservative Roma clans. Encouraged by their previous nomadic lifestyle, it hasn't allowed them to blend with other clans or populations. Mixed marriages are forbidden and marriages with members of other Roma clans are rare. The aim of this study is to identify the elements that define the ethnic identity of the coppersmiths clan, to analyse the features that make out the coppersmiths' customary identity, and to measure the self-segregation tendencies within the coppersmiths ethnic group. The main research methods were: bibliographic documentation, direct observation, field inquiries (structured interviews), and digital mapping. The research concluded the following: the coppersmiths are one of the extreme conservative clans, which have maintained their customary identity. The tendency of self-segregation is a direct consequence of their resistance towards anything modern, and the members of the coppersmiths clan believe that acting like the majority of society will only lead to the loss of their own identity. The consequences are mostly negative, e.g. poor school enrolment, marrying at an early age, an absence from modern socio-economic activities, etc.

Keywords: Roma, coppersmiths clan, customary identity, self-segregation, traditionalism.

Introduction

When analysing the Roma population it is compulsory to start your investigation from the issue of their occupational structure, given that this aspect is important in explaining the socio-cultural differences as well as the existence of several Roma groups (called clans).

The specialised literature has studied Roma communities in their different aspects, such as: origin and history (Crowe 1994; Merfea 1994; Liegeois and Nicolae 1995; Achim 1998; Anghel et al., 2000; Tamaş 2001), demographic aspects (Preda 2010), education (Kyuchukov 2000; Myers and Bhopal 2009; Bhopal 2010), customs and traditions (Spradley 1980; Burawouy 2003; O'Reily 2005; Martin and Gamella 2005; Ozcan 2006; Crowe 2007; Falzon 2009), socio-economic aspects (Watson 1994; Emigh et al. 2001; Pine et al. 2004; Ladány and Szelényi 2006; Czepczyński 2008; Grill 2011; Ruzicka 2011; Schwartz 2012; Pasięka 2012; Roman 2013), and quality of life (Manea et al. 2009). The study of Roma sub-groups and, even more so, the specific clans is deficient both at a European level as well as concerning the Romanian literature (Ozcan 2000; Potra 2002).

A clan is defined as a sub-group that shares a traditional craft as well as a series of cultural and economic features, shared by all members. In the past, the clans were determined solely by their practising a specific craft (Şerboianu-Pop 1930; Chelcea 1944; Kogălniceanu 1976; Potra 2002). Today, though, this criterion is no longer valid as most of the Roma are no longer practising any traditional occupation. Their allegiance to a clan still exists and is given by certain (mutual) features that, in fact, are directly caused by the existence and manifestation in the past among the elderly of the group of that particular craft. Depending on the raw material used, their following traditional customs or not, and the language they speak, we can identify several Roma clans, e.g. coppersmiths, silversmiths, tinsmiths, ironworkers, shoers of horses, woodworkers, brick-makers, bear trainers, florists, musicians, and *tismănari* (named after the area from which they come: Tismana). The later ones are known to be the clan that were mostly assimilated by the Romanian population (Burtea 1994; Preda 2010).

Aim of the Study

The study aims to analyse the coppersmiths clan as part of the Roma ethnic group in Romania, given that the current literature doesn't include studies referring strictly to this ethnic group, which has a traditional customary identity, which is extremely different from the other Roma clans. The objectives of the study are to define the ethnic identity of the coppersmiths clan, analyse the elements that define their customary identity, and determine the self-segregation tendency within the coppersmiths ethnic clan.

Area of Study

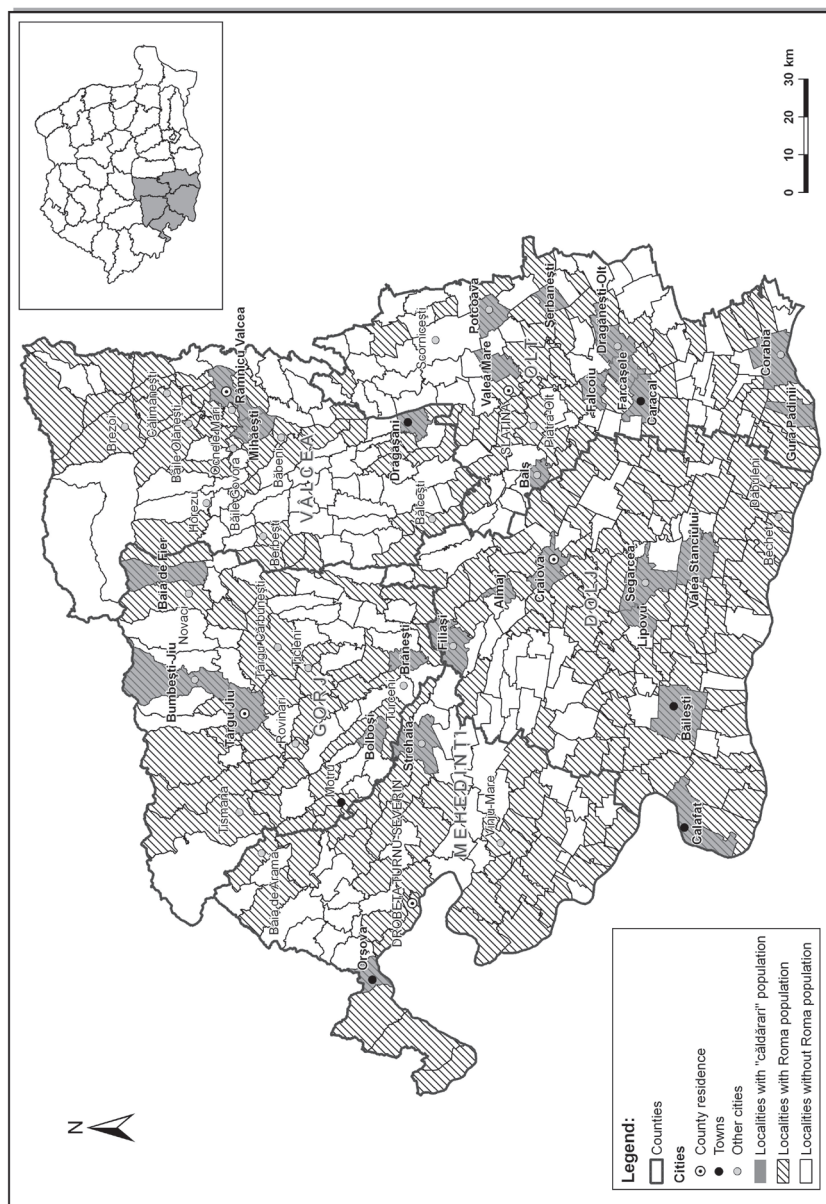
The study area overlaps with the historical province of Oltenia, situated in southwestern Romania, and limited by the Danube in the west and south, the Meridional Carpathians in the north, and the River Olt in the east. The relief is suitable for human life as it includes vast areas of the Romanian Plain, the Getic Plateau, and the Getic Subcarpathians. From an administrative point of view, it includes territories from the Mehedinți, Dolj, Olt, Gorj and Vâlcea counties (Fig. 1).

When the study area was chosen, the authors considered the high density of Roma populations as well as the diversity of clans, with all of these being closely related to the geographical conditions and historical framework. The high numbers of monasteries and boyar domains where Roma people were slaves also represented a solid argument in defining the study area.

Methodology

The study was based on data collected by the authors in successive field visits between February and May 2013 by using an interview guide that was realised with members of the coppersmiths communities from the sample localities, which, in turn, were selected based on the percentage of Roma populations within the total number of inhabitants: Strehăia (10%), Caracal (3.97%), Drăgănești-Olt (6.82%), Tg. Jiu (3.21%), Craiova (1.96%), and Băilești (6.2%).

Figure 1. Territorial distribution of Roma communities in Oltenia



The main research methods used in this study were: the observation method and the inquiry method (interview). Direct field observations were aimed at the characteristics of the natural and anthropogenic environment where the community is settled, the architecture, and the rate at which they are keeping the habit of wearing their traditional costumes.

The interview was used as a research method in order to collect data. The interview guide consisted of 29 questions that aimed to obtain information about: allegiance to the clan, reasons for belonging to that clan (traditional occupation, the occupation of their grandparents, etc.), perpetuating their traditional occupations from generation to generation, rituals relating to important events in the community's life (wedding, birth, baptism, funeral), traditional costumes, judicial system (the gypsy trials), and the self-segregation tendencies from within the coppersmiths ethnic clan.

For this study, 50 people, who are members of the coppersmiths communities from the above-mentioned localities, were interviewed. The interviewed people included the *bulibaşa* (the leader of the community, who is recognised, as such, by all of the members that he represents), members of the *stabor* (members of the *gypsy trial* court), elderly men (the ones that know the old ways – the living connection between tradition and modernity), young men (when wanting to pinpoint the degree to which the traditions were kept and passed along as long as their tendencies were to continue living with their parents or not), and women (as they can often offer information that is taboo or would be improper to be disclosed publicly).

Accessing these autarkic communities was possible with the support of the representatives for Roma issues from the County Mayoralties (Mehedinţi, Dolj, Olt, Gorj and Vâlcea) and the informal Roma representatives.

The cartographic mapping of the Roma people's distribution in the historical region of Oltenia was realised using ArcGIS 9.3, and the database was provided by the Roma representatives of the Mehedinţi, Dolj, Olt, Gorj and Vâlcea County Mayoralties.

Results and Discussions

Defining the coppersmiths clan's ethnic identity

The research showed that the coppersmiths clan identifies itself as a Roma subgroup, mainly due to its traditional occupation. They specialise in

processing copper or brass into boilers or alembics, buckets, pans, pots, glasses, ornaments or worship objects. Later on they turned to aluminium processing by selling household items or tinwork. Following the interviews it became clear that in the past the copper processing enterprise developed due to a market demand for these objects, and because the processing itself could be done without any heavy or bulky instruments the coppersmiths became nomadic and, later on, semi-nomadic – even during the communist era.

We are called coppersmiths because that's how things happened. My grandparents were going from village to village making and selling copper pots. (man, 55 years old, Caracal, Olt)

We, coppersmiths, are a particular clan. We know how to process copper. We know how to make caldrons and buckets and that is why people in all villages look for us. (woman, 60 years old, Drăgănești Olt, Olt)

The results of the inquiries show that the coppersmiths clan is among the few Roma clans that sacredly keep their occupation of processing copper, as it is transmitted from generation to generation only to members of the same clan. The surveyed declared that the entire brass processing operation specific to gypsies is a secret that they know – it is compulsory to teach it to the next generation. Passing the craft along ensures that it will not be lost, as it represents one of the specific cultural values of the clan. Presently, producing and marketing the products can no longer sustain a decent living, like it did in the past, but even among the richest families of coppersmiths this traditional occupation is practised in order to ensure its perpetuation.

All our children learn how to process brass in the gypsy way, even if it is no longer fashionable. Now people go and buy the products from stores. (man, 35 years old, Strehaia, Mehedinți)

In the past, melting copper was done in a mud oven using plum-made wood charcoal. In the gypsy-specific brass processing operation, the brass (after being melted) is processed in the cold, and the constitutive elements of the bowl are cleaved by using dovetail-shaped cuts. They are later combined by beating them in the cold (on an anvil) until the brass is

tempered. This phase alternates with an un-tempering phase by passing the material through burning embers. The two phases of the operation succeed multiple times in order to ensure the hardness of the metal; the joints of the products are then glued with so-called 'hard water' or hydrochloric acid in order to obtain proper tightness.

A long time ago we would use plum wood, because only that wood is as hard as charcoal. After we would meld the piece we would shape it using a hammer when the metal cooled and we would beat until every joint would be smooth. We would also use "hard water" so our cauldrons would be the best. We know this technique from father to son and we all know it now, even if we don't make cauldrons anymore. (man, 43 years old, Târgu-Jiu, Gorj)

The coppersmiths clan represents one of the most conservative Roma groups, which is explained by their past nomadic lifestyle that didn't allow their mixing with other population groups. Mixed marriages were (and still are) forbidden and marrying members of other Roma clans is very rare.

Today, the nomadic lifestyle is long forgotten and the coppersmiths are part of the wealthiest Roma groups. Their households include spacious houses with many rooms, built with modern materials, luxuriously garnished, and sometimes even ostentatious with the most expensive decorations and furniture.

Analysing the components that define the customary identity of the coppersmiths clan

The following items that define the customary identity of the coppersmiths clan became apparent from the field investigations:

The wedding customs have a symbolic weight that is kept sacred; the interviews showed that the subgroup identity is transmitted from generation to generation. We can identify two stages of the coppersmiths' weddings, stages that other Roma clans don't entirely respect: 1. The premarital stage mentioned by all of the interviewed people as mandatory, because it precedes the marriage. It is represented by the engagement and is concluded by the representatives of the two families when the future bride and groom are still very young. The price of the bride is established based on her beauty

and the claims of the family from which she comes, with the dowry being equally matched by the sums of money provided by the groom's family. 2. The marriage itself. The respondents describe this as being one of the most important events in the couple's life, as it marks the maturity stage; it takes place when the girls are around 12–13 years old and the boys are 13–14 years old. The two grooms are mostly chosen in advance through a consensus between the two families. Before the wedding the two are not allowed to speak to each other, except in the presence of relatives, and the two families frequently visit each other in order to accommodate the young husband and wife to be with the idea of a future family.

The structured interviews realised among the coppersmiths groups emphasised the fact that the following wedding-specific customs are practised exclusively by them: the entire community takes part in the wedding; the invitation is not written down or printed, but rather transmitted orally prior to the event; the wedding starts with the entire wedding travelling to the bride's house; in the bride's courtyard a tent is installed, where the dowry is displayed (at least 50 scarves, 60 skirts, 50 pillows, 50 bars of soap, furniture for the entire house, and other household items), which will then be loaded in order to be transported to the new house, together with the bride; the bride is dressed beforehand, garnished plentifully with gold, and wearing a necklace, preferably made out of large gold coins; many times (more than 200), her hair will be braided in two pigtailed, which is a sign that she has become a wife (as only single girls wear three pigtailed) (see photo no. 1); after the wedding party arrives with the bride, the godparents (that were previously escorted with a traditional fold band from their house) and the dowry to the groom house, the mother-in-law (together with the older women in the cortege) counts the skirts, scarves, aprons, and pillows in order to prove to the entire party that the bride meets tradition; the next morning the mother-in-law and other women certify the virginity of the girl.

A wedding for the coppersmiths clan is a big thing. The bride has to be embellished with gold; she has to have a big dowry, with everything you need to fill a house, because the groom has the house; and everybody needs to see the dowry – such are things with us ...” (woman, 28 years old, Craiova, Dolj)

When getting married it is very important that the girl is a virgin. The next day, if the girl is not pure, she is sent back to her parents without the dowry or any gold. (man, 56 years old, Caracal, Olt)



Photo no. 1: Bride and groom at a coppersmiths wedding, displaying their dowry in gold coins (Strehaia, Mehedinți County). Source: Preda, 2009

Within the coppersmiths clan, the weddings aren't officiated at the town hall or the church, as it only has value inside the community. The element of novelty about the coppersmiths wedding is that it takes place on Saturdays or Sundays, as the tradition of having it on Tuesdays or Thursdays is long abandoned.

After analysing the structured interviews, it resulted that the coppersmiths Roma have an individual customary background concerning pregnancy, birth and baptism rituals. The most numerous customs circle around the pregnant woman, who has interdictions concerning carrying

water (previously explained by the belief that anything that comes in contact with a pregnant woman becomes impure) and interdictions about participating in a funeral (whose significance relates to propagating the death onto the unborn baby). She isn't allowed to take things that don't belong to her or the baby will be born with marks that will resemble those objects. During the pregnancy the wife's attitude towards the family members changes: she is completely obedient and distant from the male representatives of the family, avoiding all physical contact in order not to "defile" them, and from the moment of the pregnancy any visible social interaction with the members of the community diminishes, because displaying the pregnancy is considered shameful.

When it comes to baptism rituals, it was clear that the respondents couldn't identify specific customary features exclusive to the coppersmiths clans, as the customs concerning newborns are similar to the ones found among Romanians.

According to the interviews, a coppersmith's funeral still follows old customs such as: a wake of three days and three nights for the dead, during which time the fire is kept burning; all of the participants have to display a detached, and even joyful, demeanour (it is believed that showing remorse for the departed will make him come back as a ghost); everybody speaks well of the dead; in the courtyard a table with food is set for the participants of the wake; on the third day, musicians are brought, who are meant to play the songs that the deceased liked, and they accompany the convoy to the grave; a bowl is put under the table on which the coffin is set, and once the dead is out of the door the bowl is broken in order to fend off bad luck; all of the jewellery belonging to the deceased is buried with him. According to the field data gathered, a coppersmith's funeral has important external, non-Roma influences that were adopted from other populations with which they came in contact: covering the mirrors in the house, as they are considered passages to the other world; throwing money at the crossroads on the way to the cemetery, a ritual that mirrors the payments that the deceased will have to make in the afterlife; today, the alms, which were absent in the past due to the nomadic lifestyle of the coppersmiths, are prepared at the house of one or more of the relatives (the food is not kept in the house of the deceased and it is brought out after the funeral) — they are given away and whatever is left must be thrown into a stream or other form of running water. Finally, officiating of the service is done

in a church, which is a new element introduced in their culture as a result of their current sedentary life.

A long time ago, we didn't do the alms and we didn't give food away at a funeral. Our ancestors were going from village to village by cart and we didn't have this ritual. When we starting building our own houses and we settled in villages, we started to do this as well. (woman, 71 years old, Târgu Jiu, Gorj)

Before, when one of ours died, our bailiff, a coppersmith, would hold the sermon right there where we would find ourselves with our carts; now we go to a church at a priest — we are orthodox” (man, 63 years old, Drăgănești Olt, Olt)



Photo no 2. Traditional port of the coppermists from Băilești, *Source:* Preda 2009

The traditional part is the distinctive mark of the coppersmiths, as they are among the last that still wear it as an element that provides them

with their individuality. Respondents defined the degree to which the traditional part is preserved according to gender; thus, the female one is better preserved as a result of the status that a coppersmith woman has, which imposes the wear of this costume: colourful pleated skirts (they are forbidden to wear trousers), long as to touch the ground (a woman whose legs are exposed is considered an immoral woman); their hair is braided in pigtailed; the girls who are not married will have their braids adorned with coins and a red ribbon. Until she gets married she is allowed to go around bare-headed, after which she will wear two braids and she will always cover her head with a kerchief.

A married coppersmith woman must at all times wear long skirts. You are not allowed to show your legs; it is a disgrace and of course a kerchief at all times. (woman, 46 years old, Băilești, Dolj)

Nowadays the young ones are trying to modernise. Some of the boys wear jeans, but women must cover their head and wear their hair in braids and long gypsy skirts — that is the custom. (man, 27 years old, Craiova, Dolj)

As we have already emphasised, it was concluded that the men's part has gone through a certain transformation, in the sense that sometimes they discard their hats and moustaches, the wide belt; they can often be seen wearing dark suiting pants and shirts and only the younger ones wear jeans and t-shirts.

The gypsy tribunal is another identifying element found among conservative Roma clans, presented and preserved rigorously by the coppersmiths. The respondents depicted elements regarding the manner in which this process takes place, either by mediating or sanctioning the parties involved. The tribunal itself aims to solve minor issues happening inside the community (e.g. divorce, infidelity and/or breach of marital obligations, the inappropriate treatment of a family member, quarrels, violent acts, failure to keep a financial promise, treachery, theft, etc.). The tribunal is made out of the *stabor*, which is best translated as a bigwig (which is a synonym for a panel of judges). The judge can be the *bulibașă* (the chosen leader of the Roma), with another 7–8 members being his relatives or close friends, who are known for their impartiality and are mandatorily accepted and recognised by the entire Roma community. The

stabor meets in order to organise the **criss** (criss=kris, which is the lawsuit). The *criss* is held only when the situation or conflict is specific and exclusive to members of the Roma community, and the involvement of a non-Roma person will lead to leaving the issue to the state institutions.

Identifying the self-segregation tendencies within the coppersmiths' ethnic group

The interviews realised within the coppersmiths community have led to the identification of a self-segregation tendency. This manifests in two different manners.

The first one is a territorial self-segregation tendency according to which the community delimits itself spatially; this type of self-segregation shows the fact that members of the coppersmiths group want to live inside their own community and they would rather be in the vicinity of similar people. This hypothesis is supported by responses regarding their preferences towards habitation from both the younger and elderly population, preferences that ultimately lead to the cohesion of the group, including from a spatial point of view.

I want to live among coppersmiths just like me, as we have always lived; we get along with each other. (male, 55 years old, Drăgănești Olt, Olt)
We, coppersmiths, want to have neighbours from among coppersmiths. When we moved on this street we bought houses, one next to another. Such is the things with us, to help one another. We don't like living alone, among Romanians or other Roma" (woman, 66 years old, Bailesti, Dolj)

Unlike other Roma clans, the coppersmiths have a strong cohesive tendency that manifests in most cases spatially, as a concentration of nuclei comprises 100% members of the same affiliation. When acquiring or building a house it is preferred that the neighbours be members of the same clan, and the formation of the above-mentioned nuclei is realised by attracting relatives in close proximity. This aspect generates a particular dynamic of the group functioning, in such a way that they gain an adapted resistance, but also an attitude of topographic exclusion towards other Roma or ethnic groups as the contact with them is done only by neighbour-type boundaries.

A second tendency – socio-cultural self-segregation – is also present. This second direction is the one that has the most serious negative effects, as it strongly influences school enrolment. School enrolment for girls is usually frowned upon because contact with representatives from the majority population will, according to coppersmiths' tradition, only denature or negatively influence the Roma members when having to maintain a traditional lifestyle. Boys will usually finish the 8th grade because knowing how to write, read and count (especially for obtaining a driving licence) is considered sufficient – school abandonment is mostly influenced by engagement or marriage.

Our girl hasn't been to school since we betrothed her. She is 10 years old and in school she would only learn nonsense from Romanians. In our tradition, girls are not allowed to talk to boys before marriage, Romanian girls are (woman, 39 years old, Strehaia, Mehedinti)

Our boy was in school until 7th grade – he knows how to write and read. Now he is married and needs to take care of his family; he doesn't have time for school. And anyway, school is not that useful; he can get his driving licence without much schooling. (man, 34 years old, Targu Jiu, Gorj)

The interviews showed that this self-segregation tendency has direct consequences on the manner in which marriages are set up; one result would be that mixed marriages are not allowed. Marrying a person from another ethnic group is not accepted — it can lead to the exclusion from the community of the member who chooses not to respect the moral code of the clan. The criteria for choosing a future family are mainly concerned with him/her being from the same clan, and marrying Roma from a different clan is also forbidden. (Exceptions in this case are rare, consisting mostly of persons with handicaps who haven't found a match inside the community; the decision needs to be approved by the *bulibaşă*.) These aspects have the role of eliminating any integration or assimilation tendency, and the coppersmiths clan is one of the most conservative ones, as a result of their refusal to make contact with foreign cultural elements.

With the coppersmiths, if a boy chooses to marry a Romanian girl, he does so without our approval and then he no longer has a place among

us; from now on he will live with the Romanians. (woman, 37 years old, Caracal, Olt)

A girl marrying a gypsy of another clan is rarely accepted, unless that girl is blind or crippled and poor and no other coppersmith wants her, and maybe then someone from another clan can marry her — otherwise it's not accepted. (man, 40 years old, Targu-Jiu, Gorj)

The consequences of this phenomenon are mostly related to the lack of schooling, economic qualification, and active participation in economic life in general, especially for women, whose position is strictly linked to the household. The authors also concluded that this social aspect is only characteristic of a limited number of Roma clans.

Conclusions

The coppersmiths clan is one of the extreme conservative Roma clans, which, in spite of modern times, have sacredly kept their customary identity, passing down from generation to generation their traditional craft – even if there is no longer a demand for its products.

The components that define their cultural identity were mostly kept intact. The traditions concerning their weddings, their parts, as well as the gypsy trials are as original now as they were during their nomadic period, and the traditions related to baptism and funerals merge together old Roma elements with newer Romanian ones.

The self-segregation tendency is a direct consequence of their resistance to the ever-present modernity, because the members of the coppersmiths clan consider that behaving like the majority population will only lead to the loss of their own identity. The consequences are mostly negative, e.g. poor school enrolment, early marriage, absence from modern socio-economic life, etc.

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