PhD Dissertation Theses

Ethnographical Aspects of Gypsy/Roma Identity and Gypsy Representations

by

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I. Dissertation objective and topic identification

This dissertation will focus upon the ethnographical aspects of Gypsy/Roma identity and Gypsy representations on the basis of a variety of sources. According to the central hypothesis of the related research, the applied scholarly field of the discipline of ethnography plays a definitive part in the formation of the joint identity of ethnic sub-groups both as a program and as a part of cultural practice. As a consequence of the central hypothesis, it will also be investigated what sort of Gypsy typical representations are featured within the discipline of ethnography and how the notion of ethnographical Gypsy ethnicity has been constructed.

In the dissertation, the general knowledge available for us concerning Gypsies/Romas will be regarded as discursive systems. Discursive systems are topic constructions which integrate our statements and separate them at the same time in various interrelationships. However, the topic constructions concerning Gypsies/Romas tend to represent Gypsies/Romas in a variety of ways. This variety of ways will be denoted here as systems of representation. The dissertation is related to the discourse group that has developed around the identity of Gypsies/Romas, wherein the primary focus will be on the discourse type called Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge (cigány/roma népismeret). At the same time, the issue of defining Gypsy/Roma identity will not be the direct topic of the dissertation. The dissertation will discuss the constructions of Gypsy/Roma identity occurring only within the discourse type called Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge. Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge though is not simply a discourse type but also a type of interpretation of our knowledge concerning Gypsies/Romas beside Romology and the other scholarly disciplines. The chapter Cigány/roma népismeret és identitáskonstrukciók [Gypsy/Roma Folk Knowledge and Identity Constructions] will discuss the various concepts of this interpretation type as well as the interpretation system which also comprises Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge, together with its critique. Furthermore, it will also investigate the Gypsy/Roma identity constructions that appear to have been institutionalized in Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge textbooks. A cigány/roma identitástervezetek és reprezentációk a társadalomban [Gypsy/Roma Identity Schemes and Representations in Society] will focus on the de-legitimization process and the de-legitimization structures of one of the identity schemes that has transformed Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge as an interpretation type, since the participants in the debate on identity have also attached social and moral functions to the determination of knowledge. This chapter will also contain the examination of the relationship between the identity schemes, the Gypsy/Roma representations and the social
context, restricted to the time period of the identity debate. In addition, it will also feature the media constructions of a Gypsy/Roma representation conflict series and instances of segments of the social discourse connected to the representation conflict and its media constructions. For the simple reason of their great variety and extent, the description of the connection with the social context as well as the depiction of the media constructions and the social discourse may not be fully complete and exhaustive, yet I consider their exploration essential in order to illustrate how the identity schemes are embedded socially and also the extent of the variety of the discourses and topic constructions concerning Gypsies/Romas. During the course of the research, ethnography has proved to be the most important constituent discipline in the various concepts of Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge, in the system of interpretation among the scholarly testing disciplines of Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge as an interpretation type, and at the sources of knowledge for identity schemes, since one of the most important components of the knowledge utilized for these constructions is the ethnographical information available. The chapter called A cigány/roma népismeret néprajzi vonatkozásai [Gypsy/Roma Folk Knowledge and Ethnography] will introduce the constitutional connections between ethnography and the most important identity schemes created during the second phase of textbooks on Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge alongside the ethnographical relationships of the schemes. The chapter entitled A cigány/roma reprezentációk néprajzi kontextusa [The Ethnographical Context of Gypsy/Roma Representations] will define the system of relationships between Gypsy/Roma identity schemes, representations, and ethnography already as a historical process within the ethnographical discipline, which is closely connected to the research topics of the following parts, as its overview of the history of related research discusses the ethnographical contexts of Gypsy representations. In turn, Cigány/roma reprezentációk a XIX. század végén [Gypsy/Roma Representations at the End of the 19th Century] will explore systems of Gypsy/Roma representations, presenting what the “Gypsy issue” used to mean in Hungary and how “Gypsy ethnicity” was constructed and construed in ethnography at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century. The chapter Néprajzi cigány reprezentációk debreceni Déri Múzeumban [Ethnographical Gypsy Representations in Déri Múzeum of Debrecen] will contain a survey of ethnographical Gypsy representations covering the time span of more than a century with the help of the sources available in Déri Múzeum. Following the description of the system of sources and of the formation of source exploration and databases, it will list the first the narrative texts, then the system of narratives, and then the interrelationships between narrative structures, discourse types, and textualization strategies on the basis of the available textual sources. Finally, relying on the photographic and
pictorial sources, it will provide an interpretation primarily of ethnographical Gypsy photographs and examine the thematic system of ethnographical Gypsy representations. The last chapter of the dissertation is called Összegzés [Summary], and it will offer a listing of the most important results and findings of the research, while it will also link the approach of this dissertation to the means and ways of portrayal in the general research on Gypsies in Hungary.

II. An outline of the methods applied

The topic construction entitled A cigány/roma identitás és a cigány reprezentációk néprajzi vonatkozásai [Ethnographical Aspects of Gypsy/Roma Identity and Gypsy Representations] is based on the exploration of heterogeneous ethnographical resource material, while the process of constructing the topic and the technique of processing the sources is connected to methodological reflections. The description of the methods of the research may be properly approached with the help of ethnographical methodology, such as the systematizations generated by Miklós Szilágyi and Wolfgang Kaschuba. The chapter Cigány/roma népismeret és identitáskonstrukciók [Gypsy/Roma Folk Knowledge and Identity Constructions] contains concepts about Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge and textbooks on Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge among the ethnographical sources. The direct topics of research here will be the discourses and narratives on Gypsies/Romas. Among the ethnographical sources of A cigány/roma identitástervezetek és reprezentációk a társadalomban [Gypsy/Roma Identity Schemes and Representations in Society], there are newspaper articles and manuscripts of critiques written by various experts on textbooks about Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge and identity constructions, writings and readers’ comments on Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge textbooks and education from an Internet news source edited by Romas, and a series of articles from a daily paper presenting and shaping a Gypsy/Roma representational conflict following a media event and a sample of the consequent readers’ comments. The direct topics of research here will also be the discourses and narratives on Gypsies/Romas, which are connected to folk knowledge discourses and narratives on the one hand, while on the other hand, they are narratives that take us to the social representation system related to Gypsies/Romas. The ethnographical sources of the chapter A cigány/roma népismeret és a néprajz [Gypsy/Roma Folk Knowledge and Ethnography] are again Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge textbooks. The direct topics of research here, too, will be a variety of narratives. The ethnographical sources of A cigány/roma reprezentációk a XIX. század végén [Gypsy/Roma Representations at the End of the 19th Cen-
tury] are ethnographical, statistical, and ethnographical representation systems created at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, which describe and simultaneously construct the ethnic group of Gypsies as part of the ethnic system. The direct topics of research here will be three ethnographical narratives: one based upon a statistical collection of data, and two others which are descriptive in character. Among the ethnographical sources of A néprajzi cigány reprezentációk a debreceni Déri Múzeumban [Ethnographical Gypsy Representations in Déri Múzeum of Debrecen], the entire collection on Gypsies from Debrecen’s Déri Múzeum is included. In this collection of sources, there are textual, narrative, and pictorial (painted, hand-drawn, and photographed) sources, the majority of which would be ethnographical in character. The direct topics of research here will be the ethnographical and visual artistic discourse related to Gypsies/Romas as well as the textual and image-based narratives. I will consider as ethnographical sources all the systems of data which directly contain such information or indirectly contribute to the composition of the topic construction. Thus, the ethnographical character of the sources has been determined by the disciplinary concept of the topic, while the ethnographical research methods applied have been determined jointly by the types of ethnographical sources, the research objectives, and the direct topics of research. The various types of ethnographical sources can be paralleled with the appropriate varieties of ethnographical source criticism. Thus there is source criticism attached to Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge textbooks as examples of narrative source types, to the different newspaper articles written about the Gypsy/Roma identity debate and representation conflict, to the ethnographical and statistical-ethnographical descriptions, to the textual and narrative sources from Déri Múzeum, to the pictorial, painted, or drawn works of art that belong to the category of fine arts, as well as to the photographed sources available in the various collections of the museum. However, some of the sources seem to be more complex. For example, the narrative parts of Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge textbooks, apart from the rather heterogeneous written source material, also contain pictures, figures, drawings, paintings and photographs related to the former, whose function is to illustrate the texts. In addition, in some cases there might also be audio, primarily musical, material connected to the narrative system or sometimes their expanded and simultaneously electronic versions would also be available. Another example could be a narrative source from Déri Múzeum that is accompanied by figures, drawings, and photographs, which are not simply subjected to the text but the figures, drawings, and photographs would rather complement the text and one another. Another additional kind of photographs belonging to the historical material category would be taken of drawings most of which would today qualify primarily as works of fine art, yet they can be
regarded ethnographical sources at the same time since they were created right after the middle of the 19th century. Originally, they were published in a newspaper as a part of a series with textual explanations in order to illustrate domestic folk life. Yet another part of photographs that belong to the category of Gypsy representations would be non-ethnographical pictures which were taken simply due to the museum’s documentation requirements and, according to their original status, they are either narrative sources, objects of numismatics, or works of fine art.

Beyond the routine practice of source criticism in ethnography however, the direct topics of research and the partial research objectives that determine the use of sources are also important since it is the connection between the partial research objectives that creates the topic construction. At the same time, the direct topics of research are the result of abstractions since, during the process of definitions, we do not pay attention to the great empirical variety of sources in relation to the partial research objectives any longer, as a consequence of which they will be interpretable from the aspect of the topic construction, too. Thus, from the aspect of our topic construction, the direct topics of research are various discourses and narratives that discuss the ethnographical relations of Gypsy/Roma identity and representations. Discourse analysis breaks argumentation systems, rule systems, logic systems, and the systems of social practice down to their components, strategies, and motives. Beyond this, however, it does not offer a ready-made procedure for taking care of the reconstruction and deconstruction activity. Pictorial “texts,” such as paintings, sculptures, reliefs, photographs, and films, are also parts of discourse. According to Wolfgang Kaschuba, we do not as yet possess the proper theoretical and practical set of implements with the help of which we could appropriately “read” the meaning content or the sense of pictorial representation. In Kaschuba’s interpretation, “texts” would be written, oral, pictorial, and other objectified forms of representation out of which we extract meaning or to which we attach meaning by recognizing narratives of stories and meanings in them. Texts are the representations of reality since we can only understand or interpret something that we can perceive and decode linguistically and visually. Following the crisis of representations and the linguistic turn in the methodology of research, the linguistic processes of perception, interpretation and translation became especially important because writing already creates a new “reality” and it can also take us to the concept of culture being constructed by writing. The truth of observation will become a partial truth through the various ways and means of representation. Writing does not only represent culture but also constructs it and, for that reason, requires a self-reflexive approach from
the researchers. In Clifford Geertz’s interpretation, there are various cultural meanings and points of view coming together in texts, and researchers do not require an absolute power of interpretation. Thus, the narratives which I have determined as the direct topics of research I have defined as narratives that are also “texts” in the sense Kaschuba uses the term. In this sense, discourses are systems of narratives. Also, I have used the notion of representation in a phenomenological sense. Temporarily, I have put objective reality into parentheses, which we can thus recognize only in its various manifestations. To put it in another way, reality is the “deep structure” that has a large number of “surface structures” or representations.

III. Listing of the results as theses

Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge is separated from Romology as well as from general scholarship by the basic units of meaning creation, which are the thematic groups. The basic units of meaning creation in folk knowledge can be the thematic groups exactly because the texts are not formed simply by the presentation of the scholarly findings but by the ideas concerning the shared ethnic identity. The larger systems of thematic groups are the different versions of folk knowledge and ethnic identity at the same time. The analyses proving the validity of the interpretation model expanded to include folk knowledge have pointed out that the individual Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge textbooks in grade schools differ from one another. Ildikó Menyhért’s construction seems to correspond to the naïve, Ildikó Hegyi’s and József Ignácz’s construction to the lay or nonprofessional, while György Ligeti’s one to the expert cultural practice system. Ildikó Menyhért’s text belongs to the interpretation type of Romology, Ildikó Hegyi’s and József Ignácz’s text to that of folk knowledge, while György Ligeti’s one rather to the one of scholarly paradigms. Exact correspondences between cultural practices, interpretation types, and the various texts is not possible because, in Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge textbooks, the cultural practices and the interpretation types appear as individual formations. I have identified and separated from one another naïve, lay/nonprofessional, and expert/professional varieties of cultural practices. Romology, folk knowledge, and scholarly paradigms are the interpretation types of cultural practices all of which have played a part in the construction of folk knowledge textbooks.

The critical discourses generated by the identity scheme of Ildikó Menyhért are attempts at the transformation of Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge as an interpretation type, since the participants in the identity debate have also attached social and moral functions to the definition of
canonized information. Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge textbooks and Gypsy/Roma representation have not been identified as a self-sustained topic in the social context, and no extensive public discursive system has been created for it. In the course of the transformation of Gypsy/Roma identity, the fixation of the context could be observed in this relationship. During the period of the identity debate, the constructions of the media remained closed to the opinion of an alert audience and to the processes of social communication in a Gypsy/Roma representational and self-representational conflict. For the public, the thematizations of the institutional representatives of the media and the civil organizations, the social criticism, deconstruction, rejection, complementation, acceptation, and confirmation of which happened in the media background.

In the social, political, and scholarly discourse, the identity debate closed the first stage of identity schemes. After the 1990s, newer constructions of folk knowledge textbooks were institutionalized, which partly replaced the patterns of the former period. I have studied and described the identity schemes selected from the first period of Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge textbooks as model variations, in close connection with the disciplines of the scholarly discourse. As regards the patterns of the second period, I have modified the method of description and presented an overview of the ethnographical aspects of the scholarly discourse and the ethnographical connections of the identity constructions in the case of the newer folk knowledge textbooks. The ethnographical referencing system has also been dominant in the patterns of the second period of Gypsy/Roma folk knowledge textbooks.

The Gypsy representation of the 1893 Herrmann-list of Gypsies is an ethnographical, statistical, scholarly, and also ideological construction. A system of data and ideological elements, it used the opinions considered obvious in society as well as the ideology of a political and language-ethnic nation in its statistical explanations.

The Herrmann representation treated the “Gypsy issue” separately and presented it in relationship to issues of public administration, integration, and assimilation, following the traditions of enlightened absolutism. In the ethnographical descriptions of Zsigmond Móricz and Aladár Vende in the Borovszky-encyclopedia, Gypsies are oftentimes marginalized, appearing in the roles of folk tale characters with a strange vernacular or as entertainers in communal folk balls and wedding parties.
The narratives of the textual sources available in Debrecen’s Déri Múzeum are locally fixed Roma representations which cannot be classified unanimously as types of discourse. János Náni’s narratives are related to one another, even to the extent that oftentimes they are partial repetitions of each other. These are personal and social discourses, in the narratives of which ethnic identity has a definitive role. Besides the individual narratives of personal and social discourses however, the ethnographical discipline of scholarly discourse, several ethnic narratives of the ethnographical discipline, and the socialist narrative of the political discourse are also parts of the narrative system. Zsigmond Gaál’s narrative is primarily a part of the political discourse, while its statistical apparatus is obviously subjected to the openly declared political aims and the requirements of public administration. The separated local ethnic narrative of the ethnographical discourse is also dependent on this political discourse. Nándor Iváncsics’s narrative belongs to the scholarly discourse, among the narratives of the ethnographical discipline. This narrative gives a detailed presentation and documentation of a concrete life situation. However, the members of the community observed were not migrant Gypsies but rather those who temporarily leave their homes for the time period of taking care of a job. The observed lifestyle of this is occasional group of otherwise settled people is not the same as their normal lifestyle. There is no evidence to prove their relationship to primitive people. The narrative, with the exception ethnic anthropological and sexual stereotypes taken over from the social discourse and despite the archaizing intention of the scholarly discourse, is reliable in the ethnographical description of Gypsies and remains valid at the level of empirical topics.

Within the spatial system of the pictorial sources at Debrecen’s Déri Múzeum, there are no coherent local temporal systems of ethnographical Gypsy representations, since the number of occasions for taking photographs at a settlement and the number of photographs taken at such occasions are not sufficient for this. A greater degree of ethnographical relevance may be attached to the thematic descriptions that are precisely determined in space and time, as the majority of our photographs taken of Gypsies would be a part of various local and simultaneously thematic series.

In the thematic system of ethnographical Gypsy representations, there are three temporal stages. Initially, the interest of ethnographical photography did not turn definitely to the Gypsies, who appeared in this early stage only at the level of curiosity. In the collection of Déri Múzeum, the period before the regular collecting activity of ethnographical Gypsy photographs lasted until the end of the 1940s, for which reason there are only sporadic occurrences
of photographs taken of Gypsies in the ethnographical collection. Also, from the stage following the period of regular collecting activity, we have rather few photographs. In the ethnographical Gypsy collection of Déri Múzeum, it is only the time period between 1950 and 1966 that holds a relatively large number of precisely annotated photographs.

There seem to be several iconographical parallels between the historical types of photographs taken of Gypsies in Hungary and the Déri Múzeum collection of ethnographical photographs taken of Gypsies. However, there is no close chronological correspondence between the development of the types of photos and the appearance of iconographical motives. This means that the majority of ethnographical Gypsy representations of the museum may not be included in this iconographical system.

The ethnographical Gypsy representations of Déri Múzeum emerge as an ethnographical system connected to the field proper. More than half of the ethnographical Gypsy representations of Déri Múzeum belong to the category of the so-called szokásfotók [tradition or custom photos]. The first variety of these contain the photographs taken at wedding parties. The second variety comprises everyday, routinely executed individual and group activities. The third kind of tradition photo is the dance photo. This category contains 41% of the ethnographical Gypsy representations produced in this time period. The proportion of dance photos lends a folkloristic character to the ethnographical Gypsy representation system of Déri Múzeum.

In the ethnographical photographic material extant to us from the time period between 1950 and 1966, the proportion of the types of photographs as well as the use of photographic and ethnographical semantic techniques may indicate the personal preferences of the photographers and the ethnographers, the direction of their ethnographical interests, the individual determination of the collection, and the specific photographic, scholarly, or ethnographical school.

Among the photographic and ethnographical semantic techniques, the most frequently applied methods are those of generating series, set-up, idealization, archaization, exoticism, and condensation. Generating series and set-ups seem to be a basic tendency characteristic of the entire collection of ethnographical photography taken of Gypsies.
The interpretation problems of ethnographical photographs taken of Gypsies are the consequence of the fact that these photographs are coded in a multiple fashion. During the actual process of taking them as well as in the course of their reading or interpretation, there is a simultaneous presence of individual cultural codes coming from the fields of photography in general, ethnographical photography, ethnographical Gypsy photography, and those of the photographers and the observers of the photographs.

IV. Publications of the author related to the topic of the dissertation and manuscripts accepted for publication, with the indication of page numbers


2010b Kutatás a terepen. [Research on location] In Pinczésné dr. Palásthy Ildikó (ed.): Az adhatás gyönyörűsége és a ma öröme. [The pleasure of the ability of giving and the joy of today] 129-137. Debrecen: Kölcsey Ferenc Református Tanítóképző Főiskola [Ferenc Kölcsey Reformed Teacher Training College]


V. Further publications of the author of the dissertation and writings accepted for publication, with the indication of page numbers

2004c Az orvosi antropológia és az orvosi szociológia: az etnikum problémája. [Medical anthropology and medical sociology: the problem of ethnicity] In Dr. Szendrey Sándor (ed.): Tanulmányok [Studies]. 158-165. Debrecen: Kölcsey Ferenc Református Tanítóképző Főiskola. [Ferenc Kölcsey Reformed Teacher Training College]


2005d A Bazi nagy roma lagzi című médiaprodukció reprezentációja a Magyar Hírlap online-ban. [The representation of the media production My Big Fat Roma Wedding in Magyar Hírlap online] In Pap Tibor (ed.): Utak a nyilvánossághoz [Roads to publicity]. 1-20. ROMA CD-ROM. Szeged: Zenett Kiadó [Zenett Publisher]


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