

GELEM, GELEM LUNGONE DROMEJA – I HAVE WALKED A LONG WAY

The International Anthem of the 'Travelling People' – Symbol of a Nation?¹

Translated by Mike Delaney

This title deliberately contains some contradictions: To what extent can an anthem that is supposed to be the symbol of a nation also be international, and how can a people who have no territory be a nation?

The example of the Roma – a minority worldwide without its own territory – is particularly suited to questioning certain assumed attitudes and hypotheses related to nations, their symbols, and particularly to anthems.

ANTHEMS AS NATIONAL SYMBOLS

In the European nation state – the 19th century construct which has predominated until today in Europe – unity is propagated as national identity and ethnic homogeneity is associated with a specific territory. There are different ways of dealing with the historically derived and logically existent ethnic and religious diversity, but there is always one dominant culture, a state language and alongside them various non-dominant minorities. The only exception is the model of the multinational state of Switzerland. Whether the drive towards homogeneity is carried to extremes by also striving for ethnic purity depends on the respective political regime. As an example I would like to point to the relatively new nation states in

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1 This article has been published in German in the book *Die andere Hymne. Minderheitenstimmen aus Österreich* (see Hemetek 2005). It is here published in English by courtesy of the publisher, Österreichische Dialekt Autoren.

former Yugoslavia and ‘ethnic cleansing’, a cynical concept that we heard of far too often during the war in 1992.

All of these models of dominance need national systems so that people can identify with this artificial unity, a “nation as an imagined community” (Anderson 1993). These symbols also have the function of marginalising others. Signs and symbols are used as visible signals to represent a joint identity, a common past and also a future (Grbić 1997).

Emotions are important in this context. As symbols of this type, anthems have the additional characteristic of directly addressing the emotional level through their musical aspect.

If a national anthem is therefore a symbol for a nation, and if a nation presupposes a specific territory, then the Romani anthem is not an anthem, because the Roma are not a nation with a territory. On the other hand, however, if a common identity, a common history and future are to be symbolised as a form of differentiation from others, then *Gelem gelem*² could indeed have this function and quality.

It is, however, not possible to do justice to the phenomenon of *Gelem gelem* without taking a look at the history and social structure of the Roma, since there is not just one ‘*Gelem gelem*’, but many different variations of it. And *Gelem gelem* is an example for the fact that an anthem can also foster diversity and not just uniformity.

THE ROMA ANTHEM AS AN EXPRESSION OF COMMUNITY

First of all, an example of this anthem:

Text variation 1:

1. Ġelem, ġelem lungone dromeja
maladilem ŝukare romeja.
Ġelem, ġelem lungone dromeja
maladilem ŝukare romeja.
Chorus: Aj, aj, romalen, (aj romalen)
aj čhavalen. (2x)
2. Ćindem laće lolo dikhlo tursko
kaj voliv la, ačhel latar pusto.
Chorus

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- 2 There are different ways of spelling *Gelem gelem*, according to the specific Romani dialects.



Fig. 1 – Ensemble Milan Jovanović (referred to as Paganini), featuring vocals, violin, accordion, keyboards and guitar, Vienna, 8th June 1990. Recording: Helmut Frank; transcription: Albenia Pantcheva; source: Hemetek et al. 1992.

3. Ala voliv lake kale jakha
kaj si kale sar duj kale drakha.
Chorus

Translation³:

1. I have walked a long way
And I have met a beautiful Rom.
Chorus: Oh, you Roma, oh, you boys.
2. I bought her a red Turkish scarf,
Because I love her. She is supposed to have cursed it.
Chorus
3. Oh, how I love her dark eyes
Because they are as black as two grapes.

About the lyrics:

“I have walked a long way, I have met a beautiful Rom (or other happy Roma)”. Compared to the Austrian anthem ‘Land of the Mountains’ or the lyrics of other anthems, this is a rather surprising text. Usually these sing the praises of the beauty, size and historical achievements of one’s own country and the magnificent qualities of its inhabitants.

In spite of this, these lyrics do say a lot about the Roma, about their history and the structure of their society.

3 Translation by Ursula Hemetek and Mike Delaney.

A brief summary of their history: the history of the Roma is a story of persecution, which reached its horrible climax at the time of National Socialism when around 500 000 Roma were murdered in the Nazi concentration camps. The Roma originally came from India; the first evidence of their presence in Europe is from around 1100. The story of their migration has been roughly reconstructed on the basis of their language, but also on the basis of decrees against them (cf. Vossen 1983; Heinschink 1994, and others). This makes it clear that they were not welcome anywhere and were repeatedly driven away, and that it was not their *Wanderlust* which was responsible for their long travels, but the rejection they faced everywhere. Travelling is thus on the one hand a historical reality, but in our times it is a legend, because today 95 % of the Roma in Europe are settled. Travelling took place in individual groups on different routes. The different groups stayed for longer periods in various countries, and the cultural traditions of the respective majority had on the one hand an influence on their language – recognisable from the loan words – and on their traditional culture. There is neither a uniform Romani culture nor a uniform Romani music. The Romanes language has around 1 000 original words from Sanskrit; the remainder are loan words from different languages. There are an immense number of varieties of Romanes worldwide. The various Romani groups thus differ in terms of their respective history and their varieties of Romanes, but also through different customs, taboos and not least through their music. This diversity is further favoured by the fact that until recently the Romani culture was only passed on orally.

This situation results in different levels of identification (I am referring to collective identities): Firstly with their own family or clan, then with their own group, then with the people as a whole, then with the feeling of being different from the Gaže (non-Roma), then in part with the state in which they live and whose citizenship they possess. Great importance is still attached to the cohesion of the clan, which is revealed by frequent meetings, financial and emotional support, and various customs which honour an arriving guest (*pačiv*, see Hemetek 2001: 470–475). The social structure is often described in the literature as placing the collective far above the individual. “A Rom is nothing without his family, his clan” is a sentence that I often heard during my field research.

The lyrics therefore address the legend of travelling, and in addition the cohesion of the clan (“I have met a Rom/other Roma”): general values of the Roma culture worldwide. Differentiation is carried out through the other parameters. The dialect of Romanes used indicates which Romani group this is, as does the realisation of the music, as we will see now.

VARIATIONS OF THE ROMANI ANTHEM AS A REFLECTION OF DIVERSITY

There is no Romani music per se. For historical reasons, there are a large number of different styles, which include Sinti jazz, Flamenco or Hungarian gypsy music.

Gelem gelem is probably the only melody worldwide that is played and sung by so many different Romani groups. But the great differences lie in the way they play it. The only fixed elements in the many different variations are the first two lines of text presented earlier and the basic melody of the first part.

The Serbian version (fig. 1) also has different musical characteristics apart from the structure of the melody, which is articulated in a free rhythmical way, and from A and B (chorus). It is played by an ensemble featuring vocals, violin, accordion, keyboards and guitar.

The singer takes a background role, and the text is not understandable. The chorus is sung by two voices with the participation of the public.

This style of performance is not a characteristic of Romani music in general, but a regionally influenced one. One can clearly hear the Serbian influence, particularly with regard to the instrumental elements. The Romani anthem is articulated in Romani musical style.

This is completely different to the next example. This belongs to the vocal style of the Lovara, a Romani group that used to trade in horses and travelled throughout Austria in caravans until after the World War II (for more details see Halwachs 1999). The vocal style of the Lovara is of a type that can be found among this group of Roma worldwide. Characteristics of the 'slow songs' of the Lovara are: Free rhythmical articulation, easily understandable lyrics (a song always tells a story) solo recital with the involvement of the audience, improvisations and a particular structure of the final tones of the lines (for more details see Hemetek 2001: 293–328). The anthem was adapted to that effect. The melody line is preserved, but the lyrics are varied according to the situation. The singer 'talks' to the public, and expects reactions. The instrumental accompaniment retreats into the background. Different stylistic devices that arise from improvisation are employed in the structuring of the melody.

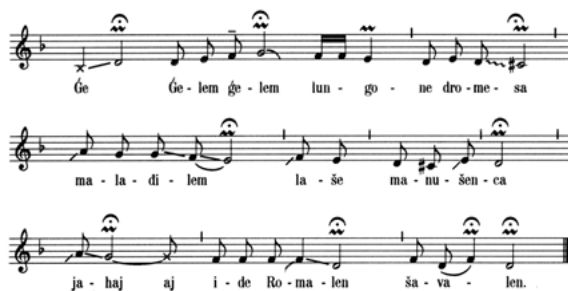


Fig. 2 – Rudi Mikula, vocals and accordion, Vienna, 26th June 1993. Recording and transcription: Ursula Hemetek; source: Institut für Volksmusikforschung und Ethnomusikologie.

A different text version of the Lovara is given below. Mišo Nikolić, the husband and accompanying musician of the singer Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos, has created new lyrics here that refer to the history of the Roma and relate their story in more detail.

1. Gelem gelem, lungone dromenca
maladilem e bute romenca.
Barvalenca taj vi e čorenca
taj vi lenge bute šavorenca.
Chorus: Aj, romalen, aj šavalen.
2. Aj romalen, katar tumen aven?
Katar aven romale butalen?
Amen avas anda e Indija,
sa le Rom sam sar jek familija.
Chorus
3. Aj romalen, kado drom sas pharo
kaj phirasas ando them, o baro.
Vurdonenca taj čore cerenca,
e asvenca taj bare dukhenca.
Chorus

Translation⁴:

1. I have walked long roads
And I have met many Roma.

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4 Translation by Mišo Nikolić, Ursula Hemetek and Mike Delaney.

- I have met rich and poor
And their many children too.
2. Roma, where do you come from?
Where do you come from, so many of you?
We come from India
We Roma are all like a big family.
3. Oh, Roma, it was a difficult road,
Which we have walked on this Earth.
With carts and shabby tents,
With tears and pain.

Lyrics: Mišo Nikolić, April 1994

The anthem has been adapted to a very particular group style here in order to fulfil the aesthetic expectations of a Lovara audience.

In the next example it is again a region that can be clearly heard. Oriental vocalisation and the use of melisms are striking here. Esma Redjepova is from Macedonia and sings the anthem in the typical Macedonian style. This is additionally complemented by a very individual artistic structure (see fig.3).

I could easily continue this list, for example with ‘Hungarian gypsy music’, where the chorus is phrased as a Csárdás, or a ‘Flamenco version’. But I think that the differences have already become clear.



Fig. 3 - Esma Redjepova and Ensemble Teodosievski, rehearsal for Magneten, 1993. Recording and transcription by Ursula Hemetek.

Source: Institut für Volksmusikforschung und Ethnomusikologie.

OBSTACLES TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF A 'NATIONAL' SYMBOL

In order to be able to judge to what extent this variety of melodies a uniform identity represents, or what sort of identity it represents, one has to investigate how the Roma use the anthem. In this context, it is important how the Roma treat music in relation to that which is 'their own' and that which is 'foreign'. Svanibor Pettan (2001) says something very apt about this that corresponds to my own observations:

Dispersed all over the world, having no nation-state of their own, and even lacking a strong sense of belonging to a national (Gypsy) body, Gypsies seem to personify conditions that are as far as possible removed from conditions a (conservative) folk music researcher would wish for his or her own ethnic group. Gypsy musicians do not perform one "Gypsy folk music" and even do not necessarily distinguish between own and adopted music. Neither the origin of tunes is relevant, nor their 'Gypsiness', but their aesthetic or market values. (Pettan 2001: 132)

In the practice of their music, the Roma thus elude the production of nationality through music in its normal form. The Romani anthem is therefore performed in such a way as the style of the musicians' demands, or depending on what they think will suit their audience. In spite of this, it does get played but in many contexts it is probably simply a piece of music which fits the audience and which can be used.

The history of its origin also speaks for the hypothesis of a certain amount of coincidence: In 1971 the first Roma World Conference took place in London with participants from all over the world, but predominantly from Europe. The President came from former Yugoslavia. This was probably why it was decided to use a traditional melody from his country of origin as an anthem. The lyrics are said to have been written by a certain Mr Jovanović. Apart from the first verse this original version is unfamiliar to me. However, it might not have been the same as the way I heard it in Vienna because in that case it just continued with the lyrics of a love song (see fig. 1).

At the beginning there was a desire to have a common 'national' symbol, simply because there are also such symbols in the world of the Gaže (the non-Roma). Subsequently, a carefree and extremely creative way of dealing with this 'national symbol' developed.

In Austria, this melody for the five main groups of the Roma only became important with the beginning of the political movement, and was introduced by Roma from the former Yugoslavia.

	SINTI	BGLD.-ROMA	LOVARA	KALDERAŠ	ARLJE
Emigrationsland	<i>S-Deutschland Tschechien</i>	<i>Ungarn</i>	<i>Ungarn Slowakei</i>	<i>Serbien</i>	<i>Mazedonien Kosovo</i>
Immigrationszeit	<i>um 1900</i>	<i>ab 15. Jhdt.</i>	<i>2.Hlfte 19. Jhdt. 1956</i>	<i>ab 1960er</i>	<i>ab 1960er</i>
Siedlungsraum	<i>primär Städte</i>	<i>Burgenland (oöst. Städte)</i>	<i>primär Raum Wien</i>	<i>Raum Wien</i>	<i>Raum Wien</i>

Fig. 4 – From Halwachs 1999: 125.

The following table shows the land of origin, settlement areas and time of settlement, but makes no claim to be exhaustive and should only provide an orientation. Comments can be found i.a. in Halwachs 1999 or Hemetek 2001.

The Burgenland Roma did not know the anthem previously but have recorded a pop version of it in the meantime (Rath 1999).

The Lovara have made a version that is centred on the lyrics (see above), and previously they did not like the melody. Now, however, it regularly appears among the songs performed by Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos, for example, who even called her latest CD after it (*Gelem, gelem*, Nikolić-Lakatos 2001).

As far as I know, the Sinti have not reacted in musical terms, at least not in Austria.

The Roma from the former Yugoslavia were those who brought the melody to Austria with them, but here its use as a ‘national symbol’ is also only taken half-seriously. In spite of this the anthem has become an ethnic symbol that is necessary in a struggle for political recognition in the world of the Gaže.

It is also undoubtedly useful as proof of a common identity. It is an obeisance to the way of thinking of the Gaže, and can always be brought out when ‘national’ symbols are needed.

This is made very clear by an example from 1994. It is the final scene from André Heller’s *Magnetan* (a Roma music show which brought Romani styles from throughout the world onto the stage). At the end, Esma Redjepova sings the Roma anthem *Gelem, gelem* together with all of the protagonists of the show. They celebrate what they have in common, ‘national’ unity. According to the stage concept, the respective groups were to appear one after the other, and would then stay on the stage and interact with each other musically or in dance. The anthem at the end should then represent the climax of their unity, because otherwise it was diversity that provided the focus of the show.



Fig. 5 – *The final scene from Magneteten.*

Source: The Magneteten programme 1994.

I am sure that Esma appreciates the anthem as a good piece of music. I am, however, not so sure that she sees it as a national symbol. André Heller, the director, certainly did, which is why he directed the finale in that way.

I have often heard the Romani anthem, in many different contexts and versions. Roma have never stood up or put their hands on their heart on those occasions, or developed the sort of solemnity and emotionality that is often attached to national symbols. Mozes Heinschink and I, two Gaže who identify with the Roma movement, did it once for fun at a Roma event, which led to laughs all round.

If there is any attempt at all to conjure up a feeling of nationhood, then it is always accompanied by a nod and a wink. This can be explained by the reasons given, and it makes the Romani anthem that much more likeable.

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