



Mahrime

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Mahrime means "ritually unclean" and forms a pair with the diametrically opposed term *užo*, *žužo* or *šušo* ("ritually clean"). The term deriving from Greek is used by many *Vlach* groups, by Balkan groups and northern groups. [Classification] In England and Wales *moxado* is used, in Poland *magerdó*. Both terms mean "besmirched" and go back to the Sanskrit word *mraks* ("smeared"). The *Sinti* describe the ritual uncleanliness with *palecido* ("neglected", "isolated") and *prast(l)o* ("infame", "outlawed").

The differentiation between *mahrime* and *užo* corresponds to the dualistic philosophy of life of the Roma, to classify the whole life into the classes of "good" and "bad" (e.g. *Rom* / *Gadžo* or *Devel* / *Beng*). This defines the internal borders between the genders, the ages and the Roma groups as well as the external ones between the Roma and the *Gadže* and this life and the hereafter.

Consequently, the idea of ritual uncleanliness represents an elementary component of the traditions of the Roma (*romanipe*). We can not speak for all Roma, however, as this may lead to undue generalisations and exoticism. Cleanliness rules are part of all world religions. They are anchored within the most important scriptures of Hinduism, the "Veda", as well as in Buddhism, in the food codex of the Koran and in the Old and the New Testament. For a long time the belief in the ritual uncleanliness of woman was prevalent within Christianity, and is still felt today. During menstruation and after giving birth to a child the woman was "unclean" and could be "delivered" only by a special blessing. Also within secularised occidental societies, there are elements of these religious beliefs.

As far as the historical background of *mahrime* is concerned there are different theories. The question, of whether the belief in the ritual uncleanliness laws represents a consequence of the caste system of their old Indian homeland of origin¹, can not yet be answered. It may also be possible that the contact with different religions and with other nomadic groups were of more decisive influence. In part, certain prohibitions and rules can be attributed to hygienic preventive measures, which later on were ritually excessively expressed (avoiding certain foods, cleaning rituals for illnesses). Taboos that control the relation between the genders on the other hand can be drawn back to social regulations. Either they were a reaction to an already existing hierarchy or they were meant to establish one. What is considered as clean or as unclean is defined by the one who has the power; like this he also consolidates his power.

The different historical, religious, social and cultural influences have resulted in a broad range of ideas within the different Roma groups. This heterogeneity becomes clear if we take the Austrian Roma groups as an example. The *Burgenland-Roma* do not have any taboos anymore, for the *Lovara* they exist only to a lessened extent, for the *Kalderaš* they still represent a central element of their personal and ethnic identity. In Northern Europe, it is evident that the idea of ritual uncleanliness has been maintained within many Nordic groupings even if over the course of the centuries slight modifications have been applied. This idea is still very present within the Finnish Roma (*Kale*) and the *Sinti*. For the Central groups (e.g. *Prekmurje-Roma* / *Burgenland-Roma* / *Servika-Roma*) it has probably never had such a relevance and is used only in part (e.g. *degeš* for the *Servika-Roma*)

For *Vlach*-Roma groups living traditionally the belief in ritual uncleanliness still plays a central role within everyday life. On the other hand, for many Muslim Balkan groups of which the traditional

¹ The contrast "clean" – "unclean" represents a central element within the caste system. By separating the clean (socially higher position) from the unclean (socially lower position) the genders as well as the castes are classified in a symbolic order. Uncleanliness is given, for example when someone touches a member of a lower caste; this uncleanliness can be "deleted" only by certain cleaning rituals.



socio culture is also completely intact, the *mahrime/užo* ideas are present only in a reduced way. This draws back to the fact that according to moderate Islam the cleanliness rules were of less importance than in Christianity.

In order to maintain these cultural norms it is less the issue of whether the groups live a nomadic or a settled life, but rather how homogeneous the group is, and how intense the contact between the different families is. If there is no group internal control then the group internal behavioural rules dissolve. In particular, the Holocaust destroyed the network of extended families and consequently the traditional socio culture of many Roma groups. The Austrian *Lovara* groups still severely observed the different taboos in the period between World War I and World War II. After World War II they were gradually dissolved. Also, forced assimilation in the former Eastern block countries, and the influence of western industrialised society caused a change of values, and consequently changed the cultural norms. The passing on of traditional culture is nearly impossible for those hundreds of thousands of Roma who, due to their social exclusion, and due to racism are impoverished and are pushed towards becoming a group on the fringe of society. These are the reasons why presumably the idea of ritual uncleanliness is of relevance only for part of the Roma population.

Mahrime-rules

The numerous mahrime-rules can be classified in the following fields:

1. Female body

The lower parts of the woman's body, and in particular the genitals, are considered as *mahrime* and in a transferred sense they are the original source of all ritual uncleanliness. Everything that comes into contact with the lower part of the female body, or with her clothes, becomes *mahrime* as well. If a woman accidentally touches an item of everyday use, this item is considered *mahrime* and will not be used anymore. Also women's and men's clothing is to be strictly separated, as are the associated items for them, such as soap and washing powder. When a nomadic group was camping next to a river strict rules for the use of water had to be observed. In many groups it was usual that men and women had to eat separately from each other.

During menstruation and after having given birth ritual uncleanliness is at its most intense level. For the Austrian *Kalderaš* still today, it is usual that a woman after having given birth must not touch any dishes of the men and furthermore she must not shake their hands. If this rule is not observed the man becomes *mahrime*. This is a condition that can last for an uncertain period and according to the *Kalderaš* is unlucky. For the English Romanies it was usual until modern times that the woman giving birth had to withdraw to a separately equipped birthing tent, and after the birth had to remain isolated from all male members of the family, for up to three or four weeks.

For the *Sinti* the period of isolation for mother and child lasted until the baptism and was concluded only by the benediction of the church. If one considers the former rules of the Catholic Church it becomes clear that these rituals were not Roma specific custom and are still not. In rural communities it was unwritten law until up to the period between the two World Wars that mothers were not allowed to participate in the baptism of their child, as they had not yet been "given the last blessing". They needed a special blessing in order to re-establish the status of cleanliness.



The Muslim *Sepečides* in Turkey where the *mahrime*-rules are also from a long tradition, do not believe in the ritualised soiling of the woman during menstruation and after having given birth. During this period *Romnja* enjoy a special esteem. For the *Sepečides* women are mahrime only when they are working as prostitutes, have a lover, or if they do not perform the ritual washings (*maxarimaskoro abdesi* – "the cleaning from the uncleanness"). If there is *mahrimos* the affected persons are stigmatised. They must not pray nor bake bread.

Ti mangesa tuj, sare derjavasar nanjuv! - Na paklandinesa!

"If you want you can wash with the entire sea! – And you would not get clean!"

For the *Sepečides*, the ritual uncleanness can be caused also by not observing the step rules. For example, the toilet must be entered with the right foot and the bath with the left one.

The Austrian *Kalderaš* differentiate also between *mahrime* and *pekelimos* (*pêkêlimos/pokelimos*). *Mahrime* is given if there is direct physical contact, (e.g. shaking hands), or indirect (passing of dishes) between unclean women and men. *Pekelimos* on the other hand can be passed on by eye contact or by the vicinity of unclean persons or items; its effect is considered worse and more sustainable.

Pêkelil tu de dural.

"She soils you from far away."

Pêkelimos si sar jek usálin.

" *Pêkelimos* is like a shadow."

For example, a man is considered *pekelime* when he passes under a clothesline with women's underwear on it or when a *Romni* overpasses him on the pavement and walks in front of him. If a woman lifts her skirt and her gender becomes visible while she is disputing with a man the worst form of *pekelimos* has happened. For the *Kalderaš* unluckiness caused like this lasts much longer than a soiling caused by *mahrimos*.

The Polish *Kalderaš* on the other hand use *mahrime* for items, *pekelime* for people:

O peklimos si manušíkano, aj o mahrimos si pe aver buća.

"*Peklimos* concerns the person, *mahrimos* concerns other things."

Palecido corresponds to what the term *pekelimos* means for the *Kalderaš*. *Prasto* represents the *Romanes* (*Sintitikes*) equivalent for *mahrimos*. Similar to the *Kalderaš* the *Sinti* consider women as unclean during menstruation and during pregnancy. A dish, which is touched during this period, is referred to as *prasto*.

The Finnish *Kale* (*Mustalainen*) do not know this differentiation but use much stricter *mahrime*-rules than the *Kalderaš* do. A *Romni*, for example must not be above a *Rom*. When there is a group of *Kale* of both genders in a store of more floors, the women must not go to the first floor when the men are



on the ground floor. When a *Rom* and a *Romni* go up a stair the man has to go in front, when they are going down a stair, the woman has to go in front.

For *Vlach* groups severe offences against the rules were subject to the Roma jurisdiction *kris*. The famous Polish Roma poet Papusza was judged *mahrime* by a *kris* and as a consequence she was excluded from the group. She was accused for complicity with the Gadžo Jerzy Ficowski who in 1953 supported, and had to support the administrative policy regarding the settlement of the Roma in the first edition of his book ““Wieviel Trauer und Wege. Zigeuner in Polen” (“Gypsies in Poland”). Papusza was avoided by her group and spent the remaining 34 years until she died in complete seclusion.

As mentioned before, all ritual cleanliness rules are to be considered in relation to the traditional social structure and with the respective religion. The belief in the uncleanness of the female body is based on a patriarchal order of society that differs from religion to religion. In contrast to the religious praxis of the non-Roma, the belief in the mystic abilities of women is much stronger. This "mystic power" assigns to the woman a certain power and protects her private life. A further difference can be seen in the fact that the women's status increases after a certain age. Her sexuality is not seen as a threat anymore and therefore it is no longer necessary to regulate it.

2. Hygiene and food

It is not allowed to keep or wash clothes in receptacles, which are used to prepare the food. Furthermore, they must not come into contact with women's skirts. It is the custom with the Austrian *Kalderaš* that in no case would a towel be used as tea towel. Even if the traditional Roma groups live a very modest life, great importance is attached to this measure. If cutlery comes into contact with unclean substances (e.g. body excretions) or if they fall on an unclean place they become *mahrime*. In these cases it is impossible to re-establish the status of cleanness. Even if the item in question is a golden plate it remains unclean and is not used any longer.

3. Illness and death

As already illustrated at the example of giving birth the transition periods of the human body are considered as unclean processes and are dealt with by certain cleaning rituals. The belief that a ritual uncleanness can be transferred by the death of a close person is considered most by many Northern groups (e.g. *Sinti*) and is closely linked to the *mulo* -belief. Doctors and midwives are referred to as unclean professions and are avoided if possible. It is frowned upon by some *Sinti* groups to move to an apartment located below a doctor or a midwife. Also the Austrian *Lovara* classify those professions that have to do with illness and death as *mahrime*. The Austrian *Kalderaš* on the other hand do not know these "unclean professions".

When a relative dies in his apartment it must be thoroughly cleaned or it is sold. Still some decades ago it was usual for some groups (especially for Northern groups) to burn the caravan and the clothes of a dead person.

4. Relationship with the non-Roma



The reason why many traditionally living Roma groups aim at having quite little contact with the non-Roma is mainly of a social kind. If one considers the history of persecution of the Roma in Europe it does not surprise that the Roma meet the world of the *Gadže* only with mistrust. Up to a certain extent this isolation is chosen by themselves, closely linked to the consciousness to be different and to be superior to the non-Roma in terms of culture. The question whether the Roma made a virtue out of the necessity for isolation or whether they expressed their own culture independently from the offence by the non-Roma is hard to be answered. It is of primary importance to maintain and to support their own culture and their own ethnic consciousness.

In particular the *Vlach* groups and the Central groups know a series of ritualised behaviours that characterise the contact to the non-Roma. At the example of the Polish Roma poet Papusza it was illustrated to which extent certain taboos were considered. Also in this context it is to be taken into account that the women's borderline to the world of the *Gadže* is drawn much earlier, and that the cases where these borderlines are offended are punished in a much more restrictive way compared to the men. For many Roma groups for example, relationships between men and non-Roma women are allowed whereas relationships between women and non-Roma are severely prohibited.

Irrespective of gender, a dependent work that leads to a dependency on the *Gadže* is avoided if possible. Also invitations for meals expressed by *Gadže* involve the risk to become *mahrime* because the fulfilment of the above-mentioned rules is not guaranteed. In general, many groups who have a great consciousness in terms of tradition consider the eating customs of the *Gadže* as incompatible with the customs of the Roma. Mongo Stojka reports that in the period between World War I and World War II, Austrian *Lovara*, who were still leading a nomadic life, threw away the dishes from which *Gadže* had eaten when they were given food for reasons of pity. Basically, the waste of the *Gadže* is considered as *mahrime*.

It is always to be taken into account that such rules are valid only as long as the living conditions allow them. When *mahrime* is judged there is always the risk of culturalisation. The in part seemingly exotic taboos and rules are over-emphasised mostly at the expense of social factors. In particular, the example of the separation from the *Gadže* clearly shows how much the fulfilment of the ritual cleanness rituals depends on the living standard of the respective group. Thousands of eastern Austrian Roma live at the fringes of the waste disposal sites of the non-Roma and live on the sale of the recyclable waste items.



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