



Names of Roma

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nav, m. (Ind.) – name

In every human society one must somehow identify individual persons: men, women, children. The shortest and most basic identification is their names. Among Slovak Roma three types of basic names are used:

- family name (i.e., the family name of the father or mother)
- Romani name (nickname)
- *Gadžo* name (personal/ first name)

Family name (i.e. the family name of the father or mother)

The family name shows from which clan (the mother's or father's) a person comes from. Some of these family/clan names are: *Badžo*, *Badi*, *Červeňák*, *Daniel*, *Holomek*, *Horváth*, *Mirga*, etc. etc. Even today, neither parish priests nor official institutions recognise a Roma marriage or marital oath – although earlier, when young people took their oaths, they grew old together and stayed together until they died. (They say: "When a couple gets married, may they live together until death does them part".)

Only if young people took their oaths in a church or in some official institution was their marriage recognised. *Gadže* considered children born after an "official wedding" legitimate. They were registered (in the registry office and on their identification papers) under their fathers' family name. Children who were born before an "official wedding" were considered illegitimate and were registered under their mothers' name.

It still happens that one or two older children have (literally, "write themselves") their mother's family name and their younger sibling have their father's.

If we want to ask a Rom what his family name is, we say, literally, "How do you write yourself?"

In 1761, the Empress Maria Theresia issued an assimilation edict, which, among other rules, ordered Gypsies to take Christian names (personal or first names and family names). Since that time, many Roma have *Gadžo* names.

Family names and their etymology

- Slovak: *Červeňák*, *Haluška*, *Holub*, *Klempár*, *Kováč*, *Lacko*, *Ščuka*, *Zima*, etc.
- Hungarian: *Horváth*, *Taragoš*, *Tokár*, *Lakatoš*, *Čonka*, *Rác(z)*, *Žiga*, etc.
- Greek: *Demeter*
- Romani: Many Slovak Roma have family names which are "pure" Romani. They fall into two main groups: (a) "modern" – with transparent meanings which we understand and (b) very ancient, whose "Indian" meaning remains hidden to us, so-called untransparent.

(a) transparent: We can again separate transparent family names into two groups: (aa) nominative and (ab) vocative.

- (aa) nominative: *Banga/Bango*, *Lolo*, *Mač(h)o*, *Ga(d)ži*, etc.



- (ab) vocative: *Kaleja*, *T(h)uleja*, *Č(h)ureja*, etc. When we greet or call someone, we use the vocative ("calling case"). Once, when a parish priest wanted to register a *Rom* in the official registry, he carefully asked him "What do they call you?" And the *Rom* carefully answered: "*Fatso!*" The priest did not know *Romani* and so he registered that name – in the vocative form.

(b) untransparent: Ancient Indian untransparent family names are vastly interesting. They can attest to the social level of the Roma's ancestors who left their ancient homeland, India. In India, even today, names like *Badi*, *Mirga*, *Džugi* or *Karela* are connected with either individual *jatis* (castes) or with *gotras* (exogamous groups within *jatis* .)

Many Indian family names are in reality caste names. A man who produces and sells *tél* (oil) is named *Téli* (oil producer). *Téli* is his family name as well as his caste name. *Džóši* comes from the word *džotiši* (astrologer) and a caste of astrologers are called *Džóši*. *Sapéré* (*sap* – snake) are members of a caste that perform with snakes and can also cure poisonous snakebites.

Falling within "Indian caste names" are, for example, *Badi* (Bodi), *Džugi*, perhaps *Dombi* or *Bihari*.

- *Badi* (Bodi)¹

The *Badis* are an ancient pre-Aryan caste. The ancestors of the *Badis* lived in India during the time of the Mohenjo-Daro civilization (3000 BC-1500 BC), before travelling Indo-Europeans invaded India from the north. Today clans (subcastes) of *Badis* are scattered around northern India. In some areas they are professional circus performers; elsewhere they live from their music. [Origins of Roma]

Even among Roma there were many groups (clans) who traditionally were circus performers. Byzantine documents, for example, discuss how there came from the east great artistes whom nobody had seen or known before, and the people of Byzantium were amazed at the performances of these unknown people. [Byzanz]

The same professions of the *Badis* and some of the Roma clans (music, circus artistry) indicate the connection between the Roma family name *Badi* and the Indian *jati* of the *Badis*.

(viz. The legend of the *Badis*, "Beautiful Sanchari" in the appendix.)

- *Džugi*

The term *džugi* comes from the Sanskrit word *yoga*. *Yoga* is an ancient Indian philosophical system which proclaims the union of the human soul with the supreme being. The responsibility of each person is to discover the essence of God within himself. *Yoga* does not recognise that any caste is "higher" or "better", and another "lower", "subservient" or "worse".

The *Džugi* earlier created a caste which believed in this philosophy. With time, the *Džugi* began to live as "holy beggars" and some of them took to the occult – which they still practice today.

- *Bihari*

¹ Variants of names such as *Badi*/*Bodi*, *Goral*/*Gorol*, *Tuleja*/*Thuleja* may have appeared because of the handwritings in the registry office books. Every official wrote his own way and sometimes, for example, the letter "a" might be mistaken for an "o," etc. Besides, officials who did not know *Romani* might have misunderstood.



The Bihari *jati* also belongs among the pre-Aryan castes which made their living from circus performing and music. However, the etymology of the Roma family name *Bihari* may also be Hungarian because there is a region in Hungary called Bihár.

What is a *gotra*? It is an exogamous group within a *jati*. A *jati*, or caste, is endogamous, which means that a boy can choose as his bride only a girl who comes from the same *jati* as he. (This law is still preserved among traditional Roma groups.) On the other hand, he must be prevented from marrying a close relative because such a union could result in a retarded child. Therefore the **gotra institution** was established. A boy from one *gotra* may not marry a girl from the same "gotra", but must search for his bride elsewhere, in another *gotra*. Each *gotra* has its own name, which might be the name of a plant, a tree, an animal, etc. Let us look at ancient Roma family names that may have a connection with Indian *gotra* names.

- Badžo

The etymology connects the term *Badžo* with the verb *badža-*, which means "to play" (*te bashavelin* Hindi). We see that the *Romani* form *bašavel* is very close to the Hindi verb.

Badže are a *gotra* within the *Bandžara* caste. *Bandžara* are a very ancient, travelling caste that made their living in trade. Primarily, they sold salt. Their customers were not only ordinary village and town people, but also the royal army.

- Mirga

The term *mirga* comes from the Sanskrit *mrgah* – antelope. The *mirga gotra* belongs to the *Baniya* caste, and *Baniya* are also members of a caste of tradesmen.

Some specialists imagine that the Roma family name *Mirga* comes from the Hungarian word *mergez-* to poison. We prefer to stay with the Indian etymology.

- Karela

A *karela* is a bitter vegetable, particularly favored in the state of Radjasthan. *Karela gotras* are found among *jatis* of *Dom* musicians and also among castes of tradesmen.

- Goral

Goral is a term for a mountain goat which lives in Rajasthan. *Goral* denotes a *gotra* within the *Rajputs*, the second highest social level. *Rajputs* were soldiers, fighters who protected the land from Muslim conquerors.

The Roma family name *Goral* can have a connection with the Indian *gotra*, but it can also be a variant of a family name with Slovak etymology: *Gorol*. – Horal, a man who lives in the mountains.

There are still more of such ancient Roma family names. We have pointed out just a few of them.

These family names are present mainly among Roma who came to Slovakia from Poland. One part of them have continued to live in Poland; they are called *Bergitska Roma*. Another group settled in northern Slovakia around Kežmarok, Poprad, etc.

Gadžo name



Gadžo names are the Christian (first/personal) names registered in official documents (on identification papers, in registry offices; on passports, etc.) In the past, it was very rare to find a Rom with a *Gadžo* name. Very few Roma called their children or each other by their *Gadže* (official) names. Some small children did not even know their *Gadže* names when they started school. When their teacher asked them, "What's your name?" they would give their Roma names because their parents, siblings and other Roma called them only by those names. Some teachers complained that Gypsy children were "stupid" because they didn't even know their own names. In reality, it is the teachers who were not sufficiently educated because they did not know Roma culture, that is, the culture of their pupils.

It can happen, though, that the *Gadžo* and *Romani* name is the same.

In the past, when most of the Roma still lived in Slovakia, almost every Romani family had its "*Gadžo* peasant woman" and almost every farming family had its "Gypsy woman". Many Roma chose their farmer or peasant woman to be a godparent to their children. Then the Roma would give their children the *Gadžo* name of those godparents.

Roma name

Roma use their Roma name when they speak to each other. In the past, there was not one Rom who would not have had a Roma name. Even today, it is hard to find even one.

When a child is first born, he is spoken of as "the little one", "the tiny one", because his character is not yet determined. Only when he has grown a bit does his Roma name usually reveal itself.

Relatives determine the Roma name for a child in various ways.

The name can reflect a personality trait or something about the appearance of the child: *Kalo*(Black), *Cikňi* (Little), *Šuki* (Slender), *Papin* (Silly), *Pušomori* (Little Flea).

Husa (Goose) is a *Gadžo* invective; a silly woman is called a *Husa*. Among Roma, however, "Husa" is said about a child who is beautiful, white as a goose.

Nor is "Little Flea" a nasty name. It is used for a small, slim girl who has a good attitude towards working and dancing.

The Roma author Tera Fabiánová was called *Baro Šero* (Big Head) or "Barešereskeri" (Big Headed) because she never behaved like other children and always did whatever she wanted. The author Gejzo Demeter was called "Buchlo Nakh" (Broad Nose) because his nose really was broad – but, naturally, he never got angry when people called him this.

Many Roma named their children after relatives: for someone who was held in high regard or who was a good musician or whom the parents particularly loved or whom the children resembled.

The author Ilona Lacková informs us that Roma of Velký Šariš named their children after Jews because there was a brotherly relationship between Jews and Roma. Besides, Jews were rich, and Roma believed that a Jewish name would bring them money.



Nowadays, many Roma take names from television, e.g. Sandokan, Angelika, James Bond, and goodness knows who else.

Some names are very funny. Gejza Demeter told about how his father was called *Majpejl'omas*. Why? Whenever he had a bit too much to drink and couldn't stand on his own two feet, he exclaimed, *Majpejl'omas*, which means, "I almost fell down!" This exclamation became his lifelong Roma name.

An "other name" (*aver nav*)

An "other name" is a Roma name with a specific function. Many Roma have forgotten this function, but in Roma settlements around Snina and Zbudské Dlhé, Roma traditionally still have an "other name".

An "other name" protects a child from illnesses and impure forces. Let's say that a child is named *Gejza*, but his mother calls him *Toňu*. *Gejza* is often kept secret from other Roma. It can happen that some illness may appear, for example *oja* (epilepsy), and this illness wants to possess the child. It looks for a child named *Toňu*, the name by which his parents and the other Roma call him. But no such *Toňu* exists. *Toňu* is merely the "other name" for the child. The illness does not know that the child's real name is *Gejza* because the name *Gejza* has been kept secret. Therefore, the illness does not find the child and cannot hurt him.

The legend of Beautiful Sanchari of the Badi clan

The people of the Badi clan were great circus performers. They could dance in the air on a high tightrope attached to two poles. They could stand on their heads on a galloping horse. Four or five men could stand on each other's shoulders. They could jump or spin in the wind. God only knows what they could do. They thrilled their audiences. But the greatest attention was paid to the beautiful, charming young girl, Sanchari. She danced on the tightrope like the wind, like fire, and she played the *sarangi*, an Indian violin-like instrument, and sang so beautifully that she melted the heart of everyone who heard her.

The Badis wandered around northern India from village to village, from town to town, and performed. Once they came to the town of Jodhpur in the state of Rajasthan. Their reputation for excellence had preceded them and so even the rajah's son, Sanjay, came to see them.

The moment Sanjay saw Sanchari, his heart was filled with love. And when Sanchari caught sight of the prince, she knew tht she could never love anyone but him.

At the end of the Badis' performance, Sanjay joined Sanchari and they disappeared into the jungle. They swore that they would never leave one other.

Alas, their love did not remain a secret. When Sanjay's father, the rajah, found out that his son wanted to marry a wandering dancer, he was so furious that he nearly had a stroke. He wanted the Badis thrown out of town and his son locked in the madhouse. On the other hand, he did not want his son to die of grief or really go mad. He, therefore, called his ministers and asked for their advice.



The ministers advised him and considered this and that – until finally the devil himself whispered in their ears the evil deed they should do.

The following day the ministers presented the prince with a golden tightrope to give to Sanchari. Sanjay was overjoyed. He thought this meant that his father agreed to permit him to marry the woman he loved.

He gave the golden tightrope to the Badis, and Sanchari's father tightened it high in the air between two poles.

Sanjay did not know that the rope had an incision in the middle.

Sanchari jumped up onto the rope and danced as she had never in her life danced before. She danced in the air and it seemed as if her beautiful little feet weren't even touching the rope.

When, however, she got to the middle, the rope snapped and the sweet girl fell from that great height onto the hard floor. She died instantly.

Sanjay ran to her. When he saw what had happened, he did not hesitate. He drew his sword, thrust it into his heart, and fell down dead beside his beloved.

When Sanjay's father learned of the death of his son, he went where no one could see him and cried his heart out. But it was too late for tears.

The rajah had the two innocent, beautiful young people burned (for, in India, they cremate the dead) together and then he had a memorial built in their honour in the centre of the town. When morning came, two roses had grown there.