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**Title:** Roma Communities in Italy: The Table as a Formative Space between Self and Community

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# Roma Communities in Italy: The Table as a Formative Space between Self and Community

**abstract** | *This research serves as a launching point for the cultural study of the Roma communities' dietary habits in Italy. Roma, as I define it here, signifies the semi-itinerant populations of South Asian descent more commonly known as "Gypsies." The Roma are of great importance to food studies given the unique methods of cultural preservation within this ethnic group and the scarcity of previous studies on the culture, especially in regards to food. In this essay I investigate how the Roma use food to define the self in contraposition to non-Roma communities and move from a focus on traditional Roma cuisine toward a broader analysis of the gastronomic "contaminations" between Roma and non-Roma populations, traditional culinary knowledge, and gender roles. The qualitative aspects of this research highlight a community rich with gastronomic traditions. In contrast to the Roma's dirty or dangerous media image throughout Europe, their cuisine echoes those of other minorities that have struggled to maintain their identities in hostile environments in its expression of the eternal duality between purity and impurity, body and mind.*

**keywords** | *Roma cuisine, food and segregation, food taboos, food and gender, Roma culture*

**INTRODUCTION** Meals are not just occasions where people eat and satisfy their biological needs. Instead, meals are meeting places where diverse groups come to know the "other" better, where social capital is accrued, and where networks of trust are built. Without this common moment, two communities may live in the same territory but remain culturally and psychologically isolated.<sup>1</sup> Such is the case for the Roma communities in Italy. Roma are the most common minority throughout Europe with around six million people belonging to the Roma ethnic group in the European Union.<sup>2</sup> Arriving from Asia more than five centuries ago, the Roma have retained the majority of their cultural traditions, from music to traditional family structures, through a rigid social code. This self-isolationism is often claimed to be the main reason for their "backwardness" or incompatibility with "modern society"; however, generally very little is known about this community.

Given the dearth of research on Roma food traditions, in this paper I compare Roma cuisine to that of the Jewish people, another religious/ethnic group that has historically used food taboos and traditions in order to keep intact their cultural identity in a hostile environment. Indeed, the more I immersed myself in the Roma community, the more I found similarities to the Jewish tradition and experience: both share the concepts of purity and impurity<sup>3</sup> and the histories of "forced" or diasporic migrations. Moreover, both groups experienced Nazi persecution during the Second World War (more than 500,000 Roma were killed in concentration camps, and to these days the Holocaust is referred to as

the *Porrajmos*, meaning the "big devouring," in *Romani*, the Roma language).

I acknowledge that the comparison with Jewish food traditions serves only as a starting point to better contextualize the food habits and traditions among Roma. This comparison is done in order to study the Roma survival strategies of avoiding cultural assimilation by the dominant group; how these strategies structure social organization, and whether food rules play a role in maintaining the social and physical boundaries between populations of Roma and *Gagès* (or *Gadgès*, the *Romani* word used to refer to non-Roma). As in the case of the diasporic Jewish community, having such strict rules about what foods or cooking methods were allowed and forbidden often allowed Jewish communities to preserve their boundaries with respect to majority groups.<sup>4</sup> From this intercultural comparison of food and foodways and the practices of boundary maintenance between social groups, I move to an intracultural one, focusing internally on how food rules structure and reproduce gender roles within the Roma community. In this paper I hope to lay the foundation for further cultural research of this rich yet unexplored (and very underappreciated) gastronomic culture.

This study is organized as follows. The next section will provide the theoretical background and the literature supporting this study in terms of food and identity construction. This section follows the historical background of the Roma population and how this history affected the present situation of segregation. After the presentation

of the methodology used in the analysis, I show the main findings of the qualitative research, moving from the concept of purity and impurity and food among Roma and how this was incorporated into their culinary techniques in order to preserve their culture and identity, to ghettoization and its implications for culinary traditions, and, finally, the role of Roma foodways in reproducing gender roles and the role of women in keeping the community pure through food preparation.

### **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE**

**REVIEW** The works of anthropologists Mary Douglas, Claude Levi-Strauss, Lucy Long, Arjun Appadurai, and Carole Counihan provide a fertile theoretical framework for analyzing food taboos among Roma communities. In structuralism—a body of scholarship that tries to study reality on the basis of structural relationships—the conceptualization and preparation of food is one of the main acts that differentiates humans from animals: cooking stands between culture and nature. As expressed by Levi-Strauss and his famous tripolar gastronomic system (the raw, the cooked, and the rotted), “There is no society without a language, nor is there any which does not cook in some manner at least some of its food...The raw constitutes the unmarked pole...the cooked is a cultural transformation of the raw, whereas the rotted is a natural transformation.”<sup>5</sup>

Food shapes our identity as human beings, and through the reiteration of meals, it preserves and reconfirms social hierarchies and customs from the individual to the national level; in Appadurai’s words, “Food is a highly condensed social fact.”<sup>6</sup> In his essays about national Indian cuisine, Appadurai thoroughly explains how food and food taboos in India (and among the Roma communities, as I will show in the next paragraphs) are linked to moral and social statuses at both group and individual levels, creating distinctions between economic and social classes in addition to between women and men. At the same time, Appadurai shows how the act of eating together is not only a “reproduction of intimacy” but also the reiteration of a social structure.<sup>7</sup> This is especially true for groups that live in an environment of social exclusion or in an ethnic enclave, such as the Roma or the migrants described by Keeler whose foodways “not only demarcate borders of ethnic difference, but [are] also tied in strong and continuing ways to practices of exclusion and the maintenance of insider status.”<sup>8</sup>

The work of Mary Douglas is particularly relevant to this study, especially when analyzing the system of food and sexual taboos among Roma communities. As Douglas has argued, food taboos play a key role in explaining

how a specific society and its vision of the universe are constructed; therefore, through the study of what food is considered taboo and inedible among Roma, it is possible to have a better knowledge of their “foregrounding processes by which their universe is classified and known.”<sup>9</sup>

In relation to gender roles among Roma, Carole Counihan’s studies on food and gender identity are also very useful. Given that “the power relations around food mirror the power of sexes in general,” through the investigation of the role of specific food taboos and food consumption rules, it has been possible to draw more clearly the power and social position of both men and women within the Roma community and with respect to the rest of society.<sup>10</sup>

In order to address the migratory history of the Roma and their gastronomic tradition, as well as how they have incorporated traits from different cultures while maintaining their identity, I am using Roland Barthes’s study on ethnic groups and boundaries. Barthes shows that while boundaries can exist, “stable, persisting, and often vitally important social relations are maintained across boundaries, and are frequently based precisely on the dichotomized ethnic statuses,” such as the contraposition of Roma and Gagès.<sup>11</sup> This dichotomization has survived even in presence of “mobility, contact, and information.”

Finally, Lucy Long’s concept of culinary “Otherness” served in defining the boundaries of Roma culinary traditions in comparison to the majoritarian cuisine as a sort of resistance to their state of subordination; here, “Otherness” means how “the humans define the world according to their own socially constructed perceptions of reality, perceptions that divide the world into the known and the familiar as opposed to the unknown and the other.”<sup>12</sup> In this essay, different foods will be considered strange or exotic, depending on whether the subjects are the Roma or the Gagès, reinforcing the idea that specific group culture and traditions determine the status of a food. In addition, Long’s analysis of food culture as dynamic is in line with the constantly changing and adapting Roma culinary culture. I make use of her definition of “cuisine” as a “publicly articulated set of dishes, ingredients, styles, aesthetics, and mind-sets that are felt to represent a group’s identity through food.”<sup>13</sup>

To date, scholarly research has approached the *Romanés* communities from different perspectives. In Italy, much of the existing literature on Roma is geared towards studying the effects of anti-Roma policies, or how the media portrays the Roma community, with only few scholars approaching the subject more holistically and with a historical and

anthropological angle, such as Leonardo Piasere and Santino Spinelli.<sup>14</sup> Many documentaries and case studies focus on the poor “socio-environmental phenomena affecting the Roma—such as forced adoptions and exposure to health hazards.”<sup>15</sup> Case in point is the housing “emergency” that was spurred by the arrival of Roma from ex-Yugoslavia and Romania after the fall of Communism and the subsequent adjustment toward a post-socialist economy, which resulted in overcrowding, lack of schooling of Roma children, and the lack of integration or assimilation more generally (which is cast as a positive imperative).

Elsewhere, as in France or in the United Kingdom, the approach is more anthropological, and academics have widely studied the Roma’s culture, especially their language, music, and other arts. However, food has been historically understudied by scholars, with the exception of Jean-Luc Poueyto in France and Spinelli in Italy.<sup>16</sup> Even so, these studies on Roma dietary habits generally focus on recipes and ingredients rather than cultural meaning or ethnic identity formation. While I will also address the main ingredients of Roma cuisine, in this paper I move beyond the surface level to ask and analyze why certain ingredients have been used intensively while others have been forbidden, and what this tells us about the social construction of identity.

Moreover, the comparison between Jewish and Roma culture is not a totally new concept. Scholars from various fields have noticed the striking similarity between Roma and Jewish societies in terms of cultural preservation, using the proliferation of research on Jewish traditions to shed light on and thereby enrich the lesser-known Roma traditions with new meaning. For example, Calum Carmichael compares the Jewish and Roma system of laws, arguing that both groups developed distinct social codes in a hostile environment that necessitates laws that would which “serve the community’s need to preserve its sense of identity.”<sup>17</sup>

Yet, one of the main challenges in exploring the food and foodways of Roma communities is the lack of reliable sources regarding food habits and norms. First, *Romanipè* (a term indicating everything related to the cultural expression of Roma groups) is an oral tradition, meaning that cultural knowledge and practices are transmitted orally from one generation to the next. Therefore, accessibility for an outsider is limited due to the fact that, as discussed by Jack Goody, only in places where a written tradition is stronger could a technical literature on cooking develop and thus crystalize recipes.<sup>18</sup> Second, even when written sources are accessible, they are mostly written by *Gagès*, inevitably

reproducing the perpetual hurdle of the anthropologist’s ethnocentric bias. A final difficulty is the almost universal fact that food is too often considered a trivial issue, not worthy of scientific or social research.

Nevertheless, despite these analytical challenges, my research does qualitatively reveal three major points: the importance of food in constructing the Roma family, *Romané* pride for their culinary traditions and how they use them to differentiate themselves from *Gagès*, and the co-constitutive roles of cuisine and gender, all of which confirm the initial hypothesis that Roma food habits serve as a code of separation and a tool to shape and preserve cultural identity.

**HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK** This work contributes to the scant literature on the topic of Roma cuisine in order to dismantle the unjustified and distorted image of *gli zingari* (an Italian pejorative for “Gypsies,” word derives from the Greek term *athzinganoi*, literally, “the untouchable”) popularized by Italian media.<sup>19</sup> Though Roma are perceived as one of the biggest threats to social safety, they count for just 0.25% of the Italian population, one of the lowest percentages in all of Europe.<sup>20</sup> Within Italy, the number of Roma is between 120,000 and 180,000; only 3% are itinerant while those living in nomad camps compose roughly 0.06% of the population, approximately forty thousand people.<sup>21</sup>

The first document to note a Roma community’s arrival in Italy dates back to 1390,<sup>22</sup> yet after more than six hundred years of sharing the same territory, relatively little is known about them. Only recently have scholars identified India as the Roma’s place of origin.<sup>23</sup> Given the linguistic similarities among many Indian dialects and *Romani*, it is very likely that this ethnic group originated from Northwestern India and that their social position among castes was low. The debate here is still open; however, their low social status would explain their forced migration between the fifth and eleventh centuries toward Persia and Armenia, given the high incidence of wars, famines, and indigence. From Armenia the Roma moved through the Byzantine Empire, reaching East Europe around the fifteenth century, from whence they were again forced to leave with the arrival of the Turkish army and the threat of slavery.<sup>24</sup>

By the sixteenth century, the Roma had spread throughout Europe, simultaneous with the nascent concept of the modern state. At such a moment when defining a unified, national identity was of utmost importance, the Roma were strongly discriminated against everywhere

they went: in Portugal they were forcibly expelled, while in Venice those who killed a Roma went unpunished. The Roma were compared to animals, werewolves, vampires, and other undesirables.<sup>25</sup> Scholars have pointed to many reasons for the ostracizing of the Roma: the Roma had their own set of laws and dismissed the State's authority; they were seen as economic rivals and were therefore banned from guilds; and, worst of all, they were considered pagans. However, persecution of the Roma reached its climax with the Nazi/Fascist ethnic laws when SS leader Heinrich Himmler ordered all Roma to be registered and sent to concentration camps in 1938. As previously mentioned, both Jewish and Roma populations have been victims of this ethnic cleansing. Yet to this day the Roma genocide is not officially recognized, and the Roma were never acknowledged as victims in the Nuremberg process.<sup>26</sup>

Today, Italy is considered one of the worst countries to live in as a Roma person because the third-rate solution of "nomad camps" promotes segregation.<sup>27</sup> Nomads camps were adopted by the Italian government in 1980 in order to provide a stable place to live for the Roma community escaping from wars and the collapse of the Soviet Union; however, they quickly became urban ghettos. Placed far away from services like hospitals, schools, public transportations, or even shops, they often lack running water, electricity, and other basic sanitation facilities and have been defined by Amnesty International as "segregation camps."<sup>28</sup>

In Italy, the word *Zingaro* is one of the most common insults; explicitly referring to the Roma identity, it implies dirtiness, unwillingness to work, and deceitfulness. Italian anti-Roma sentiment is rapidly growing, and it is especially concerning in the current context of eroding democracy and what appears to be growing xenophobia. Indeed, 47% of Italian citizens said that they would not be comfortable with a neighbor coming from a Roma ethnic group, in comparison to the European average of 24%; moreover, in Italy, racist acts against Roma rose from 156 in 2011 to 998 in 2014.<sup>29</sup>

The camps and the history of considerable discrimination are variables that will play an important role in the analysis that follows. Specifically, I frame modern Roma food habits through these two lenses and illustrate how this particular historical context has encouraged the Roma to construct unique gastronomic strategies to preserve their own culture and protect themselves from assimilation with the dominant population.

**METHODOLOGY AND FIELDWORK** This research was carried out from March through April 2015. In total, I collected thirty-five online interviews and ten in-depth open structured interviews. I collected primary data in two ways. First, I created an online survey through the website surveyplanet.com, through which I collected information on respondents' demographics (gender, age, origin, religion, etc.), as well as on topics such as food habits, knowledge of what is considered to be "Gagè cuisine" versus "Roma cuisine," and the relationship between food and health, mainly using the technique of free-listing. The survey was distributed in Italian and was posted on social networks such as Facebook or sent through email to the main NGOs involved with Roma in Italy.

The final sample is quite diversified, ranging from Roma girls of sixteen to a university professor of fifty years. Geographical provenance is less relevant to this study given that a portion of the sample travels throughout northern Italy during the year following carnival events. Almost all respondents defined themselves as Roma, and only two defined themselves as "other." No respondent claimed to be *Gagè*.

Upon completing the online survey, each respondent was encouraged to provide his/her email in case he/she was interested in knowing more about this research or wanted to participate in an in-depth, semi-structured interview. In total, three respondents contacted me to proceed with a phone/Skype interview. However, I was able to conduct seven personal interviews in the city of Bra in the northwestern region of Piedmont, Italy, during a small carnival celebrating the Easter holiday. For these interviews, I avoided words like "Gypsy, Roma, *Zingari*, or *Sinti*" when I introduced the topic, given the high level of controversy surrounding these words and to avoid any initial suspicion among interviewees.

Given that it is not easy for a Roma person to self-identify as Roma in Italy, I started with very basic questions about provenance, age, profession, etc., and then asked if they thought there were any differences between their cuisine or food habits and those of the *Gagès*. As soon as I mentioned the word *Gagè*, the respondent almost always started laughing, wondering how I knew that word, and felt more relaxed with the knowledge that I knew and was honestly interested in their culture. I could not ask the difference between Italian and Roma cuisines because this would imply, first of all, that Roma are not Italian (which is untrue since the majority of Roma are Italian citizens by law), and secondly, because it implies an ethnocentrism that could make the respondent less comfortable opening up. On

the other hand, pointing out the differences between “your” tradition and that of the

“Gagé” implies first that the interviewer knows a little bit of your language, and second, that there are no pre-conceptions prejudicing one cuisine or tradition over the other.

**MAIN RESULTS** As explained by Hasia Diner, Jewish food is highly diversified given the Jewish migratory history.<sup>30</sup> Yet their culinary traditions have been framed by a strict set of rules derived from the Torah regarding what can and cannot be eaten and how to prepare these *kosher* foods. Some of the alimentary prohibitions relate to pork and shellfish, among others, but the underlying theme is a distinction between “clean” and “unclean” animals with the foundational belief being that “unclean” foods contaminate the purity of the body.<sup>31</sup>

All of these rules have shaped and been shaped by the Jewish community in a continuous exchange; the Jewish population adapted to new lands by substituting new foods for familiar ones, and embodied the solidarity of their ethnic identity through consuming traditional foods and sharing ritualistic meals. Such is the case for Roma cuisine as well. However, while Roma cuisine shares certain traits with that of the Jewish tradition, their particular social and historical context has given shape to traditions *sui generis*, as I will describe below. As Long argues, no cuisine is static; instead, it keeps changing alongside the social structures inside different groups of Roma.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, when asked whether respondents thought there were differences between Roma and Gagé cuisines, some respondents astutely interpreted this as a result of their long histories of migration, as this Roma man told me: “Our [culinary] traditions have been mixed up over the ages! We have traveled all over Europe, and we collected ingredients and recipes from all the places we went. Everywhere we go, we pick something to add to our plate, and then we move next!” A good example can be found among the *Kalderas* communities studied by Williams in Paris and New York, which presented internal organization models in total contraposition even while both were considered to be under the same umbrella as Roma ethnic groups.<sup>33</sup>

**“SPORCO ZINGARO!”<sup>34</sup> THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN PURE/IMPURE FOODS AMONG ROMA** Within the *Romané* community, the main classification is between foods that are clean and lucky (*baxtale*) versus those that are unclean and bring bad luck to the clan (*bibaxt*), recalling the difference in the Jewish community between foods that are

*kosher* and *trief*. But rather than prohibiting certain animals or combinations of foods, the Roma designate as *baxtale* foods that have a strong taste and (not coincidentally) valuable antiseptic and antibiotic properties. These include black pepper, chili, lemon, salt, vinegar, garlic, and pickled vegetables.<sup>35</sup> This observation was confirmed by survey respondents. Many stated that the Roma cuisine has more taste and is more salty and spicy than Gagé food.

This first result is not surprising given that Roma have often lived in unstable, impermanent conditions where spices (and especially chili) can decrease the perishability of foods, cover the off tastes of spoiled aliments, or even kill parasites.<sup>36</sup> While these benefits may seem things of the past in the age of refrigeration, they are as important as ever within the nomad camps and in the Roma’s temporary settlements in peri-urban areas where refrigerators are nonexistent. Furthermore, as stated by Vito Teti, we find higher consumption of spices and chili where the diet is mainly vegetarian, low in calories, and quite repetitive, all features that we find in the Roma’s cuisine.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the use of these *baxtale* ingredients could be seen as novelty in an otherwise monotonous diet consisting primarily of rice and beans, corn and cabbage, etc. Furthermore, spicy ingredients stimulate salivation, thereby quickening the perception of satiety, a factor that could be very useful in situations of scarcity. Still today, food insecurity is a major issue among the Roma in Italy, especially in the “nomad camps.” Food security is dependent upon access to adequate food sources, regular availability of nutritious food, and a clean and sanitized environment. While the living conditions of the Roma and prejudice against them may preclude some of these factors, Roma cuisine strives to make use of whatever nutrition is available via spices as well as fermentation.

Fermentation is one of the oldest and most universal methods of food preservation. As Nina Etkin notes, fermented foods score higher nutritional, preventive, and therapeutic benefits than their non-fermented counterparts.<sup>38</sup> For a nomadic people such as the Roma, fermentation would have been a convenient processing technique to ward off food spoilage. As mentioned by Mike Battock and Sue Azam-Ali, through fermentation, those people who are more vulnerable and excluded by society can prevent starvation.<sup>39</sup> By capitalizing on free, autochthonous microbiota and the minimal ingredients they could carry with them, the Roma were able to survive persecution and uncertain, unpredictable circumstances.<sup>40</sup> The health hazards of modern Roma “nomad camps” gives further value to their traditional pickled products since



lactobacteria inhibit gram-negative bacteria and fungi. Most importantly, pickling can reduce cooking time, an absolute necessity in the past transient Roma lifestyle.

On the other hand, foods considered impure or dirty (*maxurindò/bibaxt*) are very much tied to cultural and spiritual values. Similarly to the Jewish tradition, everything that enters the body must be pure and clean, so great attention is paid not only to the food but also to the dishes, pots, pans, cutlery, and, of course, those who eat the meal. In Roma culture, few foods are forbidden in and of themselves. However, other factors can render food *bibaxt*. For example, any food can become impure if it is touched by a menstruating woman or by a woman who is considered immoral such as a prostitute.<sup>41</sup> Food is also tainted if it touches the ground or if someone talks about improper topics during the meal. In this sense, contamination through the ingestion of these aliments is primarily physical but is also psychological, moral, and social. Even clothing plays an important role, and genders must keep their clothes separate when washing because female clothes (especially underwear) are considered highly impure.

Harkening to their Indian origins, the Roma's social rules surrounding the meal reflect the code of the Indian caste system as well, where the act of "cooking is deeply embedded in moral beliefs and prescriptions."<sup>42</sup> Indeed, many of the foods considered pure or impure in the Indian caste system are likewise considered so by the Roma.<sup>43</sup> Yet the more profound similarity lies in the power of food to reinforce social hierarchies within both cultures. In the Indian caste system, it is frowned upon or even taboo to share a meal with someone from another caste, primarily because different social groups are permitted to eat (or forbidden from eating) different foods. For example, the meat of a dead cow (being a holy animal) is eaten by only the poorest and most derided caste, illustrating the phenomenon that Goody describes wherein "the hierarchy between ranks and classes takes a culinary form."<sup>44</sup> Likewise, orthodox Jews used to prohibit themselves from eating off the same plates or using the same silverware as *gentiles* or non-Jews based on this same idea of spiritual contamination.

Regardless of these similarities, it must be noted that both the Jewish and Indian culinary traditions serve merely as useful points of reference, and that the *Romanè* community has continuously reinvented their cuisine to develop their own unique traditions relevant to their particular circumstances. Moreover, given their nomadic history, it is important to stress how the Roma migratory experience brings an intrinsic interaction with numerous

and different cultural systems, making the culinary complex an ever-changing concept.

In fact, one of the primary motives for the Roma in developing these gastronomic guidelines was to define themselves as a distinct culture and ethnic heritage in contrast to dominant European society in order to fight against cultural annihilation.<sup>45</sup> Beyond Jewish food taboos, there are many similar examples in food studies literature. For example, in her research about Iranian migrants' food consumption patterns in London, Lynn Harbottle states that one of the most effective ways to shape identity through food is creating a classification of edibility, that is, what can and cannot be eaten.<sup>46</sup>

In this way, creating distinct dietary norms differentiates one community from another, rendering food a symbol and signifier of group identity in contrast to other castes, religions, or ethnic groups.<sup>47</sup> For the Roma as for the Jewish people, food rules serve as a form of protection, a way to preserve traditions from the pressure of assimilation; an example is the case of the Vlax group of Roma who, through the adherence of their laws and food habits, have been able to enhance their self-identity for more than five hundred years in Moldavia and Wallachia.<sup>48</sup> Again, John Cooper notes that while the Philistines ate pigs and shellfish, the Israelites, who wished to maintain their cultural independence and distance as a people, had strict prohibitions against the consumption of these foods.<sup>49</sup> This kind of self-segregation is promoted within Jewish religious texts as a means of keeping themselves apart from the foreign population.

Returning to the public perception of the Roma as "filthy gypsies" enhanced by the media images of squalid nomad camps, this emphasis on purity and cleanliness in cuisine seems out of place.<sup>50</sup> However, as many journalists who have visited the camps have noted, the physical state of (un) cleanliness marks a physical and psychological divide that serves to reinforce the Roma's gastronomic doctrines.<sup>51</sup> While the camp itself may appear dirty, inhabitable even, due to the lack of running water or infrastructure, the interior of each home (typically a ramshackle building or trailer) is spotless. There exists a sharp cultural dichotomy between the outside world and the inside, communal, family space; the contrast between dirtiness and cleanliness is thus manifest in both physical and ideological ways.

With this notion in mind, it follows that, since the body is in contact with the outside (which is considered dirty), the body must be guarded from contamination, especially when that same body (typically female) prepares food for the rest of the community. Therefore, the *fàld* (the apron) is used

not to protect the body from being dirtied while cooking, but rather to protect the food itself from contamination. This practice is particularly interesting because it is in total opposition with the use of the apron among Gagès. Indeed, the *fàld* is used to divide the body from the food, especially the intimate parts (female genitals are considered the most impure while male genitals are considered pure as the source of life). As such, Gagès are often considered impure and dirty (*moxadi*) by the Roma because Gagès do not eat or clean what they use in the kitchen in what the Roma see as the proper way; for example, Gagès often wash dishes or food in the same place where they wash their bodies or other objects used in proximity to their bodies, which, as I mentioned, are considered strongly impure and contaminated.<sup>52</sup>

Given that the social status of a person, both male and female, is strongly related to the purity of his/her body, these rules are crucial; as Carmichael states, "The concept of purity among the Gypsies involves a profound interaction between the purity of the human body and ethical purity in the sense of the person's observing proper rules of conduct."<sup>53</sup> On special days, the community is supposed to fast, as in the case of mourning (*kalipé*). In this time, Roma must avoid meat (*mas*), cheese (*kerala*), eggs and milk (*vare* and *thud*), or avoid a special food enjoyed by the person who died. As explained by Spinelli and Piercarlo Grimaldi, many of these foods recall life and rebirth, especially eggs, similar to the beliefs of some Southeast Asian populations and in some indigenous groups from the Pacific Islands.<sup>54</sup> There are similar resonances with the Indian tradition regarding impurity and death because death is considered one of the greatest impurities.<sup>55</sup>

In certain situations, food can destroy the barrier between life and death; as such, all the objects that belonged to a relative who died should be destroyed, particularly the dishes and cutlery. Thus, despite an apparent discrepancy between the Roma's physical environments and their stringent belief in purity/cleanliness, comparisons to both the Jewish religion and the Indian caste system reveal that food codes help to realize both the physical need for sanitation within an insecure lifestyle and a cultural affirmation of community and order.

### THE CONSTANT JOURNEY AND THE GHETTO

Roma's food habits and recipes derive from their transient life or (more recently) their life in the "nomad camps," both of which are effects of their historic social discrimination. The majority of Italian "nomad camps" are considered slums, having many common features with past Jewish ghettos or

other places where human rights were/are violated. Such camps reflect Giorgio Agamben's concept of the "state of exception," places where people are "not prisoners nor persons accused, but simply detainees...object[s] of a pure *de facto* rule, of a detention that is indefinite."<sup>56</sup> Camps are delineated with fences, cameras, and check points; they are typically located outside the urban area, away from many basic services such as hospitals and schools, and are characterized by critical hygienic conditions. Finally, there is no sense of permanence.

As previously mentioned, the *campi nomadi* are a "solution" that was first adopted in Italy in 1980 after the first arrivals of Roma from Yugoslavia. They were designed to be a temporary solution but have become permanent spaces of exclusion.<sup>57</sup> They cause not only physical but also psychological segregation. The *Platz* is where shacks (called *Colibã*) are informally built into family units in undesirable places where the public is not likely to intervene.<sup>58</sup> It is a cultural enclave where individuals are highly dependent on each other, which is partially why the meal is almost always a community event. As one twenty year old Roma woman I interviewed explained: "There is no way to escape the family. You see all these people working at the Carnival? They are my cousins or uncles. If I should misbehave, they would directly go to my parents...Sometimes I would like some privacy." Another thirty-seven year old woman added: "The meal is the moment where the whole family is united. There is no way you can go and eat whenever you want! Lunch and dinner are common moments, and the family must be together!"

During the summer, the kitchen is moved outside under a canopy because of the unbearable heat within the shelters, tents, or trailers the Roma inhabit. Within these state constructed "emergency shelters," Roma will often break down walls separating rooms in order to have a larger, communal dining room. This illustrates that there is very little distinction (physically or mentally) between the individual and the group, between body and mind. The atomistic view of life is generally rejected here; everybody is defined in relation to the group and to the family, and, as with many communitarian societies, there is always more food than necessary in case a guest shows up.<sup>59</sup> Another interesting difference between Roma and *Gadgès* related to the concept of purity and dirtiness is that in Roma houses the bathroom is often moved or build outside the house, since it is considered very inappropriate to have it in the same place where you cook and eat.<sup>60</sup> As for the cuisine itself, there is very minimal literature, both because the topic is considered unworthy of deep discussion and



because of the emphasis on oral tradition.<sup>61</sup> However, the aim of this essay is not to transcribe a list of recipes from the Roma world but to use an illustrative sample to highlight how identity is a “working process” where contaminations are one of the few constants in an ever-changing environment.

Many Roma recipes are reminiscent of Balkan or Eastern European cuisine, such as *Goulash à la Roumaine* or the *Gateaux with almonds and spices*, as mentioned by Baeza. The foundational similarity of these recipes is that they are all *ricette al cucchiaio*, or meals that can be eaten with just a spoon. A soup or stew can be easily stretched to feed more people with the addition of stock or (more likely) water, and does not require complicated utensils, simply a pot and spoons. This resonates with how Pierre Bourdieu has described working class meals as “elastic and ‘abundant’ dishes, that are brought to the table—soups or sauces, pasta or potatoes (almost always included among the vegetables)—and served with a ladle or spoon, to avoid too much measuring and counting, in contrast to everything that has to be cut and divided, such as roasts.”<sup>62</sup> Many of these traditional dishes Roma exhibit the features of “poor dishes,” proving the general conditions of poverty experienced by this ethnic group: high in carbohydrates and legumes, and, if lucky, including some meat or fish. Due to the nomadic lifestyle, appliances such as refrigerators or stoves are out of the question. and, as such, ingredients are typically fresh and either stewed or occasionally (when meat is available) roasted.

Roma cooking, as with the rest of their culture, is very much dependent on the tradition. My sample quoted many traditional dishes during the interviews, such as pita with wild plants, dumplings filled with chicken and/or savoy cabbage (*chorba*), vegetable soup with chicken (an animal perfectly suited to the nomadic lifestyle), or *sarmale*, meat and potatoes rolled in a grape leaf or in a savoy cabbage leaf. Often the people I interviewed described their recipes in very qualitative, subjective terms, showing that their cuisine was built on observation and experience rather than strict formulas. For example, one middle-aged Roma woman told me: “You just use your hands to see how much flour you need. I don’t know [how long you should cook it]; you just know looking at the color.” Similarly, Poueyto’s study of the *Manouches* community in France, through which he collected numerous oral traditional recipes, mentioned how the interviewee described quantities using words like “a handful of...” and so on.<sup>63</sup>

### FOOD AS A CHOKING NECKLACE: DIETARY HABITS AND GENDER IDENTITY AMONG ROMA COMMUNITIES

Beyond using cuisine as a tool of reproducing their threatened identity, the Roma also use food to reinforce rigid gender divisions within the community. Even today, women are married at a very young age, are more likely to be unemployed or illiterate, and they very rarely continue education after their early teens if they are educated at all.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, the word “Rom” in *Romani* means “man” in addition to signifying the ethnic group itself, which gives an idea of masculinity’s centrality in this society.

The Roma are by no means alone in the role food plays in defining gender boundaries. In almost all societies, women have been charged with the preparation of food for the family/community. As Counihan mentions in many of her anthropological case studies, the power of women has often derived from the power of food. Additionally, cooking, eating, sexual intercourse are often symbolically interconnected, meaning that both have a strong explanatory power in terms of gender roles.<sup>65</sup> In many societies, eating is compared to copulation, and certain foods represent masculinity or femininity.<sup>66</sup>

In Roma communities, the food sphere is entirely female, as was explicitly reaffirmed by all the men I interviewed. Whenever I presented my research, many men replied that their only relation to food is in eating what their wives make for them. In the words of a thirty year old man I interviewed: “You should ask my wife! I am a man, I don’t cook!” In line with this finding, the sample of interviews I collected was not perfectly gender balanced; 60% of respondents were female, and 40% were male. Since the nature of this research (i.e., food, cooking, and alimentary habits) is perceived within the Roma community as a “woman’s domain,” women were more eager to respond while men ignored it thereby confirming their masculinity, especially in such a public forum as Facebook. Moreover, women supported male disinterest, as a forty year old Roma woman told me: “Men can’t cook; I am the one who usually takes care of the kitchen. When I see my family satisfied after a meal, my heart is full of joy.”

This male privilege is reaffirmed in the order of the meal as well. In Roma communities, the order of how food is served is strictly institutionalized (as in some Indian minority groups as described by Simoons). The first to be served are the elderly men, then the younger men, followed by the elderly women. Finally younger girls and children are served at the very end. This ritual reflects the group’s hierarchy: the elderly are the most respected among the men, after which the younger men take their right as leaders

of the clans. This phenomenon falls in line with Appadurai's description of the implication of handling food within the Indian family, where "social precedence in the food cycle is based on age and sex grading with primacy generally going to the older and male members of the hearth group. Cooking is the domain of the women and therefore indicates their general subordination to the men."<sup>67</sup>

As Mary Douglas argues, exploring food as a code can help to delineate the social norms within the community. Men have the control of all money and how much will be devoted to food purchase—already an index of the gender imbalance; however, women can be seen as powerful and important for the family's destiny and continuity. Traditionally, men are supposed to work and bring money home whereas the only way women can contribute to the family income is through *manghel*, i.e., begging for money. Indeed, it is exactly this role of begging and selling door to door that gives women the special role of linking the Roma and the Gagès world; since Gagès are considered impure, the only way to protect the community from the impurity of this contact is to control women's sexuality.<sup>68</sup>

The reason underpinning this inflexible control of women is that female sexuality is considered impure and even uncontrollable. Women are so alluring, so immodestly seductive (even despite a very strict dress code of long dresses and undergarments) that they must be dominated in order for men to avoid the inevitable temptation, which would of course contaminate their inherently pure male bodies. Sexuality is dangerous and impure; it should be controlled; and since women are the expression of sexuality, they should be controlled too. As already mentioned when describing pure and impure foods, a Roma woman considered sexually impure, for example, during menstruation, is not allowed to cook, as found also by Appadurai in his study on gastro-politics among Indian castes.<sup>69</sup>

Since the woman is the only one cooking, she is the one with the ultimate power to contaminate or purify the food eaten. Serving impure food may weaken the men in the community and so reduce the clan's honor and health. While cooking can serve as a mode of empowerment for Roma women, the lack of financial control over food, lack of self-sufficiency, and general male-dominated culture usually overpower this small sphere of feminine influence, recalling Kurt Lewin's concept of women as "gatekeepers" of food into the family despite the fact that women's "responsibility about food is not equivalent of control."<sup>70</sup> Therefore, like a necklace, a symbol of femininity, providing good food for the family and avoiding contamination is in the woman's hands.

However, just as the necklace encircles a woman's neck, this role implies control over women, whose behavior and food choices can corrupt the family.

These initial findings lead to potential further investigation on women's dual role and identity as both food providers, so crucial to family survival and purity, and as threats to social image and honor.

**CONCLUSION: CULTURAL RESISTANCE AND MEMORY THROUGH FOOD** This paper has explored dietary habits of Roma communities in Italy as a system to maintain group unity and to separate it from the dominant population (the Gagès) in order to survive as a minority. Moreover, this study highlights how food traditions have been affected by the exclusively Italian phenomenon of "nomad camps" and how these culinary traditions are embedded in maintaining a strong division between genders.

What this research makes clear is the idea that culinary traditions offer a powerful means of cultural resistance, and that the Roma are a resilient population who have developed survival strategies to cope with the ghettoization they still face today. Many are the points in common with the Jewish tradition from their historical "nomad" life and food taboos to social stigma and the innovative ways employed to preserve cultural integrity. The case offers just a tentative look at how food habits can be both an analytical instrument for examining cultural discrimination, preservation, and social politics and a tool that can acknowledge cultural diversity in order to improve the social status quo in Italy and beyond. I hope that these results, derived by the study of food traditions, can work toward fighting discrimination against the Roma and giving one of the largest minorities in Europe more humane living conditions with the validation of their cultural heritage.

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