

by Larry Olomoofe<sup>1</sup>

*"Homosexuals are not human. They do not have the same rights as everyone else."  
(Participant at a Roma rights workshop held in 2003)*

*" [Early marriage] it is our culture. This is what makes us Roma. We cannot stop the practice.  
If we do, we will lose our identity". (Participant at a Roma Rights workshop 2004).*

*"I will talk with you later about this [Romani cultural traditions and homophobia] only if you are  
not gay". (Participant at a Roma Rights workshop held in 2004).*

In this article, I will attempt to explicate the various dynamics involved in conducting human rights education initiatives amongst European Romani activists and communities. Much of what will follow is drawn from personal insights and anecdotal material based upon my involvement in a number of training and developmental initiatives in the region. Over the course of the past three years, a trend has become evidently apparent, related to conducting theme-specific trainings amongst a variegated group of Romani activists – youths, "leaders", and women. When conducting these training programmes, the vexed, hydra-headed issue of culture/tradition has figured prominently and has been a major topic of discussion and in some cases, tension. The main topic for discussion involved the putative loss of cultural identity through the pursuit and acceptance of universally held human rights principles. Regardless of the merits and demerits of the discussions on this matter, the topic is one that has to be treated with a degree of seriousness by human rights advocates and I shall attempt to provide an analysis that will treat the matter with the gravity it deserves. It is an issue that crosses generational as well as gender lines amongst Romani activists, hinting at the relevance of the matter.

These debates have involved discussion around homosexuality, the role of women in Romani culture, early marriages, sexual harassment and the virginity cult. I intend to present material that will hopefully identify the major contours of the continuing discussion around culture/tradition, as well as exploring ways of addressing some of the entrenched rejection of values by opponents of the human rights approach, values that underpin much of the human rights paradigm that are crucial for a "culture" of Roma Rights to take hold in and amongst Romani communities in the region.

Much of the opposition to the tenets of the rights paradigm stem from an unequivocal relativistic position and the sense that the values of the rights approach is a foreign, antithetical set of values that have been created and generated in a "far away and unconnected place" and have little or no bearing on the realities faced by many Romani communities in Europe. Whilst accepting that much of the values of the rights paradigm are locally contingent, a merely cultural relativistic approach would overlook the universality of human rights and that these rights are not culturally specific, and therefore not dependent upon a simple local interpretation of the values that breathe life into the rights paradigm. Such banal relativism does not allow a fully-fledged critical discourse to emerge and I will attempt to tackle this particular renunciation of the rights approach through provision of an analysis that allows for the contingency of phenomena, and align it with the universality of human rights. Indeed, many of the gains of Roma Rights over the past decade or so, result from strategic approaches that have at some time or other, implemented this idea which depends upon acceptance that the situation of marginalised Romani communities must be placed in a wider global context and not simply understood as locally occurring situations that have little or no connection with the rest of the civilised world.

In many ways, this is one of the most difficult (if not the most difficult) pieces I have had to write. This

is because of the sensitivity of the topic, involving the vexed issue of assimilation versus integration, and the legitimate right to continue particular cultural practices, that is also guaranteed by the international human principles. However, we have to accept that if we (Roma Rights activists and advocates) want to encourage the majority of societies in the CEE region to acknowledge the egregious injustices Roma face there, then we will have to grapple with the various traditional practices in the Romani communities which violate universal human rights norms. Indeed, over the past few years, one of the many tactics deployed by people who deny that Roma face discrimination in their societies is the one which stresses that Roma are the main violators of their groups/communities, through recidivist cultural norms and values masquerading as traditional practices.<sup>2</sup> This is a rather disingenuous strategy but one that has currency since they are able to delineate a range of acts that fall outside of the principles that underpin the human rights paradigm itself. This moral repositioning by those who deploy this denial tactic, allows them, absurdly, to occupy the higher moral ground suggesting that Roma are the architects of their misery and need to be educated in the norms of civilization. It is in this context that issues of cultural identity, tradition, etc, need to be viewed since these practices become entrenched signifiers of the group in defiance to the mainstream who look down their noses at their Romani counterparts.

I hasten to add that my contribution here is not an exercise in casting value-judgments on the opinions of those that I fundamentally disagree with. Also, I am not seeking to castigate those who hold views that are in stark opposition to mine and those of us within the human rights sphere. This article is merely an attempt at moving the debate on so as to establish firmer grounds for future human rights training initiatives among Romani activists to be built upon. Through this, I am attempting to open up another front for constructive discussion amongst the various actors and participants striving to ensure and protect the rights of Romani communities across Europe, both Romani and non-Romani. Therefore, it should be received in the spirit it is intended, i.e., a constructive critical contribution and not seeking to claim a higher moral ground at the expense of others. Bearing this in mind, the article continues in earnest below.



The quotes at the beginning of this article are deployed here to indicate how the issue of cultural practices and the apparent clash with the overarching human rights paradigm was/is a recurring theme during these workshops among Romani activists. The apparent dislocation between "Tradition" and "Human Rights" tends to crystallise in the form of a clash of cultures, i.e., western (gadje) values on one side, and Roma values on the other. Simple analysis taken from the perspective of rampant discrimination that some Romani communities in the region face can offer partial

explanations of why this assumption is so prevalent amongst Roma. Historical reasons are another subset of factors that have allowed for this "clash" to accrue greater efficacy amongst Romani communities. A corollary of this has been the acceptance by many interlocutors who view the continued traditional practices amongst Roma as legitimate acts and they should therefore, not interfere with phenomena that are locally contingent. This approach overlooks the many dissonant voices (mainly women) within these same Romani communities that challenge these practices and they are becoming an increasingly vocal and active coalition within Romani communities in the CEE region. This much has become increasingly evident during the course of a number of workshops and initiatives conducted by the ERRC over the past few years, and the ERRC has acknowledged

the burgeoning influence of this sector of Romani communities and has begun mainstreaming Women's Rights issues into its programming.<sup>3</sup> Acolytes of the cultural relativist position alluded to above refuse to ask a series of simple questions. These are: What is Roma culture? What are the locus/loci of this "culture"? What happens when/if a Romani person refuses to accept these nodal points as their culture? In cases when this refusal occurs, do these people cease being Roma or are they "self-hating Roma" as some people have expressed to me over the years? This is a preposterous assumption indicating the facile nature of such a position, one that should not be entertained in any setting or by any audience.

The increasingly large number of Romani women who have begun to vocalise their displeasure and opposition towards a number of these "traditional" practices highlights the fact they tend to be the "victims" of these acts and are beginning to draw attention to the reality that they no longer view the practices as legitimate. When invited to international events, they eloquently articulate the major reasons why they feel that the practices should be challenged and eventually stopped. The recent creation of the Roma Women's Network in 2003 also shows that for the first time, Romani women are beginning to create a space for themselves within the public sphere and are beginning to network and create expansive coalitions – involving participants from European Union states, as well as Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Russia, Serbia and Montenegro, and Ukraine. A contemporary example of the increased visibility of women's issues in Romani communities is the Virginité Cult project in Macedonia which has been awarded funds by the Open Society Institute's Network Women's Program.

The main aim of the Virginité Cult project is to challenge the widely-held belief amongst Roma that women must be virgins when they marry. In cases where women are not virgins, they are stigmatised and are forced to be outcasts in their own families and communities since it is understood (by members of both family and community) that a woman who is not a virgin on her wedding night has brought shame and dishonour to them. The project aims to educate people (both men and women, young and old) that there is no place for such beliefs in contemporary society. Decisions such as when one becomes sexually active should be a personal one and left to the individual to make. Women should not be subject to coercive pressure through collective cultural expectations that suggests that they should refrain from sexual activity until marriage, and if they decide not to conform to the "cultural belief", should not be stigmatised by their communities for doing so.<sup>4</sup>

Opposition to some of the cultural practices does not fall along gender lines only, but generational ones also. Today, many younger Romani activists have voiced their opposition to many of the practices within their Romani communities hitherto perceived as part of their traditional heritage and integral to Romani identity. These youth tend to be university educated and are comfortable traversing that imaginary line between their Romani communities and mainstream society. They have managed to process a myriad of influences gathered mainly through attendance at university and exposure and interaction with/to wider influences, and reconcile these with beliefs and expectations of their individual Romani communities. It is with this group that one can patently observe the inherent tensions involved in the construction of a strong, positive, Romani identity. On the one hand, they understand the importance of being "Roma", especially in light of the manifold forms of discrimination that they and their group experience. On the other hand, they also appreciate that their marginal position will continue if they do not challenge popular [mis] perceptions of Roma. The subsequent process of elision, therefore, would involve the reconstitution and constant updating of the Romani identity to include some of the values that hitherto now have been considered "non-Romani" ones. For example, the simple act of trouser wearing by Romani women in public is scorned upon by some Romani communities in Europe. Romani women are prohibited from wearing trousers because it is related to sexual and biological reasons and to do so would bring shame on the family in the eyes of the wider community. This is being challenged by the current younger generation of Romani women who defiantly wear trousers and proclaim that doing so is their choice and one that will not be decided or influenced by popular in-community perceptions or expectations. This development shares similarities with the initiative women are taking in Macedonia

and the Virginité Cult project mentioned above.

In characterizing this issue of cultural identity as "Romani" and "non-Romani" and in need of "reconciliation" in this fashion, I hasten to add that the two trajectories are not mutually exclusive as perceived by a number of people involved in the current discourse. There has been much cross-over between the two communities which is an inevitable outcome when such groups live in close proximity with one another over a prolonged period of time. Whilst this is considered by some as a positive outcome, it is precisely because of this phenomenon that Romani identity and culture is vigorously protected by its leaders, etc. The fear of "assimilation" is a very potent one and therefore influences the perceptions, choices and expectations of those within these marginalised Romani communities.

As mentioned earlier above, the assumption of a potential loss of one's identity is further accentuated by the highly politicised, discriminatory and racialised environment in which these communities exist, placing a greater premium on Roma identity and their attendant cultural practices. This environment therefore generates a "them and us" syndrome that can eventually lead to a misconstrual of the integration process creating a perception that integration is tantamount to losing one's Romani identity, valorising the assumption that Roma culture and tradition are fixed and unchanging and that certain cultural practices are quintessentially Romani and attempts to change them means assimilation and loss of one's identity.<sup>5</sup>

Evidence of a generational fault-line in the understanding of Romani tradition occurred during another capacity building workshop conducted by the ERRC in the autumn of 2004 when the topics of early marriage and homosexuality were discussed by the participants. The group comprised of mainly young Romani activists with a few older members amongst them. During a discussion about the universality of human rights, the topic of homosexuality in Romani communities was examined by the group. One of the older members of the group continually used homophobic language to describe homosexual men and made a number of disparaging remarks about them. He called them "hot", "dirty", and "inhuman", amongst others. His tirade was challenged by some of the younger members of the group who explained to him that he was guilty of repeating the practices of prejudices that Roma faced by members of the majority population. He justified his stance by stressing that it was "traditional" for Roma to ostracise gay men and that if there were any gay men in a given Romani community, he would be forced out of the community since he would be considered "dirty". Younger members, whilst acknowledging that this may well be the case, stressed that the practice was insensitive and wrong and should be changed. He grew angry at the challenges he was facing and drew the tradition "card" as if it were a magic wand that would quell his detractors. It didn't and he refused to continue the dialogue after claiming that the younger members had been brainwashed by "gadje" values and had lost their own Romani identities as a consequence. This is a spurious line of argument to proffer since it misleadingly stresses that any challenge of one's cultural practices is influenced by outsiders, be they human rights activists, feminists, teachers, etc. Acceptance of this would be agreeing with the notion that Romani values are antithetical to wider mainstream values, thereby undermining much of the gains achieved by pursuing both the human rights and anti-discrimination approaches with regard to the long-term marginalisation and entrenched poverty of Romani communities in Europe.

Another disturbing feature of the current discourse is the relativisation of human rights principles. By this I mean that the very same people that insist on Roma culture and tradition being beyond the realm of inspection and challenge when viewed in light of human rights principles, apply those very same principles when dealing with situations in which violators are non-Romani and the victims are Romani. This leads to claims of hypocrisy or double-standards by the vast majority of non-Romani commentators who rightly view the position of many Romani activists and human rights supporters as duplicitous. The broader implications of such controversial positions are to render implementing a culture of anti-discrimination much more difficult -- detractors amongst the majority population too can deploy the right to conduct cultural practices that are rooted in tradition, whether they violate the

rights of Romani people or not. I have witnessed a number of occasions where people have stressed that Roma have traditionally existed at the margins of society and that discrimination against them was justified because of "tradition".

This is a disingenuous argument but one that is difficult to tackle when Roma continue to insist on the right to stigmatise, and/or violate certain individuals because they have chosen not to adopt "traditional" practices or values that are considered to be intrinsic to Romani identity and culture.

Anecdotal insights such as the one articulated above indicate that there is strong opposition to some Romani cultural practices within Romani communities. Despite this though, there is also resistance as evinced above. This tension opens up the space for critical dialogue between the two camps that will eventually lead to a temporary resolution of sorts and if the inherent dialectical tension continues, other fronts for discussion (disagreement/agreement) shall open up and move the discourse forward. There is a coalition forming in Romani communities led primarily by women that are challenging "traditional" practices in these communities. The fact that they challenge some practices does not make them any less Roma than those who support and indulge in those practices. Being "Roma" does not simply rely upon adherence of some arbitrary practices or code of conduct that is mythologised into tradition by those who fear that loss of them would mean the loss of the people. Romani culture, identity and tradition do not exist outside of the boundaries of contemporary modern societies. It is an intrinsic part of contemporary societies in Europe and the political gains and developments around Roma rights highlights the point succinctly. We need to move away from the debilitating assumption that Roma are a "traditional" group with "traditional" practices and need to continue to occupy their "traditional" place at the margins of society.

Likewise, Romani actors need to accept that "tradition" is not a legitimate excuse (or explanation) to continue practices that may violate the rights of an individual or group within the community. They also need to accept that refusal to adhere to some of the precepts that are understood to be "Roma" by some Romani individuals does not mean a loss of one's Romani identity or culture. This means that people need to vocalise their opposition to such an understanding articulating why such perceptions are wrong and harmful. This is currently being done by some brave people within Romani communities who have taken the responsibility of articulating the need for re-examining what it is that makes them Roma and what collective values are the representative ciphers that make the people what they are, especially in the complicated, discriminatory environment in Europe today. Our task as human rights educators is to provide the skills and resources that will allow these groups and individuals to be able to articulate their positions in a coherent and understandable fashion. We are charged with capacitating these people, providing them with a broad range of methods/methodologies, mechanisms, strategies, etc that will empower them and allow them to continue to conduct the internal critique of their cultural practices and spaces. Standing on the sidelines and claiming that all actions and beliefs are culturally relevant is not an option. Indeed, banal relativism of this type is actually exacerbating the situation.

## Endnotes:

1. Larry Olomoofe is Human Rights Trainer at the ERRC.
2. A recent example of this was the huge public outcry over the marriage of a 12 year-old Romani girl and 15 year old Romani boy in Romania in 2003. This event gained global notoriety and exposure after the BBC broadcast the event precipitating a huge international backlash. Much of the media focus was on the fact that the two people involved, were still, by international law, children (Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 1) and they were 'forced' or compelled to comply with the wishes of their families because it was part of Romani tradition for children to marry at an early age.
3. This fact is evinced by the recent creation and hiring of a Women's rights officer within the ERRC staff.
4. It is also interesting to note that whilst there are well-established sanctions against women who become sexually active before marriage, there are little, if any, sanctions against their male counterparts if they too decide to become sexually active. It is this apparently hypocritical code that has fuelled the anger of young

women who see the arbitrary application of the 'rule' as unjust and unfair.

5. A corollary of this is the ring-fencing of Roma culture and an essentialising of what it is exactly to be 'Roma'.