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Wearing Gypsy identity in a Gábor Gypsy community in Tîrgu Mureş

SABA TESFAY

The article is based on research conducted in Tîrgu Mureş, Romania, among a Vlax Gypsy group, the Gábors. I was struck by the Gábors' characteristic dress codes and the significance they attach to them. As one elderly man emphasised: "We haven't changed our dress, not at all [...] for the Gábors, this is ancient and has existed since there are Gábors . . ." This initial impression inspired me to write the present article, in which I begin with a brief outline of the method used, after which I move to the ideological framework around which my argument is built. Following this section, I describe the apparent facts, including Gábor Gypsy dress codes and public behaviour and then make an attempt to draw consequences as to the relationship between Gábor identity and ethnic dress, how Gábor self-consciousness and its variations of content and meaning are related to dress, what symbolic role clothing plays and what this medium communicates.

Keywords: dress codes, identity, ethnicity, Vlax Gypsies, Gábor Gypsies, Gypsy self-identification

The fieldwork

The article is based on one-year long fieldwork that I started in the summer of 2003. I contacted a Romanian Gábor family in Budapest, who were doing business in and around the city, and, accepting their offer, I tutored the children in basic reading and writing. For two months, I paid regular visits to their home, accompanied the family to the nearby Adventist church, helped them whenever I could—especially by giving them information and advice on how to navigate through the bureaucracy in Hungary. In return, I asked them to assist me in collecting information for my university studies. Starting with this fruitful co-operation, in August 2003 I went to Tîrgu Mureş, Transylvania, where I embarked on a one-year-long field trip, paying frequent visits to the neighbouring village, Budiu Mic,¹ as the family members and their extended

1. Budiu Mic is a village bordering Tîrgu Mureş. Half of the village consists of Gábors, the other half are Hungarians, while a few families are Romanians.

The paper is based on an essay which the author submitted to the National Conference on Science for Students in Hungary and was awarded third prize in the Cultural Anthropology section.

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kinsmen lived in these two settlements. For ten months I lived in a different district in the same town, commuting to and from their living quarters, Unirii, every day, or met Gábors at my home or in the city centre. In the last two months of my field trip I lived in the home of one of my closest Gábor acquaintances.

I cultivated strong relations with certain members of the extended family, which were manifested in our frequent mutual visits, mutual assistance in various matters, and the roles they assigned to me. The nature of our relationship resulted in numerous informal and unstructured conversations, which later proved to be my major source of information. Thus, the data obtained in this way was supplemented and supported by information obtained through participant observation and interviewing. Depending on the situation, I applied a range of data-collecting methods, including recording the interviews on audio tape or video tape, or by taking notes. The tape recorder was not very popular, unlike the camera, which I could use often, especially when several members of the community were present on a certain festive occasion, and some of the participants could present the “mainstream” idea of the group in front of the camera.

Research context

Various ideas have influenced me throughout the analysis. First, when analysing Gypsy culture we should not forget the internal structure nor the group's relations with the outside world. The two spheres influence one another and cannot be separated, nor can the individuals who are the actual actors. As the concrete actions of the individuals and their practices maintain the connection between the ideal constructions of the group and the outside world, the differences between the two spheres, as well as a group's distinctive traits, are maintained by the members in interaction.

Second, I have incorporated Patrick Williams's symbolic interpretation and put much emphasis on analysing the relationships that members of the ethnic group cultivate with non-members. Remaining on the individual's level, I have also made an attempt to understand how ethnicity is reflected in their economic, cultural and social behaviour. Third, I made use of Williams's notion of moments when Gypsy identity is concealed or—the opposite—reinforced (2000). Concerning flexibility in this sense, I incorporated Williams's ideas in the section dealing with the manifestations of Gábor identity.

Although as individuals, members of the Gábor community may be driven by their own interests, as part of a larger community they are supposed to fulfil certain obligations. Membership involves duties as well as rewards. Group identification rewards the individual with the use of ethnic resources (Anthias

1992: 29), which may be symbolic. Gábors, for instance, have the right of positive self-definition, which serves the good of all the members. This and many other traits, which will be specified below, I consider symbolic capital (I borrow the term from Harrison 1995: 268, who in turn borrowed it from Bourdieu), or *gazhikano* capital, based on Piasere's analysis (2000: 352). Certain patterns of behaviour or strategies applied by Gábors as members of the community, help them transform this capital into economic or social advantage when they interact with their environment. Clothing, I believe, is one of those strategies.

Who are the Gábors?

Starting with an etic categorisation, they are a Kalderash, Vlach Gypsy group who live primarily in and around Tîrgu Mureş and other towns and villages in Transylvania and the Partium. They are also scattered around other big cities in Europe, where their business is trade² and where most of them have only a temporary abode. What concerns us here is that despite their regular travels, which serve economic goals, the members of the community stay in close contact with each other. The individuals who spend most of their time abroad return to their homes for big family occasions and participate in social gatherings of the community. Weddings occur mostly in the winter period, as that is the time when most Gábors stay at home. Marriage proposals and wedding arrangements do not take more than a week. Weddings, funerals and All Saints' Day are communal events where all the members concerned are obliged to attend as they are platforms to express the communal sense of belonging and their respect for their community. One of the men said: "People say if someone does not come home to light the candle [at All Saints' Day], is it because he wants to save two million?"³ In short, this is a dispersed community that preserves its group identity through various communication channels. When they visit their homes, they take part in all events that play an important role in the community's life and solidarity, in the notion of having a common ancestor, the continuity within the community and the preservation of the sense of family and community. There is another factor that noticeably influenced the Gábor community life, namely, the advent of the Adventist Church. Many of the Gábors formerly belonging to various different congregations now belong to the Adventist Church. Complying with the teachings of the church, they have renounced many of their habits referred to as "Gypsy-like" and became "civilised" as the Adventist preacher mentioned. This phenomenon bears strik-

2. Today the majority are engaged in trade, although traditionally they were braziers and tin-smiths. Only the older generations pursue this trade.

3. Two million Romanian Lejs, which at the time of writing equaled around us\$200, and was enough to cover the cost of travel from Hungary to Tîrgu Mureş.

ing similarities to the Evangelism missions of the French Manouches described by Williams (2000) and the Evangelism of the Gitanos in Spain as described by Blasco (2000). Both authors emphasise the incorporation of elements that come from the human environment. They also emphasise that Gypsy groups employ a highly creative method that results in something new and undeniably “Gypsy-like”. A similar change, one which affects more and more Gábors in the city and the neighbouring villages—while the group retains its ethnic identity and composition—bears on the community’s self-definition, identity and on their relationship with others. This change has influenced the way I treated the subject in the rest of the article.

Closed boundaries

Members of the Gábor community define and view themselves as a strictly walled-off group. The boundaries of the group are thought of as firm and unquestionable. Crossing this boundary alienates one from the rest of the community. A clear example is when a Gábor woman marries a non-Gábor man, in which case she ceases to be a Gábor for the community. One woman mentioned: “Everyone knows where they belong. We do not mingle with other nationalities . . . everyone with their own nationality.” Thus, the boundary which is maintained by the rules of endogamy and of which Barth (1996) points out the rigidity as opposed to the enclosed content, which includes a group’s identity, demarcates the group of those individuals who we call Gábors, and who call themselves Gábors. This boundary excludes the *gajes* and the non-Gábor Gypsies and encompasses all those features that the group appropriates, internalises and adorns with meanings that define them vis-à-vis other groups. Below, I present the characteristics which are attributed a major role in the construction of identity. Suffice it to say at this point that different group features have different levels of importance and that their meaning changes continually, but that combined together they define Gábor ethnic identity.

Gábor Gypsy self-definition as a means of delimitation

“We are the Transylvanian hatted Gábor Gypsies”; “we don’t mix with other Gypsies”; “we’re Adventists”; “we don’t drink, don’t smoke, don’t steal”. These statements form part of the initial introduction which communicates a stereotyped Gábor image, created by the Gábors themselves. As one of the middle-aged men said

We have already given up drinking alcohol, we don’t drink and don’t smoke . . . of our kind, not to boast, have you ever seen anyone on TV that was in prison? No! Am I right? That would be a great shame for us. Understand?

It is worth mentioning that most Gábor men I met referred to their group, including the one just quoted. We thus have an idealised group picture complete with remarks on dress and customs made in the course of conversations. Dress code and customs are thought of as being characteristic of the group, these two being elements that differentiate them from other nationalities. It is not only the sense of believing in a common ancestor that makes one a Gábor, but all the concomitant hereditary patterns of normative behaviour and the set of traditions. The interpretation of the past and the norms of behaviour might change during the course of their lives; the group features they attribute to themselves, which are endowed with significance, might change accordingly—all this happens under the aegis of the Gábor identity. Thus, the boundary remains and what counts is its power to demarcate the group from the rest of the world (Roosens 1990).

The boundary was emphasised in conversation when the Gergovanis⁴ and other Gypsy groups were discussed, and one might have thought that their dress and customs are similar, if not identical. Gergovani customary dress, for instance, is quite similar to that of the Gábors. When talking about clothing, a woman mentioned that in their opinion, the pleated skirts worn by Gergovani women are different from the Gábors', as the former have shorter ones with different laces. The differences, however, are discernible only if you are familiar with either of them.

The Gábors are normally in close contact with the Gergovanis, who live in the neighbourhood and who were more often than not described to me in a negative way. They "are dirty", "their houses smell because they cook such food", "their language is different", "when we look at each other, we know the difference", "they still stick to their traditions", "they aren't as civilised as we are." They themselves were a point of reference for comparison, saying "they still marry their cousins", "weddings last sometimes a week or more." The Gergovanis represent a state that was already passed by the Gábors. The final stage on the path to "civilisation"—similar to how Blasco (2000: 16) described the Gitanos—was the Adventist church. Because "since we are believers, we have not lit candles on All Saints' Day, [we] have not eaten pork, have not drunk alcohol and have been more relaxed." Compared with the past, today's state is one of "civilised people" in the Gábors's self-representation.

Weber noted that "if there are sharp boundaries between areas of observable styles of life, they are due to conscious monopolistic closure, which started from small differences that were then cultivated and intensified" (1978: 388). The process of deliberate intensification, as I could observe among the Gábors,

4. The Gergovanis are a Vlach Gypsy group. They are primarily engaged in trade. Men wear hats and many of them have introduced themselves as Gábors, although, the Gábors I got acquainted with identified them as being different and said that "there are some who imitate us".

is part of a status rivalry—in Harrison's terminology, an innovation contest (1995: 261)—which marks the Gábors' endeavours to accentuate their distinctiveness from the Gergovanis. Although the Gergovanis form a group which is close to the Gábors in terms of their location and their customs, the Gábors keep their distance: their self-definition produces proof of their otherness. They wall themselves off from the Gergovanis, just like from other Gypsies.

The fact that the customary dress specified below is related to each and every Gábor, and no one else, and every member of the group is expected to wear the clothes that correspond to their gender and age, draws a clearly discernible line around the group. Thus, customary dress might be regarded as one of the group features that serve as a means of expressive delimitation. To analyse further the role of clothing in the identity construction of the group, I now turn to the specific elements that make up the dress codes.

Customary dress

Starting with men's wear, the items of clothing include the broad-brimmed hat, the loosely fitting black trousers, dark overcoat and shirt. Speaking about appearance, we cannot omit mentioning the compulsory moustache, side-whiskers and the waistcoat with silver buttons among the elderly and possibly the silver hunter. For women, the colourful pleated skirt, colourful blouse with patterns, the long pleated apron from the same material as the skirt, and for married women, the kerchief constitute the rule for clothing. Married and young women alike wear a red ribbon in their hair. Men wear black, closed shoes, women wear sandals, slippers, boots or shoes.

Girls are obliged to wear the customary pleated skirt of women from the age of about 9 or 10. Until then they are allowed to wear non-Gypsy dress such as trousers and t-shirts. Before they marry and in their first married years, that is, up until the age of about 25, women normally wear white and light-coloured skirts. Between the ages of around 25 and 60, apart from the colours mentioned, they might wear green and purple skirts, while dark blue and brown are for the elderly. Black is the colour of mourning. Customary women's wear was thus described by women, both young and old. The girl's hair is fastened up with a kerchief on her wedding, which she will wear from that time on, even if she gets divorced. A woman from a well-off family has eight to ten sets of clothes, most of which she gets on her wedding day. This is what is recounted and what I can confirm on the basis of observation; this is the ideal Gábor dress code.

There are, however, certain customs for clothing, in which case the accounts and my observations differ. These are the wearing or non-wearing of items that have come into fashion recently, or that has fallen out of fashion. These items include the already mentioned slippers, which some said they did not wear

despite evidence of the contrary and the accounts of others, or the waistcoat which is not made any more and which is normally passed on from father to son—I return to this later. Consequently, not every man has a waistcoat, although it is presented as one accessory of men's wear. One might conclude that changes, as usual, affect clothing and that rules are affected by customs. Therefore, the descriptions above and below must not be regarded as rigid dress codes. Besides, we might ascertain that there is an ideal code for clothing which does not comply in every respect with what the observer notices. The ideal is present in words and serves to describe what exists at a given point of time. Accordingly, the ideal dress code lags behind custom, so it is that, slowly but persistently, the ideal dress codes change.

Continuity in dress codes and identity

So far, I have illustrated the Gábor community's self-definition and its role in delimitation; I have also described Gábor dress customs. I now turn to the continuity that these dress customs entail.

The following quotation from an elderly man aptly summarises the role of dress: “[Our ancestors] used to be filthy, many of them slept in one room and ate from one dish—we have abandoned all this stuff. We have left a lot of things behind. But not the clothes.” Dress being an expression of ethnic identity, it represents something long-standing and can be traced back to old times.⁵ “We haven't changed our dress, not at all [...] this is ancient and has existed as long as the Gábors have.” “Our clothing has always been the same. I have known it for 80 years, and even longer. The Gábors have never changed their dress, it has always been the same: the hat, the skirt—all survived.”

Dress, according to these quotes, has not changed; this embodies continuity, while other aspects of their self-definition, which, for instance, differentiate them from the Gergovanis, are the product of the recent past. We can thus discern a kind of group feature which is thought of as eternal, symbolising continuity, and other features that, instead of continuity, stand for partial divergence from the Gypsy past. These two kinds of features are, however, comparable in that they share the power of cohesion and separate the wearers from others. “The Gábors do not abandon their ancient traditions, this makes them different: we do not abandon the moustache, do not take off our hats, we don't wear shorts and the women don't wear short skirts”—said an elderly Gábor man. Clothes are, in this conception, as old as the Gábors. As they say,

5. Descriptions prove that Gypsy dress is often rooted in the neighbouring groups' wear. Only one of my informants told me about a similar idea, mentioning that their dress comes from the Hungarians in Szék. Gropper (n.d.) also mentions the strong influence of the fashion of the area and age where and when the group lives, especially as what concerns men's wear.

they have gone through changes and have been influenced by the Adventist religion, their customs have been transformed, but in spite of all that, their dress remained the same.

But what does it mean when they say: “It has always been the same”? “Already, around 500 years ago, there was a Pici Gábor who had four sons” started one of the men about the origins of the Gábors. On the basis of the legend of their origins, this dress has been preserved for centuries, since the time of their common ancestor. Since then, they have chosen spouses from amongst each other and began thinking of themselves as Gábors, cultivating a tradition unique to them in every aspect. For example, the passing on of the silver cup⁶ and the waistcoat with silver buttons from father to son. Another example is the custom of visiting the cemetery on All Saints’ Day: “this was like that, my father and his father, and even his father, were buried here [...] we will come until the world exists”. The above examples presented the continuity that characterises the Gábor identity. In this continuity, objects and customs, which are connected to the Gábor entity or are thought to coexist with or accompany it, are passed on from one generation to the next.

This raises an important question about how we think of identity and the continuity of dress codes—can we rely on our observations in the present? Groups and their members tend to define themselves in relation to the outside world. If the world around it changes, the group’s self-definition will change accordingly, retaining its ethnic identity though its content changes. Or else we have a flexible identity which, in the case of the Gábors, is supported by the existing variations for clothing. I have come to notice the situational nature of Gábor identity and the way it is externalised in clothing.

Manifestations of flexibility in identity

During my stay in Tîrgu Mureş, I encountered two opposite sides of how the Gábor express themselves, in the house of God and in the market. Whereas in church the Gábors are at the same level as the *gajes*, pursuing the same objectives, in the market the Gábors sell the *gajes* buy. In church they stand side by side, but in the market they oppose each other. There is a clear difference in the Gábors’ behaviour in both places.

Preparing for church, which they go to on Saturdays, begins two days in advance. Women spend Thursdays and Fridays cleaning the house, washing clothes and preparing lunch for Saturday. They often asked me to take photos of them on Saturday when everything was tidy and clean. “When you attend

6. Family heads who can afford it own one or more silver cups, which are passed on to the eldest son. Although traditionally they do not sell the cup, it does sometimes occur. Its value depends on how long it has been owned by the family (see Berta 2007).

church, your heart must be clear, your clothes and body must be clean [...] you do it for God, you owe Him respect, which He rewards with goodness”, said a middle-aged woman. They are especially careful to be clean and ready when they arrive at church, which they share with the *gajes* although they normally sit in separate rows.⁷ Consequently, the lessons that they take they do among themselves, in small groups, in their own language. Thus, although they are together with the *gajes*, they are in a group, not as individuals—they discuss the new information and lessons among themselves and interpret them together. In my opinion this is part of a process which concerns the whole group. The community preserves its identity through changes which affect both customs and cognitive patterns. This, however, cannot be considered as a process of assimilation. It simply shortens the distance between the faithful and the religious Gábors. This is another dimension of the Gábor existence when “we” is used to refer to themselves, including the faithful *gajes*, and where, other than the sense of belonging to an ethnic group, the experience of religious solidarity is also felt (cf. Blasco 2000). Although Saturday has become a day devoted to church, religion is felt throughout the week. For example, pork along with alcoholic drinks as well as smoking have been abandoned for the sake of religion.⁸

But what impact does all of this have on dress? One of my women acquaintances mentioned that she liked the house of God because “people there think in the way we think”. She added that women wear long skirts, long-sleeved blouses and kerchiefs on their heads. I was also warned to put on a long skirt instead of trousers whenever I joined my host family on a trip to church. In church, one notices a similarity between the *gaje* and the Gábor women’s outfits. They wear their kerchiefs as the Hungarian and Romanian women do, they tie them in front rather than in the back, many women put on white blouses instead of coloured ones and they use small bags to carry their bibles, exercise books and tissues. On other occasions women do not carry hand bags as they have nothing to put in them. Besides, they rarely use tissues on other occasions. These are rather tiny but supposedly relevant changes.

Men’s wear does not show much difference to the everyday use. On Saturdays they wear clean clothes, many wear eyeglasses and carry their briefcases. The tiny changes might fulfil practical needs and at the same time they might be an expression of adaptation to church life.

7. This I could observe in congregation “B” in Tirgu Mureş. Church service is conducted in Hungarian and Romanian. Between 30 to 40 per cent of the members were Gábors in 2003 and 2004.

8. The teaching of the church includes notions of healthy life. This is explained through the literal interpretation of the Bible. Accordingly, pork, lard, alcohol and smoking are not allowed. Besides, they support the complete abandonment of meat, which is how I met two Gábor men who were vegetarians.

Market is the opposite of church. This is the symbolic space of “Gypsy-like” behaviour. Here the Gábors selling their goods call the attention of the potential buyers by noisy behaviour and shouting. This is the space where the contrast of Gábor and *gaje* is more emphasised, it is far from the *gaje*-friendly behaviour which is so characteristic in the church. And their dress is just the same as on other days.

Michael Stewart (1997: 95) remarked that Gypsy dress is the expression of Gypsy identity; the question is, what might the changes in dress reflect? In the light of what we described earlier, certain situations demand certain dress and behaviour. In church this entails concealing identity; in the market, however, it means emphasising it, which is accompanied by little changes in clothing. It is worth noting here that the Gábor’s main livelihood is the market, so it is an essential part of their lives. For this reason, we cannot think of their belonging to the church as the first phase of a kind of adaptation to *gaje* society (cf. Blasco 2000). The economic strategies refer to the need of preserving their independence. In conformity with this view, the adoption of the Adventist religion reflects an aspiration to be treated differently from other Gypsy groups. The conversion to Adventism is commonly referred to as “civilising” and “cultivation”—by the members of the group—which elevates them and sets them off from other Gypsy groups who, like the Gergovanis, might be similar in appearance and dress to them.

Since we started going to church, many things have changed. We are more civilised. We never stole but there were some who drank, like Csabi, he used to drink and squabbled a lot with Gizi. They used to be loud but they aren’t so noisy any more. We are civilised. There have been Adventists among us for 30 to 35 years, and during that time people used to laugh at them because they didn’t understand. But today most of us are Adventists.

The Gergovanis trade in carpets and textile. They are not as civilised as we are. They still stick to their traditions: weddings sometimes last a week or more.

Being Adventist has by now earned recognition among the Gábors, it is associated with positive attributes and, as a result the number of converted Gábors is rising in and around Tîrgu Mureş. It is also worth noting that most Adventist Gábor families prefer not to intermarry non-Adventist Gábors. Now, they are the ones who seem to exclude non-Adventists and not vice versa.

I consider Gypsy behaviour in the church and in the market as opposite ends of a scale. There are days when clothing appears not to matter. These are days when the woman leaves for the shop and is not especially conscious of or concerned about her dress. Naturally, when women clean their homes or wash clothes, they are not expected to wear pleated skirts. Nevertheless, as homes are always welcoming spaces where visitors, male and female alike, can drop in at any time, they would always wear long skirts, and if it is cold they wear

trousers or stockings underneath. The (unwritten) code for covering the bust is not as strict as that covering the body below the waist. While a blouse might lack a button or may slip off the shoulder, a skirt is always fastened to the body. When doing household chores, for example, women might wear simple T-shirts or just a bra if there are no male visitors at home (cf. Gropper n.d.).

This relatively casual dress is common during the day at home. But in the evenings, when the husbands return home, women normally dress nicely, their clothes conforming to community standards, their hair fastened with a kerchief. It is interesting that whenever women combed their hair in my presence, photographing them made them very uncomfortable because they were afraid that if their husbands saw the pictures that would be a “shame” for them. A young newly married woman said that she did not bother about her clothing when she was at her parents’ home unless her husband was present or when she was at her in-laws, where she made a point of wearing a long-sleeved blouse and doing up her hair. This suggests that women pay much respect to the male members of the community when dress is concerned.

Gender and dress

Attitudes toward customary dress differ depending on gender. Gender-based identity constructions determine attitudes to dress. Men play the dominant role in the community. It is they who represent the family to the outside world as they have more freedom to move around in the *gaje* environment. They wear hats which are assigned an important role among the symbols of identity, and the older generations did tin work and braziers, which was the traditional source of income. Hence, several internalised symbols which distinguish the group’s identity are linked with men whereas the accessories and typical items of women, whose appearance is a far cry from *gaje* or other Gypsy women, are of less importance in the identity construction of the group.

Attitudes toward dress are different between men and women within the same community. One young woman aptly remarked: “Can you imagine how we would look in such clothes if we were slimmer? Trousers suit you but not us.” For a woman, her dress is her identity. For women, being a member of the community entails wearing the specified clothes for their gender. According to Zatta, women’s distinctive clothes serve as a means of control through which men are able to identify their women and protect them from the *gajes* (2002: 103). According to Williams, women are the representation of traditionalism and continuity (2000: 191).

Undeniably, Gábor women’s dress is substantially different from that of *gaje* women’s. As such, it is much harder for them to conceal their group identity. For them, Gypsy dress always signifies the open avowal of their ethnic belong-

ing (Zatta 2002: 103). During their stay abroad, women often run into difficulty because of their distinctive dress especially when requiring different services and dealing with the authorities. On the other hand, for men it is easier to conceal their identity simply by removing their hats when it suits them—when crossing the border, encountering the authorities and in the markets abroad. One of the middle-aged men said that he rarely wore his hat abroad because he rarely met other Gypsies there, and doing business without a hat was easier.

As many romologists have pointed out, subsistence needs and tradition compete with each other quite often (see Piasere 2000; Stewart 1997; Williams 2000; Zatta 2002). While preserving their group identity and ensuring their economic sustenance, the Gábors adapt to the changing conditions of the environment and, in certain situations, conceal the distinctive features of their ethnic identity. According to Barth (1996), this can be attributed to the need to defend social and economic interests. The woman is not allowed to change her clothes, so she takes up the role of the traditionalist, stays at home and does not go out to the market abroad, which is an entirely male domain as men can mix with other ethnic groups more easily. Consequently, flexibility and traditionalism, which are so characteristic of Gypsies, can be maintained through the balance between the roles of men and women. That is to say that by allocating roles according to gender, the group is capable of maintaining its boundaries and avoid assimilation into the Hungarian or Romanian societies. At the same time, the group adapts to the changes and expectations of the outside world.

Men on the other hand think of their own clothes not as an endowment, as women tend to do, but as an option of their own choice: “We wear the hat because we like it. Women wear their kerchief because they have to wear it. Dzsitta, too, wears a kerchief, although she was just taken to Ákosfalva once with a man and then returned. They did not sleep together, but she has to wear. [. . .] We do not have to wear hat. But we wear moustaches when it starts to grow. We might wear sidelocks, too. [. . .] Adidas, we avoid, because what would people say.” The men, regarding their dress, seem to enjoy more freedom than women do, and men—as they mentioned—express their respect for the community when they get dressed as other members of the group.

Women have less freedom to make their own decisions in all aspects of life. They move less freely and they are bound by household chores and raising children while men can easily spend days away from home and might even set off on a long journey at any given time. Though men have relatively more freedom in everyday life, dress is not entirely a matter of their own decision. It is rather the group’s will with some distinction between man and woman. That is, while men think of their own decisions as a constituent part of the group, women are just passive members. When male members of the community speak of their group, they present them as “our custom is. . .”, “we are Adventists”, “we are hat-

ted Gábor Gypsies”. This latter characterisation identifies the Gábors primarily through the male members, but represents the whole group. The Adventist religion, too, penetrated the local Gábor families through the male line. One of the families I had close contact with moved from Cluj Napoca to Tîrgu Mureş because the whole family followed the eldest son of the parents. Changes that affect the group or its segment have often come through the male line; women simply comply.

The Gábors ascribe some importance to gender roles from the very beginning of a baby’s life. A little boy has more freedom than his sisters; they are not expected to help at home and are allowed to go out with the children in the neighborhood. A 14-year-old boy said that he put on his hat whenever he wanted to. In fact, he almost exclusively wore the hat when he went farther away from his home, but not always when he stayed in the vicinity. Young boys get their first hats before the age of 12 or 13, but before that they occasionally put on their father’s hat for photographs or just for fun. Men remember the time when they first got their own hats and wore it with pride. On the other hand, two girls, aged 12 and 14, complained that their mother ordered them to wear skirts instead of trousers: “If we don’t wear skirts, that’s a shame. It’s like this among us, since the Gypsy is Gypsy.” They complained that their mother would beat them if they did not wear skirts saying that it would be a “shame” in the community. In this way boys and girls alike learn what they are and are not allowed to do. As they acquire knowledge about the value system of the group, they learn about the normative codes of clothing at the same time. Young children learn about the rules through the opposition between *allowed to* and *not allowed to*. For men, as I have already mentioned, the community ensures larger freedom, and the above opposition is therefore not seen as a regulatory system but as a cultural repertoire.

Dress and changes

I have been examining customary dress and its relation to ethnic identity. Now I turn old and new elements of dress and accessories and their context. Some accessories are ascribed great importance while others are not. In what follows I try to present how certain items assume a new meaning in the process of adoption by society and their introduction to culture.

As Williams put it, Gypsy communities traditionally borrow from the neighbouring cultures, in the process internalising the elements and creating something particularly Gypsy (2000: 294). This process is aptly illustrated by Gábor Gypsy dress.

As for the range of elements accepted and internalised by the community, Gropper and Miller proposes the term “selective multiculturalism”, referring to

the constant reflections on the cultural behaviours used by the neighbouring groups, and their adoption or rejection (2001: 106–7). The process of internalising is definitely selective, but the criteria for selection remains unknown. With regard to Gábor Gypsy dress and accessories, the newly adopted elements are mainly those taken over from the fashion of the neighbouring groups. What is remarkable is the relatively rapid spread of such elements within the community, which might be attributed to the thick social network and the fact that these elements are judged communally. The adoption therefore relies on communal decisions, not on individual ones.

The selected items of clothing which the Gábors today define as “Gypsy-like” were once worn by the neighbouring groups (see Kogălniceanu 1975; Achim 2001). Today, the Hungarians of Szék do not wear such clothes any more, and the Gábors identify the items of clothing as their own distinctive clothes. An example is the waistcoat, which is worn by the older generations. The black leather waistcoats is part of the so-called traditional men’s wear: “this is ancient, this we have had since there have been Gábors [. . .] the jacket with metal buttons used to be worn by the Hungarians, no one else but the Hungarians and the Gábors. When I die, I will leave it to Csabi.” Although this was once peculiar to the Hungarians, today the Gábors regard it as their own.

The hat plays a similar symbolic role. The commonly black—sometimes brown, drab or grey—broad-brimmed hat is not inherited through the male line. Young boys get their own hat around the age of 10. It is commonly held that the Gábors adopted the hat from the Jews, that’s why it is referred to as “Jewish hat”. One Gábor man said:

we have a liking for the Jews and have adopted this hat from them. The trade, too, we have stolen from them. We used to buy the goods from them in the morning, then took them to the market and paid for it in the evening. It’s not very good to do business with them because they are as cunning as we are; you can never rip them off.

Although they admit that they have borrowed the hat from the Jews they nevertheless claim it as their own; they even include it in their self-definition: “hatted Gábor Gypsies”.

“We used to wear velvet trousers, we didn’t care if it was dirty, but it has gone out of fashion”, said one of the middle-aged men. Velvet trousers, as many men mentioned, were a characteristic type of clothing among Gábors. They used to be fashionable and used to give a unique appearance to Gábor men.

While today the moustache is a common feature for men, Gábor men used to wear beards: “Three men [I knew] among the Gábors had beards. They let it grow because this was our ancient custom, that men wore beards. But not today; as men go to foreign countries, they get rid of their long beards”.

As for women, their wardrobe has no items which are inherited and women

might have adopted more items recently than men. For example, underwear, bra and slippers have become fashionable only in the last few years. Furthermore, the introduction of the Adventist religion has brought with it another significant change in dress, which is apparent on weekdays, too. Women abandoned gold jewelry. The Adventist church preaches the abhorrence of gold jewels. Accordingly, Adventist women do not wear large gold earrings, which are very popular with non-Adventist women.

As mentioned above, the Gábors claim that their dress has not changed “since there have been Gábors”. Nevertheless, several elements have been introduced and abandoned in the course of time. Items like the waistcoat, hat and the pleated skirt were appropriated from other ethnic groups. The report of the appropriation of the “Jewish” hat is an example of capturing the symbolic value which the item represents (Harrison 1995: 269). This item has a clearly symbolic value and is used by the group as symbolic capital. It represents smartness and deftness in business and in trade. By its appropriation the group wishes to attain the value it carries and redirect to themselves the attributes that go with it.

Dress as a medium of communication

I mentioned earlier the idea of continuity through dress. I have also mentioned what the variations in dress mean within the group and how these variations differ. I will now examine the message that the Gábors try to send to the outside world through their dress.

Clothing expresses one’s sense of belonging. It is a means of communication as well as an ethnic symbol, open to various interpretations depending one’s perspective. From the point of view of the Gábors, it can be an expression of coherence and respect for the group, or in the case of women, of resignation and acceptance. Dress also reveals tells a woman’s age and marital and social status.

To an outsider it is different. It tells the observer that the wearer belongs to a well-defined group. As the interview fragments have clearly shown, the group wishes to communicate a highly positive image to the outside world. Dress being one tool of communication, it is used to “cash in” to gain economic as well as social advantages (Harrison 1995: 268). Belonging to the Adventist church and the attributes that come with it—and the emphasis they lay on it—all support this positive image, which allows them to reflect on Gypsy stereotypes and the negative connotations they hold. I have heard such remarks as “do not act like a Gypsy” or “do not eat like a Gypsy”. “Acting like a Gypsy” or “Gypsy-like behaviour” means being noisy and obnoxious. Despite the fact that they have a positive self-image and claim to be Gypsies, there are a few things that they paraphrase as “Gypsy-like” and regard as relics of their Gypsy past.

Recently, however, they have created a new image which they try to imprint in the *gaje* common thought. Dress in this process is assigned a symbolic value.

Conclusion

This article has introduced the reader to the customary dress of the Gábors, both men and women, and their cognitive relation to their clothing. This I have compared to other manifestations of Gábor identity. I have described what role the Gábor attribute to dress and how dress expresses cohesion and ethnic solidarity. I have also presented the changes that have had an impact on dress codes. All along the essay, I have tried to describe the relationship between dress and identity and to illustrate how the contents of identity can be traced back to clothing. Furthermore, I examined how man and woman within the same community acquire different cognitive schemes and thus have different attitudes towards the customary system of dress.

I conclude that Gábor dress is one of the most discernible elements of ethnic representation. Some of its features have meanings that are symbolically related to their subjective sense of belonging and which have their roots in the distant past, just like the phenomenon of Gábor identity, and thus represent continuity. These features contribute to the cultural cohesion within the Gábor group, just as language, sense of a common ancestry, patterns of behaviour and morals do. All together they ensure cultural continuity. Furthermore, clothes as part of ethnic signs is an outer manifestation of identity; it conveys a meaning to the observer. The message, its content and interpretation may differ according to the time and place, but as long as there is a relationship between ethnicity and dress, there will be the act of communication.

As a final note, a quote that best illustrates the main argument of this article comes from a conversation I had with an elderly Gábor couple:

Woman: Everyone knows where they belong. We do not mingle with other nationalities [. . .] everyone with their own nationality.

Me: And the dress?

Woman: Not the dress, you can change your dress.

Man: We haven't changed our dress, not at all [. . .] the Gábors, this is ancient and has existed since there have been Gábors [. . .]

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