Bargaining as winners: feminine dealing with outsiders in a group of settled “Voyageurs”

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BARGAINING AS WINNERS:
FEMININE DEALING WITH OUTSIDERS IN A GROUP OF SETTLED “VOYAGEURS”

Ce texte est une communication donnée lors du colloque international de la Gypsy Lore Society à Grenade, le 10 septembre 2005 et a fait l’objet d’une communication orale au L.A.U. le 21 avril 2005 sous le titre Des poupées amazones ou les paradoxes de la féminité adolescente. Interrogations autour des modes d’expression et de contrôle du corps chez des jeunes Voyageuses. Je remercie les membres du laboratoire pour les remarques utiles qui m’ont été faites alors ainsi que Lance Thompson pour ses fines corrections linguistiques.

Introduction

The Traveller community I will speak about comes from Germany, but has lived the Alsace since 1870. They settled progressively in the Burgundy, region of France, from the 1920s and 30s. After the second world war they started building houses in a special district of a small town and specialized in secondhand furniture trade in the 1960s. Subsequently, in the 1970s and 1980s, their social and economic condition improved greatly.

This report will set out the contradictions between the way in which women affirm their femininity, using violence and seduction with outsiders before they get married, as well as the constraints and fears surrounding their bodies since childhood. It will draw attention to the importance of competition and rivalry between families based on reputation and economic success. Since men can prove their individuality by buying and selling antiques, women try in their own way to demonstrate their skill in obtaining gifts, money, credit, and bargaining in prestigious stores downtown. All these types of behaviour point to the conflicts inherent in their self ascription as «middle-class Travellers».

Presentation/Description

In this little town of Burgundy tourists meander looking for excellent wines and gastronomic specialities. All is so quiet: old houses are shut, streets are very clean; the old city-center is dotted with luxury shops. Sometimes, a big crowd of foreigners swarm to the town. The townspeople lock themselves up in their houses. When grape-pickers arrive, it is as if clouds of grass-hoppers invaded the town. More prestigious events attract stars, politicians, kings and queens. A chosen few enjoy «grands crus» and gastronomic specialities in prestigious village castles. The center presents the image of a flourishing little town thanks to the shining shop-windows which appeal to rich foreign tourists. Most inhabitants don’t live downtown, and so they often go shopping in the suburbs. But inside this old part of the town, the inhabitants go to be seen, since, for the most part, they know each other (which is not surprising for this sort of big village of twenty thousand souls).

Anybody can easily notice the social diversity from vine workers to wine merchants, rich wine growers to peasant of the plain. Dressing, walking, their way of speaking quickly assigns each to his or her social configuration. Even nowadays, vine workers’ old wives wear scarves on their heads, and only a few years ago, upper and middle class women used to wear hats and gloves, and were greeted with deference by lower class people.

Traveller women have a special place in these representations. They have a specific way of dressing, speaking, moving, and of being feminine and attractive. The wives of small business owners also try to follow the same habits, like their husbands who put a roof rack on their car to resemble antique dealers. For them, Travellers represent a model of economic achievement. Most of the inhabitants of the city recognize Traveller women. They are seen as members of certain families who are descendents of rag and bone collectors and who have been there for at least 80 years: «but be careful! don’t tell them that! they don’t appreciate it at all» they will tell you. Today, they want to show they have succeeded in their economic activities.

Women often go downtown, into the most prestigious stores and buy food for banquets or feasts which are often celebrated with other Traveller families. They talk loudly, sometimes don't
respect the queue and always try to get the lowest prices possible for expensive goods. Many have big credits in the stores, but when a store is adopted by one family, everybody goes to the same. Children often shout asking their mothers to buy them something. Clothing is also very important as parents want their children to look like dolls. Hair is perfectly done and brand-name clothes are very clean.

There are many things they are not allowed to do: the first is get dirty, touch the ground, play in dirty places. They aren't allowed to be untidy either; they aren't allowed to play in the living-room, where the most expensive furniture is. They have to stay inside the yard, and so on. Once I was shown a film of their childhood; the teenagers laughed and told me: « look, we were like dolls in a box, we could do nothing. Even our clothes were winter clothes until it was very hot ». They played in their yard, between a neo-romanesque statue and an early XXth century aviary, hindered in their movements by their Scottish skirts and patent shoes, and were not allowed to climb trees. A scene of their younger sister, during a birthday party, getting hold of a knife and threatening her older sister greatly amused them. In the house, photos show this angelic aspirant murder sister in a pink « tutu » for her first gala. Like other traveller’s children, classic dance permit to learn proper gestures, like standing up straight, in order to look like a child of high society.

Free movements and dirtiness are prohibited for children. Parents are afraid that accidents could happen to them, so they have to remain quiet, in designated places, and not getting dirty. Sleeping with their parents, sometimes till the age of 10 is not uncommon. These children wouldn’t go out on school organized trips, because their parents were too anxious about eventual accidents and all sorts of things they had heard about on television. Going to school is less dangerous, as children always have some cousins going to the same place, even if relations within school are not always idyllic.

However, teenagers can easily move about. Boys and girls alike get their driver’s licence early and can take advantage of this to refuse family constraints and to meet other teenagers in bars.

Young girls often create a very compact clique, always going out together, buying the same jewels, the same dresses, sharing all their clothes, and so on. They look like their mothers, but in a more accentuated way. A mother once told me to show my « capital », giving me advice on how looking more provocative when going to a party. Often the young girls go downtown to meet other young people.

But their movements can easily be controlled. By asking their friends, or relatives who meet them in town, mothers know who they go with, who they meet, who their young friends are... The most important thing for them is that their young daughters be virgins till their marriage, or at least for their regular boyfriend, with whom she may have children. More often girls and boys get engaged while they are between 17 and 20 years old; they begin at that time travelling to buy furniture, in so doing, earn the money necessary to build a house. Competition to get a husband is very hard as there are more girls than boys in these families, and all mothers prefer that their daughter marry a boy from their group, a cousin for instance. They try to influence the choice of their daughters, by inviting family with a boy of the same age, who they have known for a long time and try to give arguments like: « Look at Martin! He is so good at Calling! He has so much luck! »... Rich families' children don't have to buy a house when they get married, as their parents have already built one for them, sometimes on the same site. Before getting married, they will help their mother in the house. After, they do this for their husband, sometimes going with him to buy furniture, more often they staying with their children.

Before getting married, young women have more freedom to go out, and meet friends of their age. Afterwards, they are not allowed to go out if they don't have something particular to do, such as shopping, taking the children to school, and so on. If they are seen in a bar, their reputation will suffer. Even an elderly widow – of strong character – would be will scold by her son....

1 I use the word “calling” for the economic activity which consist in looking for good deals, bargaining, asking private individuals to sell their furniture, objects, going round, from house to house. In French this activity is called “chine” and the good expression would be : “What a good “chineur” he is!”. 
Until their engagement, they can go wherever they want, to bars and night clubs, talking with every man they want, as long as remain virgins. Most of the time, they meet non-traveller men, but sometimes other travellers from other communities, like Manouches (Śintis).

When young girls go out, everyone notices them, even before they speak. They speak loudly, they laugh and bicker together, they always wear high-heeled shoes, golden jewels, pink or leopard printed clothes, skin-tight dresses. Their hair is dyed to a shiny blond colour (even if they are naturally blond). Like many Travellers in France, they often wear hand-made Savoyard earrings.

They speak French, but with several German expressions like: « Ach geht! » or other religious ones: « Notre dame de Lourdes! Qu'elle est belle! », sometimes romani words are inserted in conversation such as: « love » for money « Do you have the love? ». Seing other Travellers from other cities, walking in the street, they will say to one another: « see, the Walsh! » (Walsh is the name they give to other Travellers who retain manouche lifestyle, intermarrying).

When they see someone they know, they shout aloud: « Hey, come here! ». When meeting a boy, during a walk, they will take him hostage in his car and tell him to take them where they want. When they go in one of their usual bars, they will start joking with the waiter they know: « Hi! Aren't you going to offer us a bottle of champagne? I've just passed my driving test! ». Meeting boys they don't know, they joke with them, especially if they are shy and not very good-looking, saying to their friends: « look how schön he is! » (Schön means handsome, in an ironic way): « Hey! good looking boy, my sister is in love with you, but she doesn't dare tell you! ». Most of the time, the aim is to get the men to offer them something to drink. Other times, the program is to find a group they know, to go to a night club. The entrance is free, as they get invitations in the city shops, and the drinks are paid by young men. Young men try to approach these charming girls, but they know the exact distance to keep so as not to be caught in a trap, or excuse themselves buy spilling the drink, or going to the toilets in group, and so on.

When, unfortunately, they get caught, they'll say: « What a shame! We've been taken for Kantch! » (Kantch is the name used for non-Travellers, peasants, naïve, stupid and always ready to be caught in a trap). This happened one night at a village party, a man singing bawdy songs proposed that two of them sit beside him. Thinking they could laugh about it, playing « pom pom girls », they decided to accept the invitation, until he touched their breasts. They abruptly jumped from the bench, shouting an insult: « Putoirinares! » - which means people suffering from tuberculosis, a word which has been adopted by Travellers to designate particularly dangerous and stupid people, to be kept outside the group.

Often they are able to get men to offer them something to drink. They laugh and joke about these men, telling non-sense stories about themselves, giving a totally stereotypical image of gypsy girls. I thought this was specific to only the younger generations who grew up in the town and tend to display their travelling identity. But adults have told me similar stories, when young boys were afraid of them, because they looked so proud and provocative, telling them: « Do you want me to kiss you? », licking their lips.

These interactions are not transformed into closer relations. They remain stereotypical behaviour. More generally, these interactions take place in a broader economic and exterior context. Even if these young girls earn their own money and have parents who give them some, they are conditioned from childhood when going with their mothers into town, looking for every occasion to ask for money, to be offered gifts, to obtain discounts, paying for everything as if it were on sale. Even at McDonald's, they find ways to cheat with scratch cards games and come back with a mountain of hamburgers and gifts. If the prize is a bicycle, all the family contributes playing several times so as to have more chances to win. And most of the time, they will win!

Adults are more interested in natural goods in the countryside, such as fruit. They sometimes practice small thefts like picking walnuts, fearing to come upon a peasant with his rifflle. But the town is more interesting for young women, who can improve their capacity to have more things than Kantch could afford with their intelligence and cleverness.
So, teenagers also play and try to win things or bargain in shops, but with the additional perspective of seducing men, which is strictly forbidden to their mothers, as this would ruin their reputation.

But this way of behaving for the Kantch can also be seen as an attitude similar to prostitution. As a result of sticking to these stereotypes, gypsy women tend to be seen as provocative and sensual. Playing with this stereotype can sometimes back fire. Once to three of these girls went to a bar downtown and a man began addressing himself to them with obscene expressions (Hey, you, panthers! Do you want my banana?) which made the young panthers loose their sense of humour. Being attacked verbally, they began to fight, throwing bottles across the bar. The result was that they were attacked physically and ended up in a hospital.

After that story, mothers of other girls said that these three looked too provocative, that it wasn’t surprising that they had been attacked. “Being dressed as they were!”. This revealed another way of fighting between women of the group with responses like: “and your daughters! They look like whores!” Matrimonial competition tends to cause mothers to try to elevate their daughters reputation and try to put down the reputation of others.

But for the mothers, competition also takes place through the economic success of their husbands. They are more or less aware of it, because they usually don’t go buying with them. Even if they stay at home in case clients come, they often don’t know the exact price of the furniture they are to sell... But they are responsible for the expenses ; they are supposed to organize birthday parties, holy communion meals, and so on. In order to be respected and to keep a good reputation, they have to be generous, even if in reality they don’t have enough money. If this is the case, they try to make arrangements with sellers. But they also want to see if they are lucky like their husbands with the furniture business. While shopping, they might also show they are good not only at negotiating, but also at wining.

In the older generations (people who are now 70-80 years old), women used to work and sell more than their husbands did, wickerwork, harberdashery. They could also drink with their clients, without telling their husbands, they told me. Nowadays, they stay in their houses, alone most of the time as their husbands travel to buy and sell antiquaries, and the children go to school. They will travel together only during holidays, or before children are old enough to go to school.

As J. Okely showed in her works, women can find many ways to get through conflicts they have with men, in their community and outside, dealing with stereotypes and having special relations with outside men, without having any sexual relation. This could be such an example, as well as showing the evolution of women’s rules in families.

Nowadays, economic roles are different, since the group has known a great social growth. And this evolution has resulted in many mixed marriages with outsiders – non-travellers.

For them, cleanliness habits seem to be not so much a question of ethnical boundaries. I would rather see in this a fear of losing their social status. Inhabitants of the city today still link their social growth with dealing with dirty materials. To attain a middle-class status, it seems that almost all of them want to get rid of their former degraded practices as scrap, rags and bones merchants. So they focus their attention on a clean appearance (clothes, cars, gardens, houses, and so on) and want to be recognized as an elite of the town. They still keep some habits of purity (cleaning the dishes and cleaning the clothes, animal’s hair on food, and so on) but that seems not as important as exterior cleanliness. They are proud to say: «Look, yesterday, a Kantch came to my house, and she was really amazed by all this furniture, and these objects. She said to me: but you are middle-class people!». «Of course, I said, we are middle-class Travellers! ». And also after eating in luxury restaurants of the town, they tell their friends: "we were received like princes".

Looking like rich people, anticipating fashions following Parisian modes, but always having their own look, women belonging to the Traveller community try to be recognized (also through other habits like hobbies, religious and formal ceremonies, formal invitations) as an elite of the town, and as an old component of it (and indeed most of the merchants came after the World War II, even if they are always seen as familiar strangers).
Nevertheless, with the improvement of their economic status, women have lost the place they used to occupy in economic subsistence, even if their material conditions have been bettered. Moreover they have lost their mobility. Being very controlled by all the members of the group, and being subordinated to their husbands, especially in their expenses, they find ways to evade and create opportunities to obtain more than they would normally expect. They accumulate credits in the shops, play, bargain to obtain lower prices than what they are asked, even if their husbands earn a lot of money. Unlike their husbands, who try not to be recognized as Travellers when they buy furniture in private houses, women show their traveller identity when they go out. And perhaps they do it in a more pronounced way, since they no longer have their part in calling habits.

For teenagers, playing and joking with strangers seems to be easier than with other Travellers. They can speak freely about stupid things they couldn't do with boys of their group, in that if they are seen with them, they would be considered as nearly married. But freedom of tone with boys of the group wouldn't be easy either because then they would feel diminished by such treatment. Having access to non traveller men allows this behaviour, as a form of release.

Non Traveller men are seen as weaker, and the argument for a traveller woman to marry a non traveller man is often that in such a marriage she can do everything she wants with her husband (and the subordination of a non traveller husband is also stressed by the fact that his father-in-law and brothers-in-law will initiate him into antiques). A man traveller has to show his masculinity by being authoritarian, forbidding his wife to go out except for family reasons, being sure of her fidelity, looking good and presenting the habits of receiving. A non traveller man is always less masculine, his wife is too free, and she will deceive her husband, and as she also has shameless habits, she is a sexual prey for all men, Traveller or not².

Before having to live with this prescription, teenagers experiment their seduction and power of domination with strangers, even if it can sometimes be dangerous for their body. This seems to be a paradox given their education, which suggests delicate, fragile creatures. In fact, giving this education, they become women who fight and are often encouraged by their parents.

Another contradiction lies in their middle-class identity and their bargaining habits. The latter is for town inhabitants a remnant of two generations ago when these families were poor.

One might also ask questions about B.Formoso’s hypothesis on the link between education and economic skills. From the evidence of the Manouches and Rom’s communities he observed in France, freedom of movement, of satisfying desires might be seen as an habitus which will allow adults to be so efficient in asking things of outsider. In the case I saw, another kind of education, with constraints relating to bodies, doesn’t inhibit the economic faculties of shamelessly asking outsiders.

All these contradictions and conflicts point to the peculiarity of this group, which preserves a strong identity based on economic skills and exchange habits inside and outside of the group. It also shows tensions between social and familiar identification. These tensions could be resumed by a question : is it possible to still be a Traveller and dream of social recognition ?

² Many Travellers associate their job with feminine conquests, and when I asked them if I could come with them buying furnitures, they made sexual implied.