

## Roast Chicken and Other Gypsy Stories

by Jelena Čvorović

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A book *Roast Chicken and Other Gypsy Stories* by Jelena Čvorović, views oral narratives from an evolutionary perspective. The book presents a group of tales collected orally in a fieldwork from Gypsies in western Serbia. The stories are a part of a collection (80 all together) made from several different Gypsy groups showing varying degrees of influence from Serbian culture. The significance of an oral tradition is examined from anthropological, ethnographical and historical perspectives. The Gypsy narratives presented in this book explore vital issues relevant for their survival and reproduction, such as marriage, residence, resources, tensions with the surrounding majority, and proper modes of behavior. In an attempt to interpret these stories as instructions for behavior, the author developed a theoretical framework based on anthropology and evolutionary approach that relates the stories to Gypsy culture. In doing so, the author explores the world of Serbian Gypsies in details. The author argues that a variety of Gypsy narratives' characteristics such as function, scenery, depiction and variation serve the Gypsies to cover and use social knowledge on local surroundings that throughout their history have been relevant to their survival and reproduction. From the stories, other humans, non-Gypsies and their surrounding social environment appear to be the main, unpredictable, and latent dangerous aspect of the Gypsy past environment. The narratives originated probably as a response to the life conditions Gypsies met and lived upon their arrival in the Balkans: since their coming to Europe, the Gypsies main

concern was how to survive and outwit life obstacles. The conclusion is that the Serbian Gypsy Oral tradition provided models of behavior that has helped to regulate their cognitive and conscious domains through which they negotiated their social and cultural environments.

The explanatory concept applied in the book is drawn from the argument of the “dual inheritance of genes and traditions” (Boyd and Richerson 1985). Evolutionary theorists attempting to explain forms of literary narrative agree on general premise that literature is a product of the evolved human mind, reflecting so basic human motives like mating, parenting, gaining social status and resources (Carroll 2002, 1999, 1995; Storey 1996, Miller 2000, Scalise Sugiyama 2001, 2003). Scholars however, disagree about whether or not literary narrative may have an evolutionary function (Pinker 1997) or what the function might be. According to one argument, literary narrative satisfies a need for cognitive order (Carroll 2002) while the other argument holds that a narrative can directly or indirectly influence behavior (Scalise Sugiyama 2001). Both arguments are supported in this book, concentrating on Gypsy narrative strategies, and demonstrating how the stories cultural variation, description and settings influence the pattern of Gypsy behaviors, widespread traits that presumably were successful in the past. In doing so, the book presents how literary/oral narrative universals at the macro level (adaptive problems) and variations at the micro level (local solutions to these adaptive problems and constraints) are reflected in Gypsy stories.

There are several reasons why this book will make invaluable reading for all scholars and students in the field. Firstly, Gypsies remain understudied in international anthropology. Secondly, although a number of literary scholars, theorists and critics have been working successfully to integrate literary study with evolutionary approach, most contemporary theoretical studies deal with written, not oral literature, with little or no emphasis on case studies, with the exception of important works on Bushmen and foraging folklore. This book so represents a unique case study of oral tradition within one ethnic group that retained most of its traditional cultural and behavioral features in modern times. The findings complement and extend the works of others but also contribute in new ways to our understanding of the evolutionary significance of narratives, by bringing together the narrations of local people with the objective data produced by anthropology. This case study provides evidence and ways in which traditional stories are used by Gypsies to manipulate and influence the social behavior of many generations of descendants. In addition, this book is the first study to examine Gypsy traditional stories based on the concepts drawn from evolutionary psychology. This book enables us to investigate the link between the form of traditional Gypsy culture and their social and economic marginalization in Serbia. Additionally, the book is a valuable contribution to the better understanding of the Gypsy rich folklore, showing that Gypsies are something more than the usual stereotypes and mythological portrayal.

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