

ROMANI | LITERATURE

Factsheets on Romani Literature: General Introduction

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Romani culture has been passed down orally for centuries. *Romani*, the language of the *Roma*, *Sinti*, *Calè* and many other European population groups collectively referred to by the mostly pejorative term “gypsies”, is consequently a primarily oral language with a relatively short and inhomogeneous writing tradition. There is neither a universally accepted standard variety nor a uniform system of writing. As verbal creativity in Romani culture has been manifested exclusively orally for centuries, the description of the literary production by Roma begins with oral literature. The *World Oral Literature Project* (<http://www.oralliterature.org/>) defines it as

performances of creative works of verbal art which include ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, musical genres, folk tales, creation tales, songs, myths, legends, word games, life histories or historical narratives.

Due to the development of electronic media and the resulting information revolution in the 20th century, oral literature is today probably one of the most endangered cultural and literary forms of expression. This development particularly affects the oral tradition of marginalised minorities. Socio-economic constraints often result in socio-cultural assimilation of disadvantaged groups. Additionally, mainstream media almost exclusively commercially exploit their culture, if perceived at all, in the form of fossilised folklore. Due to its high degree of endangerment, this description of Romani literature begins with its rich oral tradition.

1_ ORAL LITERATURE

explores the narrative tradition of the Roma, its most important genres and in particular the tradition of *paramisa*, *paramiša*, *paramiča*, the ‘fairy tales’ and their formulas, themes, motifs, etc. A second, complementary factsheet presents examples of text as well as some well-known narrators and discusses the role of collectors and researchers in this core area of both Romani cultural research and Romani philology.

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2_ LITERATURE

deals with the written production of literature from its beginnings in the early Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s, the productive phases in the former Czechoslovakia and the former Yugoslavia up to the present. This introductory factsheet provides an overview of the diversity of contemporary Romani literature and presents three of its most important representatives.

This distinction between oral and written form is by no means to be seen as a dichotomy as it is neither binding nor tenable. The genre of oral history is integrated into the description of written literature production as most of these publications are written, revised versions of oral reports. It is also once again the open form of factsheets which allows and suggests the extension of the description of Romani literature to include additional topics. In this context, the following contributions are conceivable: The presentation of individual authors and their works, the descriptions of individual genres such as poetry, drama, etc., the literary production of individual countries, regions or Romani groups and the classification of Romani literature according to the languages used by the authors. In addition, the representation of Roma and their image in the general literature should be discussed. It can be purely descriptive as demonstrated by John Sampson in his anthology *The Wind on the Heath* published in 1930, or analytical, as done in several publications in recent decades. The possibilities of expansion are endless.

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Of the many collections of Romani oral literature, we would like to mention the series by the Graz Romani project published by Drava. These bilingual volumes (Romani/German) offer additional information on specific Romani varieties and on the fairy tale motifs. Some are supplemented by audio CDs:

- 2000. *O Rom taj o beng. Romane pamaristscha, phukajiptsch taj gila andar o Burgenland.* CD/2002. *Schun, so me phukavav ...*
- 2001. *Te na dikhas sunende ... Lovarenge paramiči, ternetura taj gjila.* CD/2002. *Kodo phende e Romora ...*
- 2003. *E bengali Romani. So Roma phenen taj gilaben.* CD/2003. *Oh romnije zelenije ...*
- 2006. *E čoxanend'i. Gurbetond'e paramiča.*
- 2009. *Momejla hem limonja. Arlijengere paramisja.*

Two of the numerous collections in majority languages are:

- Mode, Heinz / Hübschmannová, Milena. eds. 1983-1985. *Zigeunermärchen aus aller Welt.* 4vols. Wiesbaden: Drei Lilien Verlag.
- Tong, Diane. ed. 1989. *Gypsy Folktales.* San Diego / New York / London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Publications on individual topics can be found in the specific factsheets.

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