



How a Tradition Is Born

*From Invisibility to a Voice of One's Own — the Cult of Saint Sara
in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, France*

Tatiana Zachar Podolinská · Opening Address, 2 September 2026



Croatian Romani Union "Kali Sara"

Savez Roma u Republici Hrvatskoj — co-organiser, Zagreb 2026

Welcome to Zagreb

With gratitude to our hosts and organisers

- **Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar**
- **Institute for Migration Research, Zagreb**
- **Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences —**
Danijel Vojak, Željko Holjevac,
Domagoj Tončinić, Marina Perić Kaselj
- **Croatian Romani Union Kali Sara —**
Veljko Kajtazi





How a Tradition Is Born the Cult of Saint Sara in Saintes- Maries-de-la-Mer, France

“Kali Sara” — Black Sara



This year's theme was suggested by the name of our co-organiser, the Croatian Romani Union *Kali Sara*, which bears the name of a saint whose cult is centred in the crypt of Notre-Dame-de-la-Mer, in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, capital of the Camargue.

Statue of St Sara, May 25, 2026 (Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, T. Zachar Podolinská)

Fieldwork in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer

21–28 May 2026 · qualitative fieldwork during the pilgrimage



POSTER 2026 – Procession to Saint Sara (24th May) and to the Saintes Maries, Jacobé and Salomé (25th May).

Fieldwork in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer



*Pilgrims in the Basilica Notre-Dame-de-la-Mer,
by the statues of the Saintes Maries, Jacobé
and Salomé in the boat
(May 24, 2026; T. Zachar Podolinská)*



*Pilgrims by the statue of Saint Sara in the crypt
(May 25, 2026, T. Zachar Podolinská)*

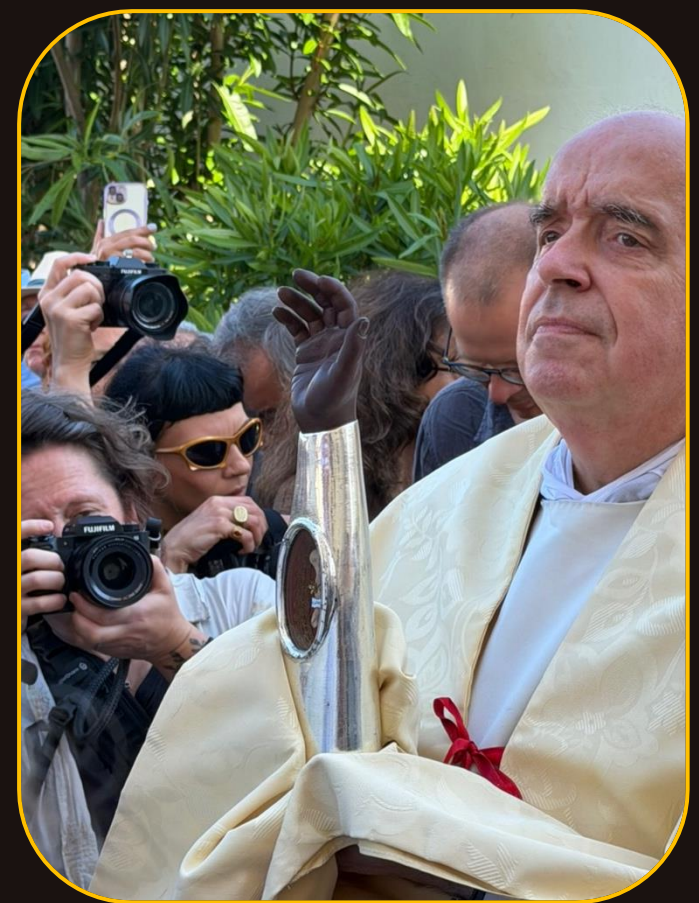
Fieldwork in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer



*Taking pictures of Banners
(May 24, 2026; Saintes, T. Zachar Podolinská)*



*Pilgrims by the statue of Saint Sara in the crypt
(May 25, 2026, Saintes; T. Zachar Podolinská)*



*"Holy arm" (May 24, 2026; Saintes,
T. Zachar Podolinská)*

Fieldwork in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer

21–28 May 2026 · qualitative fieldwork during the pilgrimage



Music-battling on the square adjacent to the cathedral. Guardians on horseback lead the processions to Saint Sara (May 24, 2026) (Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, T. Zachar Podolinská).

Fieldwork in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer

21–28 May 2026 · qualitative fieldwork during the pilgrimage



St Sara as article to buy (Saintes, 2026, T. Zachar Podolinská)

“Being on the spot”

Observing, interviewing, photographing — the crush of pilgrims, caravans, streets, cafés, and market stalls



A town overwhelmed for a few May days each year by tens of thousands of pilgrims and tourists — its dress, music, vendors, and logistics (Saintes, 2026, T. Zachar Podolinská)

Not invention. Not emancipation alone.

The concept of “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm & Ranger) holds only in part: it presupposes an active inventor and a passive recipient — a model the material does not confirm.

Co-authorship / co-agency

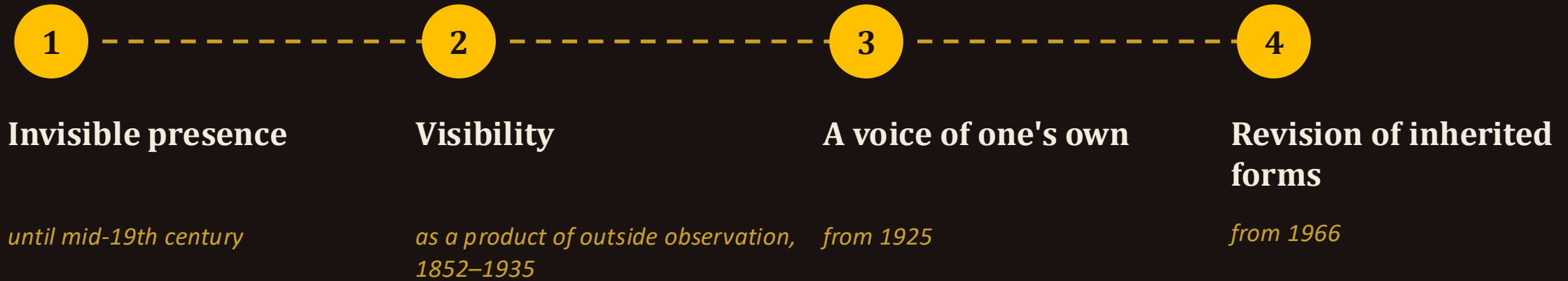
An asymmetrical interaction among several actors — at times friendly, at times conflictual — in which no single participant holds full control over the resulting meaning.

“...quite unexpectedly, the Roma emerged as emancipated authors with a respected authorship of their own.”



Relics of the St Sara (Saintes, 2026, T. Zachar Podolinská)

Four phases of a getting voice



Throughout: material interventions, processional choreography, and ritual innovation — non-verbal authorial acts that do not produce text.

PHASE I — until the mid-19th century

Invisible presence

“Egyptian” groups are documented in Provence from the early 15th century. In 1474, pilgrim Hans von Waltheim already described venerating “the body of the blessed Sara” alongside the two Marys.

Sara's relics stood accessible in the lower chapel year-round — a natural site of devotion long before any written source thought to mention its itinerant pilgrims.



Absence in the sources does not mean absence in history.



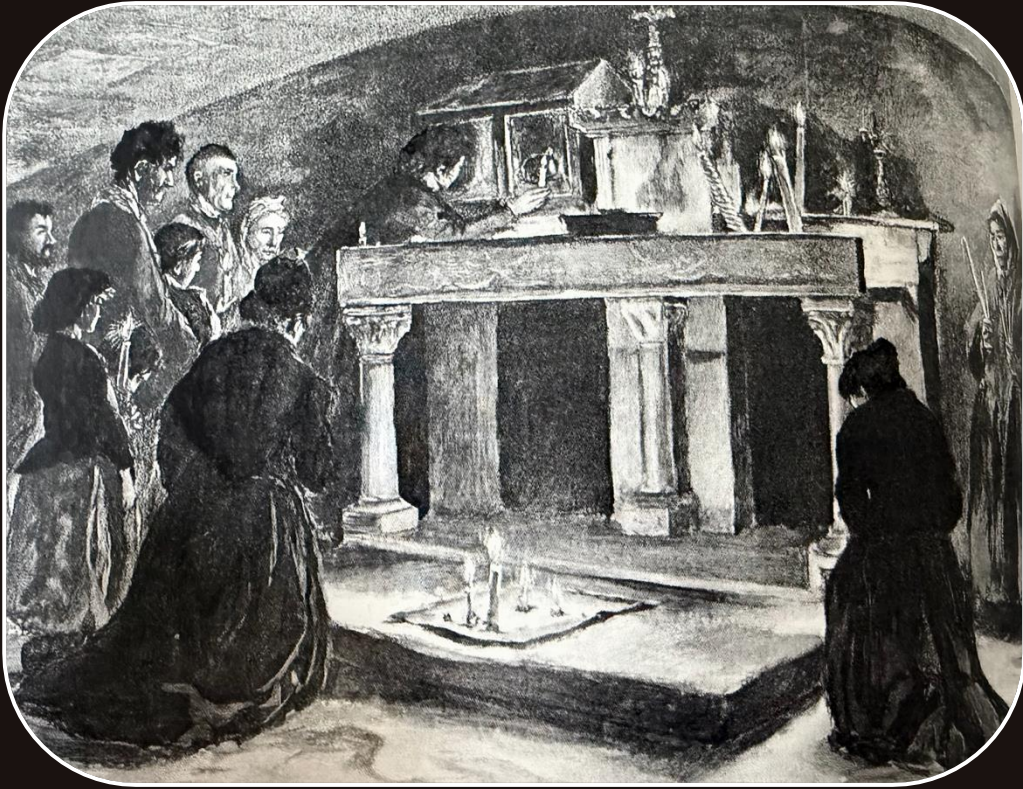
*Pilgrims venerating the reliquaries of
Sainte Marie Jacobé and Salomé
(Saintes, 2026, T. Zachar Podolinská)*



*Statues of the Saintes Maries Jacobé and Salomé in the boat
(Saintes, 2026, T. Zachar Podolinská)*

PHASE I — until the mid-19th century

Invisible presence



*Sara's relics stood accessible in the lower chapel year-round
(engraving by E. Burnard, Bohémiens in the crypt)*



*Ex-voto depicting the two Marys in a boat and Sara as a
noblewoman welcoming them on the shore*

PHASE II — 1852–1935

Visibility as a product of outside observation



J. B. Laurens, 1852 — pilgrims at the reliquary

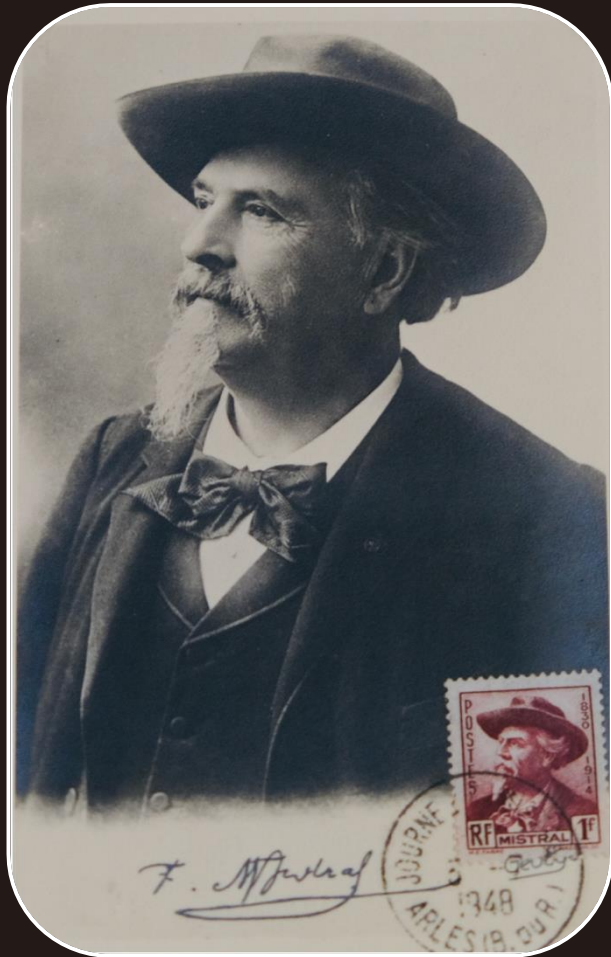
F. Mistral notes the Bohémiens let the largest candles burn before Sara's altar — she was, in their words, “one of their own nation.”



Ex-votum in the crypt (Saintes, 2026, T. Zachar Podolinská)

PHASE III — from 1925

The shaping of a voice of one's own



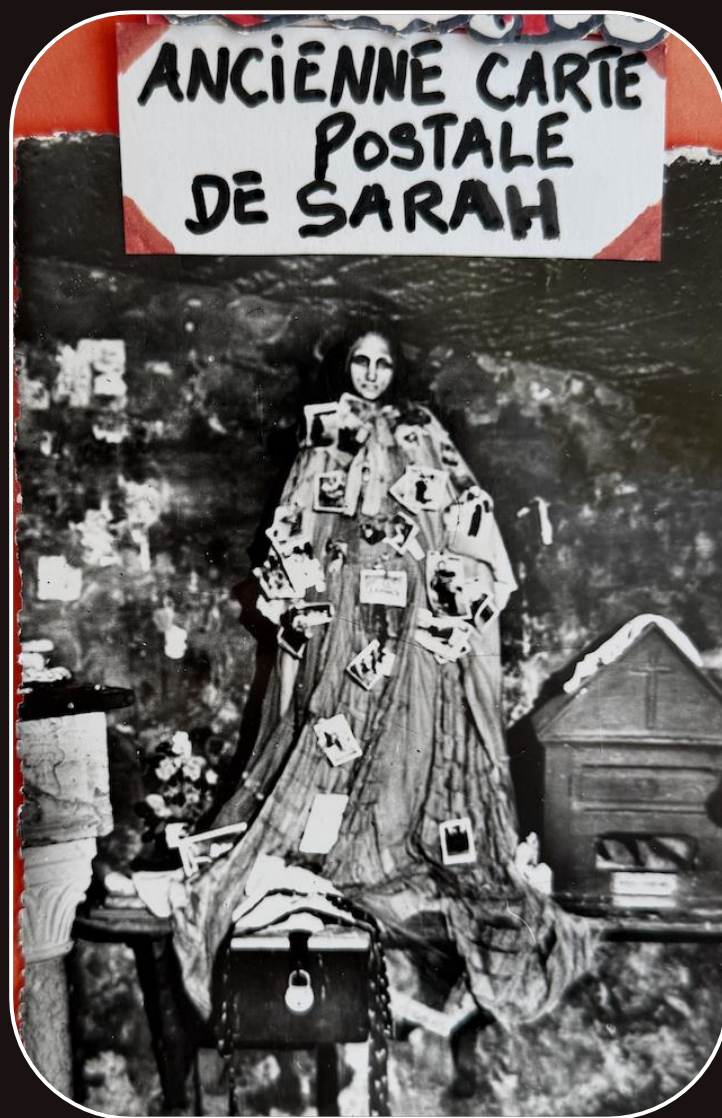
Marquis Folco de Baroncelli



Internalised version of St Sara as a noblewoman, a Gitane, native inhabitant of the Camargue



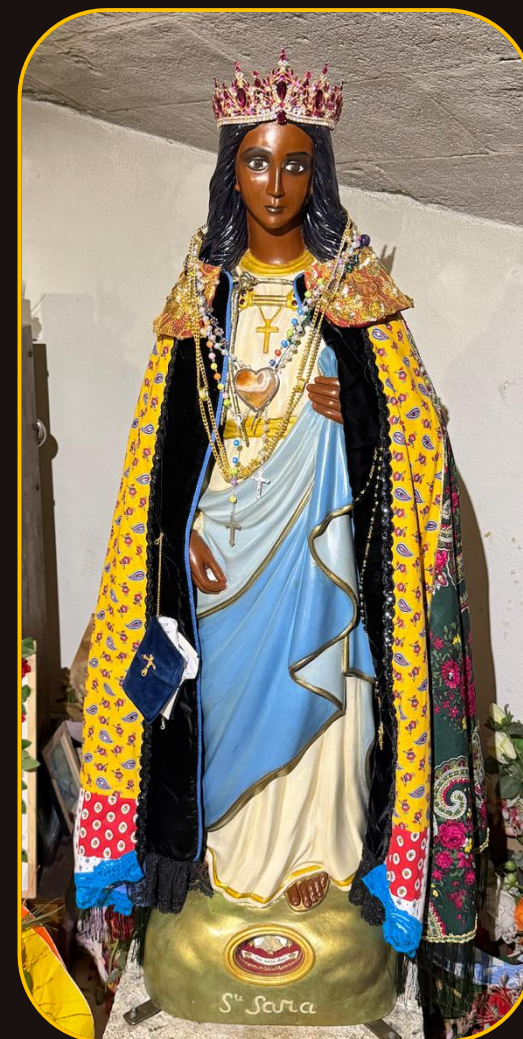
Baptiste Emmanuel, "Coucou" — the first king of the Gitans, with Monseigneur Clément Roques, 1935 *First independent procession with the statue of St Sara (May 24, 1935)*



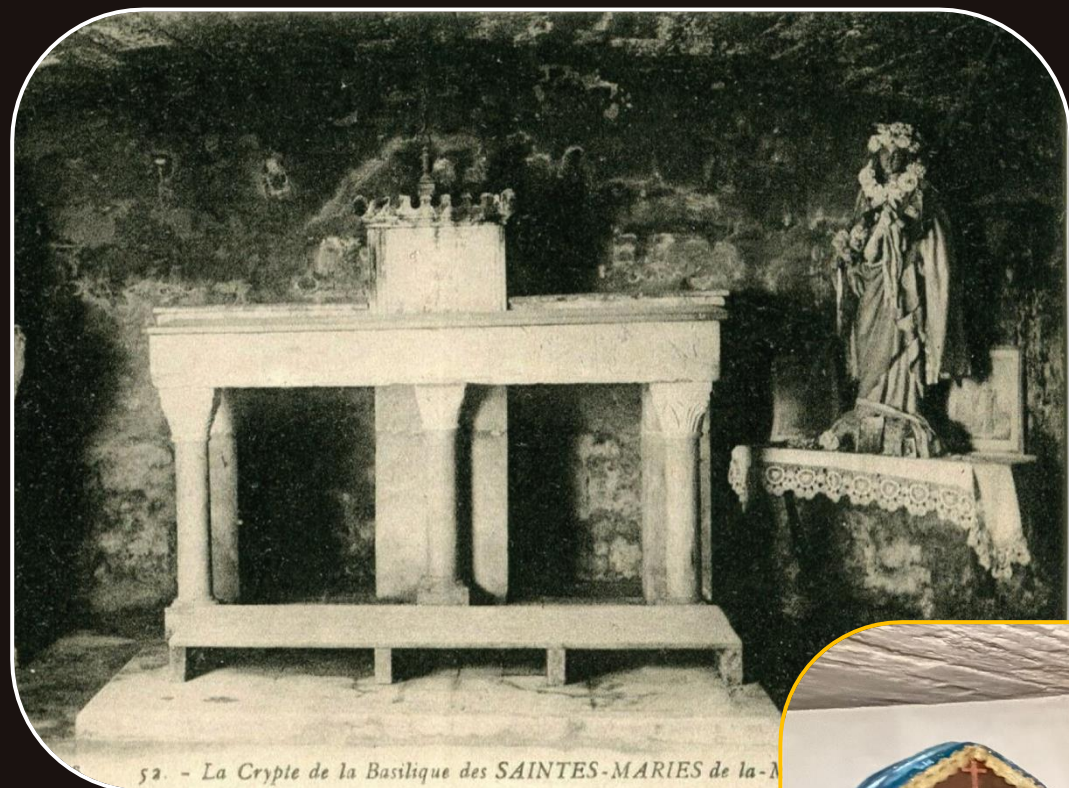
Exhibited vintage postcard of Saint Sara's statue covered with pinned ex-voto photographs (1950)



Vintage photograph of the crowned statue carried in procession



The statue of Sainte Sara in the crypt today, adorned with votive jewellery (May 27, 2026, TZP)



Vintage postcard view of the crypt of the Basilica of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, with its altar and the statue of Saint Sara.

The crypt today, its walls covered with ex-votos, photographs and offerings surrounding the statue of Saint Sara (Saintes, 2026, TZP)



PHASE IV — from 1966

The revision of inherited forms



St Sara – the crypt and the procession (May 24, 2026, Saintes, T. Zachar Podolinská)

Toward a transnational symbol

From local patroness to a shared symbol of Roma, Gitans (Kale), Manouche, Sinti, Travellers, and Gens du voyage across states and languages



*Procession of
St Sara, May 24,
2026, Saintes,
T. Zachar
Podolinská)*

Toward a transnational symbol

From local patroness to a shared symbol of Roma, Gitans (Kale), Manouche, Sinti, Travellers, and Gens du voyage across states and languages



Niglo Chatrie – The first registered „Gypsy brand“ (marque tsigane), founded more than 20 years ago, „specializing in emblems associated with the gens du voyage, Gitan, Manouche, Yéniche, Sinti, and Voyageur communities“ (<https://www.niglo-chatrie.com>).



“Drapeau voyageur” – Travellers flag with the symbol of “niglo”, (2026, Saintes, TZP)

Ex-votum in the crypt of St Sara, May 26, 2026 (Saintes, TZP)

Toward a transnational symbol



*May 28, 2026, Saintes,
T. Zachar Podolinská)*



Devotional icon, "Sara la Negra," in the Orthodox iconographic style



Contemporary illustrated artwork of Sara, evoking sea, sun and moon



Digitally generated devotional image blending Marian and Romani iconography (Sara as Black Madonna)



Hamilton Roma Hub
27. april · 🌐

Who is Kali Sara and why is she important ?? U ask we tell

Who is KALI SARA?

★ ALSO KNOWN AS SARA-LA-KÂLI ★
★ "BLACK SARAH" ★

Kali Sara is the protector and patron saint of the Romani people. She is a symbol of faith, strength, hope, and unity.

HER STORY

- ✦ Many believe Kali Sara was a servant of the Three Marys—Mary Salome, Mary Jacobié, and Mary Magdalene.
- ✦ She is said to have welcomed them when their boat landed on the shores of what is now Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, France.
- ✦ She walked with them, helped them, and stayed by their side.
- ✦ Because of her devotion and kindness, she is honored to this day by Roma around the world.

WHY IS SHE IMPORTANT?

- PROTECTOR**
She watches over our families and keeps us safe.
- HOPE**
She gives us strength in difficult times.
- UNITY**
She brings our people together in faith and pride.
- HERITAGE**
She represents our Romani identity, culture, and traditions.
- FAITH**
She is a symbol of devotion, spiritual strength, and unconditional love.

A LIVING TRADITION

Every year, thousands of Roma from around the world travel to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, France for a sacred pilgrimage in her honor.

Her statue is carried in a beautiful procession to the sea with music, prayer, candles, flowers, dancing, and joy.

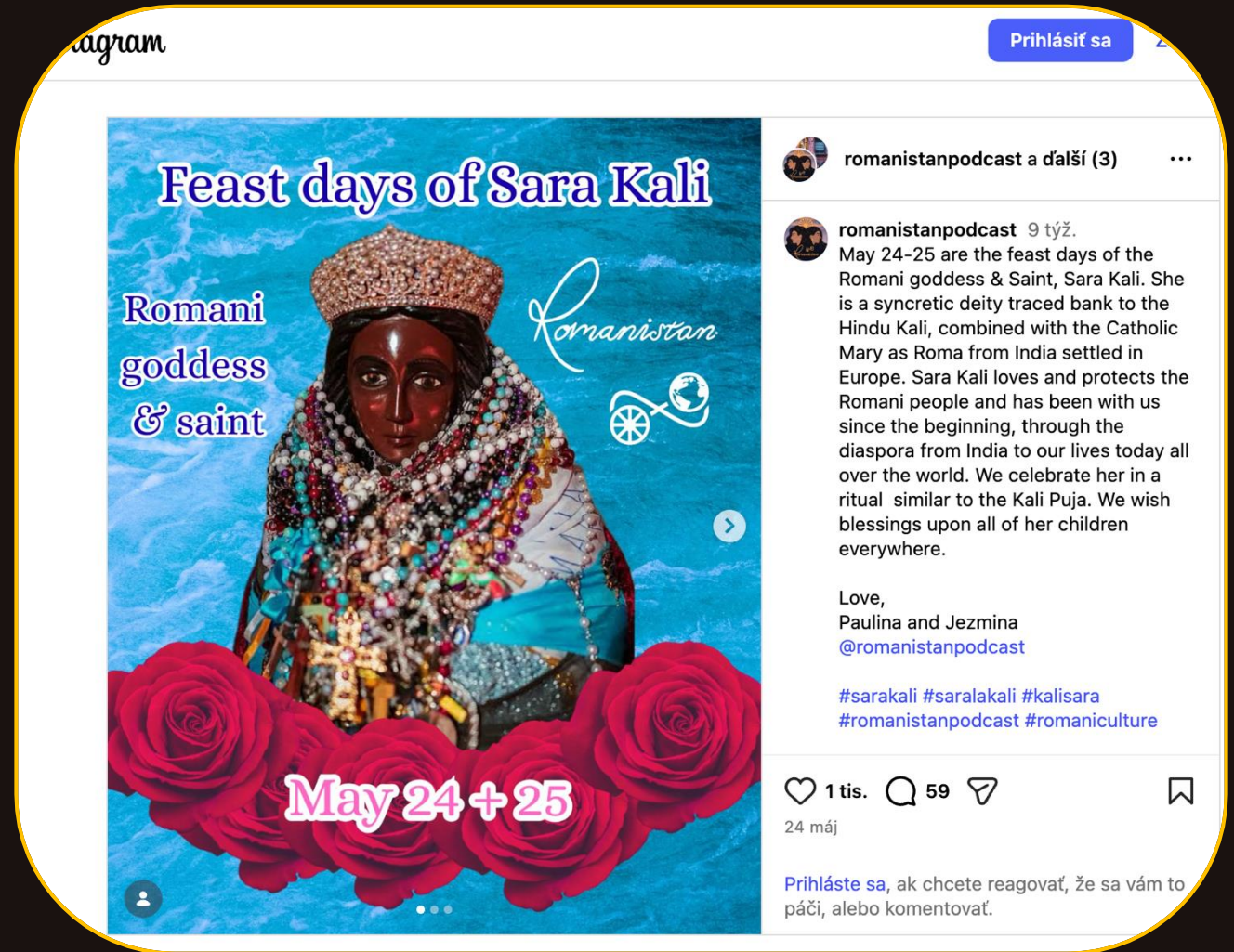
It is a time to give thanks, ask for blessings, and celebrate our culture and family.

✦ **A SAINT. A MOTHER. OUR PROTECTOR.**
✦ *Kali Sara walks with us always.*

Contemporary devotional art and online outreach: an illustrated portrait of Sara and an infographic explaining her cult to new audiences



Instagram post marking 24 May, the National Day of the Roma People and Saint Sara Kali, Brazil



Instagram post by @romanistanpodcast on the feast days of Sara Kali as a Romani goddess and saint, May 24 + 25 is declared to be the feast days of Sara

Thank you!

- *Project SRDA-22-0389 (RELIROMA) — “Research of Religiosity, Spirituality and Non-Religiosity among the Roma in Slovakia”*
- *Tatiana Zachar Podolinská, Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology, SAS, Slovakia*

