

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, France¹

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Dear esteemed colleagues, scholars, friends, and honoured guests,

It is my honour to welcome you to Zagreb, to the annual meeting of our Gypsy Lore Society. Let me first thank the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, the Institute for Migration Research in Zagreb, and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences — namely Danijel Vojak (Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, Zagreb), Željko Holjevac (Director of the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, Zagreb), Domagoj Tončinić (Dean of the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zagreb), and Marina Perić Kaselj (Director of the Institute for Migration Research, Zagreb) — members of the conference's organising and academic committee, as well as the Croatian Romani Union *Kali Sara*,³ represented by Veljko Kajtazi. Without the dedicated contribution of all of them, this event would not have taken place.

Over the past years, in my opening addresses, I have chosen to speak on themes I considered inspiring, timely, or even urgent: in Prague in 2021, I reflected on the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on Romani communities already living under structural inequality.⁴ In Belgrade in 2022, I spoke about post-normality and the necessity of a reflexive turn in scholarship.⁵ In São Paulo in 2023, I addressed the challenges and opportunities of the digital era for Romani Studies. In Sofia

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³ The organisation was established in July 2007 as the Association for the Promotion of Roma Education in the Republic of Croatia (*Udruga za promicanje obrazovanja Roma u Republici Hrvatskoj* – UZOR) “KALI SARA”. Its founder and first president is Veljko Kajtazi. Since December 2015, it has operated under the name Union of Roma in the Republic of Croatia “KALI SARA” (*Savez Roma u Republici Hrvatskoj* “KALI SARA”).

⁴ Zachar Podolinská, T. (2021). Roma and (Colour-Blind) Racism during the COVID-19 time. *Newsletter of the Gypsy Lore Society*, 44(4): 2-5.

⁵ Zachar Podolinská, T. (2022). On Post-normality and the Science. *Newsletter of the Gypsy Lore Society*, 45(4): 2-3.

in 2024, I turned our attention to research ethics,⁶ and in Paris last year, I focused on the opportunities and risks that artificial intelligence brings to our lives.⁷

This year the topic of my address was suggested to me — somewhat unconventionally — by the name of the co-organiser of our conference, the Croatian Romani Union *Kali Sara* (“Black Sara”), which bears the name of a saint whose cult in Europe is centred in the crypt of the fortified parish church of Notre-Dame-de-la-Mer, in the small French coastal town of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, the capital of the Camargue.

Since Romani religiosity and spirituality have long been an area of my scholarly interest, in May of this year, I decided to take part in the famous Gypsy pilgrimage and to carry out qualitative fieldwork research there. From 21st to 28th May, I stayed in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. The key focus of my stay was participation in two consecutive processions — the procession to Saint Sara on 24th May and the procession to the Saintes Maries, Jacobé and Salomé, on 25th May — though observing the site and the pilgrims' behaviour before and after the festivities themselves proved equally interesting and empirically valuable. I also used the stay to conduct at least a preliminary mapping of the locally strong cult of the “third Mary” (Saint Mary Magdalene), whose remains rest in the crypt of the cathedral of Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume and whose place of pilgrimage is the cave of Sainte-Baume, as well as of the local cult of the so-called Black Madonnas.

“Being on the spot” was a fascinating experience — humanly, academically, and spiritually. On that note, I will admit that at times I wished I could multiply myself, possess not merely several hands but several bodies: my research ambitions had to make painful compromises, since I wanted, all at once, to observe, to conduct interviews, to photograph the church interior and the pilgrims as the relics of the Saintes Maries were brought down, to watch the simultaneously ritualized and thoroughly private behaviour of pilgrims in the crypt before the statue of Saint Sara, and, at the same time, to document the visually rich acts of performing ethnic and spiritual identity — the display of the load-bearing pillars of the tradition (the crush around the guardians' horses on the small square in front of the church), the arrival of the “Romani pilgrimage banners” and of the local Gitan families privileged to carry the statue of Saint Sara in the procession to the sea, the posing before photographers, the “hunt for the best photograph” and the accompanying struggle for a vantage point, which at times risked a kick from a horse or, at the very least, a step into horse droppings on the square...

⁶ Zachar Podolinská, T. (2024). Ethical Challenges in Romani Studies. *2024 Annual meeting of the Gypsy Lore Society and Conference on Romani studies: Book of abstracts*. Sofia, Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, IESA SAS, pp. 6-10. <https://doi.org/10.31577/2024.9788097443481>

⁷ Zachar Podolinská, T. (2025). Centering Roma Voices in Digital Future. *2025 Gypsy Lore Society Annual Meeting and Conference on Romani Studies: Conference Book*. Paris: Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, IESA SAS, pp. 27-32. <https://doi.org/10.31577/2025.9788069127074>

“Being on the spot,” then, amounted to a constant movement towards and around this place — not only stays in the dark and stifling crypt, lit by hundreds of candles, and repeated visits to the church itself, but also visits to several caravan camps by the sea and on the town's outskirts; observing the behaviour of tourists and pilgrims in the street (outside the church and the procession); watching musical duels among various improvising groups on the squares and in the cafés; the dress code of pilgrims, tourists, and journalists; the conduct of media representatives, priests, and Romani chaplains; and equally the behaviour of vendors and the range of devotional items and everyday goods on offer around the church and at the fair set up behind the church on the way to the sea; the spectrum of services visible in the street, the names and menus of restaurants; and, finally, the organisation of traffic, parking policy, and the provision of water, electricity, toilets, and waste disposal at a time when the town — which geographically has almost no capacity for territorial growth or for accommodating visitors — is overwhelmed by tens of thousands of pilgrims and tourists concentrated in a handful of May days once a year.

“Being on the spot” led me, quite spontaneously, to a number of questions that I will certainly develop into a more extensive scholarly text. Allow me, however, to share with you today at least a few reflections that I consider worth thinking about. I believe that, against the background of this local case and of a tradition that took shape almost “before our very eyes” over the course of a few decades, we can beautifully illustrate the complexity of the process by which the *history of a place is written* — who writes it and how, who decides what becomes tradition, and who has the right to rewrite it, and how.

The concept of *invented tradition* (Hobsbawm & Ranger, Eds., 1983), which several scholars have applied to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer (Bordigoni, 2002, 2005), holds true here, in my view, only in part. First, it is applied selectively, only to the “Gypsy component” of the festival, and not to the Provençal one, even though both emerged at roughly the same time, in a very similar manner, and are organically interconnected. Second, it presupposes an identifiable active *inventor* and a relatively passive *recipient*, thereby reinforcing a model of objectification that the material itself does not confirm.

In other words, what interests me is less the question of to whom Saint Sara belongs, to whom the processions belong, and who and when “invented the tradition”, than the processes through which what is subsequently recognised as tradition becomes established — a tradition that is anything but immutable; on the contrary, it changes very dynamically. One could even say that the pilgrimage takes on different accents from year to year, as ritual and organisational innovations continually emerge — some deliberate, others improvised, in both the “real” world and the digital and social ones — and that it has, moreover, a rich post-procession afterlife that has thus far received insufficient scholarly attention.

Essentially, my broad reflection positions itself against two well-worn interpretive frameworks. This will not be a story of “objectification from above,” in which the “powerful” write history at the expense of “voiceless groups.” Nor will it be the flat antithesis, in which the voiceless

ultimately win an emancipated story of their own. Both models capture real aspects of the material, yet neither explains cases in which a powerful actor lost control over the meaning of its own construction, nor cases in which a marginalised group achieved a lasting outcome only through alliance with powerful actors.

In the forthcoming study, I will speak of *co-authorship*, or rather *co-agency* — in our case, an asymmetrical interaction among several actors, at times friendly, at times running in parallel, at times tolerant, at times conflictual, in which no single participant holds full control over the resulting meaning. Ultimately, however, this is also a struggle for dominance in which — quite unexpectedly — the Roma emerged as emancipated authors with respected self-authorship.

I will trace these processes in local history through four phases, documenting: (1) *invisible presence* (until the mid-nineteenth century), (2) *visibility as a product of outside observation* (1852–1935), (3) *the shaping of a voice of one's own* (from 1925), and (4) *the revision of inherited forms* (from 1966)⁸. In the text, I will give particular attention to material interventions, processional choreography, ritual innovations, and, for example, the reorganisation of the ritual calendar — that is, to non-verbal authorial acts that do not produce text.

Through a number of selected, representative examples, I hope to show that tradition arises both as the result of *deliberate negotiation* among several actors possessing different resources and types of power, and, at the same time, that there remains substantial room for *ongoing innovation* and *collective improvisation* that has no specific or targeted “authorship.”

The symbol of Saint Sara, or Kali Sara, around whom a distinctive local spiritual tradition initially took shape, has from the outset been extraordinarily plastic: this “humble servant” is able to draw in, synergistically and inventively transform, rewrite, and even invert fragments of diverse traditions, while carrying not only a complex spiritual-religious agenda but also an ethnic, social, and political one. Over the course of the twentieth century we can trace her transformation into a transnational symbol — “Patroness” and Queen of the Bohémiens, Tsiganes, Gitans, Kalé, Manouches, Sinti, Romanichels, Roma, and many groups referred to in France as *Gens du voyage*⁹

⁸ Throughout this address, the terms *Bohémiens*, *Gitans*, and *Roma* are used differentially rather than interchangeably. Each term is employed for the period and register in which it predominates in the historical sources under discussion: *Bohémiens* for the itinerant groups documented before and around the mid-nineteenth century; *Gitans* for the local Camargue community from the 1920s to the 1960s, the period in which its own voice and agency in shaping the pilgrimage become traceable; and *Roma* for the transnational identity that consolidates from the later twentieth century onward. This terminological choice follows the vocabulary of the cited sources for each period and is not intended to imply sharp or absolute boundaries between the groups so named. See also note 9 on the related family of ethnonyms used in the French context.

⁹ In the French context, *Tsiganes* is a broad umbrella term for various Romani groups. *Gitans* generally refers to Kalé/Kaló populations of Iberian origin, while *Manouches* designates Sinti-related groups. *Romanichels* is an older popular label often used for Roma more generally. *Gens du voyage* is a distinct French administrative category for itinerant or formerly itinerant populations and does not correspond to a single ethnic group.

or, in the anglophone world, as Travellers — across the world; in the twenty-first century, we see her cult gaining popularity also among non-Romani populations, absorbing, from a spiritual point of view, elements ranging from the ancient cult of the so-called Black Madonnas to the most current occult and esoteric New Age movements.

Against this background, it is important to stress that it is impossible to study the history of the development of what is today the world-famous “Gypsy pilgrimage” without situating it within *local and global context*; this kind of “extraction” is, in the scholarly literature, a procedure that can produce significant interpretive distortions.

(1) Invisible Presence (until the mid-nineteenth century)

The first stage in the history of the cult of Saint Sara, as well as of the presence of groups referred to as “Egyptians” (fr. *Égyptiens*), or “Saracens” (fr. *Sarrasins* / *Sarrazins*), in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer (hereafter also Saintes), is hazy. If we rely exclusively on written sources, we might get the impression that Egyptians did not appear in Saintes until the mid-nineteenth century. Historical documents from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries contain no mention either of a “Gypsy pilgrimage” or of any particular relationship between Egyptians and Saint Sara. Nor are they mentioned in the local parish archives or in detailed descriptions of the May festivities from the first half of the nineteenth century (Gangneux, 1988; Bergaglio, 2016).

Absence in the sources does not mean (automatically) absence in the history.

Groups referred to as “Egyptians,” and later as “Bohemians” (fr. *Bohémiens*), are documented in Provence as early as the beginning of the fifteenth century. French rulers repeatedly granted them protective letters that allowed them to travel safely through the country and to visit major pilgrimage sites. Archival sources record their presence in Arles, Saint-Gilles, and other towns in the immediate vicinity of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer (Vaux de Foletier, 1961). Saintes itself had been an important pilgrimage centre since the Middle Ages, and its significance grew still further after the discovery of the relics of the Saintes Maries in 1448 (Philippon, 1521). The German pilgrim Hans von Waltheim explicitly describes the town as a stop on his journey to the relics of Saint Mary Magdalene in Provence in 1474 — evidence of its international reach even at that time (Waltheim, 1925 [1474]).

The cult of Saint Sara did not arise as a later “Gypsy innovation.” As early as the late Middle Ages, in parallel with the cult of the Saintes Maries, a Provençal cult of Sara existed as their “chambermaid,” that is, their servant. It is telling that the official protocol of the royal excavation of the relics in 1448 makes no mention of Sara at all — her name does not appear in it. Yet the German pilgrim Hans von Waltheim, in 1474, states explicitly: “In the town of the three Marys... (...) rest ... Mary Jacobé and Mary Salomé — and the body of the *blessed Sara*...” (italics T.Z.P., orig. “beate Sarre”, Waltheim, 1925 [1474]), and Philippon's legendary text of 1521 likewise takes her presence entirely for granted (Philippon, 1521; see also Delage, 1956). Three centuries later,

when Labrune (1733) describes the excavations in the church at Saintes, he states that Sara's remains were found together with the relics of the Saintes Maries, and records her as buried in the lower chapel of the church (the later crypt) — without the slightest hint of doubt as to her presence or the circumstances of her discovery; and all later sources cited in this address likewise take her for granted, as a matter of course. The invisibility of Sara's relics in the official record, then, did not prevent tradition itself — orally and in writing — from carrying her forward and attesting to both her presence and her discovery, precisely in the sense that holds for the entire first phase as defined here: *presence precedes visibility*, and once established, *visibility retroactively confirms a presence* that the original source itself did not directly record.

Unlike the relics of the two Marys, which were publicly displayed only on the saints' annual feast days in May and October, Sara's relics were accessible to pilgrims in the lower chapel all year-round. The chapel — later the crypt, in the apse of the church beneath the choir — thus became a natural site of individual devotion also for those pilgrims who did not come to Saintes during the main festivities.

If we bring together these two threads — the documented presence of itinerant groups of Egyptians in the region, and the parallel existence of a stable cult of Saint Sara, of whom period sources (Philippon, 1521) claimed that she wandered through the Camargue and lived by begging alms, in a manner identical to that of the itinerant groups of Egyptians of the time, whom people in Provence also called Saracens (Vaux de Foletier, 1961) — it becomes highly plausible that *they knew and visited this place long before written sources recorded their presence*. This cannot be proven by direct documentary evidence, but the entire historical and local context makes the opposite conclusion unlikely.

The first stage of this history is therefore not a story of absence, but — very probably — one of *presence without visibility*. The Egyptians do not yet appear as recognisable actors in local history; we do not hear their voice in the written sources, yet the cult of Saint Sara and the pilgrimage landscape of southern France were already creating a space in which a long-term religious bond between the itinerant groups and this place could form.

This is precisely why the mid-nineteenth century marks such an important turning point. The Bohémiens do not become pilgrims to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer only in this period; rather, they become, for the first time, visible in the eyes of outside observers. From this moment on, we can trace not only the growth of their visibility but also the gradual assertion of their own voice and agency in co-creating the tradition.

(2) Visibility as a Product of Outside Observation (1852–1935)

The first accounts come from the engravings and reportage of Jean-Baptiste Laurens in 1852 (Laurens, 1852), followed a few years later by Frédéric Mistral's personal recollections of the

pilgrimage at Saintes in 1855¹⁰ (Mistral, 1937 [1929]). Their texts are undoubtedly a view from the outside, yet they also capture something extremely important: the Bohémiens no longer appear as anonymous pilgrims lost in the crowd. They become a recognised community with an acknowledged *interpretation of their own* of the pilgrimage site.

Mistral notes, for instance, that the Bohémiens let the largest candles burn before the altar of Saint Sara, while other pilgrims direct their attention chiefly to the Saintes Maries. He also records the explanation he heard from them — that, in their view, Sara is “one of their own nation” (Mistral, 1937 [1929]). This is the very first documented moment in which a “Bohémien interpretation” of this saint appears in the written sources. It is not yet a voice set down by their own hand, but it is already a *mediated auto-voice*.

Equally remarkable is the fact that authors of the period describe the annual gathering of Bohémien groups from across the region. Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer becomes for them not merely a pilgrimage site but also a place of meeting, of renewing social ties, and of affirming shared identity. At the same time, the press of the period produces sensational narratives about the election of a “Queen of the Bohémiens” and about secret rites in the crypt; the first-hand testimony of the disappointed painter Gaëtan Dumas, from 1911, who found in the crypt only a few sleeping pilgrims, refutes these narratives and labels them legend (Dumas, 1911 as cited in Bordigoni, 2002, 2005). The distinction between rejection and fascination is, in terms of outcome, secondary — both approaches construct the same figure (“the otherness of Gypsy devotion”), with which everyone involved subsequently has to reckon.

This *visibility was ambivalent* from the start: the same apparatus of observation produced both *fascination* and *control*. The departmental prefecture banned the presence of Bohémiens at the pilgrimage festivities between 1895 and 1898, and in 1912, the French state introduced a compulsory anthropometric identity card for itinerant populations — the first compulsory identity document imposed on a segment of its own population (Bordigoni, 2016). To be seen, in this period, meant, for the Bohémiens, also to be counted.

It is precisely in this period that the meaning of Saint Sara itself begins to change. Within church tradition, she remains the *servant* of the Saintes Maries. Among the Bohémiens, however, she increasingly and unmistakably becomes their own *patroness*. This shift arises neither from a decision of the Church nor as a product of local elites. It is *born from below* — through the interweaving of ancient traditions and worldview with the yearly repetition of pilgrimages, offerings, candles, prayers, and shared presence before her reliquary in the crypt.

¹⁰ This dating, given the later written recording of these memories, is not entirely certain (Bordigoni, 2005).

It is important to stress that even at this stage, one cannot speak of a passive group merely described by others. Outside observers do write the texts, but the content of those texts arises from observing religious practices that the Bohémiens already possessed. In other words, the *visibility is mediated from outside*, but its content is created by the pilgrims themselves.

(3) The Shaping of a Voice of One's Own (1925–1966)

In the third stage, the very scene of tradition-making changes significantly. The Gitans are no longer merely objects of observation; they become *active authors* of the pilgrimage tradition — their voice increasingly asserts itself through concrete acts, through negotiation, and through ritual and processional innovation.

One of the first visible expressions of this agency is the decision of the Bohémiens of Béziers, in 1923, to fund a new reliquary of Saint Sara of their own — until then she had been kept in an old chest covered with a century's worth of devout patina; a brass plaque on the new reliquary recorded the collection and its donors (Vaudoyer, 1927). Twenty-eight years later, in 1951, Walter Starkie stood before dawn in the crypt, as he himself writes, together with four Gypsies — two Spaniards from Valencia, an Italian from Reggio Emilia, and one local man — and it was the local man who proudly pointed out to the visitors the brass inscription, explaining that it was “his own tribe that had donated the reliquary to Sara in 1923” (Starkie, 1954). This was no mere symbolic gesture, nor an isolated act: it was a “signed gift,” a public declaration that they no longer considered the cult of Saint Sara merely part of local Catholic tradition, but their *own tradition*, into which they invested their own resources and for which they assumed shared responsibility. From *pilgrims*, they thus became *patrons of their own cult*.

It is in this period that the Marquis Folco de Baroncelli enters the story, one of the most important figures in the history of the Camargue (settled there from 1895). Existing scholarship has often presented him as the man who “invented the Gypsy pilgrimage.” Such a reading is, in my view, too simplistic and mistaken.

When, at the end of the nineteenth century, Baroncelli began working with the local Gitans, they had already been coming to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer for decades. They regarded Sara as their patroness, around whom they had built their own religious practice, and they sought greater recognition of her — and of their own — place in the pilgrimage. It is therefore far more accurate to say that Baroncelli offered a new language and, at the same time, helped open doors, previously closed, to the Gitan actors and to Saint Sara.

In his 1910 theory, Baroncelli claims that after the disappearance of Atlantis, four tribes of the Atlantean race survived at the edges of the abyss — among them the Basques, the Celts, the Egyptians, and the Gitans, whom he thus defines as the original inhabitants of the Camargue, distinguishing them from the nomadic “Bohémiens” who arrived from the East (Baroncelli-Javon, 1910: 16–17, as cited in Bordigoni, 2002). The Church never accepted this legend, nor did most

pilgrims. Nonetheless, it proved to have quite exceptional significance for the construction of the tradition: for the first time, it offered an *alternative image* of Sara as a figure endowed with her own authority and dignity, claiming that Sara had been a local Gitan *queen*, an original princess or priestess, who welcomed the Marys onto the land of her forefathers (Baroncelli, 1941). In the end, the Gitans did not adopt Baroncelli's esoteric notions about the origin of their people, but they did adopt — as a counterpoint to the Christian legend — an inverted image of Sara: not a servant, but, on the contrary, a dignified and respected daughter of their nation — a motif that would become a permanent part of the Gitan, and later the Roma, interpretation of her cult.

The decisive moment comes in 1935, when, after long effort, the Gitans succeeded for the first time in having a separate procession with the statue of Saint Sara take place the day before the procession of the Saintes Maries, that is, on 24th May. Baroncelli played an important mediating role in this step in relation to the church authorities. Yet the procession did not arise as his personal project. It was the result of the long-standing effort of the Gitans themselves to secure for their patroness the same dignity and public visibility that the processions of the Saintes Maries had already enjoyed for centuries.

The following decades show that the Gitans did not remain mere participants in the new ritual but also took over its organisation. The privilege of carrying the statue of Saint Sara in the procession to the sea has remained, since the 1930s, in the hands of a single family — the Baptiste family, whose ancestor Manuel Baptiste, nicknamed Coucou, a close friend of the Marquis and dubbed by the press of the time “the prince of the Gypsies,” obtained this right directly from Baroncelli and shared it with his cousin Titi, with whom he ran the family butcher's shop in nearby Saint-Gilles (Bergaglio, 2016). This is thus not a one-off gesture but a hereditary *ritual privilege* and right of local Gitan families, which survived Baroncelli's death, the war, the deaths of both Gitan leaders, and the postwar institutionalisation of the Catholic chaplaincy.

The processional statue of Saint Sara herself has a similar significance. Descriptions of the crypt from 1897 and 1927 consistently record the statues of the Saintes Maries in their boat, but not a statue of Sara; hers is documented only from 1935, when it was carried to the sea for the first time,¹¹ and the restorer who repaired it in the 1950s confirms that it is a modern plaster work (Delage, 1956: 29–30). The cult object, then, did not precede the practice, but arose as a material response to a *successful act of negotiation*, conducted in various ways with various actors: an alliance with influential Provençal figures with contacts to the church authorities, as well as the pressure and social influence of the media, of mass tourism, and many other entirely secular

¹¹ According to Sophie Bergaglio (2016), the now-common practice of covering the statue with donated cloaks and scarves – today numbering more than one hundred pieces, whereas in the 1950s there were only a handful – does not originate from the Gitanos of the South, but rather from Roma and Manush people arriving from Eastern Europe, who, unlike them, do not prioritise the cult of Sara over the cult of the two Marys.

circumstances from the non-Gitan (“Payo”) world, all of which ultimately helped the local Gitans win the right to their own procession.

The third stage, therefore, cannot be understood as a period in which someone “gave” or created a tradition for the Gitans. It is more accurately captured by an image of gradual negotiation, in which the Gitans made use of alliances, invested their own resources, and pushed through new ritual forms, drawing on both deliberate and intuitive forms of agency. Their *voice grew ever clearer* — not yet decisive, but already strong enough that the history of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer could no longer be told without it.

Gitan leaders themselves also played a significant role in this process. In May 1938, Coucou arranged for the *American National Broadcasting Corporation* to be granted direct access to the crypt; following an introduction prepared by the Irish Hispanist Walter Starkie, a message of peace to the Romani community in America was broadcast there in Romani — a documented transatlantic political address by Romani leaders in their own language, thirty-three years before the First World Romani Congress (Starkie, 1939). Their message was addressed not only to the pilgrims present in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, but to all “Gypsies, Romanichels,” to Roma scattered across the world (Starkie, 1939: 20–24).

It is precisely in this period that a new dimension of the cult of Saint Sara begins to emerge. She is no longer merely the local patroness of the Gitans of the Camargue, but a trans-Gitan, Gypsy, and Roma symbol, one that would later serve to connect various groups and communities to one another, without blurring their internal boundaries and distinctions.

This growing visibility, however, was not always safe. Four years later, the Vichy regime set up the Saliers internment camp in the Camargue — and its justification drew directly on Baroncelli's theory: since it held the Gitans to be the original inhabitants of the Camargue, the authorities presented their internment as a return to their “predestined” land, while a contemporary assessment by the government architect for historical monuments explicitly recommended giving the camp the “appearance of a village” that would “attract visitors and passers-by” (Bergaglio, 2016). An instrument that in the 1930s had served as a means of visibility, thus also became an instrument of its abuse. It is telling, too, that public discussion of the camp's very existence remained silent until the 1990s, and that a commemorative stele was erected there only in 2006 (Bergaglio, 2016) — the silence of the sources is, as we shall see elsewhere, itself a form of testimony. The co-authorship of which I speak was neither symmetrical nor equally safe for all parties involved.

(4) The Revision of Inherited Forms: From Local Tradition to Transnational Symbol (from 1966)

If the preceding period represented the winning of a voice of one's own, from 1966 onward, we can observe its open assertion.

The introduction of a separate procession for Saint Sara did not end the process of co-authorship, bound up as it was with various forms of negotiation and tension among the actors. It continued through a series of *procedural innovations* and *symbolic reinterpretations*. Although the Church finally agreed, in 1935, to the introduction of a separate Gypsy procession, this was never officially recognised: it did not appear in the official programme of the festivities, and the clergy did not take part in it until the mid-1960s (Bordigoni, 2002). Nevertheless, over more than two decades, this quietly “tolerated” or “ignored” Gypsy pilgrimage drew thousands of pilgrims from around the world and won worldwide media recognition. The presence and visibility of fervent forms of devotion to Saint Sara became, at a certain point, a tourist attraction and a source not only of attention but of income for the entire region. In an effort to legalise the “Gypsy pilgrimage,” the local church in 1958 introduced into the procession a statue of Notre-Dame des Gitans, blessed that same year by the bishop of Lourdes and crowned by Pope Paul VI in 1965 (Bordigoni, 2002), in order to integrate the pilgrimage of the uncanonised Sara into the official Marian framework. The Gitans answered this move with a symbolic act of their own — that same year, for the first time, they *placed a diadem* on the head of Sara's statue (Bordigoni, 2002, 2005), so as to clearly distinguish her from the — suddenly imposed on the procession — Christian legend of the “servant” of the Virgin Mary, and to visually emphasise the inverse, princely version (an internalisation of Baroncelli's version). Here again, we see *negotiation* and the *co-creation* of tradition through direct, non-verbal, unwritten *acts*, entirely within the material and visual register.

The decisive conflict among the various actors came in the mid-1960s. In the atmosphere of post-conciliar liturgical reform, voices arise that consider the procession of Saint Sara theologically problematic and propose its abolition or replacement with a Way of the Cross. Such a step would have meant the removal of the one public ritual in which the Gitans held a central place (Causse, 2001, as cited in Bordigoni, 2002, 2005).

Since representatives of the Gitan families were not invited to the official deliberations on transforming the procession, they had no forum in which to protest. Yet, precisely during the procession itself, the community once again took a direct stand against its abolition. At the first planned station of the Way of the Cross, Baroncelli's son-in-law, then captain of the local guardians, called on the procession not to stop, and the participants followed him (Bordigoni, 2005). Father Causse, who was to give the commentary at each station, had to finish his remarks before a mere handful of priests (Bordigoni, 2005). The procession was ultimately completed in the customary manner, with Saint Sara sprinkled with seawater to the accompaniment of the Guardians on their white horses. This was a demonstrative, *performative act of resistance* and refusal — and this unambiguous *authorship of the pilgrimage* no one has ever since dared to question or rewrite in any way.

The conflict eventually escalated to the point that the Gitans, through their spokesman Jean Fernandez, president of the “Association of Gypsies and Tsiganes of France” (fr. *Association des Gitans et Tziganes de France*), publicly threatened to move the statue of Sara out of the Camargue altogether, to nearby Sausset-les-Pins: “For several years now, the pilgrimage has been emptied of

its Gypsy content. A precious part of the Gypsy heritage is being removed, yet no one has officially told the Gypsies that their festival no longer belongs to them” (Bergaglio, 2016). A year later, in 1967, the Archbishop of Aix, Monsignor de Provençères, officially recognised both the cult and the procession of Sara, declaring: “The cult of Saint Sara is an age-old cult. I am therefore leaving it in its traditional form” (Bergaglio, 2016).

Gradually, local Gitan and, increasingly, Roma actors more broadly succeeded in changing the very representation of the pilgrimage, and their visibility came to encompass not only the Gypsy festival but the Provençal feast of the Saintes Maries as well. From the privilege of carrying the boat of the Saintes Maries, through winning a separate procession with the right to carry out Saint Sara at the beginning of the twentieth century, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, they have become the driving spiritual and organisational force of both pilgrimage days. Not only has their physical presence in the pilgrimage space expanded, but so has their symbolic participation in the whole story of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer.

In the last third of the twentieth century, Saint Sara gradually transforms from the *local patroness* of a single pilgrim community into a *shared symbol* of Gypsies, Roma, Travellers, Gens du voyage, and others, across states, languages, and group identities. The presence and internalisation of the ethnopological message of global Romani activism is visible today in Saintes-Maries at every turn: Romani flags in the windows of caravans, the wheel symbol present in the iconography of Saint Sara, Romani-flag motifs on ex-votos in the crypt, but also through the image of Saint Ceferino present on the wall beside Sara's reliquary, rings and chains bearing the wheel motif, and pilgrims wrapped in the Romani flag during the procession. These expressions mingle with the rich local motifs and visual forms of Gitan culture: jewellery with the hedgehog motif (“Niglo”), a flag depicting a hedgehog pulling a caravan, but also a niglo riding a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, or, in AI-generated images, depicted wearing a tie with a cigar in its mouth. This year, on the day before the pilgrimage and the lowering of the reliquaries of the Saintes Maries, Roma pilgrims lit candles in the church beside the Romani flag before the altar — the same gesture with which both the lowering of the reliquaries and the statue of Saint Sara are honoured.

As mentioned at the outset, today's Sara, or Kali Sara, has crossed the boundaries of the crypt, of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, of the Camargue, of France, and indeed of Europe as a whole. Kali Sara today is unambiguously Roma: the local programme of the pilgrimage — thanks also to the establishment, after the Second World War, of a Catholic chaplaincy among the Gitans (the *Aumônerie catholique des Gitans et Tsiganes*, founded by Father Fleury in October 1948)¹² —

¹² Parallel to the Catholic chaplaincy, an independent Roma religious movement also emerged: Pastor Clément Le Cossec began his ministry among the Gitanos in Brest in 1952 and formally founded the Pentecostal movement Vie et Lumière in 1954. In the following decades, unlike the originally exclusively non-Roma Catholic chaplaincy, this movement became increasingly led by Roma preachers themselves (Le Cossec, 1991).

proclaims not only a Gypsy pilgrimage held before the Provençal feast, but also gives Sara the same title as the blood sisters of the Virgin Mary — that is, “saint”. Some Romani authors (Lee, 2002; and, in literary form, Djuric, 1998) have proposed continuity with the Hindu goddesses Kali and Durga, a claim also discussed by other scholars examining this symbolic association (Asavei & Bushnell, 2023; Anwar, 2023). The scholarly literature places Sara among the so-called Black Madonnas, associated with the protection of families and fertility cults (e.g., Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, 2012). Sara herself, however, was never canonised and does not appear in the Roman Martyrology (*Martyrologium Romanum*, 2004). The same two-day structure is ultimately reproduced by the Devlesa Avilan temple in Teresina, Brazil, founded in 2015, where a festival in her honour is held on 24th and 25th May — in a place with no connection whatsoever to the Marian legend (Sousa Santos et al., 2023). In Brazil, indeed, Kali Sara has become an unambiguous symbol of Roma identity, and her day, 24th May, has been declared there “Roma Day.”

If we look, then, at the entire history of the cult of Saint Sara as we have traced it here, in accelerated sequence across the centuries, we see far more than the development of a single pilgrimage tradition. We see how she gradually became the most important saint, symbol, and patroness of the Roma nation.

In the making and consolidation of this tradition, we can see clearly the gradual growth of a Roma voice — from invisible presence, through visibility mediated by the gaze of others, to a voice of their own, and finally to the capacity to reshape an inherited tradition according to their own needs, functions, and meanings.

The story of Saint Sara is therefore not merely the history of a single saint and of a successful, originally asymmetrical negotiation among various actors. It is the story of how the Roma succeeded, through their own means, in asserting their own story — their own cult and their own saint. At the same time, it shows how a marginalized community can, through religious tradition, gradually gain not only visibility and a voice but also the right to help determine the meaning of particular symbols and representations, in its own language, forms, and acts — including artistic, performative, non-verbal, and other registers of expression — in the place itself and in the “non-place,” in the time of the processions and at any other time — in digital, virtual, and other, spiritually and otherwise defined, worlds.

In closing, I would like to add that the very fact that a Romani organisation in Croatia adopted the name Kali Sara, and today also hosts our scholarly conference, is itself proof of the significance and influence of Kali Sara in the processes of the unification of the Roma nation.

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