

# Contemporary signs of magic in the everyday life of Roma minority in the selected areas of Brno, focusing on magical acts like “pokerování” and evil eye

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**Abstract** | Background: The results from the research presented in this article were carried out to capture the changes or eventual disappearance of phenomena of traditional Romani spiritual culture, specifically manifestations of magical thinking. This contribution aims to discuss selected manifestations of magical thinking in the Roma communities in Brno, which have not been mapped so far. These are mainly manifestations of magic that are aimed at harming individuals. Specific attention is paid to acts such as “pokerování” and evil eye “zoči”. Objectives: The present article focuses on understanding how and to what extent magical practices are still used in the environment of Brno's Slovak and Hungarian Roma communities. One of the aims was to take note of the memories of those respondents about the magical practices they had encountered in the past and the related occult practices performed by Romani people in earlier times. Methods: The paper relies mainly on the collection of material obtained during field research carried out in 2019 and 2020 in Brno. The primary research method was field interviews and the research focused on the environment of the sub-ethnic groups servika and ungrika Roma. The interviews were conducted in Czech. The type of interview was chosen depending on the nature of the informants and whether they agreed to be recorded. In some cases, semi-structured interviews were used and audio recordings were always made. It was difficult to achieve complete privacy in the research and in most cases, the interviews were conducted collectively. In only two cases were we completely alone with the respondents. Given the undeniable intimacy of the topic, the “ero-epic” interview was used as an appropriate method, where we indirectly accessed the topic. In addition to interviews, the participant observation method was also used. Conclusion: The signs of magical thinking are present or not are summarised. Although it appears that magical practices are still abundantly represented in the majority, in comparison with the Slovak-Romani environment we can see their gradual disappearance. A significant factor in keeping these practices alive is by maintaining active contact with their relatives from Slovakia. It helps them continue these practices fluently and also they are able to mediate the services of a specialist from the original Slovak-Romani environment. One of the important factors of their extinction in the Czech environment is the disappearance of the original Roma specialists who have no successors. Similarly, the influence of the majority society and the rapid progress of globalisation is unquestionable.

**Keywords** | spiritual culture, evil eye, rituals, Brno, Czech Republic, servika Roma, ungrika Roma

## Introduction

Magical thinking has been with people since time immemorial. The similarity of certain phenomena occurring in different parts of the world without any obvious mutual influence was already noted by Frazer in his book *The Golden Bough*. Members of the Roma minority themselves have also noticed these similarities.

*"[...] Therefore, it is my logical . . . No one can explain to me how there can be the same rules for the Gypsies as there are in Jamaica, for example, where it came to be known in the world. That Jamaica, they have the little effigy [meaning voodoo doll, author's note], all that, and like that... how would it get to the Gypsies? [...] they get it from above or from below [...] But they certainly didn't have any sources to read it, especially since some of them couldn't even read, right?"[1]*

Archetypal manifestations of magic occur independently of place and time. It is a question of how much the elements of Romani magic are inherent and how much are influenced by the environments through which the Roma migrated to the places where they settled.

It would be very difficult to find a single definition of the concept of magic. The beginnings of a scientific and more detailed examination and explanation of various manifestations of spiritual culture date back to the period of initial interest in foreign cultures in the 19th century, when this topic was dealt with primarily by Western sociologists, philosophers, and cultural anthropologists. It was then when the first fundamental concepts of magic and religion emerged. Generally, it is believed that there is a link between a performer and a subject of a magical act, so if a performer of such an act, performed with the help of an object, harms or helps the person concerned, it always has a positive or negative effect on them. Frazer calls this phenomenon transference magic. [2] Magical action has its own unwritten order, illegible to an uninitiated individual at first sight. The British anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard speaks of magic as a system with an internal logic. [3] For the research I defined magic as a *usage of symbols to achieve a goal*. Magical thinking is a very circumscribed concept, with many phenomena in general. This article focuses on two selected phenomena, which are evil eye of the so-called "zoči" and manipulation of a person (in the negative sense) which the Roma themselves call *pokerování*.

The issue of Romani magic in the Czech and Slovak environment has already been addressed by Romani Studies scholars Milena Hübschmannová and Eva Davidová.[4] Marek Jakoubek and Lenka Budilová have assessed the current professional interest in Romani religiosity and manifestations of spiritual culture, including magic.[5] In general, these manifestations-related terminology and more knowledge about Romani culture are documented in the Rombase web database.[6]

## Background

The second largest city in Czech Republic, Brno, is located in Moravia, in the administrative unit of the South Moravian Region. This paper illustrates the results of the field research[7] carried out in the urban districts of Brno-Zábřovice and Brno-Husovice. Some neighbourhoods of these districts are inhabited mainly by Roma. In these localities, there is also a large number of substandard *housing*[8] where socially disadvantaged people, including Roma, live. The research was performed due to a lack of source material and aims to document the current state of magical thinking in the local Roma communities. This contribution will focus on three selected manifestations of magical thinking among two Roma groups, which are originally Slovak and Hungarian Roma communities known by the ethnonyms *servika Roma* and *ungrika Roma* respectively.

## Objectives

In this paper, we will first briefly discuss the history and changes in the composition of the Romani population in the Czech Republic in the 20th century. We will gain a more comprehensive idea of why or to what extent the phenomena discussed here occur. Without this context, the contribution would lose its completeness. Then g, we will present two main practices of supernatural power which, for the purpose of this research, will specifically focus on signs of magical harming power. The main interest of this paper is the actual contemporary manifestations of mystical thinking and the interpretation of these signs, which were collected during field research in selected localities in Brno. Finally, we will observe the current situation in order to find out if these manifestations tend to change and whether they are still actively practised or in fact disappearing.

## The situation of the Roma during the 20th century

After World War II, Czechoslovakia experienced a major change in the structure of its population. Before the beginning of the conflict in 1939 the ethnic structure in Czechoslovakia was quite diverse. Alongside Poles, Germans, Ruthenians, Moravian Charvats and many others, Roma had inhabited the area for several centuries, especially in the Moravian territory. For example, some families in the areas of south-eastern Moravia assimilated to the extent that they adopted the local folk culture, and in turn had enriched the local culture with their musicianship - arguably their most known known cultural characteristic. World War II was a turning point and a break in the continuity of Roma settlement in the Czech territories, the effect of which we see to this day. The Holocaust of the Roma is a tragic part of European history. This fact resulted in the almost complete decimation of the Roma population in the Czech territories. The post-war reorganisation resulted in the resettlement of Germans, internal population movements, repatriation and re-settlement, especially in border areas. This also affected Brno, which had been largely populated by German-speaking people until 1945.

Migration after 1945 gave rise to the current Roma population, not only in Brno. A noteworthy event that affected the Roma people movement is arguably the Act on the Permanent Settlement of Travelling Persons No. 74/1958 Coll., which from the 1950s onwards meant a ban on travelling for the Wallachian Roma.[9] In the mid-1960s, the government decided on resettlement action. As mentioned by Arne B. Mann, the resettlement of Roma from Slovakia to predetermined administrative units in the Czech Republic was to take place.[10] In the case of the South Moravian Region, including Brno, this meant the arrival of Roma from central Slovakia.

At the same time, a continuous migration was taking place. The new arrivals during the period of so-called normalisation in Czechoslovakia were mainly Roma from Slovakia, namely, the servika Roma group and the hungarian-speaking group ungrika Roma. Today's Roma population in Brno is thus largely made up of the descendants of these migrants. Maintaining ties with families in Slovakia, according to the respondents, is still active, despite the fact that those from Brno define themselves as distinct to the Roma from Slovakia and consider them to be more backward, as the interviews with the respondents revealed. This may also be one of the many factors why we can still encounter manifestations of magical thinking to some extent.

## "Every day they burn a candle on me to die." [11] or the current situation of Brno Roma

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, two terms will be introduced here, namely *pokerování* and evil eye „zoči“. Both of which has a summoning function.

## **Pokerování**

Before describing the magical acts themselves, let us first clarify some specific terms. Within the Brno Roma community, we encounter the word *pokerovat*. It corresponds in meaning to the Czech word *očarovat* (bewitch). Etymologically, the word is a compound of the Czech prefix *po* and the Romani verb *te kerel* (Czech: dělat; English: to do), which is preceded by the participle *te* in the infinitive.[12]

Another term discussed below is *porobisko*. This term is used in Slovak traditional folk culture.[13] However, the Roma themselves do not use the word *porobisko*. For this research this term was used because there is no equivalent in Czech and it best describes the various objects used in negative magic as an umbrella term for all objects infused by such magical harming power.

In order to bewitch (*pokerování*) the person in question, it is necessary to obtain an object of a personal nature. The testimonies showed that these are most often items such as photographs, clothes, hair. The ways in which these items are used vary. However, they should always be physically very close to the bewitched person and thus have an effect on him. [...] *Some people said they put the photo under the shoes, means under the pad [shoe insole, author's note]. You get dressed [14], but you don't check it. Something like that. Or the hair.*"[15]

The interviewees said that the bewitched individuals do not recognize themselves as being bewitched. A person is not aware of it. However, the surrounding does, and points it out to the individual. In the past, *pokerování* used to be practised between Romani people by the universal specialist called *phuri daj* (in Czech: grandmother, an old woman. The term also corresponds to the word *wisewoman*).[16] In most cases the woman is being described as a source of rare and supernatural skills and abilities. Women possessed different kinds of magic: positive, aimed at helping others or healing them, but also a negative intended mainly on harming others.

Romani people of Brno still use the term *phuri daj* or *bosorki* to describe witches. However contemporarily, young women are also called the aforementioned term, mainly through the heritage of their mothers and grandmothers. Nowadays, according to the testimonies, there are no longer specialists in Brno. However, as these are tabooed persons, it is questionable whether this is the case because either specialists are sought out among the Czech population who practise various magical acts, or Brno Roma seek out specialists in the other cities in the Czech Republic. Finding a Romani specialist in Slovakia is also not considered extraordinary, especially in places where the practice of magical acts is still cultivated. Often these specialists appear in the testimony of the interviewees.

*"My mom, for example, lost her money. A lot of her money went missing and her gold was stolen. We were all at home, we were seven siblings. We were little, my sisters were bigger and my mom suspected who, but she didn't say who stole it from her. But she said if it wasn't back tomorrow, she'd go to the "cd" [anonymized nickname, author's note], her name is XY, but we call her "cd". So she goes to her, she catches the frog, sews its eyes shut and the thief goes blind. Well, my sister gave it back. My sister took it. But otherwise, I know she would have done it and the guy would have just gone blind."*[17]

It is worth mentioning the practice of magic utilizing a frog, which occurred in several interviews. Moreover it is a very frequent phenomenon in the Czech and Slovak folk culture. Finally, it's worth mentioning that *pokerování* occurs also to describe love and erotic magic.

## Evil eye “zoči”

In Czech folk culture, we could use definition of evil eye which was made by Matiegka. He described hex or evil eye as a reaction of the organism that manifests itself by *“nausea, headache, yawning, blurred vision, upset stomach, etc. [...] The self-conscious person thus...he does not easily become overconfident. [...] It is a condition brought about by suggestion or autosuggestion.”* [18] There is a difference between an oath and a curse, and together with a spell, all three are used for a different kind of summoning. The *zoči* is done by gazing at someone without the need to utter any incantation that would be needed in a curse and an oath.

Romani people in Brno very often struggle with the evil eye. In the local communities' appellations such as *jakhalo, jakhendar, zoči* or *čemerindā* can be encountered, depending on where the people come from. The first three terms mentioned are used among servika Roma, while the word *čemerindā* is preferred in use among ungrika Roma. Interestingly, some of the interviewees did not consider *zoči* to be a sign of magic and so were more open in their statements. The following excerpts come from respondents' statements published in the thesis.[19] The manifestations themselves may be as follows: *“When you are sick and you get used to it, it stays there.”* [points to the stomach area, author's note] (male, seventy-ish). *“The eyes burn.”* (female, sixty-ish), *“[...] Look, if you have a child, you can't handle it, it will cry, it will be sick, so you will think that it has this evil eye. We call it “zoči”. It's only you[20], who say it like that, it's just a spell, otherwise in Romani it's zoči. [...]”* (female, forty-ish), *“We have a habit of not looking at each other in the eye when I pick up food. [...] when a stranger comes and maybe he says he doesn't want it. The food. Then you'll get it from him. Because he's always looking and swallowing the saliva and it makes you sick and you're sick of it. And that's what's going on between you two now. [...]”* (male, seventy-ish). *“Sick...that's what you get when you have a fever, that's sick. But if you're just feeling queasy and you're not pregnant [...]”* (female, thirty-ish)

In the course of the research, it became apparent that the most frequent sign of negative forces is the evil eye. The incantation of evil eye then promises to get rid of the unfavourable physical symptoms of a malevolent look.

To free someone from the negative effects of *evil eye*, there is no need to use the services of any extraordinarily gifted individual, unlike the healing magic researched in the earlier thesis. This role, instead is appointed to the village shepherd, blacksmith, or other person perceived by the community as gifted with the ability to heal, cure, and ward off the effects of negative forces, whether intentionally or not. Nowadays, among the Roma in Brno, the chanting of the *zoči* is a common ritual that does not require the presence of a specialist.

During the research, respondents described several ways in which it is possible to get rid of nausea caused by the evil eye. The first was an act of healing magic and at the same time a diagnostic method, which was defined for the purposes of the research as “making water.”[21] Although the term *jagalo paňi* (czech ohnivá voda, eng. fire water[22]) is used for this act in the Romani environment, as Hübschmannová[23] mentions, no one among the respondents from servika and ungrika Roma knew or used it. It consists of a purification ritual during which hot coals (in our case matches) are thrown into water. The afflicted individual then takes a drink of this water. The performer of the ritual dips his or her fingers in the water and rubs the person's eyes, draws an imaginary cross on the forehead and then begins to massage the wrist bones with wet fingers. In one case, while “making the water”, the performer of the magic act silently counted the number of burnt matches that floated or sunk to the bottom of the vessel.

Finally, the water is thrown out of the house. *"Or if you have an apartment in some house, you don't have a porch, your house is closed and you have stairs. So it spills down the stairs."* [24]

Some of the respondents "made the water" without incantation. In two cases, however, it appears that only a fragment of this act remained, namely, the massaging of the wrist bones (there would be crunching sounds if the person is bewitched), while the rest of it was probably forgotten. Nausea can thus be warded off by a movement of, as the respondents put it, "grče" (little balls).[25]

1. S.: *And if someone makes you gets rid of it ...and knows how to do it. So someone does it to you and then someone makes "ptui ptui ptui" [spitting noises] three times and makes you cross and it's good. [...] Everybody does it differently. That's already bosorování [meaning witchcraft, author's note] you around, what she did to you.*

Interviewer: *Do you think that's witchcraft?*

1. S.: *Witchcraft, that's what they think. Somebody's doing it with matches.*

Interviewer: *Do you say anything during the act, too?*

1. T.: *I can't, with matches.*
2. S.: *She takes the cream, but someone's spitting on it, saliva. And you have these little balls here. [points to wrist bones, author's note]*

[...]

1. T.: *I do it to him, always, or to the daughter.*[26]

Another respondent reported a similar experience with wrist massages: *"Or is it still done, you know how? That somebody will rub you here, there are these little balls... [showing the rubbing of the wrist bones] [...] A friend did that to me too. I went at a disco and I felt totally nauseous and she said, "There are these little balls like that." So she massaged my wrist. And then it [the nausea] disappeared and I started to feel fine again."* [27]

In addition to healing magic itself, which deals with the consequence of a malevolent look, it is possible to protect oneself from the evil eye itself. When asked if it is possible to prevent the bad look, the respondent replied, *"Red bow [meaning ribbon, author's note]. [...] No, you can wear it anyway. [...] It's like this with the Roma, that when a child is born, you put on a red bow right away. Or there must be something red... red is a deterrent."* (female, forty-ish). At the same time, the woman mentioned that the ribbon does not have to be given only to babies, as is customary among the Roma people. Otto's Learned Dictionary (Ottův slovník naučný) of 1907 mentions hanging anything red on an object as a protection of the people against being evil eye and hex, believing that the red colour will attract the attention of the originator of the evil eye before the object itself and thus weaken the negative effect.[28]

In summary, the phenomenon of the evil eye, as well as the related practices to diagnose and protect against it, and help distinguish it against a regular illness is still alive among the Roma communities in Brno, as evidenced by the interviews carried out with the group members.

## Conclusion

The relationship between *pokerování* and other phenomena of harmful magic like "zoči" is not firmly defined. If we see *pokerování* as a general term for the negative magical influence of one person on another, it is possible to view evil eye "face to face" as a specific technique. The

research respondents themselves often did not distinguish between these terms and *pokerování* often perceived *pokerování* as a generic term for any type of ill-wishing towards someone.

Since research has confirmed the existence of these manifestations of magical thinking, the most frequent of which was the phenomenon of the evil eyes “zoči”, it is presented in this article as a proxy for these signs. It has been confirmed that the phenomenon of *zoči* or *jakhalo* or *jakhendar*, as evil eye is called among the Roma, is not only a supernatural phenomenon in Slovakia, but still occurs at least among the Roma in Brno. Given the fact that many Roma still have ties to Slovakia, and have extended family or acquaintances there, it seems likely that these manifestations of magical thinking are still alive.

The research shows that a relatively wide range of these practices is still maintained among Brno Roma, but is disappearing in comparison to Slovakian Roma. A large part of the older generation of Roma living in the Czech Republic come from Slovakia, and because they have brought the customs of their original homeland with them, it can be assumed that when they are not in the natural environment of the community they left, the manifestations of magical thinking can disappear and change. As is apparent from the statements of the respondents. The surrounding majority environment and globalization are also undeniably influential. In some cases, people are turning these acts into habits after forgetting the magical symbolism behind them.

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The author did not share data (transcripts of interviews).

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

[1] From a previously unpublished interview with a member of the ungrika Roma (male, sixty-ish).

[2] FRAZER, James George. *Zlatá ratolest*. Praha : Československý spisovatel, 2012, p. 42.

[3] PALS, Daniel L. *Osm teorií náboženství*. Praha : ExOriente, 2015, p. 336.

[4] See DAVIDOVÁ, Eva. *Romano drom: cesty Romů: 1945 - 1990 : změny v postavení a způsobu života Romů v Čechách, na Moravě a na Slovensku*. Olomouc : Vydavatelství Univerzity Palackého, 1995, p. 230.

[5] BUDILOVÁ, Lenka J. - JAKOUBEK, Marek. *Religiozita cikánů v ČR: konceptuálně-metodologické poznámky*. In *Český lid*, 2011, Vol. 98, No. 4, pp. 359-378.

[6] ROMBASE. Didactically edited information on Roma. Austria, 2004. [online]. See <http://rombase.uni-graz.at/> , cit. 1. 11. 2022.

[7] The main research method was field interviews. The type of interview was chosen depending on the nature of the informants and whether they agreed to be recorded. In addition to semi-structured interviews, Roland Girtler's ero-epic dialogues was used. See GIRTLE, Roland.

*Okrajové sociální kultury*. Brno : Masarykova univerzita, 2001.

[8] In the sense of a product of the poverty business.

[9] Zákon o trvalém usídlení kočujících osob č. 74/1958 Sb. Act on the permanent settlement of Travellers No.74/1958 Col.

[10] MANN, Arne B. *Romský dějepis*, Praha : Fortuna, 2001, p. 38.

[11] FIGUROVÁ, Eva. *Současné projevy magie v každodennosti Romů ve vybraných lokalitách Brna*. Brno : Filozofická fakulta, Masarykova univerzita, 2021, p. 43.

[12] FIGUROVÁ, E. *Současné projevy magie ...*, p. 16.

[13] See NÁDASKÁ, Katarína. *Čary a veštby: mágia v ľudovej kultúre Slovenska*. Bratislava : Fortuna Libri, 2014, p. 145.

[14] In the sense of put on one's shoes.

[15] FIGUROVÁ, E. *Současné projevy magie ...*, p. 17.

[16] HÜBSCHMANNOVÁ, Milena - ŽIGOVÁ, Anna - ŠEBKOVÁ, Hana. *Romsko-český a česko-romský kapesní slovník*. Praha : Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, 1991, p. 231.

[17] From a previously unpublished interview with a member of the servika Roma (female, thirty-ish).

[18] MATIEGKA, Jindřich. Lidové léčení. In *Československá vlastivěda*. Řada II. Národopis. Praha, 1936, p. 323.

[19] FIGUROVÁ, E. *Současné projevy magie ...*, p. 50, 50, 21, 50, 51.

[20] Meaning Czechs.

[21] Cf. Ritual "čítaná voda" in the Czech folk culture see DOBŠOVIČOVÁ PINTÍŘOVÁ, Dagmar. *Žitkovské bohyně: lidová magie na Moravských Kopanicích*. Brno : Masarykova univerzita, 2018.

[22] See LACKOVA, Ilona. *A false dawn: My life as a Gypsy woman in Slovakia*. Hatfield : University of Hertfordshire Press, 2000, p. 217

[23] HÜBSCHMANNOVÁ, Milena. "Bara" see. Available from: <http://rombase.unigraz.at/cd/data/ethn/belief/data/bara.cs.pdf> , cit. 07. 06. 2022.

[24] FIGUROVÁ, E. *Současné projevy magie...*, p. 51.

[25] *Grče* or *hrče* as the respondents call the little balls, is a term from the Moravian and also Slovak dialect.

[26] From interview with male, seventy-ish and female, sixty-ish. See FIGUROVÁ, E. *Současné projevy magie...*, p. 50.

[27] From interview with male, seventy-ish and female, sixty-ish. See FIGUROVÁ, E. *Současné projevy magie...*, p. 51.

[28] "Evil eye" (czech uhrnutí) see *Ottův slovník naučný: illustrovaná encyklopaedie obecných vědomostí*. Praha : J. Otto, 1907, Vol. 26, p. 110.



[29] See FIGUROVÁ, Eva. *Contemporary signs of magic in the everyday life of Roma in selected area of Brno*. Master's thesis. Brno : Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, 2021.

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