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On the Indian origins of certain supposedly-Byzantine words in the Romani language*

Linguists have proposed the hypothesis that the ancestors of the Roma lived for a long time in Byzantium, due to the presence of over two hundred Greek words in the Romani dialects. However, no-one made the effort to check whether some of these words are really of Greek origin... in Greek! I do not intend to detail the etymology of all of them, limiting myself for the moment to the most representative ones, frequently cited as an example in textbooks of Romani history in Romania, published or approved by the National Ministry of Education: *kokalo*, “bone”, *lulugi*, “flower”, and the numbers *efta*, “seven”, *ohhto*, “eight”, and *înea/(î)nia/enea*, “nine”.

An old Romani proverb says: “The dog who walks finds bones” (“*O jukāl kai phirel kokala arakhāl*”). In other words, research is the source of understanding. However, this research is not always fruitful. Some look for bones where they cannot be found, while others find bones, but not exactly edible ones.

***Kokalo* (“bone”)**

Marcel Courthiade wrote about the etymology of the Romani word *kokalo* in an article entitled “Teaching Sanskrit to European Rromanies (or Rroms)” (Courthiade, 2017). The commentary begins suggestively: “One case is of special interest: **kōkalo** ‘bone’...” (*ibidem*, 20). Why it should be *of special interest* is not mentioned, and he has not read my work, I myself being the first Rom in history who demonstrated with a bibliography the unquestionably Sanskrit origin of the Romani noun *kokalo*, in the online magazine *Confluente literare* (Cîrpaci, 2017).

Mr. Courthiade goes so far as to declare the noun *kokalo* to be a *hapax*¹ in Sanskrit. Here I

* Translation, with some additions, of the text from pag. 135. Translator: Natalie Adele Winter (Essex, Anglia).

present the main ideas of the French author about the Romani noun *kokalo*, extracted from the article quoted above: “One case is of special interest: **kokalo**, ‘bone’, usually ascribed to Greek $\kappa\acute{o}\kappa\alpha\lambda\omicron$, also a common word in Bulgarian...” (Courthiade, 2017: 20). Other opinions of M. Courthiade on the etymology of some Romani words are full of unjustified certainty: “Some are obvious for the speaker ... while others can be identified only by researchers: **lolo** ‘red’ [comes from] Skt. [Sanskrit] *lóhitam*” (*ibidem*, 19).

I shall argue my interpretation of the origin of these words; thus, *Mr. Courthiade's argument that the noun kokalo is found in only one single instance in Sanskrit does not meet the criteria of scientific research*; the plural in -a, *kokala*, “bones”, is used in India: *ghār*, (house) / *ghāraa* (houses); *lolo*, “red”, in Romani is not from Sanskrit, but from Persian. Persian and Hindi use *lal* for red, and *lolo* means red in the Shina language of Pakistan. The Persian *lal* is the origin of the Indo-Romani word *lulugi*, “flower”, as I will demonstrate in the next paragraph.

I mentioned that in the text under consideration, it is stated that the noun *kokalo* is a *hapax*, that is, it appears only once in Sanskrit literature, and that it did not produce cognates in the modern Indian languages. I will show that it is not a *hapax*, but is used today in India. There are *twenty-three* modern Indian languages in which cognates of the Romani word *kokalo* are used: Oriya, Sindhi-Lari, Kashmiri, Nepalese Hindi, Palula, Kumaoni, Urdu, Tamil, Malayalam, Kurukh-Oraon, Dhangar-Kurux, Keikadi, Suthun, Kolami, Chitwan-Tharu, Naiki, Naikkude Gondi, Madi, Telugu, Kamviri, Degano, Vayu, Sarikoli.

In standard Oriya, *kOnkaLo* means “skeleton” (Mahapatra *et al.*, 2002: 202). Oriya is one of the oldest Indian languages, a classical language. As of 2011, Oriya was spoken by over thirty-one million speakers. The noun *kankala*, “skeleton”, is attested in the dictionary of G. C. Praharaj, *Purnacandra Ordia Bhashakosha*. The Oriya language also has *kankāli*, “the part of the sides above the waist, on which grown up people carry children straddle-legged”, “lap”. One of the names of the goddess Durga is *Kankalamalini*, “she who wears a necklace of bones”, and the god Shiva also wears a *kankalamala*, a necklace of bones, which is why he is also called *Kankalamali* (Praharaj, 1931: 21). On page 408, G. C. Praharaj gives the variant *kikaśa*, “bone”, and on page 581, *kokali*, “a small seafish with scales”, *kokali sukhua*, “dried small pickerel and other fry of the sea used for food”. As we will see, this word, *kokali*, is found in the Dravidian languages, but with the sense of *shell*.

¹ “HÁPAX LEGÓMENON *s.n.* A word that appears in only one place (in literature or in a text). ♦ Something said only once. [Pl. *hapax legomena*. / <from Gk. *hapax legomenon*]” (<https://dexonline.ro/definitie/hapax>, accessed June 6, 2019).

In the Kurukh-Oraon language there exists a word related to the Romani noun *kokalo*: in the expression *barandi khocol* or *kubru khocol*, “backbone”, with *khocol* meaning “bone” (Hahn, 1903: 106).

Khocol, bone.

Baranḍi or *kubru khocol*, the backbone or spine.

Moreover, in the Kurukh-Oraon language, there are many nouns compounded with *khocol*: *hīkā khocol*, “the breast bone” (*ibidem*, 65), *pun khocol*, “breast bone” (152), *karrō khocol*, “cartilage” (84), *kharpatī khocol*, “the hip bone” (96), *kiss khocol-mann*, “pig’s bone, name of a tree” (88).

In the Keikadi language, *koikal*, “claws”; in Naikkude Gondi, *bokkal*, “bone”; in Madi, *bokairo*, “bone” and in Telugu, *bokka*, “bone” (Temple [ed.], 1866: 6). The Suthun language of northern India has *shishan-kokar*, meaning skull, “occiput” (*shish*, “head”) (Leitner, 1889: 15). And the Roma say *shāresko kokalo* for skull. Also the Suthun language has *gheron*, “great”, a cognate of the Greek *gheros*, “elder (man)”. The Kashmiri language has *kānkāl*, “chain” (Elmslie, 1872: 11), a word that refers to the chain of bones on the neck of the god Shiva. In Romani language, we find the Sanskrit word *kankala* in a traditional saying: *Kon phenela o čačipe, musaj leske te thol pesko punrro and’e kakali* – “Whoever (is about to) tell the truth should have his foot in the stirrup” (Hancock, 2017: 145). The Romani word *kakali* means the chain of a horse’s saddle, in the form of a loop with a flat base to support the rider’s foot.

Also interesting is the meaning of “big pit” (of a plum or apricot) of the word *kokalo* in my Kalderash dialect from Caransebeș (Romania). The same usage is found in the Sindhi Lari dialect: *KAKŌLŌ*, masculine noun, “the stone of a mango” (Grierson, 2005: 174). In Oriya too, *koili* means “the kernel inside the mango seed” (Praharaj, 1931: 579). The Roma in eastern Slovakia also use *kokalo* with the meaning of “fruit stone”, and the Bugurdji Roma have *badaneskoro kokalo*, “skeleton”, in which *badan* means “body”, exactly as in Hindi (a Romani inheritance from the Mughal period of India). And the Arli Roma, from Skopje, F.Y.R.O.M., say *badani*, “body” (Petrovski, 2010: 13). The Lovars call a nutshell *akhorako kokalo*. As for the supposed Greek ending, -os (*kokalos*, nominative), we may also recall the fact that the Roma who speak thus, *o kokalos* (nominative), have inherited this -s from Sanskrit: *shiras*, “head”. In Nepal, there are two other languages that use this ancient Sanskrit word, namely Hindi, *kōṅkal*, “bone” (Trail, 1973: 21), and Kolami, *bokka* “skeleton” (*ibidem*, 15). Again, Ronald L. Trail, the author of the book describing the dialects of Nepal, notes in the Dhangar Kurux language, the word *xocol*, “skeleton”. It appears that this Sanskrit word gave rise to another interesting word in the

Kumaoni language of Nepal, namely *kakal-sauni*, “centipede” (Grierson, 1967: 259). In Nepal, the Vayu language has *khokáli*, “knee” (Hodgson, 1858: 374), a cognate of the Ursari (the Bear-trainer Roma from Romania) word *koceia*, “knees”. The Degano² language of Nuristan, Pakistan, has *koṭ’â*, *koṭ’a*, “knee”. The Palula (Phalura) language of Pakistan has *kákar*, *kakaríi*, “skull”, from the Sanskrit *kapar*. It is worth noting the emphasis placed on the first *a*, as it is in the Romani dialects. Moreover, the authors of the Palula dictionary, Henrik Liljegren and Naseem Haider (2011: 80), specify that the plural of the noun *kákar*, *kakaríi* is *kakara*, exactly as in the Romani language (*kokali*, “bone”/ *kokala*, “bones”). The gender of the noun *kakaríi* in Palula is feminine (*ibidem*, 80), as is sometimes used in the dialect of the Kalderash from Caransebeş (Romania), *o kokali*, although the gender of this noun is masculine in Romani³. This feature is inherited from India. Proof by comparison would be the Indian word *pani*, “water”, which in Hindi is masculine but has a feminine ending (ni), as in the Romani of the Ursari: *pani*, “water”, *o pani*, “the water”. The use of the noun *pani* with the definite article *o* proves the Indian heritage of the Romani dialects, because the article *o* indicates the masculine gender in Romani.

Linguists T. Burrow and M. B. Emeneau, in their already famous dictionary, describe the Dravidian words derived from the Sanskrit noun *ukhá*, referring to an upper part of the foot, words which, in my opinion, are cognates of the Sanskrit word *kankala*, “skeleton”. These two linguists, on page 55, give examples of Dravidian languages in which this word has cognates: Tamil, *ukkam*, “waist”, *ukkal*, “side”, *okkal*, *okkalai*, “hip”, “side of the body”; Malalayam, *ukkam*, *ukkal*, “middle”, “hip”, “side”, *okk*, “hip”, “loins”, *okkil*, “waist”, “hip”. I consider the Romani word *o kuko*, “the hip” to be related to these, which is pronounced almost identically in the Himalayan language Chitwan Tharu: *kulha*, “hip” (cf. Ronald L. Trail, 1973: 26). Urdu has *kuulha*, “hip”. T. Burrow and M. B. Emeneau also cite *karro xocol*, “cartilage” in the Kurux language (position 1296 in the dictionary). Totally unexpected, in position 1423, we see a Dravidian word which the Romani linguists consider to be of Greek origin. This word is *cipa*, “scales”. In the Telugu language there is *kakki cipa*, “a bivalve shell”. The Kolami language has *kākke*, “shellfish” or “shell of snail”. The Naiki language also has *kakke*, “shellfish”, “snail”. T. Burrow and M. B. Emeneau derive these words from Sanskrit *kākinī*, “a small coin”, the Cyprae Moneta shell. This shell was used in ancient India as currency. At position 2535, page 221, we read that Kannada has *cippu*, *simpu*, *simpe*, “oyster shell”, “a pearl oyster”. Tamil has *simpe*,

² www.nuristan.info (accessed 14 June 2019).

³ In parallel, the Roma use the forms *kokalo*, *kokalos*, “bone”. The final -s of *kokalos* can be explained by a loan from Sanskrit, *shira* (शिरः), *shiras* (शिरसः), “head”

(http://spokensanskrit.org/index.php?mode=3&script=hk&tran_input=head&direct=au, accessed 11 June 2019).

referring to the nut part of a coconut, and in Pali and Prakrit, *sippi*, “pearl oyster”. In the Kamviri⁴ dialect of the group of languages known as Nuristani, from the Nuristan region, Pakistan, *’akali*, *ârnkâlin*, *p’âakali*, “jaw”. The word *pââkali* in the Kamviri language is related to *bokka*, “skeleton”, in the Kolami language. The sarikoli language has *khaun kâl*, “the hip bone” (Shaw, 1876: 86).

Thus we rule out the possibility that the noun *kokalo* could be a loan from the imagined Byzantine period of the proto-Roma, particularly because of the meaning “the stone of a mango”, which exists both in the Sindhi language, and also in the Romani dialects. On page 728 of the book *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, the author, Robert Beekes, says of *κογχη*, “mussel”, that it was borrowed in Latin with the form *conchylium* from the Greek *κογχηύλιον*, which is a cognate of *κόχλαος*. The author makes a link with the shell from which purple dye was extracted in ancient times. In his opinion, this word is pre-Greek, which is confirmed by the variants *κοκάλιά*, and *κωκαλία*. Beekes claims that it comes from Sanskrit (*śankha*, “mussel”), and is a loanword in Greek. And the Roma in England were using *shanko* for a shell. Beekes adds that the reconstruction cannot be taken further, but we have the Dravidian forms *kakke*, *kakki*, “shellfish”, discussed above.

***Lulugi* (“flower”)**

Although present in Greek, in the form *louloudi*, this word is not Greek, but a loan, although it is unclear from which language it entered medieval Greek (“Λουλούδι”). In the dictionary edited by Georgios Babiniotis (2008) three possibilities are considered: it entered Byzantine Greek from Albanian, from *lules* or *ludeli*, “sunflower”; from *leiridion* or *leilidion* from Koine Greek (*leirion*, “lily”); from Ancient Greek *lilion*, via the Latin *lilium* (“lily”), plus the diminutive *-oudi*. The linguist Emmanuel Kriaras (1995) also considers that it entered Greek through the Latin *lilium*. It is curious that the plural in Greek is *louloudia*, as in Romani, *lulugia/luludia*. Linguist Peter Smith claims that the Latin *gladi-olus*, “little sword”, is the source for the word “flower” and “many flowers and plants have been named based on such a rich image” (Peter, 2016: 101). Indeed, we have the variant *floretă* in Romanian, but also the Romanian word *gladiolă*. The Romanian word *floare* originated in the Latin *flos*, which is cognate with the Sanskrit word *phalya*, “flower”, and Hindi *phul*, “flower”.

Many Romani dialects retain variants ending in the suffix *-in*: *lulud'in*, “flower”

⁴ www.nuristan.info (accessed 14 June 2019). The researcher in Nuristani is linguist Richard Strand.

(“Macedonian Džambazi...”); *luluzin*, “flower”, “plant” (“Bugurdži Romani”); *lolod’in, lolodžin, LONĐI, LUĐI, LUĐIN, luled’in, lulud’in*, “flower”, “rose” (“Gurbeti Romani”); *ludi*, “flower” (“Sinte Romani”). In my opinion, the original forms of the word were *ludin/lodin*, being inherited from India, because we find the cognate *ladin*, “rose”, in the Shina language of Pakistan (Bailey, 1924: 272). It should be noted that T. Bailey also gives as a synonym for *ladin* the Indo-Persian word *gulab*. In this case, we can consider the phenomenon of reduplication (*lu + ludin*), so common in modern Indian languages, which probably appeared through contamination with the Persian word *lolo*, “red” (*lal* in Persian and Hindi), found in the same language, Shina, pronounced identically in Romani too.

In Persian, *lala* forms part of the composition of many flower names: dictionaries mention many species of flowers, partly distinguished by their colors, partly by other characteristics: *lala i gul boy*, “a tulip with a scent of a rose”, *lala i dil-sokhta (dil-soz)*, *lala i du-ru (du-ruy)*, *lala i rumi*, *lala i zard*, *lala i saped*, *lala i qirmizy*; *lalazar*, “garden of tulips” (Steingass, 1963: 1113); *gulangubin*, “a conserve of roses made with honey” (*ibidem*, 1096); *lal-sag* (*Amaranthus Gangeticus*); *gul-lāla*, “anemone”, “tulip” (*ibidem*, 1095).

We consider that this enigmatic Indo-European word originates in Persian, because in Armenian the same Persian *lal* gave *lolig*, “tomato” (Samuelian, 1993: 60). And the tomato is red in color. The origin of the word *lulugi* in Romani is from Persian, as it may be for Greek *louloudi*. When asked who brought the word *louloudi* to Greece, we can say that it was the Roma or the Doma (another Indian group, present before the Roma in Europe). That the Romani *lulugi* is Indo-European is not in doubt, since tomato is *lolig* in Armenian, or *loli*, “red”, just as in Romani. The Domari language has *glülk*, “flower” (Herin), but also *lōrga*, “tomato” (*idem*, 2018: 24). The Domari language of Syria has many elements in common with Romani⁵ and, probably, in the past, the Syrian Doma, who also call themselves “*jinganih*” (from which the Romanian word “*țigan*” derives) (Newbold, 1856: 292), arrived in Greece selling flowers, and they used an archaic form, *luoluodi*, the word thus entering into Greek. From that old word, *lulugi*, the form *glülk* probably survived until today in the language of the Syrian Doma, evidently related to the *lulugi* of Romani. Richard Strand informs us that in Nuristan, the Khowari language has *ṭumb’uki*, “rose bud”, *buḷ’učī*, “unripe fruit”, *bl’ok*, “flower bud”. The Khowari words *ṭumb’uki* and *buḷ’učī* are cognates of the Romani word *lulugi*, and *bl’ok* is cognate to Domari *glülk*.

It would be very useful for the history of the Roma if the date of the first attestation of this word in Greek literature could be established, for this is how we would find the date when the first Indians who used it entered the Greek territories.

⁵ As in almost all dialects of the Domari diaspora.

I am of the opinion that *luludi* is an Indo-European word, of Persian origin, in the Indian languages (*lal*, “red”, in Persian and Hindi). To establish its origin and historical route, we have the forms: *lala i dil-sokhta* (Persian), *gladiolus* (Latin), *lolo* (Shina, romani), *ladin* (Shina), (*lo*)*lodin* (Romani), *glulk* (Domari), *lolig*, *lōrga* (Armenian), *lilium* (Latin), *lilion* (Ancient Greek), *leilidion* (Koine Greek), *louloudi* (Modern Greek), *lule/ludeli* (Albanian), *lalea* (Romanian).

***Efta* (“seven”), *ohhto* (“eight”), *inia* (“nine”)**

These Romani numbers are presumed to be taken from Greek. But they are also found in Indian regional languages. Thus, *haft* means “seven” in Persian, and some Roma say *hifta*, while *haphta/hafta* means *week* in Hindi. We have *āht*, “eight”, in the Poguli dialect of Kashmiri (Bailey, 1903: 58), and *ōtth*, “eight”, in the Kului dialect (*idem*, 1905: 64).

Sarikoli is a language of Dardic (North Indian) origin, in which appears *wokht*, “eight”. R. B. Shaw, the author of the book *On the Ghalchah Languages*, in which we located this word, demonstrates with the grammar of the Wakhi and Sarikoli languages that the two languages are related, as “cousins”, with the Indian Dardic languages. Moreover, the author says that the Ghalcha and Dard languages were separated from the Persian and Hindi languages (sister languages) in the period when these two languages were taking on their modern form. R. B. Shaw (1876: 2-3) argues that in the past, the speakers of the Dard and Ghalcha languages lived together and spoke the same language. The Kurukh-Oraon language also has *akhta*, “the eighth” (Hahn, 1903: 4). In Kashmiri, *ought*, “eight” (Godwin-Austen, 1867: 258).

In India, in the Bhatiri dialects, from Kotpad Tahsil, Koraput district, and from Umarnkot Tahsil, Orissa state, the numbers eight and nine are pronounced as *a'tho* and *ne* (Beine, 2017: 27). The vowel *ɛ* from *ne*, “nine”, is written with an underdash, which, according to the “International Alphabetic Chart”, is called “*e retracted*”, identical with the pronunciation of the Kalderash Roma from Caransebeș (Romania), that is to say, *inia* or shortened to *nea*. Comparing *āht*, “eight”, from the Dardic language Poguli, with *wokht*, “eight”, from Sarikoli, another language with Dardic origins, with *a'tho*, “eight”, from the Bhatiri language, and with *ōtth*, “eight”, from Kului, another language spoken in the Dardic region, we get a very old origin for *ohhto* (*oxto*) in the Romani language.

When could these Greek words (*oxto*, *enia*) have entered into the Indian languages? The only reasonable hypothesis would be the time of Alexander the Great’s invasion of India, and the establishment of the Indo-Greek kingdoms. As a result of cultural exchange, these words have

certainly become commonplace, changing their form of pronunciation under the influence of Indian contact languages.

Implications for identity

The final conclusion is that *the Roma can regain their Indian identity based on the linguistic archeology of the words kokalo, lulugi, eŧta, ohhto, înia*. The “correct” etymology of these words was incorrectly claimed to be Greek. It can be successfully demonstrated, with a large bibliography, that most of the Romani words mistakenly identified by linguists as Greek are actually found in India.

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