

“This Is Not Your Santa”: Roma Children Visualize Christmas

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By discussing visualizations of Christmas by Hungarian children, I integrate children’s drawings and ideas about the holiday as they relate to education, authorship, and ways in which the Roma view the world. While images and figures of the traditional holiday appear as standard tropes, interpretations of the respective drawings provide insights into the children’s perceptions of – and wishes and aspirations for Christmas. Their images highlight anthropologically challenging socio-economic, educational, and familial aspects of Roma culture.

▪ **Keywords:** education, Roma, children, drawing, Christmas holiday

V razpravi o vizualizacijah božiča med otroki na Madžarskem povežujem otroške risbe in ideje o prazniku z izobraževanjem, avtorstvom in načini, kako Romi vidijo svet. Medtem ko se podobe in figure tradicionalnega praznika kažejo kot standardni tropi, dajejo interpretacije posamičnih risb vpogled v otroško dojemanje božiča ter z njim povezane želje in hotenja. Podobe božiča razkrivajo antropološko zahtevne družbeno-ekonomske, izobraževalne in družinske vidike romske kulture.

▪ **Ključne besede:** izobraževanje, Romi, otroci, risanje, božič

Introduction: Children and their artwork

Recently, anthropologists Smørholm and Simonsen argue that “children are the best informants on their own lives, and their abilities to interpret, express, and communicate their lived experiences should not be underestimated” (2017: 381). Cross-cultural and anthropological analyses also highlight some of the cultural specificities and patterns of children’s drawing (Afonso, Ramos, 2004; Baluch et al., 2017; Gernhardt, Rübelling, Keller, 2013; Kuschnir, 2016; Punch, 2016; Stokrocki, 1994). Since the late 19th century, an understanding of children’s artwork has been a constant source of revelation and consequential difficulty facing educators, artists, and psychologists. In Germany and Hungary, children’s art exhibits were mounted in 1897 and 1903 respectively (Claus, 1901; Nagy, 1905). One of the first scholars to provide a highly original contribution to the field was the Norwegian educator and psychologist Helga Eng, whose 1926 study concerned her niece’s drawings from the age of 10 months to 8 years, translated and published in English in 1931 (Eng, 2002). However, it was not until two decades later that the first trained Hungarian psychologist ventured to discuss drawings of school children: this was Julianna Sárany (1912–1983), whose Ph.D. dissertation elevated the subject to a scholarly standard (Sárany, 1937). Despite this century-long interest in the

drawings of children, the “discovery” of Roma visual art can be traced back to the 1970s, when paintings were shown to the public by journalists, ethnographers, and art historians (Ribó Pongrácz, 2001). At that time, these were labeled “naïve artists” or “folk artists”, since they often lacked formal artistic education and even proper schooling (Bánszky, 1984; Daróczi, Karsai, 1979; Daróczi, Kerékgyártó, 1989). The democratization of the international art world gradually opened the way for East European Roma artists, whose paintings are now regularly exhibited in European museums and galleries (Illés, 2018; Junghouse, Székely, 2006). While working with Roma children, one researcher found individual differences in the artwork, and not surprisingly, but somewhat stereotypically, she interpreted their drawings as polysemic projections of Roma children’s inner conflicts anchored to their tendency to visualize often opposing feelings of fear and hope, aggression, and defensiveness (Hortoványi, 2020: 218).

By viewing the artwork of Roma elementary school children in a rural town in Hungary, my aim is to understand how these youngsters’ visual competency reflects their ideas and self-understanding about the various characters and elements of Christmas.¹ My initial idea was that, since it is the most commercialized and internationally mediatized holiday of the year, children would have no difficulty in depicting Christmas and its main protagonists – Santa, Rudolf, Christ, the Krampus, angel, the Christmas tree – or even the manger scene of the nativity play. As I intend to demonstrate, the results of this extra-curricular ethnography at home exercise proved otherwise, suggesting instead that some children had little knowledge of a Krampus image and were baffled by depicting reindeer, while others stressed their congenial family stories and relied on Roma religiosity in contributing their own memories or aspirations.

Roma children beyond the classroom

As is well known throughout Europe, Romani families have been ghettoized for most of their history and thus live apart from the majority of inhabitants of any towns in separate sections of settlements; the Roma in Hungary are no exception (Kemény, 2005; Stewart, 1997; Szuhay, 1999). National statistics suggest that some 10 percent of Hungary’s population belong to the Roma minority, but only about one-third of them self-identify as Roma (Országgyűlés Hivatala, 2021). Since the collapse of the communist state, opportunities for Roma families to secure paid work have decreased dramatically; since the 2010s, more than 50 percent of Roma men have been unemployed, and this figure rises to nearly 80 percent among Roma women (Papp, 2021: 244–245). Their second-class status is further exacerbated by the meager social benefits provided by the state and the work-program assistance to which they are entitled. In

¹ I describe the town and the local Roma community in detail elsewhere (Kürti, 2019).

terms of educational advancement, data compiled by the EU present a distressing picture: “Only half (53 percent) of Roma children between the ages of 4 and 6 (or the starting age of compulsory primary education) participate in early childhood education [...] on average, 18 percent of Roma aged between 6 and 24 attend an educational level lower than that corresponding to their age, and the share of Roma early school-leavers is disproportionately high compared with the general EU population” (Lecerf, 2022: 2–3; cf. also European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2018: 10–11). Since the fall of communism in 1990, the number of private and religious schools has multiplied, but this by no means offers a viable solution to the majority-minority segregation affecting Roma children (Kovats, 2001: 342; OECD, 2012: 17).

These international statistics are even more obvious when viewed in tandem with national educational policy concerning the classification of school children with learning difficulties. As it turns out, about 30 percent of Roma pupils in Hungary have been classified by the educational system as children having difficulty with comprehension and learning, a figure roughly corresponding to the national average (Farkas, 1994; Forray, Hegedűs, 1991; Havas, Kemény, Liskó, 2001; Szabolcs, 2007). All Roma children selected for the project also belonged to social categories with specific learning disorders (SLD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD. These classifications, which Gábor Eröss calls “medicalization” and “psychologization” of “learning disabilities” and “behavioral disorders” (2012: 177), have unflinchingly been linked not only to parents’ lack of basic education, unemployed status, and extreme poverty on the fringes of Hungarian society but to the one-sided governmental educational policies (Farkas, 2007; Plainer, 2021; Van den Bogaert, 2019; Zsigó, 2022).

In contrast to such previous studies, I had the opportunity to continue my previous anthropological project “at home” (Kürti, Skalnik, 2009) by devising an ethnographic field project (Sarroub, Nicholas, 2021) when the director of the community health center approached me to teach in an after-school voluntary educational program with Roma children in a medium-sized rural town of 11,000 people with roughly 10 percent of Roma inhabitants.² Since state schools are majority spaces considered by psychologists and critical educators to be limiting and frustrating for minority Roma children (Alexiadou, 2017; Kertesi, Kézdi, 2014; Obrovská, 2018), it became imperative to try to distance children from the institutional school context by providing them with a real sense of autonomy or agency during the visual exercises. In contrast to Kuo, however, who allowed Roma children in a Romanian town to improvise and draw freely (Kuo,

² I have been conducting fieldwork among local Roma since early 2000. As usual in data collecting, I started with the elderly, and continued with their offspring; those children twenty years ago now are all adults with their own families. I was fortunate because many of the families live only a few hundred meters from my house, and thus daily contact was assured. I conducted interviews, photo-elicitation, and video documentaries often returning to the same families for more data and clarification of personal histories, concepts, and more. I have not, however, included those Roma who settled in the town recently, only arriving from Romania since joining the EU.

2015, 2020), I selected a more culturally specific and informal premise by focusing on a single theme, the Christmas holiday.

Since this was a European Union-funded limited-scope project at the end of 2021, young social workers of the community health compound volunteered, for a modest commission, to work with Roma children as part of their regular jobs.³ None of the social workers involved with the project belonged to the Roma minority however; indeed, there were no Roma educators available in the town or even in the nearby city, even though the social workers were determined to include at least one. When I volunteered to join the educators, I immediately realized the daunting task of working with Roma children whose parents did not fully wish to participate in the project. Unequivocally, Roma parents (primarily women) take their children home immediately after the end of classes, resulting in almost 90 percent of Roma children missing special and voluntary educational activities offered by the school. One reason for this has to do with the ubiquitous racism and anti-Roma attitudes widespread not only in segregated schools in Hungary as elsewhere in Europe but on the streets, in the labor market and social services, and in the media (Doytcheva, 2016; Janko Spreizer, 2020; Rorke, 2021). Unfortunately, this action not only hinders children's educational advancement and opportunity to learn special skills but also further aggravates strained majority-minority relations while, at the same time, reinforcing greater ghettoization. Local Roma leaders not only seem disinterested but also eschew direct involvement in school politics, perhaps because of their traditionally divided kinship structure that favors extended family relations rather than the neighborhood or larger ethnonational bonding, in addition to the "double bind" phenomenon – stereotyped popular images and governmental ethnicization of Roma that offer no alternative understandings of Roma identity, described by Peter Vermeersch with regard to dysfunctional national Roma political representation (Vermeersch, 2007: 181). Even the special after-school educational programs initiated by various humanitarian NGOs in Hungary, so prevalent during the 1990s and early years of 2000 and described by Timmer (2010), never took root in the countryside or in the town itself.

With regard to the two months-long after-school art project, only those pupils and their parents were selected to take part who willingly expressed their participation in the project. Initially, thirty children between the ages of eight and fourteen were admitted, but after the first two weeks, all eighth graders left the project. By the beginning of December, attendance dropped to twenty-two children, most of them between the ages of eight and twelve. For the project, we were able to use the local Roma community center, a building that had been reconstructed with European Union financing. My co-workers (three social workers from the municipal health center) and I especially

³ Szegregált területen élők társadalmi együttműködését erősítő helyi szintű komplex programok Lajosmizsén (Local-level complex programmes to strengthen social cooperation among people living in segregated areas in Lajosmizse); TOP-5.2.1, BK1-2015-00001.

welcomed the availability of the building as the spacious room and onsite technical support made our task easy. For my part, I decided against smartphones – about a third of the twelve-to-thirteen-year-old children possessed them – mainly because the children used them in their free time to listen to music, chat with their friends, and view Tik-Tok clips.⁴ After my insistence on this point during the initial classes, this project gained acceptance by the Roma pupils who were willing and eager to become partners in cheerful and entertaining exercises.

Like Roma children elsewhere in Europe, for example in Turkey (Cicekler, Aral, 2020), England (Matras, Leggio, Steel, 2015), Spain (Blasco, 2016), and Romania (Cosmas, Cuso, Momanu, 2010), Hungarian children receive elementary school education; visual learning and drawing, in particular, were not novel to Hungarian Roma pupils in the project; they had already learned to draw in school, many in kindergarten, which considerably strengthened manual dexterity, creativity, and drawing skills. There is an important proviso: in Hungarian elementary schools, specialized sports or art classes are offered mostly after regular classes in the afternoon, a time when most Roma children have already been picked up by their mothers and taken home. No doubt most enjoyed this new artistic opportunity to express themselves freely in any way they wished by using as many kinds of tools, colors, and subjects as they wished. Roma children felt relaxed and enjoyed themselves throughout the afternoon session. The noise level was high at first, but, as the project progressed, the children became more reserved, paying attention to the assignment. I selected the Christmas holiday season as a topic because we started in November and followed in the first half of December but, more importantly, I felt that a more focused approach would challenge and require them to channel their ideas and cultural associations of their lives around a single theme.

Roma children begin to draw...

I devised exercises according to age and gender composition, starting with general discussions about the holiday season, St. Nicholas Day (December 6), and following up with clips and short films, music, and stories about Christmas. In the wake of post-1990 Americanization, globalization, and fully entering the global capitalist market and international commercial culture, in Hungary, the two holidays slowly merged into a single three-week holiday season (Kürti, 2020). I explained that the idea was for them to express themselves freely with images and concepts that come to mind. I decided to exclude selfies and photos, fetish objects children tend to overuse. I suggested that

⁴ By using their mobile phones, participatory photography (Lorenz-Meyer, 2022) would have been another way to conduct a similar visual project. However, since only a few older children possessed mobile phones, I dropped this possibility. For ethnographic examples of using visual anthropology methods with children, see Turk Niskač (2013).

drawing was less labor-intensive than painting; children could sit around four large tables freely and select any type of material – graphite pencils, crayons, and pens. They were also happy with the freedom to use as many A4 papers as they wished, together with erasers. My experience was that most of the children simply discarded the first attempts they did not like or in which they considered images to be inadequate or aesthetically unacceptable.⁵

As it turned out, to depict their own images of the holiday season was an entirely new idea to them. Smaller children were less certain, as one eight-year-old girl asked: *“How can I draw Christmas?”* Before I could answer, a boy slightly older offered help: *“Just draw a Christmas tree or Santa Claus.”* Seeing their first attempts, and the discarded scribbles, I offered some ideas that they might draw. I listed figures of stereotypical images (Santa Claus, Krampus, Angel, Jesus, reindeer), objects (Christmas tree, gifts, candles, stars, candy, accouterments, the nativity), and actions associated with the holiday season (snow, snowman, sled-riding, special food, family gathering). This turned out to be less helpful, as most children drew only a limited range of images, obviously what they perceived to be important. Those less sure of their artistic capabilities looked to their peers for ideas and help; only one ten-year-old boy drew Christian religious objects, such as a cross, shepherd’s staff, and a crown – for him, non-anthropomorphic representation stood for spirituality and God Almighty. This is somewhat similar to the example of anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic representations in the drawings of Christian and Sunni Muslim children in Sweden (Gülec, 2021).

After about an hour, we collected the drawings from each child and continued with open-ended as well as semi-structured interviews focusing on selected drawings. About three-quarters of the drawings were set aside as doodling and unfinished attempts, or because children decided to scrap or destroy them (*“I am not happy with this one”*, or *“That’s really awful, I didn’t know what to do”*, were common decisions on their part). Their answers to our questions were grouped with the main types of drawings: Santa Claus, angels, Christmas tree, reindeer, Krampus, and related religious objects, resulting in about 100 drawings by the end of the project. At the initial stage, younger children were interested only in scribbling just for sensory enjoyment and the independence of playful hand movements. It was for many a free exercise, an emotional release especially since, in the classrooms, they are restricted by their teachers and the subject matter. It also became clear to me that the older ones, those between the ages of thirteen and fourteen, were less enthusiastic about drawing. While some children needed coaching because they were unsure of how to begin, others relied on help. Giving praise and encouraging their ideas to be put on paper, my co-workers and I noticed that the process facilitated increasing social interaction among pupils who were

⁵ For depicting images of beauty and ugliness among Roma and non-Roma Hungarian and American adolescents, see Kárpáti and Kay (2013).

timid at first. Even though they knew each other – they were from the same minority community, some even relatives, and many came from the same school classes – the exercise presented new challenges. The first spontaneous drawings were made with playful lines and chaotic scrawls. Sometimes Santa’s face was represented with unsure contours and indifferent proportions – for example, eyes only indicated by dots, with missing body parts, such as ears. I asked a girl if she saw this as a problem, and her answer was plain: “Ears are not important, Santa knows everything.”



Figure 1: Santa Claus drawings.

I should note, however, that aside from the positive images of Christmas figures, Santa's mischievous associate, the Krampus, morphed early on into his original devil-like personage, the opposite of an angel, an enduring image association based on Christian Apocrypha. In fact, 19th-century German-Austrian Christmas postcards clearly identify the Krampus as the devil (Rest, Seiser, 2016; Ridenour, 2016). Oddly, for Roma children, Krampus possesses even more lurid stylistic characteristics fashioned after horror images taken from films and television cartoons. Quite extraordinarily, the Roma Krampus' mask-like faces parallel those used in recent Austrian wild Krampus revivals, unique Christmas holiday events with which Roma children clearly are not acquainted. When I asked one twelve-year-old about his fierce-looking Krampus, he was not shy about offering his impression: "*The Krampus is not nice, he has big teeth, and he chases and terrifies children.*"

For the smaller children, below age twelve, representing Krampus was an enigma, and when I carefully guided them about the role of the Krampus, one boy (the only thirteen-year-old in the group), said: "*I know, he is the Devil-Santa.*" Because of his self-assured and loud comment, several boys illustrated Krampus as holding a large military-style weapon and not, as was customary, a stick, a broom, or a bunch of small sticks (originally called *virgács*). Rather like the classic trident of Poseidon, boys – most of them like to present a fierce Krampus picture – depicted this dreaded folkloric figure as similar to an image shown to them in which the Krampus holds a three-pronged pitchfork. While four boys pictured Krampus with a three-pronged pitchfork, one boy drew it with a five-pronged fork. I asked him: "*Your Krampus has a dangerous implement, no?*" The boy's answer was stern: "*He is a bad guy, maybe he could kill somebody.*" He seemed to be strongly under the influence of horror films and violent cartoons. Patrick's (eleven at the time of the project) Krampus is perhaps the most frightening of all: his figure is a combination of a devilish animal and an extra-terrestrial creature. Two of the boys of the same age did not bother to display whole Krampuses, only the frightening face; both artworks are mask-like headshots with enormous mouths revealing sharp fangs.

The use of dimension, color, and context

I tried to offer a few directions to some of the children, for example, to one girl of ten years of age who was drawing an unusually small Santa Claus compared to the other Santa images. To jump to an easy assessment seemed too obvious, as my co-workers and I hastily assumed that the pupil was introverted, withdrawn, and less communicative than her schoolmates. This closely approximates what one psychologist asserts: "small figures on a comparably large drawing paper suggest emotional closeness and a distant communication with the world" (Feuer, 2002: 12). Dimensionality, symmetry,



Figure 2: Krampus as pictured by the children.

and proportionality have created difficult questions for some of the children. In their drawings, the scale of extremities compared to the size of the body, or adding a small head to large hands or feet did not bother our young artists. As Nagy asserted more than a century ago – reinforced later by Sáray – “children below the age of 12 tend to draw in a smaller scale, smaller objects [...] (and) in general, do not tend to [respect] scale and dimension” (Nagy, 1905: 10; Sáray, 1937: 16). In contrast, girls drew angels with enormous wings, and in two instances Santa was depicted with horrendous legs resembling tree stumps. Only one of the creators readily explained the reason: “*Santa has to have strong feet since he has to go to so many places.*” In the children’s minds, Santa is gender-specific, and he is always a man.

There were some questions about the children’s lack of use of different colors and tools (pencils, markers, paint brushes, chalk, and crayons). A sixth-grade boy relied exclusively on a graphite pencil, but slowly he progressed into a more polychromatic visualization, even venturing into coloring the angel’s dress and hair. While not always obvious in the drawings, angels in their imagination represent positive feelings and trustworthiness, especially when compared to other supernatural beings (Sánta, 2002). As many ethnographers, among them Fosztó (2009), Rostás-Farkas (2000), and Szuhay (1999), have noted, Hungarian-speaking Roma (Romungro) children believe in the general Judeo-Christian opposition concerning the positive-negative duality of angels and the devil. Moreover, many Roma families in the local community we studied belong to or frequently attend services of new charismatic evangelical (Pentecostal) Churches (Kürti, 2019). Naturally, Roma children use elements of their adult world as known by their parents and relatives, and couple those with their mediatized fantasies. A few angels stand out from the rest, as one of them is depicted with a saint’s halo. Encouraged by this specificity I asked the girl to explain the reason for the halo, “*An angel is a holy person*”, was the rational answer. Another girl created an angel, in a manner that resembled a bumble bee. “*She has to fly*”, she commented on the image, “*actually she is flying right now*”, a reason why the angel’s body was tilting to the right with blue clouds around her. For the children, as it turned out, angels are gender-specific, they are always female and all of them, including the boys, justified their belief that angels can fly (have wings) and have long hair.

Children in this project refrained from using multiple colors, a pattern that has not been observed as typical of adult Roma artists especially painters (Medgyesi, Garancsi, 2011). For instance, János Balázs (1905–1977), one of the first nationally recognized Roma painters in Hungary, has often been hailed by art critics as a maverick of “luxurious colors” (Zöldi, 2000). Paintings of the well-known artist Márta Bada (1951-), to use another example, have been associated with rich color schemes (Zsigó, 2009: 15–16). One art critic describes her art as “instinctual” in which there is “an orgy of colors, just like emotions are brimming in the soul of children” (Ritók, 2015). This may be part of the general dichotomy of “us” and “them”, resulting in centuries-long exoticization



Figure 3: Angels.

and racialization of the Roma as many scholars have suggested (Doytcheva, 2016; Kligman, 2001; Kroon et al., 2016). But in the artwork of children, simple colors send powerful messages. This can easily be witnessed, for instance, in the eight selected images of Krampuses, all monochromatic with only two exceptions. One Krampus has five rather subdued colors (grey, green, pink, brown, blue); another is completely green with brown contours. The monochromatic dominance may be due to their age and the lack of art education; but for the child what the image represented was secondary to the narratives attached to it, as Sárany noted almost a century ago (1937: 18–19).

Strange as it may seem at first, one of the most revealing aspects of the drawings is the lack of a larger holiday context, a commercialized and highly internationalized event in Hungary today (see my articles). All the drawings seem to stand isolated without depicting a more contextual approach to the Christmas holiday. It was quite apparent that even though the exercise was clearly about Christmas in a generally wintry landscape, depicting snow or a snowman never occurred to them. The lack of animals in the drawings was also a surprising discovery. Whether this was related to the idea proposed by Carroll and Ryan-Wenger that most children express fear and anxiety about depicting animals (1999) remains to be assessed through more rigorous and specific studies. Of all the possibilities, children mostly drew angels, a Christmas tree, Santa Claus, and Krampus. Only two sisters ventured to draw a single reindeer. The centrality of the angel, Santa, and Krampus is not without justification for these are the most talked about and depicted figures of the Christmas pantheon in Hungary.

To the children, Krampus has been identified as a masculine imp, a negative sidekick of Santa, as per his popularized image in nineteenth-century Central European media, and boys were more likely than girls to depict him. By contrast, girls eagerly drew angels. A lonely Christmas tree, plain without gifts and few decorations, is a sight not readily associated with the holiday. Many children decided to draw Christmas trees. Only rarely did they put a candle or ornaments on the tree. There was one proviso: Christmas trees were always decorated by either the parents or older siblings. When I asked if they ever helped or wanted to help decorate the tree, they were immediately defensive: parents should decorate Christmas trees in secret without children knowing anything about it. One older boy even admitted that they never bought Christmas trees but used the nearby forest to retrieve one for themselves, a constant source of tension between the farmer and the Roma families. One boy of 10 even drew a large box on a single piece of paper. Surprised, I inquired about its meaning, and he answered simply that it is a box full of Christmas gifts he will receive from his parents. However, wrapped boxes illustrating gifts and the process of gift-giving were very few, and when I asked, most Roma children did share their wishes about the gifts they wanted under the Christmas tree. To my surprise, the difference between their expectations and the visual narratives was quite revealing as they knew from previous experiences that their parents would not be able to fulfill their wishes. Most of the Roma children

talked about receiving plenty of gifts only as an ideal situation but not as a reality, as their few drawings of holiday objects revealed.

A rather curious aspect of Roma Christmas drawings was the lack of self-representation as well as that of other people, parents, relatives, or friends. Sequential narrative images were missing as well, except for one important note: in their minds, stories connected to the images were not without people. A twelve-year-old boy commented: *“We will have a tree with many lights on it and it is lit day and night. We do nothing else with it, though. I drew the tree alone. We are not part of the tree.”* When I argued further with him and tried to convince him that the holiday is nothing without the people who make it a holiday, he replied: *“The Christmas tree makes Christmas. By the way, this is my Christmas, not yours.”* After the second or third class, I was able to meet the boy’s mother and showed her some of the drawings her son had made. Her smile revealed she was happy with all of them. I asked her about the lonely Christmas tree and hinted at the family unit during the holiday season. She confessed that she lives in her unmarried brother’s household and that her husband had left her a few years earlier. She is the head of the household, raising her two children alone. Single-parent or non-conforming families among the Roma are the rule, not the exception, a structural constraint that exacerbates Roma pupils’ disadvantages and segregation in learning and school performance (Rostas, Kostka, 2014).

Images, meanings, and explanations

I would also emphasize the discursive qualities and manifold meanings attached to drawings in subsequent discussions with children as I asked them to evaluate each other’s artwork. Apart from criticizing each other’s drawings – *“It’s a bad Santa”*, or *“Angels don’t look like that”* were some of the printable comments – it became quite clear that they easily offered offensive and blunt criticism. Viewing each other’s work gave them a free pass to make judgmental statements such as *“Oh, you don’t know how to draw”*, and *“Why don’t you go to school to learn how to draw”*. Responses were equally dismissive: *“Don’t worry about my skill, look at your Christmas tree, it’s really awful”*, or *“Your devil/Krampus looks like your father.”*

Some children drew figures of different sizes that made me wonder whether this was attributable to their being children, their minority status, or other factors. To illustrate this point, I adduce segments from my conversations with the children, starting with a girl of twelve, which speaks about her feelings about drawing an angel:

Q: *Why did you draw the Angel?*

A: *Because she brings presents.*

Q: *Is she a man or a woman?*

A: *Of course, she is a woman, what else? She has long hair.*

Q: *You drew her with long blond hair, why?*

A: *Angels are beautiful, they have gold.*

Q: *Gold? Could she have nice long dark hair, like yours?*

A: *Impossible, angels are blond.*

Q: *And so small?*

A: *They're tiny, you can't see them, and big angels can't fly.*

Depiction of blond angels is an obvious stereotyped Christian image deeply ingrained in a Euro-American mentality, although it might also suggest hidden or “invisible” racism (Powell, van Baar, 2019: 94), but also internalized racism and self-denigration and the impossibility of living up to a majority aesthetics and body image. Throughout my conversations with the children, their ethnonym – Roma – was never voiced, and none of them ever uttered the phrase “*I'm a Roma*” (*cigány* in Hungarian parlance): that identity seemed obvious to them albeit muted. Another similar Western pattern, that of Santa's reindeer, baffled Roma children as was the case with an eleven-year-old boy, whose grandfather was a well-known and respected musician in the town. The merging of Santa and the reindeer with Christmas was out of the question as our conversation reveals:

Q: *I suggested you could draw a scene showing how Santa brings gifts to children; you know like in the movies?*

A: *They're so stupid.*

Q: *Don't you think that it's a nice scene, with a sled, and reindeer?*

A: *Movies, I said. Because angels are powerful, they do magic, they bring gifts, (they) don't need anything, no sled, no reindeer.*

Another girl of the same age drew a very small animal, a single reindeer, a visual depiction I thought quite impetuous at first that made me ask her:

Q: *Your animal is very small. Why?*

A: *It's not so small, it's just right.*

Q: *But reindeer grow big.*

A: *Yes, but smaller animals are easier to feed, they don't eat so much.*

An older boy even considered the depiction of reindeer a silly idea arguing with an example: as a special treat, two years earlier a horse-drawn buggy brought Santa Claus to his school!

Religious thinking and superstition are detectable in the images children drew. A boy of nine decided to depict only objects, symbols associated with the holiday season,

a shepherd’s crook, a crown, and crosses. A quintessential part of Western Christmas mythology, that of the reindeer, presented a dilemma to Roma children. Clearly, commercialized Western images have not, or not yet, impacted them considerably, and in some cases not at all. Also, angels seem to be still very much within their grasp as supernatural beings who can say and do anything. These and previous extracts illustrate a real divide about how children visualize and rationalize, as opposed to the limited interpretations of an adult instructor. I had never considered that the size of an angel – an imaginary figure readily open to various perceptions – would and could really be a concern. Nativity scenes across Catholic Hungary reproduce angels as the same size as humans – renaissance or baroque little angels (putti) are smaller and childlike and represent a different school of artistic imagination; but clearly, mine was a standard Eurocentric adult rationalization that did not fit with the visualization of this Roma girl. The nativity scene and Christmas carols, two popular aspects of the holiday in Hungary, were simply not present in the minds of Roma children. As I happened to notice during Christmas nativity festivals, none of the families who gathered around the manger scene in the central part of the town were from the Roma community. As Scheffel and Mušinka have shown (2019: 19) with regard to the situation of Slovak majority and minority relations, Roma families are often weary of, and even voluntarily distance themselves from “integrating strategies” devised by *gadjos* (non-Roma), whether school ceremonies, political remembrances, or even popular entertainments. Moreover, racism, poverty, and the existence of a different magic-religious worldview present considerable obstacles that impede their participation in mainstream popular culture. This attitude became evident in our project as Roma children seemed rather lackadaisical about Roman Catholic middle-class cultural elements and ideals. The latter dialogue was even more faithful to children’s imagination. Since, in cartoons or children’s movies, reindeer are depicted as being of normal size, I was expecting that, in the children’s drawings, proportionality would matter somewhat. Yet the girl’s argument presented a curious but rational reasoning as her knowledge of their neighbor’s draught horse and a foal provided a realistic, albeit not straightforward answer: that it is better if reindeer are small because they need less food. What is even more astonishing is the fact that only a few Roma families in the community possessed horses, but in local folklore and imagination, owning a horse has been preserved as a precious symbolic resource.

To picture Santa Claus, David (the only fourteen-year-old who remained in the project until the very end) drew a friendly and loveable head of Santa with the explanation that “*The head is important*”, and continued smilingly, “*he looks very much like my grandfather, he has a beard and always smiles.*” The smiling mouth for him was obviously the most important characteristic that he associated both with his grandfather and with Santa Claus. I met with the boy’s mother who came at the end of the class to take David home and showed his artwork to her. She acknowledged it only

with a small nod, but when I said that she could take the drawing home she rejected my offer without an explanation. I asked her about the boy's grandfather and, to my surprise, she answered that the man had passed away two years earlier. This revelation suggested the contemporaneity of the boy's drawing: the memory of the recently deceased grandfather – actually, his smiling face and beard – in the boy's mind had become associated with the image of Santa Claus.

Another Santa image recalled different associations in the young artist's mind. Here is an excerpt of a conversation with a nine-year-old Eva whose Santa Claus looked, to me, rather frightful:

Q: *Do you know what Santa Claus looks like?*

A: *I forgot.*

Q: *Well, did you see him last week visiting your school?*

A: *Yes, but he did not look like a real Santa Claus. Santa has a long red and gold coat and doesn't smell.*

Q: *Smell?*

A: *School Santa smelled bad.*

Obviously, an unpleasant olfactory sensation created an inimical image in her, resulting in a rather frightening-looking Santa Claus that she had re-considered. When I suggested to her that she could draw a Santa without a smell, she declined, *"It's my Santa, I can draw him any which way I please."* This stress on smell is an important interethnic marker as olfactory discrimination against Roma is pervasive among Hungarians. Most Hungarians hold an ethnocentric view that Roma can be recognized because of their distinct body odor. As the conversation with the other girl reveals, Roma have their own cultural association with odor.

Another curiosity about depicting Santa has to do with his gift-giving. A ten-year-old child drew Santa Claus with two enormous bags on his back. The child answered my question: *"Santa needs two bags because he has to bring so many gifts for us."* An obvious wish fulfillment? Perhaps. For Edina, another ten-year-old, this was not an important issue. She related her Santa picture to me: *"Santa is quite fat and old. He should watch his weight."* Only a 13-year-old girl drew a Santa that more closely approximates the mediatized happy image of Santa, depicting a smiling figure holding a large bag in his left hand and a bell in his right hand, and dressed entirely in red. Her classmate, Vivienne, drew Santa differently with a large conical hat, rather like the wizard Minerva McGonagall in the Harry Potter series or the Wicked Witch of animated children's films. An 11-year-old boy's Santa had enormous feet and outstretched arms with the moon and stars visible above his head. I was rather curious and asked him about this: his answer was quite unexpected: *"Santa is not a real person, he comes from the sky, from heaven."* Another image of Santa, drawn by the eight-year-old Dalma, was

quite unlike any other. Her Santa was pink with a pointed cap, and a long transparent beard, looking surprised. This image prompted me to ask her:

Q: Your Santa is surprised!

A: No, he is just happy. Can't you see? He is smiling. He is happy because Christmas break is here soon.

Happiness seemed to be a dominant trope the girl wanted to depict, not only in Santa's face but even with some angels exuding this feeling, mostly depicted with open mouths.

Conclusion

Are there unique aspects in the ways in which Roma children visualize Christmas? As an anthropologist, I would argue that the foregoing introduction to Roma children's art yields a resoundingly affirmative response: Roma minority children read such phenomena in light of their own ghettoized/marginalized experience and imagery, interpreting Christmas as their own holiday through a unique prism of Roma cultural identity. The cultural influences on children and their perceptions of what they know and remember cannot be overemphasized in this regard (Feuer, 2002: 7; Jolly, 2010: 247–259). These conclusions corroborate John Berger's argument that “a drawing is an autobiographical record of one's discovery of an event – seen, remembered or imagined” (2005: 3).

In using a visual anthropological methodology in this project, I am well aware that drawing is not a “magic tool”, as Sondergaard and Reventlow put it (2019: 9) in their analysis of disadvantaged Danish school children's artwork. Nor does it readily offer new information about their prejudiced, hidden, and disadvantaged lives, aspects of visual narratives that I have also experienced with regard to messages embedded in vintage postcards (Kürti, 2004). Yet, it would be misleading to dismiss the visual exercise of Roma children as simple, one-sided, or even bland at first sight, especially compared to globally essentialized media-hyped and commercialized holiday images. Nonetheless, it is clear from the above images that such visualization is not without value or individuality. As I have noted, an internationalized Christmas holiday is domesticated or rendered familiar to them, as demonstrated by their unexpected explanations and rationalizations. Roma children attach minimal prestige and importance to receiving gifts, and instead rely on their own world of memory and mysticism generated by the spirit of holiday mythology. Despite the overwhelming influence and pressure of official state education, spiritual aspects of Christmas, a mainstay of Roman Catholic dogma and biblical narratives, seemed only superficially present for many children. They attached less importance to other aspects of popular American and West European

Christmas mythology, such as Santa’s reindeer, and their ample verbal narratives attest to that. For as Tracy Smith has suggested earlier, Roma children’s verbal skills far outweigh their reading-writing competency (1997: 247–248). These ideas together should compel anthropologists of education and visual anthropologists to work more closely together, instead of isolating children’s activities into educational and visual aspects. Namely, there are plenty of benefits from both perspectives, not least of which is the possibility of gaining more useful information, as well as developing more enjoyable meaning-making activities, between adults and children (Spray, 2021).

Perhaps children’s drawings introduced here do not tell us what their subjects may know, what is hidden in their thoughts, or what outside “interventionist” educators or intellectuals would like to hear. It is possible that what children communicate to the observer is something more mundane: that they enjoyed themselves visualizing Christmas, spent a few hours with their peers in an environment outside the rigid school system, and were able to offer their own immediate visions of what the holiday is about. These visual images confirm what others have proposed: that children can and do feel enthusiastic and empowered about their cultural products (Terton et al., 2020). Moreover, by listening to their narratives of their own drawings, we may be better situated to disrupt conventional stereotyping and negative self-representation of Roma communities (Imre, 2003; Kroon et al., 2016; Kürti, 2011). Finally, the images these children created convey the sense that, for a special moment, the holiday and the Santa they represented were indeed theirs, not mine.

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»To ni vaš Božiček«: romski otroci vizualizirajo božič

Etnografsko raziskovanje otrok »po pouku« je potekalo na način »antropologije doma« in je obravnavalo romske otroke v srednje velikem podeželskem mestu z 11.000 prebivalci, od katerih je približno 10 % Romov. Ker so državne šole prostori večinskega prebivalstva, zanje pa psihologi in kritični pedagogi menijo, da so za manjšinske romske otroke omejujoči in frustrirajoči dejavnik, smo v raziskavi oblikovali fakultativni krožek risanja, da bi otroke oddaljili od institucionalnega šolskega konteksta in jim zagotovili pravi občutek avtonomije in lastne tvornosti. V nasprotju s predhodnimi študijami, v katerih je bilo otrokom dovoljeno improvizirati po mili volji, so v tem projektu otroci ustvarjali na izbrano temo – božič. Želeli smo, da se s svinčniki in barvicami svobodno izražajo s podobami in pojmi, ki jim pridejo na misel ob božiču. Otroci so seveda uporabljali elemente iz sveta odraslih, ki jih poznajo njihovi starši in sorodniki, ter jih povezovali s svojimi fantazijami. Toda bila so tudi presenečenja. Večina otrok se je namreč vzdržala uporabe več barv, kar je vzorec, ki bi ga opazili pri odraslih romskih umetnikih, posebej slikarjih. Tudi drugi elementi, povezani z božičnimi prazniki, ki jih širijo množični mediji, so bili večinoma odsotni, se je pa v otroških podobah pojavilo vraževerje. Z opazovanjem likovnega ustvarjanja obravnavanih osnovnošolcev smo želeli razumeti, kako v njihovih likovnih kompetencah odsevajo njihove predstave in razumevanje različnih likov in elementov božiča. Naša prvotna ideja je bila, da otroci ne bodo imeli težav pri upodabljanju božiča in njegovih glavnih junakov – Božička, Rudolfa, Kristusa, parklja, angela, božičnega drevesa in jaslíc, saj gre za najbolj skomercializiran in mednarodno medijsko razširjen praznik v letu. Rezultati te zunajšolske etnografske domače vaje pa so pokazali drugačne rezultate, saj so razkrili, da nekateri otroci slabo poznajo podobo parklja, nekatere je zmedlo upodabljanje severnih jelenov, medtem ko so drugi poudarjali svoje družinske zgodbe in se pri opisovanju svojih spominov ali želja opirali na romsko religioznost. Otroci romske manjšine razumejo božič v luči lastnih getoiziranih/marginaliziranih izkušenj in podob ter si ga razlagajo kot svoj praznik skozi enkratno prizmo romske identitete.