



Houses under Construction

Conspicuous Consumption and the Values of Youth among Romanian Cortorari Gypsies

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Over the last ten years, I have had the chance to watch the shifts in both the architecture and the interior decorations and furnishings of a particular house. In 2003, Luca owned the highest and most spectacular brick house in the Cortorari neighbourhood. It had the advantage of being located at the top of the steep track that leads up to the Gypsy settlement. Anyone taking that track would marvel at the unusually glittery metal turrets and large ionic columns of the front porches of Luca's house. Luca and his large family (his wife, his unmarried daughter, Luca's married son and his family) lived in an adobe hut adjacent to an imposing mansion. I can only imagine the kind of life they had, sharing a few square metres for all their eating and sleeping needs. Luca has never invited me inside his shabby hut. However, he seized every opportunity to give me a guided tour of the mansion, which had been under construction for a while. He would show me every room while reiterating names of the various construction materials used, the quantities used and their costs. The pleasure he took in recounting the sums of money he had spent on the building and the sincere admiration he showed for the materiality of the concrete that made the mansion grow left me speechless every time. Luca was presenting himself as 'the biggest *rom* [Cortorari man]', and his self-appreciation appeared to me incongruous when seen against the conditions under which he lived his day-to-day life.

To my surprise, at a time when the mansion seemed to be close to completion, I saw Luca having it knocked down. His neighbours' conjecture was that other houses in the neighbourhood had already surpassed Luca's in height, its turrets no longer visible to someone climbing the track up to the settlement. However, Luca explained to me that he wanted to change the design and construction materials in accordance with the new trends

he had seen during his travels. In 2008, Luca had his house rebuilt, this time taller and larger. Cortorari houses follow the ‘train-car’ style seen throughout the region, with a front room facing the street and the rest of the built space stretching out behind it. Luca’s mansion now filled not only the whole plot attached to the hut – initially allotted to a stable and a vegetable garden – but also part of the ditch that stretched between the row of houses and the road that crosses the neighbourhood. In the economy of the village, the ditch is assigned a precise infrastructural role: it collects rainwater, thus preventing the flooding of houses. When Luca’s son, Emil, bought the first and, to my knowledge, still the only Mitsubishi car in the settlement (a much sought-after make of car), he realised that there was no space available to park it either in their courtyard or in front of their house. The mansion took up all the space. Therefore, Emil had to ask a neighbour for permission to park the car in his courtyard.

Because of diabetes, Luca had one leg amputated. From his wheelchair parked in the shade of his manor-like house, he would shout orders at the painters decorating the interior of the house or to the workers unloading construction materials in front of it. Ongoing building work requires money, and I was interested to learn about the deals that kept the money flowing into Luca’s pockets. He boasted about having managed to get welfare payments from the Italian state on account of his health problems and about his success in begging abroad, which he attributed to his physical disability. However, his neighbours explained that Luca’s son, Emil, had taken over the business of making money and, together with it, the stewardship of the building work. In 2010, Emil embarked on the enterprise of building a clone of his father’s mansion – a ‘twin house’, in his words.

His whim to build a replica of his father’s house makes Emil an exceptional character among Cortorari. Normally, the extended family is accommodated in a single house. Yet the fanciful ‘twin-house’ design is not unheard of in Romania. Journals, web sites, tourist blogs and architectural design web pages, as well as anonymous YouTube posts abound with photos and videos of twin mansions owned by rich Romanian Gypsies. Emil and other Cortorari surf the web in search of the latest trends in housing styles. Wherever they go in Romania or abroad, they keep their eyes peeled for novel structures, colours and styles of house decoration. They all want to emulate the most magnificent buildings they encounter. Although, to my knowledge, Emil’s project of building a ‘twin house’ is still unique in the Cortorari settlement, the ongoing nature of building work, which I described for Luca’s house, is a general state of affairs here. I have been visiting the Cortorari neighbourhood for a dozen

years now, and during this time it has expanded both in width and in length. New houses for young couples are still being built, crammed into the narrow space between two existing houses. People have even started building their houses on land located on the outskirts of the settlement, which only a few years ago looked like barren fields. Buildings have mushroomed, taking over all of the empty plots that in the past served as borders between the Cortorari neighbourhood and the nearest village. In fact, the new Cortorari houses are built beyond the official boundary of the village. Nobody has bothered to move the village's name plate to reflect the neighbourhood's expansion. Prosperity might be the word that best describes Cortorari acts of extravagant consumption, which are visible both in men's prominent bellies and in ongoing projects of house construction.

I have never ceased to be struck by the contradiction between ubiquitous affluence and the incompleteness of houses, a contradiction that forms the core concern of this chapter. In the early 2000s, I concluded that the unfinished character of these houses was due to their owners' (limited) economic means at a time when Romania's transition to a market economy was breeding uncertainty. Yet the principle, according to which the completion of a house depends solely upon possession and wise management of financial resources, cannot account for Luca's action of tearing down what appeared to me to be an almost finished mansion. To add to my consternation, the wealthier that Cortorari became, the more prevalent was the incompleteness of their houses.

The building of imposing brick houses is closely linked to the new economic possibilities brought about by transnational mobility, a daring journey that Cortorari have been undertaking for almost two decades now. The intersecting paths of transnational migration and building houses in migrants' homelands are acknowledged worldwide. Few ethnographies, however, have emphasised the 'perpetually ongoing projects' (Dalakoglou 2010: 763) of migrant house construction. Houses in Albania stand as proxies for absent migrants in processes of creating transnational relatedness (ibid.: 761–66). In Peru, the open and changing nature of houses is interpreted as a reflection of 'their owners' constant and pressing desire for betterment' (Leinaweaver 2009: 785) coupled with 'the local political economy of insecurity' (Lobo 1982: 39, cited in Leinaweaver 2009: 785). In both of these cases, houses are active agents in the production of relatedness (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995) in contexts in which people involved in labour migration are largely absent from their homelands. In contradistinction to Peruvian and Albanian migrants, who sponsor building work by sending remittances back home, Cortorari do not settle in the

countries to which they migrate. Rather, they incessantly and irregularly go back and forth, making money and investing it in houses permanently under construction. How are we then to understand the interrelatedness of people and houses, and what are the ways in which ongoing building work is linked to the production and reproduction of social relationships among Cortorari?

This chapter discusses the meanings and representations of consumption behaviour among Cortorari in postsocialist Romania in light of local conceptions of reproduction and relatedness. Transformations of the state after the collapse of communism, especially the liberalisation of borders brought about by the process of joining the European Union, forged new economic practices among Cortorari, who turned to Western Europe as an *El Dorado* of available resources. This was the case with other Gypsies from Central and Eastern Europe, some of whom, such as former Yugoslavians (see Piasere 1987), reached the West before the fall of the Iron Curtain. Unlike the chapters of Grill and Solimene (this volume), which provide detailed descriptions of the economic strategies of Gypsies in migration contexts, I focus here on forms of investment in the home country. Why Cortorari have chosen the house as the ultimate vehicle of their consumption behaviour and why they are so reluctant to finish their houses will become apparent through consideration of both the internal dynamics of relatedness and the Cortorari representation of their positioning vis-à-vis neighbouring Romanian peasants.

I begin by sketching out the social history of Cortorari, focusing on their transition from tents to houses and the accompanying shift in economic practices that this entailed, which intertwines with changes in their perceived position within the broader village context. Then I move on and discuss the idiom of visibility – as manifested in, among other things, houses – in which Cortorari couch their desire and readiness to incorporate broader socio-economic changes. The visibility of houses is opposed to the invisibility of certain material items that Cortorari inherited from their ancestors, namely, chalices. Possession of these objects is constitutive of conceptions of personhood and relatedness as they are articulated in the realm of long-term reproduction, which assumes both a future and presentist orientation of developmental cycles in the domestic group (Goody 1971). The flow of chalices in marriage and inheritance transactions alludes to the rebirth of kinship and makes room for the mundane consumption behaviour objectified in spectacular houses. Cortorari consider their houses to be a sign of their civility, all the more so as houses have traditionally been a central idiom of peasant sociality. I conclude the chapter by arguing that the ongoing construction of houses

is intimately related to the presentist and future orientation of Cortorari life-cycles.

Cortorari Livelihoods: Past and Present

There are just a few villages in Transylvania, central Romania, where you can find Cortorari and their homes. Over the last twenty years, Cortorari and their families have been living scattered all over Central and Western Europe. Even though many spend as much if not more time abroad than in Romania, Cortorari do not make efforts to build homes for themselves in the countries they migrate to. Instead, they sleep in the open, in parks and underneath bridges. The idea of renting or buying a temporary dwelling place abroad has hardly ever crossed a Cortorari's mind. Cortorari consider their home (*kher-al*) to be where their houses (*kher-a*) are. The Cortorari term *kher-al* defines the place in which their domestic affections are centred as it translates both as 'home country' and as 'one's home' (that is, the physical construction of one's house and the affects embedded in the kin relations that the house accommodates). Houses, as physical, social and symbolic forms, are placed at the core of the phenomenon of mobility.

No longer than half a century ago, Cortorari resided exclusively in tents. The name Cortorari derives from the Romanian *cort* (tent), and *cortorari* literally means 'tent-dwellers'. Cortorari do not have a word in their language equivalent to the Romanian Cortorari. Like other Romani-speaking populations – such as the Gabor studied by Olivera (2012) – they speak of themselves as belonging to a kind of people whom they refer to as *ame Roma* ('we, the Roma'), and from which non-Cortorari Roma and *Gaže* alike are excluded. Cortorari possess some of the attributes that the *Gaže* assign to 'exotic' Gypsies – the mythical and historical image of the Gypsy, as it were – such as the wearing of colourful skirts by women and the skilful working with copper by men. Well aware of the romantic stereotyping of unsettled Gypsies, Cortorari take delight in recalling their former nomadic life, which would singularise them as more 'real' and 'authentic' than other Gypsies. In contradistinction with the discourse of elders, which portrays life in tents as healthier and happier than their current life in houses, Cortorari have been more than successful in appropriating the house and making of it a matter of cultural elaboration.¹

For Cortorari, the process of sedentarisation started in the 1950s, when the communists came to power in Romania. In an attempt to improve the welfare of Gypsies, the new regime forced them to buy houses and to take

care of their personal hygiene. Old people remember how men had their hair and beards trimmed and how children were dragged to schools. At that time, some Cortorari had just returned from the deportation camps in Transnistria where they had been taken during the Second World War. Cortorari embraced forced sedentarisation both because, as some survivors confessed, it gave them the chance to 'be more like the rest of the world', and because it could prevent potential further incarceration in concentration camps. During the communist period, Cortorari engaged in various livelihood activities strictly divided by gender. Men traded in horses and were involved in the manufacture of copper utensils needed in peasant households, such as stills. Women, meanwhile, ran the house and went from door to door offering services such as palmistry and card reading to peasant women. Additionally, they engaged in the hard work of pig husbandry, for which they scavenged the neighbouring towns and carried home loads of discarded foodstuff on their backs.

If we give credence to elders' stories, Romanian peasants and Cortorari have generally lived in harmony. Old Cortorari used to put up their tents on the outskirts of the villages where they were later forcibly sedentarised. This also happened in Băleni, the village where I carried out fieldwork between 2008 and 2010. Romanians' narratives described their relationship with Cortorari in the distant and more recent past in tones infused with amity and benevolence. These feelings were bred by the acknowledged difference in the economic and social standing of the two populations. At the time when Cortorari led a nomadic life, Romanians were better off, respectable householders (*gospodar*) who looked down on Cortorari with pity. The latter were unkempt and ragged; without estates of their own, they 'only owned the sky above their heads', as people say in an attempt to convey the idea of a life that juggles freedom with risk, contingency and chance. Nowadays, such a clear-cut hierarchy is disputable, given that Cortorari have proven shockingly economically successful of late. Their economic betterment is most visible in their housing. Although Romanians concede that Cortorari would never be able to master the skills and care a household requires, they are nonetheless jealous of the latter's affluence.

Cortorari gain the bulk of their money from informal economic activities, especially begging (*manglimos*), carried out in Western European countries. Elsewhere, I have shown that Cortorari conceive of begging as work (*munca*), which allows for the accumulation of wealth, in contrast to manual labour (*kerel buti*), such as coppersmithing by males and pig husbandry by females, which is carried out within the confines of the household and whose yields are redistributed among relatives (see Tesăr 2011).

Besides the different management of expenditure when begging abroad and performing manual labour at home respectively, the gender configuration of labour is particularly noteworthy. While at home, economic activities are clearly divided by gender, but abroad, begging is practised by both males and females. The playing down of the importance of gender together with the underscoring of the idiom of age in begging activities is of paramount importance to understanding the meaning attached to ongoing building work on Cortorari houses, as will become clear below.

A Politics of Visibility

The way they dress and the way they build their houses makes Cortorari strikingly visible in the landscape they inhabit. The Transylvanian built environment is, for the most part, a homogeneous grey. Here, people wear dark outfits even during the hottest days of summer. They make their presence unobtrusive by spending the time working in far-removed fields or behind the high fences of their households. Against this background, Cortorari people appear as a splash of colour. Women with long, bright red skirts and men with pinkish shirts and black lofty hats fill the streets from sunrise till late at night. They are everywhere – coming and going at the bus station and in front of the doctor’s surgery, getting off trains, crowding the shops, selling trinkets and copper artefacts along the highway, or queuing in front of the village hall or post office – and they wave at everybody, even anonymous drivers who happen to drive by. They always have something to sell or some news to communicate very loudly.

In Băleni, Cortorari houses, erected in the eastern part of the village, quite a few along the highway, dominate the whole village and are surpassed in grandeur only by a medieval fortified church. Made from durable brick, their glittering turrets point towards the sky. I suggest that Cortorari endeavours to make themselves visible is a political statement about their participation in the broader world by sharing the resources and knowledge on which the very reproduction of their society depends. Political philosophy regards attempts to make oneself visible as efforts to be recognised within an intersubjective field of action, whereby processes of inclusion and exclusion of the ‘other’ underscore the politics of identity and/or inequality (Dixon and Peachey 2012: 1). This leads me to argue that the Cortorari quest for recognition equates with their partaking in history and social change.

I return to Luca to substantiate my claim. Luca's house is located on the main road along which Cortorari houses are clustered. With the exception of its turrets, the Cortorari neighbourhood is not visible either from the village centre or from the highway that goes through it. Luca's nephew, Banu, lives in a house bordering the highway. He is quite a regular presence in Luca's house, his visits being either disguised as a request to borrow a tool or simply overtly performed for no other reason than chatting or even partaking in a general silence. On a hot summer's day, Banu, Luca, Luca's wife and I were sitting under a tree at the side of the ditch in front of Luca's house. We were all eating sunflower seeds, spitting out the shells, deep in our own thoughts. Banu broke the silence by addressing Luca:

Hey, uncle (kako), I don't know how you don't get bored. I couldn't live in your house. You cannot see anybody if you sit here on the side of the ditch, outside your house. Me, I spend my days sitting or standing on the side of the highway. You can't even imagine how many cars pass by. I wave at them and they [i.e. the drivers] wave back. Some people stop and chat to me ... And that's how I learn what's new in the world.

Banu was not inferring that Luca sees nobody. On the contrary, Luca has a good view over the whole Cortorari neighbourhood, and he can keep an eye on most of the Cortorari who walk up and down the road. What Banu was inferring is that Luca does not see and subsequently is not seen by the broader world, by the non-Cortorari with whom, by way of consequence, he does not communicate. In contrast, Banu, who trades in copper artefacts on the side of the highway, engages not merely in economic exchanges with his customers but also in exchanges of information. One thing that kept surprising me was the knowledge of global political and economic issues that Cortorari hold. The conversion rate of the euro, new state regulations regarding the flow of immigration, discrimination policies against Roma in Italy and France, changes in welfare policies both at the national and European level – all this news Cortorari learnt before I did. It took me a while to understand how it was that Cortorari – illiterate people who do not read newspapers and most of the time misunderstand the elitist language of media newscasts – nonetheless held extensive knowledge of contemporary economic and political circumstances. I propose that for the Cortorari, visibility and the desire to be visible to the outside world, as manifested in either the size of their houses or their colourful outfits, equate with participation in broader socio-economic changes.

Invisible Chalice and Cortorari Reproduction

Cortorari consider themselves descendants of a common group of ancestors, and they intermarry. Marriages are central rituals that reflect the organisation of gender differences, the allocation of property and the mastery of political relations. Cortorari consider their wealth (*averea*) to reside in the possession of a limited number of material items, namely chalices (*taxtaja*), which have been passed down from their ancestors and have a pre-eminent role in practices of filiation and marriage.² Chalices are made of gilded silver and were manufactured by craft guilds from Transylvania in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Chalices are the dominant metaphor of value and a point of reference in Cortorari understandings of relatedness and personhood.

Cortorari have a strong androcentric ideology: women are attributed less symbolic value than men and are excluded from the inheritance of ceremonial wealth. Maleness and femaleness are achieved through procreation within wedlock. Marriages are processual; they are repeatedly concluded and broken off. Their endurance is contingent on the production of children, that endurance being normally guaranteed by the birth of a male offspring to a new couple. This is so because male offspring are seen as the essence of the reproduction of a family. The transmission of a chalice from a father to his son is secured only when a man has male offspring. Under such conditions, the nurturing of children necessarily involves a long-term future-oriented dimension. Parents pool their energy and efforts in order to deliver to the world culturally competent actors: daughters (*šėja*) and sons (*šave*) who are bodily capable of becoming *romni*, a married Cortorari mother, and *rom*, a married Cortorari father (see Tesăr 2012: 130–31). The successful realisation of parenthood coincides with the transition from being parents to being grandparents. Because the latter control the flow of chalices, they assume the role of arranging the marriages of their grandsons. The old people (*al phure*) are thus symbolically associated with chalices.

Although these material objects circulate vertically as heirlooms, in marriage transactions, rights (*dreptul*) in the objects are surrendered to wife-givers in exchange for cash dowries (*zestrea*).³ The chalice does not change hands at any time. As a matter of fact, in spite of the rhetoric of flow and movement in which Cortorari couch the social life of chalices, these material items have a static nature: they are permanently kept tucked away in the houses and granaries of non-Roma Romanian peasants. It is nonetheless the multifarious social entitlements in a chal-

ice which are circulated among people and which connect a person to numerous others. When I explicitly asked Cortorari what a chalice was good for, they said that it ‘brings a daughter-in-law’ and ‘binds co-parents-in-law’. The youngest son is normally the heir of a family’s chalice. As heir, the youngest son attracts a cash dowry whose value is calculated proportionally to the value attached to his chalice at his marriage. He is expected to give money to his brothers as compensation for their shares (partea) in the inherited chalice; this money usually comes from the marriage payment that he receives from his wife-givers. In exchange for the cash dowry, wife-givers gain entitlements to arrange further (cousin) marriages between female descendants on the bride’s side and male descendants on the heir’s side in the future. Meanwhile, the heir’s brothers use their cash share of the dowry received by the heir to build houses for their new families.⁴ With the influx of capital coming from transnational migration, the value of the cash dowry has increased and houses have become larger. People say that it is advisable to conclude alliances in order to keep inherited wealth (chalices) in the family; in other words, the male descendants of heirs should marry female descendants of non-inheriting brothers, alliances that are normally accompanied by the writing off of the marriage payment. Yet the heir is happy to receive a large dowry from outsiders (that is, families who do not possess a chalice). By the same token, non-inheriting brothers prove eager to receive larger compensation shares with which to build bigger houses.

Despite marriages with outsiders being morally condemned, they nonetheless occur frequently, giving everybody an incentive to multiply economic gains. Those without a chalice need large sums of money to pay the dowries needed to marry off their daughters. An heir’s brothers endeavour to procure resources for building their own houses, which otherwise would be financed from the compensation received from shares in a chalice. In so doing, they secure themselves the chance to marry their daughters to the sons of their brother, the heir to the chalice, thus concluding alliances that prevent their wealth being surrendered to strangers.

It becomes apparent that chalices – ‘sacred objects’ (Godelier 1996) that act as gifts and are withheld from being exchanged outside the local marriage market – are mobilised in consumption practices that are bound to the liberalisation of the flow of people and goods in present-day Romania. Cortorari prosperity – as objectified not only in houses, which form the core concern of this chapter, but also in lavish wedding ceremonies, or in the enormous quantities of meat and expensive bottles of alcohol that tower on tables laid at kinship gatherings – is intimately

related to the circulation of chalices. Transactions which are being concluded around these cherished material items work as a catalyst for the flow of money embedded in dowries, compensation shares and houses. Moreover, the supreme motivation behind the movement of money goes beyond an individual human life and touches upon the reproduction of generational cycles, a long-term realm dominated by the chalice. The successful replacement of a generation by another and the flow of chalices – as entanglements of both heirlooms and marital endowments – are closely entwined. Cortorari say of chalices that ‘they are our life’; they thus attribute their own fertility and vitality to these objects.

Though chalices are pre-eminent in Cortorari talk and in their social reproduction, they are kept hidden (*garade*) in the custody of ethnic Romanian peasants. Like other groups of Gypsies, such as the Manus (Williams 1993) and the Sinti (Tauber 2006), who developed models of reproduction based on practices (such as the relationship with the dead) that are invisible to outsiders, Cortorari sociality is constructed and revolves around chalices, objects that remain invisible in everyday life. The chalices are vectors in creating extensive webs of relatedness: transactions in compensation shares, dowries, debts and promises to pay circulate intergenerationally, linking a person to numerous others.

I hold that chalices and the significance with which they are imbued have a central role not only in Cortorari social reproduction (that is, the replacement of people and things in time, and thus their endurance) but also in the incorporation of modernity into people’s life. In other words, the chalices are active agents both of the growth of kinship as an invisible realm and in the growth of people as a visible realm objectified in their magnificent houses. Cortorari assign a permanent quality to chalices and discursively oppose them to the transience of houses. Yet seemingly contrary to what they are saying, Cortorari endeavour constantly to build larger and more solid houses. It is to the meanings attached to houses in relation to both the majority society and internal sociality that I dedicate the remainder of this chapter.

‘We’ve Become Civilised’: From Tent to Palace

Cortorari consider their mansions the expressive form of their betterment, understood both as economic advancement and especially as enlightenment and social development. They are adamant in their stories that they exchanged the tent for the villa-type house and that, by so doing, they went from ‘savagery’ straight to ‘civilisation’. They

associate their tent life with backwardness and the current turn in their life's trajectories with upward mobility.

When I first set foot in the Cortorari neighbourhood in 2001, it looked like a huge building site, since the residents had just started working on new imposing houses next to their original shabby huts. The people themselves were caught up in the process of constructing new livelihoods and reshaping their lifestyles. One could smell the prosperity of the market economy in the dust rising from the unpaved road and from the brick masonry of the new houses. Back then, there were no fences to demarcate households. People wandered about from one house to another, handing out bowls of food to neighbours, which made it difficult for me to associate people with their dwellings. Some Cortorari did not wait for their new houses to be finished before moving in their personal belongings and the furniture in which they were trading without worrying about the missing doors or windows.⁵ Nobody bothered about taking the main track to reach the homes of their relatives when they could freely cut a new shortcut through someone's back garden. Gradually, as the number of newly built houses increased and the buildings themselves grew taller and taller, the more they resembled, in the ways they policed physical barriers and apertures, folk representations of private estates. In 2008, all the back gardens were closed off and the front yards fenced. People's movements were now shaped by the materiality of barriers coupled with the presence of fierce dogs in almost all households. Some of the houses looked like finished buildings dyed in bright greens, oranges, pinks or reds. However, piles of bricks were still lying on the sides of the unpaved road that crosses the neighbourhood. Lorries with construction business logos on them were continuously rolling by, stopping here and there to offload building materials such as tiles, lime or timber.

Not long ago, people were preoccupied exclusively with the size of their house the exterior walls of which were left unplastered – and paid little or no attention to aesthetics. Gradually, however, not only did Cortorari start painting the exterior their houses, but they also started decorating the interiors, with the style of decoration and materials used changing over time. The interiors of their houses shifted in style from what people termed *țărănește* ('peasant-like') to *rajkane* ('modern', lit. gentleman-like). Houses in the former style were richly adorned, with floral patterned walls on which colourful rugs were hung, with embroidered curtains, and hand-woven wool blankets covering the beds. Houses in the latter style are more austere, with walls in plain colours and no hanging rugs; the old thick blankets have been replaced with thin synthetic Turkish throws in lively colours, while the candelabra have been replaced by

spotlights. Cortorari speak of the changes in their domestic architecture and tastes in interior decor in terms of progress and evolution. To their mind, the new fences, the new interiors and the overall transformation of houses testify to the fact that Cortorari have become gentlemen-like (*rajsalen*). This expression is derived from the noun *raj*, which is attributed with different meanings depending on the context. A *raj* can equally be a Gypsy who leads a luxurious life, or a non-Gypsy who has an office job and a secure income; one who has overcome an alleged stage of backwardness (*înapoime*) and is highly civilised, but also any person who lives in prodigal extravagance, be it a king, a nobleman or a Cortorari.

This opposition, between *țărănește* and *raj Kane*, connotes a process of refinement or civilisation that Cortorari envisage as moving them nearer to the living standards of ethnic Romanian peasants. Cortorari believe that it is *raj Kane* to attend to the interior of one's house. Mastery of ownership and care of the house is a central moral value among Romanian peasants (Nicolescu 2011); it is thus the utmost *Gaže* characteristic. When they smoke indoors, Cortorari do not use ashtrays, objects that, to their minds, are specific to *raj-a* (gentlemen); instead, they simply discard their ash and butts on the floor, which the women are expected to clean continuously. One should not imagine that Cortorari do not have ashtrays in their homes. On the contrary, they display ashtrays in glass cases for non-Cortorari visitors to see. Likewise, Cortorari know that good manners stipulate the use of cutlery at mealtimes. They do keep cutlery in their homes, yet they usually make no use of it, given that 'only the good mannered/civilised eat with forks'. Among Cortorari, the moral evaluation of *rajsalen* is not at all clear and straightforward. There is no easy way out of the riddle. Some say with envy that those who excel in *rajsalen* (such as people who have built an indoor toilet) have 'brought shame' on themselves by disrespecting the Cortorari moral code.⁶ Yet the envious ones also dream of building an indoor toilet as soon as they can afford it. Regardless of the moral overtones it carries, the concept of *rajsalen* is thought of as a processual undertaking intimately linked to consumption behaviour.

Miller characterises consumption as empowering and ultimately egalitarian, an act that allows consumers 'to employ their resources for the self-construction of their individual and social identity' (Miller 1995: 38). In light of this argument, one can conclude that consumption is about the politics of identity. Yet consumption is also about the politics of inequality: when the lower strata and the disadvantaged, who have historically been denied access to the forms of consumption of the upper strata, grasp new economic possibilities, they cling to consumption as a

means of contesting, if not reversing, old hierarchies (Thomas 1998: 434; Osella and Osella 1999: 1004). By the same token, practices of consumption destabilise the distinction between centre and periphery (Howes 1996). From this perspective, the fact that Cortorari choose the mansion as the ultimate form of consumption should not appear surprising, given that the house(hold) has customarily been the paramount idiom of Romanian peasants' sociality, in which both social recognition and the objectification of success were couched. Moreover, within the configuration of the multi-ethnic village, the house has long been acknowledged by villagers as a marker of distinction between peasants and *Țigani* (Gypsies), instantiating long-standing social hierarchies. Cortorari engage in the process of *rajsalen* not merely as a quest for redefining Cortorariness, but also with thoughts of redefining their social position as perceived by the 'other'. Cortorari consumption behaviour complies with the model of conspicuous consumption developed by Veblen (1899): it articulates both status competition inside the notional community and emulation in relation to the outside.

Houses under Construction and Processual Marriages

Cortorari mansions are not only signs of upward mobility and of a project of *Gaže*-oriented civility; they are also family-oriented consumer goods, and the meanings attached to ongoing building work are revealed in the light of the replacement and reproduction of domestic groups. Consumption behaviour as expressed in housing assumes a long-term dimension, oriented towards present and future, which characterises Cortorari understandings of the person and relatedness. Cortorari all vie to pass on to their offspring the biggest, most beautiful and spectacular houses, and the motivations that underlay their economic behaviour are related to the prosperity and well-being of the forthcoming generation. In the present, houses objectify the economic success of the generation that is the most active in begging activities abroad. In this respect, consumption also assumes a presentist orientation.

Money derived from begging is invested in houses. As mentioned previously, begging abroad is performed by both men and women. Age and kinship status, as well as notions of personhood, are nonetheless major consideration in the social organisation of the work of begging, which is family centred. The extended family, which normally comprises three generations with their accretions, shares a house and constitutes the atom of Cortorari sociality: it should pursue common interests and

pool resources. It is the middle generation – parents of marriageable and newly-wed children – that is the most economically productive. Because begging takes place far from the security and comfort of the domestic unit, it is not suitable for unmarried persons. Women are expected not only to be virgins but also to be in good health at marriage. This ideal can only be attained through the close surveillance of girls, who are kept in the confines of the household before marriage. Boys of their age should also receive proper nurture at home (that is, prevented from getting engaged in excessive physical work while being fed on meat-based meals) in order to attain suitable maturation. Successful realisation of maleness and femaleness, which coincides with the transformation of children into parents, is contingent on the nurture the former receive from their own parents. Young couples should tend to their offspring and, only when the latter approach marriageable age, are they to start making begging expeditions abroad, leaving children in the care of their grandparents.

In the economy of the domestic unit, the old (*al phure*) exercise control over the flow of chalices with which they are associated. The middle generation – the youth (*al terne*) – are in charge of earning the money to invest in housing. They are thus symbolically associated with the aesthetics and the comfort of houses. Cortorari houses are recent phenomena, and some of them have not yet witnessed the death of one generation. Unlike European peasant houses, which are symbols of permanence and fixity associated with the *longue durée* of intergenerational inheritance (see Pine 1996), Cortorari houses are as transient and dynamic as their marriages, with which they are intimately connected.

In marriages, people are assigned to houses, and the latter, as containers of both people and objects, publicise the successful realisation and endurance of an alliance. When a bride comes to live in her spouse's parental house, the new couple is allocated a separate room that contains only the necessities of life. This room will be furnished and decorated with items of the trousseau tendered when the production of children occurs, thus securing the continuation of marriage. The domestication of the living place is an intricate process congruent with biological reproduction. The new couple has an uneasy and in-between status: seen as an accretion of the groom's parents and grandparents' household, it is nonetheless excluded from decision making inside the household and is economically dependent on the adults.⁷ The liminal condition of the new couple surfaces clearly in the position of the daughter-in-law (*bori*), who does not participate in the household's communal meals and is expected to complete all the domestic chores by herself. The *bori* puts all her la-

bour to the service of her parents-in-law and her economic activities are confined to the household. She usually helps her mother with pig husbandry yet she has no control over the gains derived from it. Her husband attends to his father's coppersmithing without laying any claims to the yields of his work. Only later in life, when their own son approaches a marriageable age and consequently a new daughter-in-law is expected to arrive in the household, will this couple gain autonomy in economic activities and control over their own money. They start engaging in begging and invest the gains in changing the design of the house and its interior decorations.

Despite the ongoing nature of house building, Cortorari hold that it is not advisable for one to bring a daughter-in-law into one's house unless the house is finished, or that it is bad (for wife-givers) to have the ritual that communicates the severance of a daughter from her parental family held in an unfurnished room. These sayings suggest that every house is expected to reach its completion stage, which is associated with the conclusion of an alliance. The ritual that publicises the severance of a daughter is held in the 'best room', which is the most public space in a house. It is the centre stage of life-cycle rituals (marriages and funerals). The room contains the most valuable objects, including the best bedding and carpets, and the glass cases where the packaging of consumer goods brought from abroad is displayed. Each generation of parents of marriageable daughters is expected to customise this room in accordance with the latest fashion in house interiors. Parents of male offspring are equally expected to provide the wherewithal for the latest in home improvements, which currently include parquet flooring, double-glazed windows and metal doors.

The accomplishment of a domestic cycle is thus publicised through the completion of a house. Marriages endure only through procreation, and sometimes they are broken for trivial reasons, such as a bride's failure to adjust to the demands of her parents-in-law or a small quarrel over the marriage payment. Until their youngest male offspring's marriage is secured – ideally by the birth of a son – parents are expected to work on their house continuously, making changes to it so that it reaches the 'completed' stage on the occasion of the youngest son's marriage which, itself, can be one in a series of marriages (and hence of completed houses). Given that generations follow one another at great speed (marriages occur in a person's early teens), and that marriages are concluded and broken off equally rapidly, it is not surprising that Cortorari houses are permanently under construction, despite the ideal of their being completed on the occasion of a marriage.

The fact that Luca's son, Emil, embarked on the troublesome enterprise of building a new house should be understood in light of the argument currently being advanced: located within developmental cycles of the domestic group and individuals' economic projects, consumption assumes a long-term dimension, oriented towards future and present. Let us conclude by discussing these two attitudes towards time enmeshed in consumption behaviour. Firstly, Emil had a son whose marriage was expected to be arranged in about two years' time, when Emil would have already 'completed' a house suitable for a daughter-in-law. The construction of the house is thus constituent of the process of the replacement of generations. Secondly, Emil's motivations for building a replica of the house built by his own father articulate the idea that houses objectify the work performed by the youth in the present. Owning two houses is a sign of this extended family's prosperity. Its visibility substantiates their access to pockets of knowledge about the flow of money both along state welfare chains and within intersubjective donor-beggar exchanges.

Cortorari have incorporated consumption practices into both local cultural reproduction and wider transnational mobility projects. Their economic affluence is intrinsically linked to notions of reproduction and relatedness: the visibility of their houses and the invisibility of their chalices are two sides of the same coin, that is of the creativity that permeates both the long-term realm of the replacement of domestic cycles and the presentist orientation of individuals' economic ventures. Over time, Cortorari have continued to be Cortorari in spite of changing state regimes, lifestyles and economic practices, and they have done so precisely by integrating wider social-economic transformations into their sociality. The transition from tent to house has not made Cortorari less Cortorari. On the contrary, the house, perceived as a sign of civility that brings Cortorari closer to their Romanian neighbours, is subject to internal cultural elaboration; its perpetual incompleteness, materialised as changes in aesthetic tastes and ideas of comfort, speaks of enduring values attached to chalices and ensuing notions of personhood and kinship.

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NOTES

1. For the idea of Gypsies appropriating things from the *Gaže* and endowing them with their own meanings, see Williams (1993), Stewart (1997) and Okely (2011).
2. For a detailed description of chalices among Romanian Gabor Roma, see Berta (2007, 2009, 2010). Berta translates the vernacular term *taxtaja* as ‘beakers’, though I find the word ‘chalice’ to be a more appropriate translation. According to my own estimate, about thirty such chalices are in possession of Cortorari in the village of Băleni. The community comprises approximately 700 inhabitants and 80 households.
3. Cortorari dowry consists both of cash, which flows from wife-givers to wife-takers, and of a trousseau which is passed from a mother to her daughter. Both the cash dowry and the trousseau are tendered in instalments at significant moments such as the production of children.
4. Residence is (patri)virilocal: the youngest son lives with his parents and inherits their house, while his brothers, if there are any, are expected to build their own houses in which to live with their wives; daughters, meanwhile, move into their husbands’ houses. As will become clear in this chapter, parents are in charge of the management of the resources for building a house.
5. In the early 2000s, a common economic strategy was trading in antique furniture collected from villages across Romania.
6. Because of their pollution beliefs, which prescribe that faeces should be kept at a distance, Cortorari privies are normally located at the far end of their back gardens.
7. The bride’s parents bear her living expenses.

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