THE IRANIAN LOAN-WORDS IN LOMAVREN,
THE SECRET LANGUAGE OF THE ARMENIAN GYPSIES

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For a people that has evolved neither an old literary tradition nor lasting works of material culture, and who's past existence is shrouded in the mist of centuries, the single thing in which its historical roots are sure to reside is its language. Among such peoples one can mention the various Gypsy groups in the East (Dom and Lom) and in the West (Rom), whose language is the only authentic, although imperfect, source for the reconstruction of their early history.

Many groups of the Near Eastern Gypsies at the present time speak mostly the vernacular languages of the local population among which they usually dwell. Simultaneously, some of these Gypsies have developed specific secret languages or argots, known as a form of speech basically alien in grammar and mainly or partly Indo-Aryan in vocabulary: a kind of hybrids, which are the last scanty remnants of their former native tongue inherited from India.

One of these mixed languages is Lomavren, the secret language of the Armenian Gypsies, or Loms (Armenian exonym Boşɑ), the Iranian-derived lexicon of which is the object of the present article.

This relict language now is spoken only by a small part, predominantly the elder generation, of the Lom population in Armenia, Georgia and Turkey. As a secret language, Lomavren has a rather limited field of usage, being spoken by the Loms only in the course of confidential conversations.

The vocabulary of Lomavren consists mostly of original words, a considerable part of which is shared by the entire Gypsy dialects or languages. At the same time, a great number of borrowings from Armenian and, to a lesser extent, loans from Iranian have become an integral part of the Lomavren lexicon.

That the Iranian languages and especially New Persian have had a profound influence on the Gypsy vocabulary at a formative stage of its development is proved by many basic Gypsy words of

1 Traditionally, the term "Armenian" is used for this group of the Gypsies, because not only in Armenia, but also in Georgia and Turkey, they dwell exclusively in the Armenian milieu.

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Iranian origin. While the first, genuine but unsatisfactory, etymological examination of the Iranian loan-words in Lomavren appeared in Finck (1907: 53-58, et passim) and, most recently, the issue has been discussed once more in Hancock (1995: 39-41, et passim), the necessity of a more accurate investigation in this field is still relevant.

The entire Lomavren lexicon discussed in this paper is the result of the author’s field research work, carried out among the Lom population in the Republics of Armenia and Georgia during the past years. Some of these words, e.g., \textit{aras-}, \textit{sir[av]}, etc., are not attested in any other source and are presented for the first time here.

As Lomavren now has completely adopted the phonetic system of the Armenian language, the principles of the international transcription system for Armenian are introduced for the Lomavren material.

The major part of the Iranian-derived vocabulary has been adopted by Lomavren directly from New Persian, while some of the original Iranian words, as one can judge from their phonetic forms, have appeared in this language due to the lexical impact of the West Armenian dialects.\footnote{2} The tables below illustrate the sources of borrowing for the Iranian lexicon in Lomavren, together with any comments needed for each particular item.

The existence of the following Lomavren words is the result of direct borrowing from New Persian language:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LM.</th>
<th>CL. NP</th>
<th>COMMENTS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. axvar “bad, poor”</td>
<td>x’är “detestable, mean”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. aras- “to reach, ripen”</td>
<td>ras- id.</td>
<td>by addition of prosthetic \textit{a-}.\footnote{3}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. aros “candle, fire”</td>
<td>rōsan “light, bright”</td>
<td>by loss of the last syllable.\footnote{4}</td>
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\footnote{2} It is not the objective of this article to discuss the large number of standard Armenian words of Iranian, mainly Middle Persian and Parthian descent (e.g., \textit{mom} “candle, wax”, \textit{baxt} “fortune, fate”, etc.), or the majority of New Persian and Kurdish items attested in Armenian dialects (e.g., \textit{dasta} “bundle”, \textit{dolca} “mug”, \textit{peṭsun} “small round table”, \textit{usta} “master”, etc.), which are widely adopted by Lomavren as well.

\footnote{3} In Lomavren this prosthetic \textit{a-} always appears before the initial \textit{r-} both in the original, e.g., \textit{amos-} “cry” < OIA \textit{ran}- id., and in the borrowed words, perhaps due to Armenian influence; cf. Arm. \textit{erasan} / \textit{arasan} < Middle Pers. \textit{rasan} “rope, bridle”, and cf. also Arm. dial. \textit{yarasi} < Trk. \textit{raka} “arrack”, etc. In Romany some original and borrowed words with historical initial \textit{r-} can acquire a prosthetic \textit{a-}, e.g., \textit{ares-} “arrive” < Cl. NP \textit{ras-} id., \textit{arakhi} “find, guard” < OIA \textit{raks}- “to guard”.}