

Values in Roma American Culture

KEY POINTS:

The Story of the 4th Nail:

The beginning of the film introduces audiences to the story of the 4th Nail* through a conversation with Rom elders. George Eli, the director and narrator of the film, says that this story has affected the psychology of Rom living in the U.S. today. The 4th Nail story has served as a source of entitlement for Rom to justify their survival tactics throughout history. (00:00:55) This story has been passed from generation to generation. Almost every Rom knows some version of the story and it is one of the few pieces of history that Rom in America know about themselves. The filmmaker uses the 4th Nail story as the title to serve as a metaphor for his search for the real history of the traditions of the Roma today.

*See end of study guide for the complete story of the Fourth Nail.

Early in the film George identifies the most important values for the Rom. (00:02:55) This includes the following:

1. **Respect:** In Rom society, the expression of mutual respect is among the most important and revered values.
2. **Cleansing laws:** Rom must maintain cleansing laws in order to preserve the integrity of their culture, which includes keeping strict boundaries from others (non-Gypsies, known as Gadge). This means no mixed marriages, no mainstream American jobs, and no formal education. More recently however, Rom attend school as children, because they now believe that the fundamentals of education are important (such as reading and writing). Young children do not have to keep strict boundary laws (as teenagers and adults do) because they are prepubescent. Roma fear that if they participate in the outside community, they may lose their Roma identity. They choose to remain isolated in order to preserve their culture. They believe this isolation is important because their culture is their only source of identity. Rom do not identify with a particular country and have no political power, so their Roma identity is their primary source of strength.



Screen shot: *Fourth Nail, Where Are They Now, Annie and Alex Eli*

The taboo against mixed marriages is much more strongly enforced in George's culture in the United States. This is not such a powerful taboo for Roma communities in other parts of the world. In the Balkans, for example, mixed marriages are more common and accepted.




Screen shot: *Searching for the Fourth Nail*

There are numerous indications of Hindu practice in the Roma culture. The Gypsy idea of pollution, or "Marime" is one of them. Signs of Hindu beliefs and practices in the culture support the theory that Roma originated from India.

Roma will have more loyalty to an unfamiliar Roma than to a Gadjo neighbor who might have lived next door to them for twenty years.

3. Marime: Marime means spiritual contamination or a state of being unclean. Someone may be spiritually contaminated if they mix sexually or inappropriately with a non-Gypsy. Marime also refers to menstruating women, who are not allowed to prepare food. This is just one of a number of the cleansing laws. It is believed that if a person is contaminated, they will bring bad luck to those around them and that they will attract negative energy.

4. Gadje and Separation from the Outside World: Roma choose to be separated from those outside their culture. In the opening of the film George states that "We call you Gadje and you call us Gypsy." He later continues to say, "at five years old I knew I was different." (00:01:49) Roma have always seen themselves as separate from the rest of society. The term Gadje, is an important and commonly used word because psychologically, it reasserts the value of separation. Dr. Andrei Simic says that Roma also use the word Gadje to reinforce "moral responsibility and loyalty" to other



5. *Role of the Ancestors:* Rom look to their ancestors for guidance in everyday life. They do not feel disconnected. It is a common practice for Rom to communicate with their ancestors, by making small offerings at their graves. (00:04:31) It is also not unusual for living family members to arrange a place setting for coffee or dinner for a deceased person on the anniversary of their death or on important holidays. When George was young this was more common. This is becoming less and less common as more Rom in the United States join the Born-Again Christian Movement.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1.** When George's sons are born, he begins to question the values in his culture he wants to pass along. Identify the values that have been established in your environment. In which ways do these values enhance your existence? Do any of these values limit you? Which values would you pass along to your children?
- 2.** How do the boundary laws both protect and further limit the Roma? If Marime did not exist, do you think the Roma culture would have continued? Do you think these laws evolved as a result of persecution from the outside world?
- 3.** Read the story of the 4th Nail. Imagine this story was passed down to you from your ancestors. What are some of the different ways you can interpret this story? How might you apply this story to your own experiences?
- 4.** In your own cultural heritage, which stereotypes can you identify?