



The Culture of the Finnish Roma

Edited by
Airi Markkanen and Kai Åberg

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We hope this book helps make visible the challenges of Roma people in the modern-day Europe, as well as highlights the importance of Romani research whether it is conducted by Roma people themselves or representatives of the majority population.

Helsinki, 6 June, 2024
Airi Markkanen & Kai Åberg

Preface

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Roma studies form a special field of scientific research. They also bring together numerous scholars with a shared interest and aims at both theoretical and empirical knowledge formation of the current Romani life. It is important to learn, in Finland and in Europe more widely, about the lives of Roma today. In the past few years, Roma people have increasingly opened to the public and have been ready to discuss even issues that have previously been kept silent – mostly because of the conflictual nature of the relationship between Roma minorities and the dominant societal populations (Markkanen 2008; Törmä, Tuokkola & Hurtig 2014). However, even today Roma populations form significantly marginalized minorities all over Europe, which makes the research of their lives even more necessary.

This volume compiles and updates a wide array of contemporary Roma research done in present-day Finland, both by Finnish researchers, native Roma, and international scholars. There are writers who represent Finnish majority as well as Finnish Roma, and a writer from the Romanian majority. A great deal has been written about Roma in Finland, as will become apparent later in this volume, but there are not many histories written by Roma themselves about the experiences of their people. Consequently, Romani history has been written by and from the perspective of the majority and has thus been based on materials produced by the administrative apparatus of the majority (Markkanen 2003; Åberg 2015; 2019). This anthology, however, aims at reaching a wider and more authentic tone stretching towards different aspects of Romani people's societal and communal meanings and positions in the course of history, the significance of Romani language for an individual Roma, linguistics of the language, significance of mutual interaction between Roma and the researcher, and gender as a topic to be reflected on analytically in the Romani research.

The volume aims to be of interest to both academic readers and lay readers interested in Roma culture and Roma life in the past and in the present. However, compromises have not been made with respect to scholarly standards and academic appeal. The contents cover a range of topics and author positions; some are based on extensive fieldwork or systematic work in the archives, some are based on longitudinal ethnographies, others are drawn from the writer's own life experiences as a member of an ethnic minority, and some from a specific interdisciplinary professional expertise. Bringing to light the various sides of the Romani way of life, scholars from different fields include historians, linguists, anthropologists, and cultural and social researchers.

This anthology shows that there is a large group of Romani researchers in Finland. The variety of researchers benefits and enriches research. During recent years much

has happened in Roma research. One of the main shifts is that research by Finnish Roma themselves has increased – research carried out by their own group. In the methodological sense this is a qualitative and thematic progression: more authentic and manifold Romani experiences can be reached via autoethnographies and other analyses of Roma people who themselves form a part of different branches of the academic community. Although the goal of Roma studies has been to create a general and covering picture of the history of the Romani population, many previous analyses have leaned on recycled materials that mythologize and stereotype Romani people (Markkanen 2003; cf. Okely 1983; Silverman 2012; Åberg 2015). Sarita Friman-Korpela, who is a Roma herself, states in her dissertation (2014, 12) that ‘although Romani people have been objects of scientific studies and various socio-political procedures, it always comes down to one question: What is meant by the Romani people? In this volume, we respond to that question from different angles: from cultural, political, historical, religious, and also gendered points of view.

One of the goals of this anthology is also to bring knowledge of Romani life to the dominant societal majorities in Europe. Romani migration, poverty, and marginalization are complex questions that concern Finland and all of Europe (Saarinen, Markkanen & Enache 2020). The discussion about the Romani migration in Europe is based on images of Roma as problematic, poor, illiterate, unemployed, and criminal vagrants. They are conceived as outsiders and as new nomads, for whom the united Europe seems to find no space. Especially Roma children and women are excluded Others in many ways (ibid.). Finland has been one of the destinations of Roma from Bulgaria and Romania and some other post-socialist countries. They are treated as a pariah group in Europe. As the social inequality encountered by Roma in Europe has been generally accepted as ‘normal’, the position of Romani migrants in Finland as the most marginalized seems to have been normalized, enhanced, and perpetuated as well (Markkanen 2012; Saarinen, Markkanen & Enache 2020). We hope that wider understanding of Romani life will lead to more understanding treatment of these excluded Roma as well.

Roma communities face many confrontations today. Their form of life has changed a lot: the mobile way to earn a living has changed towards a more stable apartment and neighborhood life. Possibilities to meet other Roma communities are a bit rarer. Still, the song *Gelem gelem* – I roam, I roam – is sung as the Roma national anthem. When European Roma sing that song, they feel a sense of community. Roma sing *Gelem, gelem* during many of their festivals, such as the International Day of Romani people, the 8th of April. In Finland the International Day of Romani people is also a flag day and has been included in the Finnish University Almanac since 2016. All this means a shift from rejection to recognition as well.

Contents and topics of the volume

This volume is divided into two main themes. Part I focuses widely on issues of Roma history and language, and Part II concerns more individual Roma people in their social surroundings. The chapters within these themes are based on either academic research or personal life-histories and are presented in more detail below.

This anthology is a needed collection of chapters intended for the international audience. In many international conferences and seminars, we have often been asked: Is there Roma research in Finland? What is it like? Which perspectives does it utilize?

The main function of this anthology is to reply to those questions. It compiles an array of contemporary Roma research done in present day Finland, both by Finnish, native Roma, and international scholars. It will be of interest to both academic as well as lay readers interested in Roma culture and Roma life in Finland, past and present.

The chapters focus on the research and the life of Roma in Finland. Bringing into light various sides of the Romani way of life, scholars from different fields include historians, linguists, anthropologists, and cultural and social researchers.

The eternal contemplation and negotiation of identities lie in the heart of any culture. We hope that the way The Culture of the Finnish Roma discusses these issues brings forth interesting topics to consider for any reader, regardless of national or ethnic origin.



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