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**RESPECT FOR OLDER PEOPLE AND THEIR LIFE EXPERIENCES
AS THE MESSAGE OF TRADITIONAL ROMA CULTURE***<https://doi.org/10.34739/sn.2022.22.15>

Abstrakt: The paper focuses on the status of older people in the traditional Roma culture through the perspective of the cultural pattern – the so-called all-Roma identity. It also states some life experiences, especially related to marginalisation and dealing with.

Keywords: *all-Roma identity, respect for older people, clan, family*

Background

Knowing the traditional Roma culture is important not only for anthropologists but also for social workers and other assisting professionals. Such knowledge offers us a reflection of the individual socio-cultural elements of the traditional Roma culture which include the cultural pattern called all-Roma identity (“romipen”, “romimo”). One of its elements is respect for older people and their life experiences which related to significant marginalization in the previous century, especially during the totalitarianism in 1939-1945.

Romipen, Pat’iv, Phuripen”**(All-Roma Identity, Respect, Respect For Older People)**

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An important identifier in the traditional Roma culture is the so-called all-Roma identity. In the Romani language, the name depends on whether it is a community of Vlachi Roma or a community of the so-called Rumungri. Thus, there are the expressions such as romimo, romipen, or romavipen. Stojka and Pivoň (2003, p. 6; translated by the study authors) state that “the all-Roma identity goes with the Roma throughout their lives”. Therefore, we may deduce its presence in the life of the Roma from the beginning of life until its end. It may be described as a chain of cultural values that are passed down from generation to generation. Older people have passed down their social experiences gained from their coexistence with the majority, especially the positive ones, but they have also talked about the unfavourable ones. They include, in particular, the marginalisation that Roma communities have had to face over the centuries.

One of the most tragic periods with significant discrimination and racist ideology leading up to the Holocaust (“porraimos”) was experienced by the Roma communities in the totalitarian period of Nazi Germany. The Sinti, living in this country, were the first to face that danger. Kinship – a clan, a family were the only safety nets for them, providing them with a sense of belonging and help even in such a difficult time. It was all-Roma identity – romipen – that played an important role in this value constant of Roma life.

It represents social norms – traditions that determine the preservation of the ceremonial culture, artistic expressions, or moral and ethical principles in the community. Romipen includes practiced patterns of behaviour and value orientation of bearers of so-called “true all-Roma identity” (“čačo Rom”). It contains the following principles: respect (“pat’iv”), which is manifested mainly to older people in the clan (“phuripen”), true humanity (“manušipen”), respect for the truth (“čačipen”) and others, such as respect for a well-done job, or a good craft. They play a homogenizing role despite the considerable differentiation of Roma communities. The importance of this value may be found, for example, in the saying: “Our all-Roma identity is our wealth, reflecting our ethnic strength” (“Amaro romipen – amaro bariipen”).

Clan and family belong to the ethnological constants of the Roma culture. They represent the values that occur in the relationships not only in the nuclear family but also among the broader, more distant kinship. The

Roma call it “*dureder familia*” – a more distant family, but relationships are very close and strong.

In the traditional life of the Roma, kinship is an important form of an informal social network which functions as social support and helps in various difficult situations. “Clan, family and kinship as social categories of coexistence create space for attitudes and sense of security, safety, belonging, solidarity, mutual assistance, cohesion, respect, love, morality, ethics, faith.” [Lehoczká, Haburajová-Ilavská, 2008, p. 71; translated by the study authors]. In them, each individual has a fixed position. “For Gypsies and nomads, the family is of great importance as a basic social unit in which the reproduction, education and protection of an individual is ensured” [Liégeois, 1995, p. 75; translated by the study authors].

In the kinship structures of Roma communities, the older persons have had their important and revered status. Natural authority and age have often been the reasons why older men have also become clan chiefs/mayors – *vajdas*. In the traditional Roma culture, special respect has also been shown to older women (referred to as grandmothers). Those women have focused on keeping the habits, healing, and the use of various herbs.

In the traditional nomadic Roma communities, older men have also had the opportunity to gain membership in a council of elders with the important role of the institute of the so-called *Romano kris*. It is an important normative element of the traditional society. It relates to a customary law and is enforced by the council of elders. A *kris'* decision is considered to be unequivocal, irrefutable, and only a real Roma can be a part of it. The law contains a code of morality and family rights. The identification hierarchy is based on the ethnic identification (being in the spirit of the real Roma, the most respected person, a member of the *kris*, the status of the “*krisinako*” Roma) and the clan-family economic-professional caste identification. Their identification with a majority society is quite complex, especially when some nomadic communities do not have a nationality. (These communities are closed to anthropological research).

Unfortunately, in the period of the Slovak Republic in 1939-1945, many older Roma had to work hard in labour camps. They were in many places in Slovakia. The most known were the labour camps in: Očová (20.5.1941-20.11.1941), Most na Ostrove (10.6.1941-10.12.1941), Dubnica

nad Váhom (1941-15.11.1944), Nižný Hrabovec (1.8.1942-3.10.1942), Lipníky (1.7.1941-10.12.1941 and 1.4.1942-1.6.1943), Petič (1.6.1943-1944), Jarabá (3.7.1942-21.11.1942), Bystré nad Topľou (1.7.1942-24.7.1943), Hanušovce nad Topľou (1.7.1942-8.11.1942), Ptíčie (1.7.1942-8.11.1942), Ilava (1.4.1943 – 21.12.1943), Revúca (10.3.1943-10.6.1944), and Ústie nad Oravou (1.11.1943-18.2.1944 and 15.5.1944-31.12.1944) (Varinský, 2004; p. 16-18). In the labour camps, the Roma faced difficult conditions with many problems that seriously and permanently damaged their health and also caused their death.

Knowledge on customs in Roma families is important not only for ethnologists but also for other professionals working in various fields and sectors: social, education, economic and political areas, and other community relations.

Culturally Sensitive Approach In Social Work

One of the current social strategies in Slovakia is to strengthen inclusive communities, especially in those parts where marginalized Roma communities are located. Community centres have been developed there and may play the role of systematic community-based care for the benefits of social inclusion. The local communities and partnerships involved in the implementation of the various social programmes for these communities provide space for re-integration and inclusion. These programmes need to correspond to the real social needs of the population, and thus create the potential to empower them and improve their life situations. Identification opportunities that are natural and beneficial for the local development, seamless coexistence and overall social inclusive nature of civil society may be brought to the attention of the Roma through community activities. Social work with communities is one of its youngest methods in Slovakia. The network of expanding community centres, as well as other social entities providing services and assistance, opens up the possibility to carry out regular consultations to develop community work, to know the needs of the community and to organise and fulfil sensitively individual community models (community planning, community organisation, community events, community development, and community education). In addition to social work, community work is also a universal method for other areas: health

care, education, interaction in the local population, interethnic relationships, environmental issues, and other areas. Part of this is the possibility of pluralism and multiplicity of identities, so that they do not interfere in public space and do not create barriers.

Conclusions

The elderly Roma are personal observers of the events of the previous century, including, unfortunately, the tragic period of the Second World War. Thus, they are oral historians and can pass down their memories to younger people who still worship the elders of their clan; the effects of life memories are further enhanced by this moral aspect. The message of the traditional Roma culture – respect for older people still exists in the lives of Roma communities and has an important place there. It is beneficial for the assisting professionals to know the social and cultural elements of the traditional Roma culture and use the culturally sensitive approach in their interventions and promote a human-legal dimension in individual social interventions.

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