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One Culture or Multiple Cultures? The Diversity of Roma People in Poland

Abstract

There are no universal criteria which would be useful to describe the diversity of all of the Roma. Their presence in given country is linked to adaptive processes to majority societies. It is the majority that creates condition and space to which minorities need to adapt somehow. The results of the above-mentioned adaptive processes also vary and depend on an external context. The attitude of given populations towards minorities and the current political and economic situation of given country, where the Roma settled had and still has significant influence on mentioned processes. The way of life of different Romani groups has also a great importance, because sedentary way of life (typical for most European Roma) and external influences especially on culture and models of lifestyle also furthered the adaptive processes. The cultural diversity among the Roma is the case not only with the groups living in different countries. It needs to be emphasized that the Roma who have lived in one country for centuries are not a homogenous group in terms of their culture. Previous migration processes and sedentary or nomadic way of life had a great influence on this internal diversity. In Poland with four distinguished Romani groups such diversity occurs between Carpathian Roma (Bergitka Roma, Polish Highlander Roma) and traditionally nomadic groups: Polska Roma, Lovara, Kelderari. This article is mainly based on available sources and dissertations on the subject. However it refers to the field research regarding

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the use of European Union's funds for the Roma community in Poland, which was conducted by the author in 2010 and 2011.

Key words: Roma people; minority; cultural diversity; Roma in Poland

Scientific deliberations on culture commenced along with the inception of cultural anthropology, when researchers began focusing on human culture. With time and the evolving of the scientific discipline and empirical studies, it was proven that various human societies develop not a single culture, as stated before, but many diversified cultures. As we look into the past, we might think that maybe it was once easier to conduct research in this field of scholarship as people generally used to speak about particular cultures, e.g. Trobriand culture, Samoan culture, Inuit culture, etc. Contemporary processes related to globalization and migration provide a much more complicated background for researchers. In this context, one of the main problems is the complexity and changeability of human identities. According to Zygmunt Bauman, nowadays identity is not stable and not designed for a long time, but on the contrary it is something unstable, changeable and hybrid (Bauman 2000). This is why it is so difficult to clearly identify what present European, British or French cultures are. They have some characteristic and common features, nevertheless there are some significant deviations from norms resulting from this internal diversification of human societies. These deliberations also apply to Roma societies. Migrations and the different circumstances in which they found themselves have had a great impact on Roma people and caused the internal diversification of this society in both international and domestic contexts. Assimilation, migrations, different social status and education made Roma society equally heterogeneous as non-Roma population. Despite this, the existing generalization maintains the perception of Roma people as one transnational ethnic group with a common history and culture.

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the internal cultural diversification of Roma people in Poland. The paper is not a result of research, as it is generally based on available literature on the topic being discussed here, however I make reference to field work concerning the use of the European Union funds for Roma people in Poland, performed in 2010 and 2011 (Talewicz-Kwiatkowska 2013). It should be mentioned that little research on cultural diversification within Roma societies and between them has been conducted so far. When it comes to Poland, we can mention literally just a few publications (Kowarska 2005; Godlewska-Goska, Kopańska 2011) resulting from empirical research. Moreover, they do not focus on the results of contemporary social processes that also

include Roma people and have a significant impact on their culture and its perception. These publications mostly focus on description of social hierarchy, cultural features or traditional Roma social functions, not taking into account internal diversification of Roma groups or attitudes towards traditional rules.

As we have already mentioned, Roma people have for centuries functioned in various political and economic environments, as well as in societies with different cultures. They are a minority everywhere they are present, resulting in the dependency of their socio-economic condition on a wider context. As a minority, their culture is in danger of blurring or even vanishing, as they are culturally separated from majority groups in the societies they live in. This threat can be associated with the parallel existence of culturally differing groups, possibly resulting in the phenomenon of syncretism, when adjoining cultures mix and become one. The additional threat for Roma culture is the attractiveness of their surroundings. The adapting of some behavioral patterns may seem to be superficial, but it may lead to intense modification of culture. Despite various negative external conditions, the Roma people have managed to preserve their cultural separateness, owing to the development of methods of interaction with majority groups and the ability to live on the border line between two worlds: their own Roma world and the external and alien one. Here it is worth mentioning Michael Stewart's concept that Roma identity constituted conceptualization of a place where they can feel safe and 'at home'. This place is social space with domination of Roma rules and values. In this context, being Roma is self-defense against hostile surroundings (Stewart 1997). A strong internal structure, group solidarity and binding norms constitute the border between Roma and non-Roma worlds and its trespassing often results in serious consequences for the one who does so. The most severe punishment is being excluded from the Roma society and the resulting prohibition of any contacts with the excluded person.

The above-mentioned factors are supposed to counteract the influence of the surrounding world that is sometimes seen as a threat to the culture of Roma groups. However, it does not mean that Roma people are insensible to external influence. As Will Guy rightly says: "Romani 'culture' as such, understood in a broad sense, is not a unique and isolated entity, in spite of its characteristic elements, but rather arises out of and is a response to the nature of the symbolic relationship between Roma and the wider majority communities on which they have always depended for their livelihood" (Guy 2001:5).

Functioning among majority groups has nevertheless caused enormous diversification of Roma people in the fields of language, way of living, habits,

occupations, religion, etc. This diversity is the reason why we should not talk about a primary or model Roma culture but about multiple cultures of Roma societies. There are no universal criteria by which we could describe diversification of all Roma. Their presence in a given country is linked to adaptive processes to majority societies, as the majority creates conditions and space to which minorities adapt to some extent. The above-mentioned adaptive processes take different forms and depend on external contexts. The attitude of local inhabitants and the current political and economic situation of the place where Roma people settled down still has a significant influence on these processes. The way of life in certain Roma groups is also of great importance, as a sedentarized way of life (characteristic for most Roma people in Europe) and thus the influence of their surroundings in the fields of culture and living patterns were the factors enhancing adaptive processes.

Diversification of the Roma population in the field of language is one of the consequences of Roma adaptive processes in relation to the outer world. Living in a certain area results in bilingualism, which, in turn, is conducive to borrowings. New cultural phenomena entering the Roma cognitive horizon often have no equivalents in the Romani language, so terms are transferred from national languages and adapted to the rules of Roma grammar. From this stems the significant influence of national languages on languages of various Roma groups. Underlining the nature of diversification in the field of language, we should add that nowadays there are situations in which Roma people from various countries have difficulties in communicating, not knowing the basic principles of the language of the interlocutor's country of origin. Moreover, there are Roma groups that have entirely adopted the language of the country they live in and do not use the Romani language at all.

Religion is another area in which Roma people have become the reflection of their surroundings, as they have generally adopted the religion of the countries where they have stayed for longer. Thus, among Roma there are Catholics, Orthodox Christians, members of Protestant denominations and Muslims. A recent phenomenon is the growing number of Roma joining the Pentecostal Church, especially Roma in Romania and Slovakia, and the Spanish gitanos, as well as a minor number of Carpathian Roma in Poland. This has an impact on changes related to perception of business activity ethics and development of a new community based on enhanced self-esteem (Kapralski 2008).

As far as types of jobs and professions are concerned, the division is between those pursued by former nomads and those done by Roma groups that have been settled for generations. The way of life determined the

development of certain occupational skills. The travelers had jobs mostly related to trade, smithery, coppersmithing and playing music, and were generally self-employed, whilst settled Roma became hired laborers and performed clearing work or broke stones used for road construction. Nowadays, when traditional methods of work have been ousted by technical development, former nomads still have the deeply rooted need to be self-employed while settled Roma become hired laborers more readily.

Cultural diversification of Roma people does not only apply to groups living in different countries. Roma who have lived in the same country for generations also do not constitute a culturally homogenous group, as they have been influenced by former migrations and way of life (nomadic or sedentary). In this context it is difficult not to agree with Ewa Nowicka who says that nomadism and sedentariness are the main factors diversifying Roma societies (Nowicka 2008). In Poland, where four Roma groups live, the above-mentioned diversification is present between Carpathian Roma (Bergitka Roma, Polish Highlander Gypsies) and groups with a nomadic tradition: Polska Roma, Lowari, and Kelderari. The three last groups developed their identities on the basis of the customary laws of Romanipen, which is a set of norms including the most important behavioral and cooperation patterns. It is the traditional moral law, setting the boundaries of ethnicity. In this context, there is a dichotomous division of life and culture between the Roma and non-Roma world. It is absolutely binding for all members of a Roma group (e.g. among Polska Roma or Kelderari) and does not go beyond the Roma community. However, this does not mean that it does not include non-Roma people at all. Romanipen defines relations between Roma and non-Roma and enables identifying “the other” and determining the relation between “the other” and oneself and in this sense extends beyond the Roma community. It regulates behaviour within the group and its relations with non-Roma society, something that was crucially important when they lived a nomadic life. In those times, creating a model of interactions with the outside world that simultaneously did not disturb the inner order was a priority.

One of the most important rules of Romanipen is the dictate of respect for elders, both women and men. Respect should be expressed by moderation when speaking in the presence of the elders (a young person should ask for permission before speaking) and by behavior. In some groups the custom of kissing an elder’s hand by younger people is still upheld. When speaking to elders, even unrelated, the appellation “aunt” or “uncle” is used with the obligatory plural “you”. Elders are considered as people having wisdom and great experience, that is why they are a good model for young people. Considering the leading role of elders in Roma society, we can

say – following Margaret Mead – that Roma are organized in accordance with rules characteristic for postfigurative societies (Mirga, Mróz, 1994). In such a type of society knowledge and wisdom are derived from age and not from formal education. As there are no written sources, the elders pass on knowledge to the young. Moreover, they are protectors of tradition and shape the character and way of thinking of young people. Andrzej Mirga and Lech Mróz say that though the Roma live in societies that have left the postfigurative stage of development behind, they still preserve a relatively archaic social model.

The universal rule among Roma is ritual hospitality (“pativ”, “pacziwa”), an expression of social bonding and awareness of community. The characteristic feature of feasts is plentifulness of meals and generosity shown by the organizer of the meeting, regardless of their financial condition. A “pativ” is generally held on the occasion of holidays, weddings, funerals, births, family meetings, etc. It is important that people invited to the feast repay with the same, organizing the next meeting. Those who do not do that are in danger of losing their good reputation and respect.

Romanipen imposes on Roma people of the nomadic tradition the obligation to manifest their Romaniness, speak Romani in intergroup relations, show solidarity within the group, and forbids them to deny their descent. An equally important obligation is to observe traditional ceremonies and rituals. Gender divisions are also an important feature of Roma society. The patrilocality and patriarchalism of Roma families means that men play the dominant role. They are the heads of families and extended families and they are responsible for taking crucial decisions. Moreover, for the greater part of their lives women are treated as impure and subordinate to men. For example, the division of sexes is expressed during feasts or family meetings, when women sit on one side of the table and men sit on the other. Women do not sit on the side where men do and vice versa. If possible, in case of meetings held for a greater number people, two tables are arranged, one for women and one for men.

The basic element of Romani social structure is the family, defined as a group of related people (parents, children – also from previous marriages, – grandparents). These people are strongly bonded, while other relatives and their parents are described as members of the extended family. In Roma families special importance is given to the upbringing of girls. From their earliest years girls are taught how to behave in certain situations in order to be good wives and mothers in future. They are taught to be well-behaved, modest and delicate. When a girl’s sexual maturity becomes evident, she should wear proper and modest clothes (a long skirt, her arms should be covered). Girls cannot sit on the table when men are sitting at it or walk

over cutlery when it falls on the ground. It is considered improper for a girl to go out in the evening, or to go out in the company of boys. She should keep her virginity until her wedding and afterwards she must be faithful to her husband, take care of the house and children and be resourceful and modest. When it comes to upbringing of boys, focus is placed on the rules defining how to be the head of a family and how to represent it in contacts with other Roma. Since early childhood boys are taught how to guard the traditional behavior of women and other men. Teaching both boys and girls the rules and forms of paying respect to elders is important because it is the elders who determine hierarchy within a group. A well brought-up child knows Roma habits, is respectful of elders, cares for the family's good name and defends it when necessary. The family is the greatest value for Roma people because the entire social life takes place within it. It is the family that maintains cultural continuity by educating children about the values which are crucial to the group and its older members control the social behavior of relatives to ensure that this behavior does not deviate from commonly accepted norms.

The result of not respecting the rules is taboo defilement (*mageripen*) of the person who violated them. *Mageripen* is an unwritten code of forbidden actions. For nomadic Roma people *mageripen* divides the world into pure and impure areas and refers exclusively to members of the given Roma community. In her book entitled "Polska Roma. Tradition and Modernity" Agnieszka Kowarska writes that "the term of defilement categorizes actions, items, individuals, time and space into pure and impure (...) Thus, takes the form of evaluation of all behavior related to eating, hygiene, age, sex and functioning of Roma groups in a non-Roma society" (Kowarska 2005:38).

Speaking of purity and impurity, we should underline that what matters is not physical dirt but ritual impurity that one can get rid of by undergoing a penalty and then ritually rejoining the Roma community (Kowarska, 2005). Apart from unaccepted actions against other Roma, like dishonesty or murder, impurity may be caused by certain parts of the human body, its secretions, sputum, hair, excrements and also by what can be separated from the body, because, according to research done by Judith Okely, there is a dichotomous division of the body into external and internal. Thus, contact with menstruating women or women who have just given birth to a child is dangerous because it can infect the person coming into contact with such a woman. Contact with a newly born child is also dangerous and impure as the baby has come out from a female body. Impurity includes the lower parts of a female body (down from the waist) and all items coming in touch with it (footwear, underwear, skirt) (Okely 1975). It should be added that the mentioned division of the world into ritually pure and impure areas

refers to Roma people following the nomadic tradition in Poland (Polska Roma, Lowari, Kelderari).

Contact with a defiled person (called *magerdo* by Polska Roma and *mahrim'e* by Lowari and Kelderari) is inadvisable, because of the threat of defilement for the contacting person. Thus a defiled person is temporarily, or for life, separated (depending on the action they committed) from the rest of the Roma community and cannot hide their status. Children and elders are excluded from the set of people who are in danger of defilement. The safety period for children ends when they become sexually mature and married.

Observance of rules is controlled by traditional Roma institutions, thus conflicts, deviations from norms and all unclear situations are not disclosed to the outside world. The highest judge and leader among Polska Roma is *Szero Rom*, while among Kelderari and Lowari this function is served by *Romano Kris*, i.e. Council of the Elders. *Szero Rom* (*Šero-Rom*, *Baro-Šero*) finds an accused person guilty or not guilty and only he determines if another Roma is defiled, or can remove such defilement, which makes him an undisputed leader and authority. Nowadays, there are situations when a leader's authority is questioned and arguments are resolved before Polish courts. The same applies to Lowari and Kelderari in cases when the decisions by the *Romano Kris* are questioned. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that such situations are still very rare, because, as it has already been mentioned, according to the rules of *Romanipen* conflicts and arguments within Roma communities of Polska Roma, Lowari and Kelderari are internal affairs. The *Szero Rom* is elected from among the heads of (extended) families when they meet at a *Romano Celu*. These summits are held irregularly, also when it is necessary to talk about things important for the community. The *Szero Rom* participates in these meetings. Henryk Kozłowski from Nowy Dwór Mazowiecki has been the *Szero Rom* for over twenty years. .

Among the Lowari and Kelderari the counterpart of the *Szero Rom* is the Council of Elders called *Kris*. Similarly to the *Szero Rom*, the *Kris* is kind of a court, however, instead of a single judge, there are about a dozen or even tens of family heads whose votes are equal. The council selects a leader among its members and his vote is decisive in case of arguments. Like the *Szero Rom*, the *Kris* makes decisions about the guilt or innocence of an accused person. It can also remove defilement. Apart from sentencing guilty members of the community to banishment, the Kelderari also apply fines. Part of the fine is awarded to the victim of the defiled person, while the rest is spent on a feast for *Kris* members.

Unlike Romani people of a nomadic tradition, the Carpathian Roma did not shape their identity on the basis of *Romanipen*. The rules which are so crucial for the first group are not as important for the highland Roma. As

the Carpathian Roma have been a sedentary community living for centuries close to non-Roma societies, changes resulting from adaptation to the outer world led to loss of such features of their culture.

For Carpathian Roma there is no division of the world into ritually pure and impure areas, so such institutions as the *Szero Rom* or *Kris* are not important. Jerzy Ficowski found that until not long ago these institutions were completely unknown to highland Roma people (Ficowski 1985). In the past, relations with Carpathian Roma used to be forbidden under threat of defilement because they were accused, for instance of eating dogs and horse meat, what was strictly forbidden among nomadic Roma people. Another reason for the separation of the Roma communities is that the Carpathian Roma take on jobs that are forbidden among other Roma groups living in Poland under threat of defilement, as they violate the rules of purity. Among these are cleaning jobs (e.g. street sweeper, restroom attendant), work in hospitals – because of contact with human waste, lower parts of human body, corpses – and work on the police force. For Carpathian Roma these occupations are in accordance with the rules of so called good work (*laćhi bući*), bringing income and appreciation. According to the code binding Roma people of the nomadic tradition, a person performing the above-mentioned occupations is permanently excluded from Roma community.

Relations between Carpathian Roma and other Roma groups are also influenced by the clothes worn by women from the community of Bergitka Roma, for whom wearing trousers is quite common and normal, while for Roma people of the nomadic tradition it is against the rules of purity and modesty.

It should be stressed that, despite significant cultural differences, the distance between Roma groups and the isolation of Carpathian Roma from other Roma communities living in Poland are diminishing. It is difficult to determine when exactly this process started, but it seems that it was at least partially the result of forced settlement of nomadic Roma people in the 1960s. Roma people that had often lived far away from other groups were forced to live together, sharing the same social status, as for the majority of the population in Poland they were and still are simply Gypsies. Also, young people have a great impact on lessening the distance between groups because, being born into settled communities, they know nomadic life only from stories told by older members of the family, and thus some principles or rules are not as meaningful for them as for older Roma people. In many cases mutual prejudices sometimes passed on to young people at home by the older generation are verified by daily life (learning in the same schools or classes, coping with the same problems). Carpathian Roma have also become better acquainted with the rules which bind the communities with

nomadic traditions and, in some cases, members of the Bergitka Roma have begun to adopt some of these rules. Adam Bartosz considers this to be a way of raising their self-esteem and prestige (Bartosz 2004). A feeling of bonding with the formerly nomadic groups is also expressed through adoption of symbols of nomadic life by Carpathian Roma people who have never been nomads. For instance, by attending pilgrimages and holding cultural events, during which the nomadic lifestyle – that they have never lived – is recreated.

Changes linked to relations between the groups of nomadic Roma people and Carpathian Roma express the process of Roma cultural evolution. In the past, such closer relations were generally impossible and unaccepted, especially by the nomadic Roma people. Highland Roma were in an extremely unfavorable situation as, on the one hand, for the majority population they were Gypsies and thus encountered their hostility while, on the other, for the nomadic Roma they were the people with whom contacts were inadvisable or even forbidden. As we have already mentioned, forced settlement of nomads and civilization changes resulted in significant modifications of Roma culture. Moreover, nowadays we can observe that the border line between Roma people does not focus on membership in a certain community, which is currently of lesser importance than in the past, but between Roma leaders and their organizations, what was confirmed by the author of this paper in her field work performed in 2010 and 2011. We should mention that funds are significantly important in this context as they have been the reason for conflicts and disagreement in Roma communities, as well as changes in these communities. Obtaining funds, when there is a lack of specified-user subsidies for non-governmental organizations, is a key to their existence and the possibility of implementing planned goals. Moreover, for many leaders working in a given organization became their way of earning money and a sole source of income. This is why gaining the support of Roma people became crucial in many cases. Nevertheless, relying on empirical research and participant observation, we can state that the leaders of the Roma groups with a nomadic tradition are aware of their status within their communities. The posts they hold do not place them higher within the hierarchy, because such places are still reserved for elders (Lowari, Kelderari) and, in the case of Polska Roma, also for the traditional leader. Thus leaders of organizations are not leaders of communities and cannot decide on the most important affairs. They have to respect the opinion of elders (Lowari, Kelderari) and, in the Polska Roma groups, the opinion of Szero Rom (something they pointed out themselves), because otherwise they will not be trusted by their communities anymore. As it turns out, there are exceptions to this rule, when, for example, leaders of Polska

Roma organizations cooperate with an excluded member of this Polska Roma community within the Roma Committee of the Mutual Commission on National and Ethnic Minorities. Research conducted in this case showed that pragmatism turned out to be more important and people from Polska Roma did not leave the Committee, which is the symptom of changes in the perception of the decisive role of the traditional leader. We should add that among Polska Roma there are some opinions questioning his authority, however, they are unofficial as nobody would dare to talk about this matter publicly, as well as no one participating in Committee activities would publicly admit that they are cooperating with a person excluded from the community by Szero Rom. Respondents from Polska Roma underlined that Szero Rom and the elders had a decisive vote in the community, while they see the activity of leaders as a kind of aid, and as a method of obtaining funds. Respondents from the Lowari and Kelderari communities expressed similar views as for them the council of elders also plays the most important role in the group. When it comes to Carpathian Roma, changes have gone farthest here and are seen by both old and young people. The authority of older people, whose opinions used to be decisive, is diminishing. Nowadays, young educated people do not take their opinions into account so much, unless they are members of their close family. This is the result of education in schools and universities. There are more and more people who have decided to continue their education, also from former nomadic communities of Lowari, Kelderari and Polska Roma, however to a lesser extent than in the case of Carpathian Roma. As a result, children and young people have much more intense relations with non-Roma surroundings than their parents or grandparents and that is why they treat differently the taboos and precepts that have bound their communities up to now. Young people choose education and professional careers over having their own family at a young age. They want to live like their non-Roma friends, whom they have been in contact with since they were young children. They make use of the advantages of the contemporary world and do not always find approval in the eyes of older Roma as their choices often clash with the traditions and principles binding Roma communities. Despite this, young educated Roma people know that a condition for surviving in the so-called modern world are the choices which they make and which are in opposition to the Roma values. Maybe one older Roma man I once spoke to was right when he said that “Roma people have always lived in foreign, often alien environments. Our culture, language and tradition survived wars and totalitarianism. We still exist, we have not melted into other societies. But is it going to continue? We had many enemies but we have never had such an enemy as what we call modernity”.

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Kultura jedna czy wieloraka? Zróżnicowanie populacji romskiej w Polsce

Nie istnieją uniwersalne kryteria użyteczne w opisie zróżnicowania wszystkich Romów. Ich obecność w danym kraju wiąże się z procesami adaptowania się do społeczeństw większościowych. To większość tworzy warunki i przestrzeń, do których mniejszości muszą się jakoś przystosować. Skutki wspomnianych procesów adaptacyjnych także są różne i zależą od kontekstu zewnętrznego. W znacznym stopniu wpływa na to postawa danej populacji wobec mniejszości oraz aktualna sytuacja polityczno-ekonomiczna kraju, w którym osiedlają się Romowie. Sposób życia różnych grup romskich także ma ogromne znaczenie, ponieważ osiadły tryb życia (typowy dla większości europejskich Romów) i wpływy zewnętrzne odzwierciedlające się w kulturze i stylach życia również kształtują owe procesy. Zróżnicowanie kulturowe Romów dotyczy nie tylko grup żyjących w różnych państwach. Trzeba podkreślić, iż Romowie od stuleci zamieszkujący dane państwo również nie stanowią jednorodnej grupy w kategoriach kultury własnej. Wcześniejsze procesy migracyjne oraz osiedlby bądź wędrowny tryb życia wywierały ogromny wpływ na owo zróżnicowanie. W Polsce,

przy czterech różnych grupach romskich, taka różnorodność rodzi się między Romami karpackimi (Bergitka Roma, góralscy Romowie) a tradycyjnie wędrownymi grupami: Polska Roma, Lovara, Kelderari. Niniejszy artykuł opiera się na dostępnych źródłach i dotychczasowych opracowaniach tematu, odwołując się również do badania wykorzystywania funduszy unijnych przez społeczność romską w Polsce, przeprowadzonego przez autorkę w latach 2010-2011.