

GENDER, HISTORY, AND ROMA IDENTITIES: FROM CULTURAL DETERMINISM TO THE LONG SHADOW OF THE PAST

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In this article, I criticise two main approaches to Roma identity: cultural essentialism and social relationism. As a result of this criticism, I argue for a multidimensional concept of identity which would incorporate the cultural and social perspectives supplemented by an historical approach. I develop this concept in relation to empirical data collected in my research to prove false the thesis that the cultural substance of a group's life can be treated as an independent variable and to show that groups with similar cultural values may have different standpoints regarding some important issues (for example gender constructs) and that culturally different groups may have similar views. Then, with the help of system theory and symbolic anthropology, I present Roma identities as the result of "double encoding" whereby the existential anxieties associated with transgression of the social boundary are transformed into concrete fears related to cultural boundaries, and vice versa. This process is framed in history which means, firstly, that it takes different forms in different times and, secondly, that the transgression of boundary that has occurred in the past has a significant impact on the present identities. I illustrate this impact by the different fate of Polish and Slovak Roma communities during the Holocaust which still influences the way in which these communities encode the boundary between Roma and non-Roma into the boundary between cultural constructs of men and women.

Key words: Roma, Identity, Essentialism, Relationism, History, Gender

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INTRODUCTION

In this article I will argue for the role of historical experiences accumulated in the social/collective memory of Roma people in the shaping of their identities. In the first part I review two main approaches to Roma identity that can be found in the existing literature on this topic: ethnographic essentialism and relational perspective of

sociology. Although they very much differ in their approach to the role of culture, they share the reluctance to accept the third perspective on Roma identity: historical or process-oriented that emphasizes the importance of the past events that shape contemporary experiences and self-perceptions. I am arguing for a conciliatory theoretical standpoint which integrates these three approaches and perceives Roma identities as contingent and dynamic constructs made in different proportions of cultural values, the group's social microcosm with its boundary, and the group's historical trajectories reflected in memories. This understanding of Roma identity corresponds with several important strands in general theory of identity (Clifford, 1988; Bauman, 1996; Appadurai, 1996; Brubaker, 2004; Bhabha, 2006; Vertovec, 2007) which are recently being more widely applied in Romani studies (e.g. Stewart, 2013; Tremlett, 2014; Podolinská, 2017).

In the second part of the article the multidimensional concept of identity presented here has been tested against evidence collected in interviews with female Roma activists who belonged to three groups: Polska Roma, Polish Carpathian Roma, and Slovak Carpathian Roma. These interviews were collected as part of the research project "Women in Roma political movement and NGO sector. Pilot study of Poland and Slovakia".¹ The research was grounded in the assumption of intersectionality as the main feature of the situation of the researched Roma women. Eventually, however, the intersectional character of discrimination faced by our interviewees (as Roma and as women) turned out to disclose Roma identity as something that subverted the division into groups and appeared to be a dynamic intersection of gender, culture, social position, non-Roma environments and historical fate. In short, it has turned out that women who belong to culturally and socially different Roma groups may see the situation of woman in a similar way while women who belong to similar groups may significantly differ in their opinions.

After having proved the culturalist hypothesis false, in the third part of the article I turn to the sociological perspective, the second among those that constitute the multidimensional concept of identity presented here. In this perspective it is the relation between Roma and non-Roma that explains the process of selecting certain cultural elements as the markers of Roma distinctiveness. I have grounded this "sociological turn" in theoretical references to Niklas Luhmann's system theory (1995) and anthropology of Mary Douglas (1966). The synthesis of these two theoretical traditions helps to better understand Michael Stewart's (1997) thesis that gender divisions in Roma communities are not exactly about men and women, but that they represent a mechanism that reduces existential anxieties associated with transgression of the social or cultural boundary and/or transforms them into concrete fears that are in principle manageable. Thus, if a particular Roma group is unable to efficiently control its social boundary (for example is physically attacked or persecuted), it may strengthen the boundary between segments of Roma culture, for example between the constructs of woman and man.

1 Project financed by the Warsaw University of Social Sciences and Humanities, carried out in 2013 (see Kaprański, 2014). Altogether we have conducted 60 interviews: 40 in Poland (20 with Polska Roma and 20 with Carpathian Roma) and 20 in Slovakia. Our interviewees were Roma women activists in the age of 20–59, half of them with a university degree while the other half were high school graduates. The interviews have been collected by female Roma scholars/activists: Erika Adamova, Agnieszka Caban and Joanna Talewicz-Kwiatkowska.

The situation of the social boundaries of Roma communities is, however, historically conditioned and changes in time. Therefore, in the fourth part of the article the third element of the concept of identity, the historical dimension is introduced. Here I am building on the argument by Kirsten Martins-Heuß (1989) regarding the outcomes of the experience of the genocide for the German Sinti. As a result of having been persecuted, they enacted the cultural mechanism of consolidating the cultural boundaries which in the field of gender has eventually led to the stricter separation of men and women. The men-women divide internally, reproduced the external division in the system of Roma community and its non-Roma environment. I would claim that the situation of Polish Roma was similar to when they were seriously victimized during the Second World War, regardless of which group they belonged to and the Nazi persecution had a deep impact on their collective memories (Kapralski, 2012). Contrary to that, the losses of the Slovak Roma were comparatively smaller and did not leave a massive trauma on the survivors (Marushiakova and Popov, 2006). This, on the one hand, offers us an historical explanation of the difference of opinions between female activists who belonged to the Polish Carpathian Roma and Slovak Roma in spite of their cultural similarities and, on the other hand, of the similarity of views of Polska Roma and Polish Carpathian Roma in spite of their cultural difference.

Methodologically this article is an evidence-based reflection in the field of sociological theory of identity. The evidence that informed my theorizing comes from the interviews with members of different European Roma communities collected in the projects “Violence and Memory” (1996–1997), “Forced Migrations, Voluntary Returns?” (2007–2008), “Women in Roma political movement and NGO sector. Pilot study of Poland and Slovakia” (2013), “Direction: Future. 25 Years of Freedom and the Roma” (2014–2016), “The Fight Against Antisemitism and Antigypsyism in Poland: Monitoring, Intervention, Education” (2017–2018).

1. TWO APPROACHES TO ROMA IDENTITY AND THE ROLE OF HISTORY: TOWARDS A CONCILIATORY MODEL

In the literature on Roma identity (or identities – because the plural form seems to be more appropriate here) we may distinguish two main approaches: essentialism of traditional approach and relationism of the so-called constructivist perspective. In the first approach, Roma identity (here usually in the singular form) is perceived as a reproduction of a cultural essence or substance: the idiom of “being Rom” which means an enactment of the core values of Roma culture in the behaviour of Roma individuals and in a group’s life. Culture here is an independent variable: to explain Roma social life one has to refer to culture that provides a matrix of patterns that are activated in particular situations.

In this approach, characterizing the traditional ethnography and history, Roma were perceived as an ethnic group with a strong, stable, and basically unchanging identity. Such an identity can be understood as a synthesis of shared origin and a cultural community. Thus a Rom was someone whose forebears came from India and arrived in Western Europe in the fifteenth century, and who was born a Rom – that is, someone whose parents were Roma. In the cultural sense, a Rom was someone who spoke the Romani language and whose everyday life was marked by the concept of a world divided into “pure” and “impure” spheres, who expressed solidarity with other Roma, who

showed respect for the intragroup hierarchy, who accepted the obligations stemming from the structure of the Roma community, and finally someone who – through nomadism or the taking up of specific forms of occupational activity – tried to lead a life making it possible to minimize the control extended by the non-Roma surroundings (Salo, 1979). This set of values makes up a special code of behaviour with an associated way of seeing the world that together constitute the essence of being a Rom, the “true Romness” defined by some Roma groups as *romanipen*, *romipen*, *romanija*, *ciganija* etc.

It should be noted that in a more general way the concept of *romanipen* does not have to contain the dualism of pure/impure and an elaborated code of pollutions together with associated rituals of purification. In such a general perspective *romanipen* describes the social and cultural habitus of a particular Roma group and its way of life: lived, experienced and enacted in its social space and time (see for example Podolinská, 2014, 2015). Such a general concept of *romanipen* characterizes any Roma community that sociologically can be described as a group. *Romanipen* understood in a more narrow sense, as the worldview based on pure vs. impure dichotomy, characterizes only some groups which, because of that, often develop a sense of superiority in relation to Roma who do not share it and are therefore treated as less “authentic” or even as not fully belonging to the Roma universe. In the narrow concept of *romanipen*, female sexuality, everything related to sexual intercourse, childbearing, menstruation, lower body etc., is perceived as potentially polluting and thus in need for segregation and control. We may therefore assume that within the culturalist perspective the situation of Roma women who live in groups with *romanipen* in the narrow sense of the term will be significantly different than those who are members of other groups.

The second approach to Roma identity can be defined as relational. In this view, the set of cultural values (*romanipen*) is treated as the historical product of concrete relations between Roma and the non-Roma environment, between specific Roma groups, and between various categories of people within the context of these groups. It is precisely these relations, within the framework of this view, that define the Roma identity and its numerous variations. In other words, in order to understand who the Roma are, it is necessary above all to go back to the fundamental opposition between the world of the Roma and the world of the non-Roma. It is precisely the impact of the non-Roma world, rather than any “natural difference”, “ethnicity”, or distinct cultural values that played, in the view of some scholars, the crucial role in constituting the Roma as a separate group (See Lucassen, 1991, 1996).

This approach is grounded in Fredrik Barth’s (1969) idea that it is not cultural substance that determines a group’s identity but social boundaries that shape the cultural content they contain. Roma identity is therefore perceived here as a maintenance of the social boundary that protects Roma “social space composed according to their own ethic of relatedness” (Stewart, 1997: 28). In this approach culture is a dependent variable: we may explain it as a result of and resource for the processes in which Roma build their relations with their environment.

Judith Okely (1996), in turn, appreciates the important role of cultural values in the forming of the Roma identity but nevertheless states that these values are a derivative of the specific system of relations between the world of the Roma and the world of the non-Roma, and of Roma efforts aimed at defending and controlling the borders between those worlds. Similarly, Will Guy regards the Roma as characterized by ethnic and cultural separateness with the caveat that the dominant aspects of their ethnic and cultural identity are socially constructed. “Roma culture,” he writes, “is not something

isolated and unique unto itself regardless of its specific components, but rather arises as a response to the symbolic relations connecting the Roma with the majority groups on whom Roma life has always depended” (Guy, 2001: 5).

We may thus say that within this approach Roma do not have a single identity but a plethora of them, contingently constructed in the context of concrete relations with the non-Roma world and between different Roma groups. The process of construction means here two things. First, that Roma are constructed by non-Roma through official definition, administrative practice, popular stereotype and persecution. Second, that Roma, often in response to the non-Roma, construct themselves in a way that satisfies their needs, protects them and is instrumental regarding their interest groups (Willems, 1997: 6–7). The latter process involves phenomena described in literature as “strategic essentialism” (Spivak, 1987), “resistance identity” (Castells, 1997) or, more recently, as “skin identity” (Cardús, 2010), a term which corresponds very well with Barth’s concept because it “emphasizes not content but the container” of what we call identity which forms “the frontier, as well as the point of contact without which there is no possible relationship” with others in which we construct ourselves (*ibid.*: 70).

The proponents of the two propositions presented above may well be engaged in a sharp theoretical dispute, but both approaches share a mistrust of the third method of conceiving of the Roma identity, which can be defined as historical or process-oriented. According to this approach, who the Roma are here and now depends on who their ancestors were in the past and what kind of fates they were subject to. According to the familiar definition by Anthony Giddens (1994: 80), Roma identity thus understood would be a product of the sense of the continued existence of this group in time, based on the connection between its past and its predicted or desired future. Such an identity is based on the living memory of the past, an interest in the history of one’s own group, and the commemoration of the events that are most important to it.

Orientations that emphasize the substantive nature of the Roma identity regard that identity as not having an historical dimension. This approach emphasizes the fact that thinking in historical categories is alien to Roma, whose memory is fleeting and not supported by acts of commemoration. As Jerzy Ficowski (1986: 24) wrote, “Gypsies do not in general retain any memory of collective matters and people after passing away of the living witnesses to past times. The past dies almost simultaneously with those who participated in it.”

According to the proponents of the relational approach, in turn, Roma seldom spend time mulling over past events and their identities are based on neither the myth of a shared origin nor – for instance – dreams of future unification. Within the framework of this approach, however, they admit that the Roma do possess their own sort of memory, which is “encoded” in a certain sense in the social relations that connect Roma with the non-Roma surroundings. These relations contain within themselves a significant burden of hostility towards the Roma and by the same token continually “remind” them of a history filled with persecution on the part of the societies amongst which they lived. Such memory sometimes goes by the name of “implicit memory,” which is not an object of reflection or cultivation, but which could potentially have an impact on the way the Roma perceive themselves (Stewart, 2004).

In his later work, however, Stewart claimed that there may be a link between the constructivist approach to identity and historical perspective. An emphasis on the “construction” of Roma by the classifying practices of the non-Roma institution allows to speak of a history of Roma, which “is as much a history of those who classified people

as ‘Gypsy’ as it is of those thus labelled” (Stewart, 2013: 423). In this way the constructivist approach is “potentially liberating” (Ibid.) and contributes to building Roma agency and recognition. However, one needs to notice that it is also rejected by some Roma activists who “often prefer to see them [their collective identities – S.K.] as fairly fixed, implying a homogeneity and hence a coherence for a group that give it power” (Jasper and McGarry, 2015: 3). This attitude sometimes takes a form of the already mentioned “strategic essentialism” which may be sometimes efficient, but more often than does not lead to an authentic, empowering communication and freezes Roma in their subjugated subaltern position (Spivak, 1999: 310).

Campaigning for the recognition of identity and history sustains, selects, and constructs memories of marginalized groups. This is the case of contemporary Roma who in the older literature were often presented as “people without history” who live in an “eternal present” and have no tradition of commemoration (Yoors, 1967; Cohn, 1973; Ficowski, 1989). As I have argued elsewhere (Kapralski, 2007, 2008, 2012, 2013), this “orientalising” picture of the Roma was largely a result of the processes of “differential deprivation of history” (Bauman, 1992), “othering” them by placing them in an “allochronic discourse” (Fabian, 1983) through the “erasure of interconnection” (Wolf, 1982) and “silencing” their past (Trouillot, 1995) or projecting on them the repressed dreams of Western modernity (Trumpener, 1992).

It must be said, however, that the “rehabilitation” of Romani cultures of memory often takes the form of an “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm, 1983) or “authentication” of the past. To authenticate the past means “to select from all that has gone before that which is distinctive, unique...and thereby to mark out a unique shared destiny” (Smith, 1998: 43). The concept is therefore very much applicable to Roma as a network of dispersed communities but the process it describes may threaten the distinctively unique histories of particular groups, which may disappear within a unified “master narrative” of Roma history, often having a status very close to mythology (Marushiakova and Popov, 2006). Therefore, by history-oriented approach to Roma identity I understand a perspective that focuses not only on the way Roma past is perceived, for example by Roma activists and intellectuals, but also on the concrete historical circumstances that form a context in which an interaction between cultural resources and social relation takes place and has an impact on the results of this interaction (Kapralski, 2012).

There is no room here to settle the dispute as to which of these approaches – the substantive, the relational, or the history-oriented – constitutes the most adequate representation of Roma identity. This might, in any case, be an intellectually sterile exercise. Roma identities are exceptionally complicated entities in which cultural, social, and historical contents all feature, and the researcher’s job is to define the way in which these elements are connected with each other at a given moment and in a given group, and how the hierarchy of the elements arises and changes over time. For the purposes of the present text we shall therefore treat “the Roma identity” as a complex whole made up of a vision of the world based on cultural values, the image of one’s own social space and the boundaries separating it from others, and the manner of perceiving one’s own history. In other words, the competing approaches to Roma identity will be treated here as the unilateral absolutisation of some single aspect of “being Roma,” which constitutes a fluid configuration of cultural values, social boundaries, and intellectual conceptions in a state of constant transformation.

This approach is in line with some contemporary developments in the field of identity studies which emphasize that contemporary identity is something improvised

and staged for the time being (Clifford, 1988), hybrid (Bhabha, 2006) and thus heterogeneous and incoherent, that draws upon a multiplicity of meanings, historical codes, memories and imaginations (Friese, 2002: 5). If modern identities were meant to be solid and durable, the contemporary, postmodern people try to avoid such fixed identities and accept them only “until further notice” in order to be open to their inevitable future transformations (Bauman, 1996: 18). This changed status of identity was largely engendered by the process of globalization which made available globally identities that formerly were confined to concrete local contexts. Nowadays, their existence is no longer guaranteed by tradition and reproduced by personal relations in relatively closed communities. Instead, they are produced and reproduced in the mass-mediated, loose networks of relations between dispersed individuals, in the “ethnoscapes” in which the “genie of ethnicity” escapes from the “bottle” of locality and becomes a “global force, forever slipping in and through the cracks between states and borders” (Appadurai, 1996: 41).

Contemporary identities do not presuppose therefore the continuity of culture and tradition in which they were once formed nor do they need traditional containers, like for example ethnic groups: they are produced in the locales of a new kind: abstract, imagined and disconnected from concrete physical spaces and groupings. As Rogers Brubaker (2004: 4) observed, contemporary ethnicity “works not only, or even especially, in and through bounded groups, but in and through categories, schemas, encounters, identifications, languages, stories, institutions, organizations, networks, and events.” Brubaker’s concept of “ethnicity without groups” is applied in the field of Roma studies by Tatiana Podolinská (2017). A similar concept of “super-diversity” coined by Steven Vertovec (2007) has been used in Roma studies by Annabel Tremlett (2014) who recommended investigating “the cross-cutting, multiple, hybrid components that feature in our everyday lives, from experiences of gender, sexuality, multi-media platforms (TV, internet, etc.), socio-economic status, disabilities, work environment, to the local environment and so on” (ibid.: 840).

Such approaches form a valuable deconstruction of the essentialising concepts of Romani studies although their fear of essentialism may lead to denying Roma any form of concrete, distinct collective identity or to the arbitrary classification of some constructs of identity as “enforced” or “unauthentic.” Nevertheless, deconstructionist elements can be also found in the work of the younger generation of Roma intellectuals for whom the most important feature of “Roma identity” is a rejection of any fixed shape and scepticism about any content it may take or have, regardless of whether prescribed by non-Roma scholars or Roma political activists. Roma identity is for them a recognition of the fact that the only feature that is shared by individual Roma persons is that each of them is different and unique (Belton, 2010: 46). Even they, however, point out the experience of external threat, historically exemplified by the Holocaust, as the common denominator of different variants of “being Rom” and thus a form of shared commonality of fate (ibid.: 42).

2. THE SITUATION OF ROMA WOMEN IN POLAND AND SLOVAKIA

The multidimensional concept of identity elaborated in the previous section will be applied to the interpretation of data collected in 2013 in the interviews with female Roma activists who belonged to three groups: Polska Roma, Polish Carpathian Roma,

and Slovak Carpathian Roma (see Footnote 1 and Kapralski, 2014). Polska Roma is a group that was nomadic (or semi-nomadic) until the beginning of the 1970s. Its members often identify themselves as the followers of *romanipen* in the narrow sense presented earlier; that is of the system of values and code of behaviour based on a specific vision of the world as divided into the spheres of purity and pollution, which especially affects the situation of women. Polish Carpathian Roma (called *Bergitka* by Polska Roma and some scholars) are formed by several largely disintegrated communities who had been settled for centuries in the Carpathian Mountains and after the Second World War migrated to towns, where they were seeking opportunities created by communist industrialization, while Polska Roma preferred self-employment in traditional Roma professions and in trade. The Carpathian Roma speak a different dialect to Polska Roma (although they can easily communicate with one another). They do not have nomadic tradition and do not live according to *romanipen* in the narrow sense that is the way it is understood by Polska Roma. Thus they have been perceived by the latter as ritually impure, and generally worse, which inhibited mutual relations.

Slovak Roma are culturally, linguistically and socially close to the Polish Carpathian Roma. They have been sedentary populations, in the past subjected to strong assimilationist policy of the Habsburg monarchy. They speak the same dialect of Romani, although its version spoken by the Polish Carpathian Roma is now heavily influenced by Polish vocabulary while the Slovak Roma are influenced by their Slovak linguistic environment. They do not have *romanipen* in the narrow sense except of some traces preserved in language and custom, that by some authors are perceived as remnants of the once existing set of cultural values that disappeared in the course of forcible assimilation (Tcherenkov and Laederich, 2004, II: 564). Similarly to Roma in Poland, Slovak Roma are predominantly Roman Catholic, although recently Pentecostal Churches are very active among them much more than in Poland (Podolinská and Hrustič, 2011).

We may thus say that in the cultural perspective outlined earlier, the members of Polska Roma are different from Polish Carpathian Roma and Slovak Roma while the members of the last two groups are culturally similar. From the sociological point of view, all three groups have similar relations with their environments, although Polish Carpathian Roma and Slovak Roma have a longer tradition of permanent interactions with non-Roma due to their sedentary life and exposure to forced assimilation. On the other hand though, the social situation of Polska Roma and Polish Carpathian Roma is similar because of the fact that both groups live in one country and face the same kind of social policy and popular attitude.

Therefore, following the culturalist hypothesis, we should expect that the attitudes of the members of Polska Roma regarding the important aspects of Roma life will be different from those expressed by the Polish Carpathian Roma and Slovak Roma while there should be a similarity of opinions among the members of the last two groups. The situation of women is definitely one of the important aspects of Roma life and the discussion of the role of women in Roma communities involves some crucial issues of Roma identity. Moreover, it is claimed that the experience of women who belong to different Roma groups may essentially differ depending on the cultural features of these groups and on their social situation (Ceneda, 2002: 31–32).

Narrowing the culturalist hypothesis, we should expect that the attitudes of our interviewees regarding the education of Roma girls, the patriarchal character of Roma communities, and forms of assistance Roma women may expect, especially in the area of reproductive rights and sexual education, will be similar in the case of the Polish

Carpathian Roma and Slovak Roma, while these two groups will differ from the more conservative Polska Roma.

2.1 Polska Roma

Women from this group whom we interviewed did not experience negative attitude of the traditional Roma environment to their education but were aware that this issue created a problem for other Roma women. Our interviewees interpreted their particular situation in the context of the specific character of families in which they had been raised. In some of them women performed a very important role. Other families were patriarchal but it was kind of an “enlightened patriarchy” where the father understood the aspirations of his daughters and often served as a role model for our respondents.

In general, our respondents claimed that the situation of Roma women in the field of education is far from being perfect but it is definitely improving. According to them, right now it is difficult to speak of any traditional, cultural obstacles regarding the education of girls, for example related to the principles of *Romanipen*. Instead, there are a number of concrete problems such as separate dressing rooms or special sports clothes for girls that can be solved in a way that satisfies both Roma and school authorities. Early marriages (that is unofficial, traditional Roma marriages) are still a problem because married women cannot continue education. Today, however, an early marriage means that the bride is on average 16-17 years old (ERTF, 2014: 4-5), which – together with the educational reform in Poland and introduction of grammar schools – has offered girls an opportunity to complete their education on this level.²

The problem of the patriarchal character of the traditional Roma communities has been explicitly raised by two of our respondents in this group. One of them claimed it to be a serious problem for Roma female activists although not for her personally. For another one patriarchy belongs to public life and is a serious obstacle in the development of this sphere among Roma. If in the private sphere wives often argue with their husbands and criticize them, in the public sphere, however, they pretend to look obedient not to embarrass their husbands and spoil their reputation. Generally, there are circles in which a woman “must know her place” if she wants to function publicly, even if she is a Roma activist.

Female Polska Roma activists are unanimous regarding the assistance that a Roma woman can receive. According to them, if a woman has problems in family life or in the community, she can receive assistance first of all from the members of her family and then from the “elders” – traditional leaders of bigger families or just important personalities with charisma who are respected as experts in traditional law. The last instance to whom a woman can turn is *Śero Rom*, the biggest authority regarding the observance of the principles of *romanipen*. The institution of *Śero Rom* guards tradition and therefore conserves the patriarchal relations. Women can, however, apply for his judgement and their requests are usually dealt with by the wife of *Śero Rom* or a respectable older woman from his family (*Phuri Daj* – “old mother”). None of our respondents mentioned in this context Roma NGOs or non-Roma institutions.

The situation is similar when it comes to specific women’s problems, related to sexual activity, contraceptives, and reproductive rights. Here all our interviewees

2 This opportunity disappears now as the government elected in 2015 decided to liquidate this kind of school, extending instead the education in elementary school.

agreed that this sphere is discussed – if at all – only on the level of family. In general, there is a veil of silence put on these issues in Roma communities as they pertain to the sphere of *romanipen*'s crucial values. Women who experience problems in these areas have no support from organizations and for our female activists it would even be difficult to imagine that they could be involved in solving of what is perceived as internal, family matters. The interviewees hoped that even if contraceptives, abortion and family planning are taboo issues, women are always in a position to “somehow” find another woman whom they can ask or learn from leaflets collected in medical facilities. An idea that it could be precisely their organizations that offer assistance and information in this field does not come across the minds of our activists. One of them did not want to talk about that at all. Another one claimed that nothing can be done because mothers do not give their consent for any kind of sexual education of their daughters. Although the activists notice a growing awareness of health-related issues among Roma women, they nevertheless are of the opinion that matters such as contraceptives and safe sex are not debated at all or, if yes, then in a very small circle. According to one of our respondents, the reproductive laws form probably the only area in which traditional Roma values play today an essential role.

In the opinion of the Polska Roma female activists, traditional family and the system of power based on the institution of the “elders” are still important cultural values that need to be taken into account in the activities of the Roma organizations, in particular women's organizations that deal with the women's problems.

2.2 Polish Carpathian Roma

As far as the education was considered, the female activists from the Carpathian Roma group had very divergent opinions. The dominant idea was that the problems associated with the education of Roma girls are of an economic, rather than a cultural nature. For example, female students often leave school when they manage to find a job. Negative attitudes towards education can be interpreted as the result of social marginalization, lack of hope, and mistrust in education as a means of improvement. The resistance to education in the older generation is related to the fear of assimilation where education is perceived as the way out of the Roma world.

Our interviewees have generally noticed that there is patriarchy behind the resistance to education. They claimed, however, it was not a specifically Roma kind of patriarchy but a typical attitude of the traditional, poor and uneducated communities in southern Poland, both Roma and non-Roma. Generally speaking, most of the activists noticed the patriarchal character of the relations within Roma communities although they often characterised Polska Roma as definitely patriarchal while emphasizing that among Carpathian Roma women are professionally more active and earn their own money which strengthens their position in the family. If the elements of patriarchy are still present among Carpathian Roma, it is not because of some special Roma cultural patterns but rather because their culture is, according to our respondents, a mixture of Roma and non-Roma features, including patriarchy that characterizes rural communities of the Carpathian Mountains. That is why, regardless of their special position in Roma communities, the interviewees confess that it happens in their professional activities that they “try not to forget that they are women” that is to behave the way expected by the patriarchal culture.

Regarding the assistance Roma women may receive, the answers of the activists

from the Carpathian Roma are practically identical with those given by the members of Polska Roma. According to them, Roma women may rely only on their families. The Polska Roma women can also go to the “elders”, whose role is limited among Carpathian Roma. Our respondents emphasize also a big role of mothers in law to whom women may turn when they have problems with their husbands.

Also when it comes to the problems related to the sexual life and contraceptives, the situation of Carpathian Roma women is, according to our interviewees, very similar to that of Polska Roma. Knowledge of these matters is very limited although in the case of the Carpathian Roma it is due to poverty, lack of education, and superstition (e.g. that the use of the contraceptives causes cancer), rather than to the cultural factors. The latter perform, however, a certain role but they are not specifically Roma: the Roma share them with their non-Roma environment, which is as rule uneducated and traditionally Catholic. The issues of sexual life are taboo and even the women who are educated and have relevant knowledge do not want to share it, having been afraid about the reaction of their community.

2.3 Slovak Roma

Slovak Roma activists had an ambivalent attitude to the problems of the education of Roma girls. Almost all of them claimed that the situation in this field is changing for the better. But simultaneously most of them emphasized negative attitudes towards education that can be seen among Roma. According to them they are caused first of all by the economic situation that makes it difficult for the families to cover the expenses associated with the education of children and presses the latter to work part-time to support family budgets. Three respondents mentioned in this context also the patriarchal relations within Roma communities that cause a perception that education is something “not for girls”. Eventually, two persons stated that school happens to be an area of discrimination, against which parents want to protect their children.

Generally speaking, patriarchy is a serious problem for more than half of our Slovak respondents who claim that it is a crucial obstacle for the improvement of the situation of Roma women. In Roma families sons are the source of a greater joy than daughters and their education is a priority. The conduct of women is controlled by men who, as a rule, have a negative attitude to women active outside the family circle and prescribed female social roles.

Four respondents touched upon the issue of domestic violence, physical and psychological, that women experience in their families. This issue has not been at all mentioned by the Polish activists. Similarly to the Polish Roma women, however, the Slovak activists have been inclined to search for the causes of patriarchal relations not in the specific values of Roma culture but in the marginal position and social exclusion of the Roma communities.

The most important difference between Polish and Slovak activists was related to the issue of assistance that women may receive. None of our Slovak respondents mentioned family or “elders” as persons that could offer such assistance. Women should in their opinion contact first of all Roma and non-Roma NGOs, Roma assistants, Roma and non-Roma doctors and educational/training centres operated by Roma and non-Roma institutions. Such a suggestion was never mentioned in the interviews with Polish female Roma activists regardless of the group they belonged to.

The institutions mentioned above should also, according to our Slovak interviewees,

offer Roma women assistance regarding contraceptives and sexual education. It seems that sexual life is not taboo among Slovak Roma; at least not to the extent that it is in the Polish Roma communities regardless of their cultural systems. According to the Slovak activists, problems encountered by women who need assistance in this field are related to the negative attitude of medical personnel to Roma, the material conditions and level of education of Roma women, and accessibility of medical service. These issues differentiate Roma women in Slovakia and in consequence our interviewees claimed that the category "Roma women" is too general. There is a substantial difference between educated, well-off women who live in bigger cities and poor, uneducated women from the settlements in rural areas (confirmed by Mušinka et al., 2014).

In conclusion of this section we may say that the evidence provided by the interviews proves the culturalist hypothesis false: it turns out that women who belong to culturally similar groups may have different perceptions of their situation and seek different solutions, while women who belong to culturally different groups may have similar perceptions of some issues and seek similar solutions. The situation of Roma women depends therefore on the relations of their groups with their environments rather than on their groups' cultural values. For example, the similarities between culturally different groups such as Polska Roma and Polish Carpathian Roma can be interpreted as the result of the interaction with similar, more conservative than in Slovakia, context of the country of residence. Moreover, the Roma NGO sector seems to be developed better in Slovakia than in Poland which makes its position stronger in relation with the traditional structures of Roma communities.

3. THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER RELATIONS

Having proved the culturalist hypothesis false in the previous section I would like to turn now to the sociological hypothesis that assumes the predominant role of the relations between Roma groups and their environments in shaping their cultural characteristics, including those associated with a particular shape of the relations between men and women in a given group. More generally speaking, I will search for the nature of the relation between "society" and "culture" in the gendered constructs of Roma identities, taking the former as an independent and the latter as dependent variable.

Roma culture may be perceived in this perspective as a real entity that, however, is not active *per se* but forms a resource of cultural elements that are in certain situations activated, while silenced in others. This mechanism resembles the already mentioned invention of tradition or authentication. In this process a key role is played, for example, by Roma organizations that have emerged since 1970s and sometimes tend to present the people they strive to represent along ethnic-national lines (Willems, 1997: 7). In this way Roma politics can make Roma more aware of the existence and meaning of some aspects of their tradition (Mayall, 2004: 207).

Of course, it does not mean that culture does not have any influence on its own. It has its own inertia that makes certain cultural elements more easily "authenticated" than others. Contrary to the culturalist perspective, however, I would claim here that what makes culture an active factor is not its immanent power to influence human action but, in the spirit of Max Weber, a constellation of political, economic or social

interests that set cultural values in motion as their vehicle or means of legitimization (Kalberg, 2000).

This approach to the relation between culture and social relations is rooted, on the one hand, in the general system theory and, on the other hand, in some tendencies in social anthropology. In the perspective of the first theory it is said that the boundary between groups is constituted in the process of differentiation of system (“Us”) and environment (“Them”) and in this process, according to Niklas Luhmann (1995: 7), the difference between system and environment is repeated within the system. If we apply this perspective to Roma identity, we may say that the fundamental difference between Roma (“system”) and non-Roma (“environment”) is reproduced within Roma as, for example, the cultural difference between “pure” and “polluted” or “man” and “woman”.

The perspective of system theory can be accompanied by the anthropological approach of Mary Douglas (1966) in which cultural conceptions of human body encode crucial features of social relations that characterize human groups. In particular, the control of the body (physiology, procreation, sexuality) can be understood in this perspective as a symbolic code (substitute) for the control of the social boundary. From this we may infer that the more precautions regarding human body we find in a given culture, the more its bearers are focused on the protection of social borders that separate them from other groups and the less are they able to control those borders.

This is particularly important for discriminated minorities whose existence and identity are often put in jeopardy. In such groups, fears and anxieties associated with the human body, its physiology and reproduction, and especially with its “entrances” and “exits,” express fears and anxieties related to group’s social boundary and groups’ survival. Culture and social relations are in this perspective systems that mutually code fears and anxieties that emerge within each of them.

If we apply this reasoning to the particular context of Roma life, we may see, as Michael Stewart (1997: 205) has observed that culturally prescribed gender divisions are essentially not about the relations between men and women: they symbolize the denial of biology (represented by woman) and the affirmation of social-cultural relations (represented by Roma man) that determine Roma identity. Through the control of female bodies and sexuality, as well as through the separation of the male and female bodies, Roma neglect or deny their involvement in biological reproduction and venerate social reproduction. In this way they reduce the importance of their biological bodies through which they are depend on and are exposed to the non-Roma world.

The non-Roma environment, usually hostile towards Roma, can control and repress the biological bodies of Roma, for example through limiting the freedom of movement, incarceration, physical assaults, sterilization or extermination. The non-Roma have all the power to control the boundary between Roma and themselves, and Roma as a rule cannot effectively protect it. On the contrary: living in the state symbiotic dependency on the non-Roma world, Roma must cross the boundary to secure their livelihood which exposes them to the discriminatory practices of the non-Roma. But although the non-Roma can do a lot of harm to Roma biological bodies, they do not have access to the Roma social body that consists of the internal organization of life, safeguarded by cultural concepts, in which Roma sustain their identities. As in the political anthropology of Ernst Kantorowicz (1957), the biological body is perishable while the social-cultural body is immortal.

The social construction of gender relations is in this approach a function of the social standing of a group. A group whose existence is threatened by the interactions with

the hostile environment, encodes the binary opposition “Us/Them” (which is essential for its identity) with the help of another opposition: “Male/Female.” Then the ritual mechanisms of handling the latter opposition provide the group a guarantee that the first opposition will be maintained and thus the boundary that separates Roma from non-Roma will be protected.

This approach enables us to present the relation between cultural and social systems as the relation of double expression or double encoding. The social relations between Roma and non-Roma are expressed (encoded) with the help of cultural oppositions while the relations between cultural constructs are expressed (encoded) in the social system. In particular, when Roma are unable to even partly control their social relations with non-Roma on their own terms, the anxieties related to the impossibility of controlling the social boundary may lead to an increased effort to control what is controllable, namely the boundaries between the elements of Roma culture, for example “male/female” opposition. When the latter are blurred (for example in a process of acculturation), the anxieties related to this process may be expressed in the efforts to make the social boundary less permeable and to reduce intergroup contacts.

4. THE HISTORICAL DIMENSION

It is argued here that the gendered character of Roma identities (i.e. the foundation of identity in “male/female” cultural distinction) is not the result of the reproduction of primordial cultural values but a reaction to the lack of control of the social boundary. This argument can be supported by the findings of Kirsten Martins-Heuß (1989) regarding the outcomes of the experience of the genocide for the German Sinti. The Nazi victimization of Sinti and Roma meant a radical collapse of the Roma mechanisms of controlling and protecting their social boundary. Moreover, the radical anti-Roma measures that involved the denial of civil rights, incarceration in concentration camps, forced sterilization and, finally, mass death, threatened the cultural principles of Roma life that offered no shield and had to be sometimes temporarily suspended, for example in concentration camps where the conditions of life inhibited the possibility of living according to cultural patterns. In consequence, in the Third Reich “each and every adult Gypsy survivor had lost his or her honour” (ibid.: 207). It must be stressed though that the collapse of the internal cultural regulations followed the collapse of the mechanisms that protected the social boundary and had been caused by the targeting of Roma as the enemies of the racial state.

After the war, the psychological consequences of the Nazi persecution aggravated in the context of the general unwillingness in German society to acknowledge the crimes committed towards Roma and further humiliation that Sinti experienced in their fight for compensation (Krokowski, 2001; Knesebeck, 2011). According to Martins-Heuß (ibid.: 208), the traumas related to the Nazi persecution and post-war situation have seriously influenced the process of restoring internal cultural distinctions and thus the position of Sinti women: “Male Gypsies tend to confront and work through what the external world inflicted upon them during the Nazi period in terms of that element which for them represents – and embodies – the world (both the inner world and external reality): namely their women. The degradations experienced by Sinti and Roma under Nazi racist policies and the consequences of this experience, contributed to the creation of a deep – and even today, firmly internalized – sense of inferiority

among those persecuted and their children. In order to be able to cope with this permanent burden of self-contempt, feelings of humiliation are 'acted out' against and using their own women."

What Martins-Heuß suggests in her approach is that the patriarchy of Roma/Sinti communities and the cultural construction of woman as the source of pollution that needs to be kept at bay by controlling female sexuality and safeguarding their inferior position is not a result of the reproduction of cultural idiom and tradition simply inherited from the past. It may well be a contingent, historically conditioned reaction to the collapse of the mechanisms that controlled the social boundary of the Roma world in the Third Reich and after. Martins-Heuß claims for example "that Sinti men and women sat together as equals around the turn of the century," but "after 1945 it became customary to separate adult males and females inside a room. In the meantime, this has come to be considered as traditionally prescribed behaviour" (ibid.: 211).

The gendered identity of the Roma may therefore be presented as a relatively recent result of contingent social relations that later on undergoes the process of "retraditionalization" and functions in the consciousness of both Roma and scholars who study them as primordial and perennial cultural value. This conclusion fits a growing anthropological self-reflection: "It is now increasingly clear," writes Arjun Appadurai (1988: 38–39), "that in many instances where anthropologists believed they were observing and analysing pristine or historically deep systems, they were in fact viewing products of recent...interactions." Such an approach does not imply that all Roma traditions are relatively recent responses to the social standing of Roma groups. It only points out that to understand a particular aspect of Roma culture we need to take into account an interaction of culture as a historically accumulated resource of meanings and the concrete history forms social relations between Roma and non-Roma whereby the later are responsible for cultural dynamics.

The time of genocide during the Second World War was a period in which the boundary that separated Roma from non-Roma had been brutally destroyed by the Nazi persecution. Simultaneously, Roma were not in a position to encode the fear related to the destruction of boundary in the internal sphere of culture because of the conditions of life in the oppressive state. They took up this task after the war. Although they could not control the relations with the non-Roma environment according to their own principles, they successfully created inside their own communities a boundary they could control using cultural tools which involved the cultural construction of gender relations that reinforced some elements of cultural resources and blocked the process of their transformation. This control helped the Sinti to regain the sense of agency and integrity, shattered by the Nazi persecution and the situation in post-war Germany.

If we apply the argument outlined above to the situation of the Polish and Slovak Roma groups presented earlier, we should start with the different experiences these groups had during the Second World War. In the typology introduced by Helen Fein (1979) and applied by Brenda Davis Lutz and James M. Lutz (1995) to the study of the persecution of Roma, Poland and Slovakia belonged to two entirely different areas of the Nazi rule.

Poland, defeated by the German army in September 1939, had been subsequently occupied by the Nazi Germany (and, until 1941, by the Soviets who then collaborated with the Third Reich) with part of her territory incorporated into the Reich and others ruled directly by Germans. Slovakia declared independence in March 1939 and

established the Slovak Republic, allied with Nazi Germany. This meant a radical difference regarding the situation of Roma in these countries. On the territory of Poland the Nazis directly implemented their anti-Roma policies that involved deportations to death camps and summary executions. In the Slovak Republic, Roma were not targeted for genocide. The anti-Roma policies were carried out by the local, Slovak administration which was sending Roma to special work brigades that were building roads and railways or to internment camps. In 1944, after the outbreak of the Slovak National Uprising some of what had until then been labour camps were converted into concentration camps in which a certain number of Roma died from illness or were shot. After the collapse of the uprising, Roma who were suspected of participation in it were executed.

As a result, a much higher number of Roma were murdered in Poland than in Slovakia and the percentage of the Roma victims in Poland was much bigger. This is what we can say with certitude, regardless of the concrete figures, about which there are only estimations, different in the work of different authors. As for Poland, Lutz and Lutz (1995: 349) give the figure of about 28,000 Roma murdered (approx. sixty-three percent of the pre-war Roma population of the country) while in Slovakia only 1,000 Roma lost their lives that is 1.25 percent of the 80,000 Roma who had lived there before the Second World War. These figures are taken from the first edition of the book by Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon (1972) which contained several mistakes and was not particularly well evidenced. In the second edition of the book (Kenrick and Puxon, 1995: 75) the authors estimated the number of Roma murdered in Poland as 13,000 that is twenty-five percent of the total number of Roma in pre-war Poland. Michael Zimmermann (1996: 283) claims that the number of victims was even smaller: about. 8,000, but still, according to him, it would be close to one-third of the Roma population of Poland before the Second World War. As for Slovakia, in the second edition of their book Kenrick and Puxon (1995: 123) claimed that “only a few hundred of the wartime Gypsy population of Slovakia, estimated at over a hundred thousand, died at the hands of the fascist.”

Regardless of the lack of consensus regarding the actual number of the victims and of the size of the Roma populations in both countries we must agree that there was a significant difference of historical experience between Polish and Slovak Roma. This disparity of fate partly confirms the thesis advocated by Brenda Davis Lutz and James M. Lutz (*ibid.*: 354) that “in the areas of greatest Nazi dominance...the Gypsies were almost as likely to suffer as the Jews. In effect, total annihilation was the goal.” In the territories administered by the states allied with Nazi Germany, “authorities in Berlin had to negotiate for action against the chosen targets rather than simply order death squads to begin killing or deportations to occur” (*ibid.*: 351). The allied states, except Croatia, were for various, mostly economic reasons, not particularly interested in persecuting Roma and thus Roma who had lived on their territories had a greater chance of survival than those subjected to the direct Nazi rule.

In consequence of the differential treatment during the Second World War, the experience of destruction, humiliation, and threat to group existence was much more developed among Poland's Roma survivors than among Slovak Roma. The former had therefore more reasons to fortify the internal cultural boundaries, including male/female divide, as a compensation for the lost control of the external, social boundary. This historical difference of fate could account for the similarities of culturally different groups of Roma in Poland and dissimilarities of the Polish Carpathian Roma and Slovak Roma who culturally are close to each other.

Of course, the historical fate and the mechanisms of response towards it cannot explain everything. To have a more complete picture, one has to take into account differences of the policy towards Roma employed by the communist states of Poland and Czechoslovakia after the war, different levels of assimilation, different economic situation of particular Roma groups in both countries, and different level of the development of Roma NGO sector. The hypothesis advanced here, namely that the process of gendering of Roma identities is not a direct product of Roma culture but a result of historically contingent relations between social boundaries and cultural resources, seems nevertheless worth further research.

CONCLUSION

I have begun this article with the criticism of the cultural essentialism and social relationism as two main approaches to Roma identity one can find in the literature. Instead, I have argued for a multidimensional, conciliatory concept of identity which would incorporate the cultural and social perspectives and presented their interaction as mediated by the historical approach that shows how the concrete historical events shape the social boundary between Roma and non-Roma and the way Roma use their cultural resources to mark their distinctiveness. I have subsequently used the empirical evidence collected in my research to prove false the consequences of the cultural perspective, namely to show that Roma groups with similar cultural values may have different standpoints regarding some important issues (like the role of women in Roma communities) and, conversely, that culturally different groups may have similar views. Therefore, I have made my starting point the sociological perspective and, with the help of Niklas Luhmann's system theory and Mary Douglas' symbolic anthropology, I have presented the relation between Roma social and cultural systems as "double encoding" whereby the existential anxieties associated with transgression of the social boundary are transformed into concrete fears related to cultural boundaries, and vice versa. This process is framed in history which means, firstly, that it takes different forms in different times and, secondly, that the transgression of boundary that has occurred in the past has a significant impact on the present identities. I have illustrated this long shadow of the past with the process of "retraditionalization" of the German Sinti community and argued that something similar happened to Polish Carpathian Roma whose different experience of the Holocaust differentiated them from otherwise similar Slovak Carpathian Roma and brought them closer to the Polska Roma group, otherwise quite different. The argument presented here supports therefore the multidimensional concept of Roma identity as a historically contingent form of interrelation between cultural resources and social divides. Such forms are characterized by inertia and may outlive the conditions of their emergence which often leads to an essentialist bias of ethnography or sociological ahistoricism.

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