IDENTITY MARKERS AND SOCIAL RITUALS IN THE ROMA ETHNICITY

Prof. PhD CRISTINA GAVRILUȚĂ, PhD Student BOGDAN HERȚANU
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania

ABSTRACT: *The paper aims to build an identity profile of the Roma ethnicity by identifying a series of defining identity markers in this regard and the way in which they are found in a series of social rituals. Our desire was to highlight the survival over time of deep identity elements that refer to the origins and history of this ethnic group. In this regard, we pay attention to the following identity markers: 1. territoriality; 2. solidarity in the family and community; 3. Craftsmanship and talent; 4. religion and rituals; 5. orality, honor and speech. Starting from the existing literature, we have identified in addition to these identity data, a series of social rituals that are associated with them. The paper highlights the fact that these identity marks are camouflaged under different faces and that they can acquire different meanings and connotations over time and thus contribute to shaping an identity profile from the perspective of cultural patterns.*

Keywords: identity markers; social rituals; social inclusion; Roma ethnicity.

Introduction

The failure of the socio-economic integration of the Roma population can be attributed [1] to a number of impediments, including insufficient financial allocations, the absence of consistent and strategic support for long-term inclusion initiatives – essential for strengthening new social patterns – as well as the inadequacy of intervention programmes to the cultural specificities of the Roma. In the Romanian space, the cultural perspective in Roma integration programs is at most a theoretical chapter that does not weigh too much in substantiating some decisions. Existing studies rather capture a series of historical and ethnographic data on the existence and manifestations of the Roma ethnicity. Mirel Bănică, for example, in Bafta, devla and haram. Studies on Roma Culture proposes an anthropological approach, rooted in a thorough theoretical and field documentation on the culture of the Roma ethnicity. Other analyses [2] investigate the phenomenon of resistance to adaptation within Roma communities, but they advance, either directly or implicitly, the conclusion that resistance to change is the result of an intrinsic inability of Roma to evolve in the direction of conforming to the standards imposed by the majority society.

For this reason, the purpose of the present research is to identify, as far as possible, a series of identity markers that are related to the deep structures of ethnicity and that are valued in different ways in social rituals. The analysis of some rituals still alive within the Roma ethnicity could configure new perspectives of knowledge and understanding of the deep cultural data built around defining markers. We started this approach from the following questions, the answer to which we consider important in addressing any discussions regarding the integration of the Roma population: 1. What are the specific cultural markers in Roma culture? 2. What is their role in the life of the Roma community? 3. Is there any connection between cultural markers and social rituals in Roma communities?

The premises from which we start are those that give a first-rate importance to these cultural determinants in the formation of behaviors resistant to change. These identity constructs are deeply anchored in a series of cultural archetypes that structure the identity profile of the Roma community in a special way. The fact becomes visible in everyday life, at an individual and community behavioral level. Some of these behaviors formed within the community are living expressions of situating in the world, of survival as an ethnicity and of operating with a series of symbols and meanings that encompass in existence an entire mythology and lived experience. However, they are often perceived to be incompatible with the normative requirements of the majority population or with its expectations from the Roma community [3]. In the end, we find

that beyond the high level of adaptability and sociability they show, the Roma show enough reluctance to profoundly modify their behaviors and social manifestations. This is because their entire social exercise takes place within the limits of assumed identity frameworks. Basically, for many of those who make up the Roma ethnicity, integration and inclusion policies are nothing more than solutions that propose profound restructuring at the identity level and operating with other symbolic and cultural coordinates, quite different from those of the ethnicity. The prospect generates a deep anguish related to a potential identity dissolution. It could equate to a fear of acculturation or deculturation.

If acculturation presents a process of mutual exchange and balancing between two cultures, deculturation represents the progressive erosion of the cultural features of a minority community through the assimilation of the cultural data of the majority, starting with the acquisition of its language. This linguistic transition is essential both for the coherent articulation of needs and demands, and for the smooth running of everyday interactions and ordinary social life. [4]. Rudmin [5] points out that acculturation is the process by which an individual gives pre-eminence to the cultural elements of the society in which he settles, while his own cultural elements, which he has acquired within the family of origin, are maintained only at the level of occasional or contextual social manifestations. The cultural aspects transmitted intergenerationally are no longer identity traits of the person concerned, but are valued only as historical reminiscences or as traditions remembered, but not practiced.

What is certain is that a strong social cohesion is developing in Roma communities. It is based on ethnic distinctive features, which confer specific identity elements at the individual level [6], so that the Roma perceive the loss of their ethnic group identity as a risk of dilution of their personal identity, given that they do not adhere in value to the cultural characteristics of majority societies, the validity of which is contested or, at best, viewed with skepticism.

1. Identity markers and their importance in Roma culture

Identity markers are attributes to which a symbolic value is given, and adherence to the symbolism of these attributes configures a person's individuality both within his or her restricted social group and in his or her relations with society as a whole [7]. Group identity markers are those elements whose symbolic value transcends the individual plane and acquire an extended symbolic resonance, allowing the individuals who adopt them to be recognized as part of the group themselves by the members of the group, on the one hand, and as being different from other persons or groups at the level of the wider society, on the other hand. Thus, these group identity markers account for the level of integration within the group and, at the same time, shape relationships with members of other different groups. They give specificity to the group and identity consistency to the individuals who are part of that group.

The cultural contamination of the Roma from the majority populations in the territories where they have stabilized throughout their history is questionable, given that the Roma culture itself was formed by the constant accumulation of the cultural elements of the populations encountered on their migratory routes. The fact that the Roma have created a new and distinct, mature culture with its own characteristics emerges precisely from their reluctance to give up their cultural data in today's socio-cultural contexts. And this in the context in which, historically, Roma culture is marked by heterogeneity.

Although Roma remain a cross-border ethnic group, race and ethnicity, as primary identity markers, have become the cultural and symbolic attributes of cultural particularities profoundly different from those of the host states' communities, closely related to the dynamics of intergenerational communication. Basically, we can say that the Roma have developed over time a certain practical sense, as Pierre Bourdieu would say. It is a practical sense that materializes in structures, habitus and practices that encompass in a specific, clearly delimited manner, a certain social and cultural experience. Thus, historically acquired knowledge about the world and society are transmitted from one generation to another, along with the positive or negative experiences that accompany them, as well as the social skills necessary to cope with diverse social contexts, both within the minority group and in relations with the majority group [9]. The consolidation of the group identity is given by the meanings that the group attributes to personal experiences and feelings over time.

2. Identity markers of Roma culture

2.1. Deterritoriality

Deterritoriality has contributed essentially to the identity formation of the Roma, because during their migratory journey, they have accumulated traits from the various peoples with whom they have come into contact, until they have formed their own cultural identity, which they then insisted on maintaining in the face of external influences. This was a dynamic process, which was not without identity conflicts, especially in terms of strengthening loyalty to the family, as social cohesion with members of the majority group eroded under the pressure of discriminatory attitudes or lack of economic opportunities [10]. The phenomena of identity negotiation cannot be ignored as an expression of a continuous survival exercise. Nomadism and the lack of precise territorial frameworks generated specific forms of behavior. This territoriality manifests itself in multiple ways: at the linguistic level (the use of the language of the majority in the interaction with them and between ethnicities of the Roma language), at the level of housing (in Roma communities the private space invades the public space and vice versa if we analyze their extremely visible and familiar presence in front of the house, the gate, or in various public spaces), at the behavioral and gestural level (the Roma are a living presence, with broad, invasive gestures, noisy presences that are difficult to ignore), at the level of cultural and spiritual products often marked by loans, compilations or original syntheses (the Christianity of the Roma ethnicity is, as is well known, a melange between popular Christianity and a series of magical-religious beliefs specific to the ethnicity).

This territoriality present as a manifestation in different spheres of social and cultural existence announces a certain permeability in the face of the majority culture. However, it is a permeability of survival and specific identity affirmation, born over time in different experiences with the majority otherness. The transformation and capitalization of a historical condition into a fact of life, into ways of being in the world can be the secret of a formidable survival of the ethnicity. The Roma did not conquer, they did not impose themselves, but it is equally true that they could never be assimilated in the true sense of the word.

The nomadic spirit can hardly be placed in a series of social frameworks, specific to the majority. There will always be a space of refuge, of escape, whether it is an artistic escape, an escape into traditional family experiences, or into community experiences, in the form of periodic migration, or in the form of breaking norms.

Currently, in Roma communities there is a cleavage between the members of the ethnic group who support the identity reaffirmation of traditional, conservative identity markers, which support cultural uniqueness, and those who renounce, even partially, them, under the pressure of the opposition they encounter from society precisely because of the adherence to these traditional markers [11]. Deterritoriality, currently, also functions as a form of cultural dislocation, not just spatial. Under the impact of globalization, it seems increasingly difficult for the Roma to preserve their identity built beyond any borders, but based on a number of traditional principles, with predetermined social roles. The desires of a majoritarian and inclusive society cannot be achieved without social conformism [12] and without the adoption of social and cultural boundaries. However, it may be paradoxical that this territoriality can be a stimulating one and can still play an adaptive role. For example, it can stimulate and develop a range of transnational networks of mutual support, based on a strong sense of solidarity and ethnicity.

Even when from a spatial point of view there is a certain stability, coagulating Roma communities, there are enough forms of manifestation of territoriality either at the community level or through a series of survival practices. Some communities of this kind are characterized, according to studies [14], by endemic poverty and socio-economic isolation. The autarkic forms of survival, the inadaptation and inadequacy of communities of this kind to the majority model make interaction problematic. In this case, otherness is experienced in a negative register, which makes the Roma people not feel like they belong to that space. In this case, territoriality takes the form of an otherness "without a place", of a negative otherness, difficult to assimilate.

In this context, conflicts related to access to the labour market and housing resources can arise, negatively influencing public perception of Roma and support for public policies related to Roma integration [11]. At the same time, complex

hybrid identities crystallize, in which Roma ethnicity merges with the experience of host communities, generating new paradigms of belonging and self-definition.

In summary, deterritoriality, based on the migratory history of the Roma, is emerging as an essential feature of Roma communities based on a multifactorial process, which constantly reconfigures the continuity and definition of Roma identity [14]. This requires, on the one hand, the ability to adapt to change, counterbalanced by the manifestation of a certain degree of resistance to external cultural influences, correlated with a continuous reinvention of the meaning of belonging to ethnicity.

2.2. Solidarity in the family and community

Family solidarity and community cohesion are the fundamental pillars of Roma identity, manifested in the strong ties of clans and extensive kinship networks. These structures provide consistent mutual support in the face of the adversity of the majority group, financial problems, illness, loss of loved ones, etc. This cultural resilience through the family is cemented by the long history of persecution and marginalization of enslaved Roma [15], who did not find support in the state authorities or within the extended community, but only within the family social microgroup. The feeling of identity affiliation to the family is strengthened by the close cohabitation of extended family members and by sharing essential cultural practices, such as music, costume and crafts, which differentiate them from other members of society.

In the Roma, the notion of 'family' goes beyond the small nucleus (parents and children), encompassing a large group of consanguineous and affine, often resident in close proximity, who ensure uninterrupted mutual support. In moments of vulnerability, such as serious illnesses or deaths, the entire community mobilizes, providing both emotional support and pragmatic assistance. This cohesion has been a key catalyst for adapting to and overcoming historical adversities, including systemic discrimination, enabling Roma communities to retain their distinct cultural identity and to strengthen a unique intra-community force [16], distinct from the social assistance or social security system of the host states. Family and community interconnections generate a strong collective identity and a deep sense of security.

In terms of solidarity at the community level, the Roma are recognized for their intrinsic hospitality, an eloquent expression of their manifest generosity. Elders have a primary role as repositories of collective memory and traditional heritage, and their advice and guidance are considered invaluable for the proper functioning of the community. The cultivation and sharing of artistic and traditional expressions, especially music and dance, are powerful mechanisms for strengthening social ties and affirming cultural identity. Community and family solidarity transcends the status of mere value, but represents an essential instrument for the perpetuation of Roma culture and resilience in the face of the influences of contemporary society, which is marked by the fluidity of values [17]. Social solidarity thus becomes an inherent attribute that defines the essence of Roma identity. This cohesion solidifies intra-Community ties in the face of an often adverse external environment, thus ensuring the sustainability and transmission of the Roma cultural heritage.

2.3. Craftsmanship and talent

Craftsmanship and talent are the identity markers that probably most clearly demarcate members of the Roma ethnicity from the majority population, but even from other minority groups. Roma crafts do not only possess economic value, but have been invested with cultural valences [18]. Some crafts, such as metalworking, have gone into decline under the pressure of modern industries and extreme production technology, but others, such as music, have been revitalized and have become a source of ethnic pride and self-definition of identity.

Roma crafts include, as a cultural component, the separation of activities according to socially accepted gender roles in the Roma community, traditionally with men working with wood and metal, and women taking over activities with high artistic potential, such as weaving or music [19]. Currently, however, artistic expressions, especially through music, have transcended gender roles and are practiced by both women and men. Crafts focused on manufacturing (the production of various objects made of metal, wood, bone) represented a reason for interaction with communities outside the Roma community,

offering the opportunity for cultural exchanges, beyond material gain, and at the identity level, they helped the Roma to assert their belonging to certain clans or subgroups (goldsmiths, cocalari, etc.).

When the technologization of production and the market economy made traditional crafts no longer competitive in today's market, they were partially creatively adapted, by transforming them into artistic activities, but, for the most part, Roma crafts lost both their economic importance and their appetite for recent generations. The artisanal value of the objects obtained through craftsmanship skills is not considered sufficient by the new generations, therefore the tendency is to abandon crafts and to move mainly in the direction of occupations that mainly involve talent: fiddle and vocal music [20].

2.4. Religion and magical-religious practices

Traditionally, the Roma officially take over the majority religion of the country where they settle. Some authors call this phenomenon "religious mimicry"[21] and attribute it to the fact that, by adopting the religion of the host community, the Roma want to facilitate their integration process, and other times the religion is used for the benefits of social and material mutual aid that it attracts from the religious community. In fact, beyond the official aspects, religion and religious experiences extend their sphere of manifestation beyond the official frameworks. In fact, we discover a series of magical-religious manifestations that capitalize on basic manifestations of the sacred, specific to traditional societies such as: pure (size) / impure, sacred / profane, spiritual energy (Dji). All these function translated into the social register in the form of moral imperatives such as: honor (baxt) / dishonored, moral/ immoral, good/ bad, fair/ incorrect.

The religious experience of the Roma goes beyond the frameworks of a strict religiosity, it is fully seasoned with magical-religious beliefs and practices. Basically, assuming the religion of a space does not in any way cancel old rituals, beliefs and superstitions. Here we are talking rather about a phenomenon of acculturation in which, for example, they are invoked in various magical rituals. Specific to Roma culture is the mixture of religion and mysticism. Although some sources place the Roma's inclination towards

magic in their Egyptian history [22], the first clear mentions of these concerns of the Roma can be found in the historical annals of the Roman Empire, with the entry of the Roma into its territory, around 1054 [23]. Since at that time the Roman Empire was under the rule of Constantine IX Monomachus, a Christian emperor, the Roma were considered a heretical sect, primarily because they were not Christians.

Anthropologists [24] note a lack of understanding of Roma religiosity and customs that materializes at the level of general perception in the form of stereotypes such as: witchcraft, magic, charlatanry, bizarre rituals, etc. This is because the many magical-religious experiences that the Roma have assimilated and decanted throughout their nomadic history are ignored. Those customs were taken over by the Roma fragmented or adapted, they were combined and reorganized into new formulas, specific to the Roma, which moved away from the known traditions of the peoples of various historical periods. It is not surprising that they have been associated with witchcraft, especially in Europe, given that since 1184 the population of this continent has gone through the historical trauma of the Inquisition.

What is worth emphasizing, however, is the fact that religion and magical-religious practices remain an important identity marker. In the case of the Roma ethnicity, the way in which the vertical relationship with the divinity is lived and understood rather announces an integrative spiritual profile in which beliefs in the forces of nature, spirits and spirits do not annul the religious dogma but confirm it in a particular register. This particular way of taking over and processing the religious and the magical can go beyond a simple adaptive effort. It can be a form of cosmicization of existence in the form of a reconciliation between the visible and the invisible of this world in the most diverse ways.

2.5. Orality and speech

The history, values, norms and social rules of the Roma community are mainly transmitted orally, through language in stories, proverbs, lyrics, songs, riddles, myths, snoaves, etc., orality being one of the specific features par excellence of Roma culture. Such a way of transmitting information has the disadvantage that, over time, many details are lost or altered. Thanks to this,

today there are many unknowns in the history of the Roma. On the other hand, orality has the advantage that it allows informal control of the aspects transmitted to future generations, through the continuous adaptation of information, to suit the context in which it is disseminated. From the perspective of orality, it is not surprising that Roma have a low adherence to cultural formulas involving written records [25].

This is a possible reason for only partial and sometimes uninvolved participation in formal education programmes in the states where Roma have settled. This is because it is based on the written word as the main method of transmitting information.

Respect for Roma traditions [26] and for the word given is a moral duty that is under the sign of honor. In fact, the entire justice system of the Roma community (Kris) revolves around the idea of orality and honor. Developing as a parallel justice system to the state one, Kris operates without written laws and without many procedures. What matters is the word and honor of those who share justice.

The language, music, lyrics, myths, snoaves and legends of the Roma ethnicity, although inaccessible to a majority tributary to a written culture, become an important identity marker for the Roma ethnicity. In the absence of any theoretical standardization, this eminently oral culture brings the community closer in countless ways. His energy brings people closer together and marks clear distinctions between Roma and others. It is a form of preservation and permanent accumulation of new cultural experiences in a pattern of its own.

Despite attempts to translate Roma culture into written culture, orality seems to have won. The spoken word continues to retain its prestige and value and to generate an area of cultural inaccessibility despite many efforts.

In this context, the word is not only a vehicle of communication, but it is a formidable cultural and identity vehicle. In a world of generalized, hyper-technological communication, the Roma continue to remain an ethnic enclave that, although it lives countless cultural and social experiences scattered around the world, feels united through the spoken word. Despite its volatility, it imparts stability and roots.

3. The link between identity markers and social rituals

Social rituals are a sequence of activities, gestures, words or a combination of them, which are practiced in certain contexts or according to certain stimuli [27]. These practices have a deep cultural underpinning, reflecting the group-identity markers specific to a particular community. Roma social rituals reflect the ethnic identity characteristics that we have previously analyzed.

Social rituals maintain cohesion within the group and express belonging to the group [28], differentiating Roma from other social groups, even if the concrete way in which these rituals manifest themselves may be quite different from one Roma community to another, depending on the geographical and socio-economic context in which that community is placed. However, with regard to the essential identity markers of Roma culture, the common features of social rituals are so strong that the demarcation from other social groups is obvious. Birth, marriage, funeral remain defining social rituals for the Roma identity. They combine a whole suite of trust practices that engage the entire community. To these can be added the traditional form of judgment, or other forms of human relationship and interaction that involve the observance of clear patterns.

Even in Roma communities where there is an openness to cultural contamination with the majority population and harmonization with its social rituals, what is happening is rather a process of harmonizing these rituals with the Roma ones, not just a takeover of the social behaviors of the majority. In families that no longer adhere to the traditional gender roles promoted by Roma culture, that family unity is maintained, however, sustained by the collective memory of Roma social customs, which continues to influence the present identity of the members of those families. Family hierarchy, moral codes, taboos continue to define who is part of the community and who is considered outside the community [29]. The Roma identity acts as an umbrella identity, to which the personal choices and different expressions of identity of the members of the community, which arise in the process of interaction with other social groups, are subordinated.

Social rituals, however, have a dual effect. On the one hand, within the community, it helps to

strengthen one's self-identity, sense of belonging and social acceptance. On the other hand, practicing the same rituals in social contexts external to the Roma community can lead to exclusion, marginalization, social isolation. Identity markers are transformed by the majority population into social labels, which are then invested with symbolic value on both sides [27]. From the Roma, they receive a positive value, which strengthens their adherence to social rituals that reflect those markers, strengthening their ethnic identity. If there is a reaction from the majority population to reject those markers, the Roma will tend to protect their identity, therefore it leads to the ostentatious practice of precisely those rituals that increase the potential for exclusion. For this reason, we believe that smoothing out the rough edges of socialization between the Roma community and the wider society can be done much easier if Roma social rituals are understood by the host communities, from their cultural-historical perspective.

Conclusions

Identifying identity makers and capitalizing on them in different social rituals brings us closer to knowing the other in all its defining experiences.

This fact can have positive effects not only from a theoretical point of view but also from a practical point of view. Knowing the Other is, after all, a path to oneself. It is important to penetrate the cultural values of those around us in order to understand, accept and respect them as our own. In this case, otherness in all its richness and differences is also the chance to develop and practice values and a series of bridges of communication, understanding and cooperation.

In addition, such an approach represents a starting point that tries to capitalize on the identity dimension in future social inclusion policies. Understanding identity markers helps us to identify a series of challenges within the Roma community but also unsuspected resources, hidden in the identity DNA.

The paradox of this ethnic group is that despite a history that has placed them in the area of marginality, vulnerability and social exclusion, they manage to survive in a miraculous way.

We believe that a series of identity markers and their creative capitalization in the social space played an important role in this regard. Surely this fact should inspire us to live otherness properly.

Conflict of interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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