



'Tsihko diives? – Aahhen Deuleha!'
'How do you do?' – 'May God allow it!'

Kaale in Finland

Henry Hedman & Tuula Åkerlund

The Romani group called Kaale was among the first to arrive to the area of today's Finland in the 16th century. They preserved the Romani language though it is now endangered. Among the salient cultural characteristics of the Kaale we find adherence to traditional clothing (especially that of women) and strict rules of hygiene. Until the 1960s the Kaale were itinerant. During the past couple of decades the material well-being of the Roma has improved, although they are still in the midst of a strong transition.

INTRODUCTION

The Finnish Roma or otherwise called Finnish Kaale constitute a linguistic and cultural minority group in Finland, which has lived in the country for 500 years. They participated in the Winter and Continuation Wars during 1939–1945 and have made sacrifices in defending Finland's independence which, in turn, has strengthened the national identity of the Roma. No exact information about the number of Finnish Roma is available since the Finnish legislation prohibits registration based on ethnic origin. However, it has been estimated that there are approximately 10,000 Finnish Kaale in Finland while around 3,000 Finnish Kaale live in Sweden. Despite their small number, they have been able to preserve their uniqueness and cultural traditions.

Most Finnish Kaale are members of the Lutheran Church, while some 15 per cent of them belong to the Evangelical Free Church and Pentecostal Church. They are Finnish citizens and have equal civil rights and obligations. Regarding identity, they consider themselves both Finns and Roma. The status of the Finnish Roma as a national and traditional minority is safeguarded by the Constitution of Finland of 2000. In addition, the constitution also guarantees the right of minorities to their own culture: The Sami as an indigenous people as well as the Roma and other minority groups have the right to maintain and develop their culture and language.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Roma arrived in Finland and in other Nordic countries in the 16th century at a time when Finland was still part of Sweden. The first Roma arrived in mainland Sweden in 1512. The first official note on Roma having arrived in Finland is found in the account books of the Kastelholm Castle on the Åland Islands dated back to 1559 noting that the Roma were deported from the Åland Islands to mainland Sweden over the ice, with their march impeded by depriving most of the Roma of their

workhorses. The Roma people were found settled in the mainland Finland for the first time some twenty years later.

There are several different hypotheses promoted by researchers about the route the Roma arrived in Finland. According to the earlier belief the Finnish Roma had arrived in Finland from the east via Russia. In contrast to it, Arthur Thesleff held the opinion that the Roma arrived from the west via Denmark and Scotland to Sweden, and further to Finland. Raino Vehmas was of the opinion that geographical considerations speak against the arrival of the Roma from the west. Armas Viita assumes that the Roma arrived both from the west and the east, a hypothesis which is also confirmed by current language research.

The first written references to the arrival of Roma in Finland date from the 16th century. The Swedish Kingdom (Sweden-Finland) took an initial positive stance towards the Roma. They were believed to have arrived in the country from Southern Russia, and were therefore called the Tartars. Attitudes towards the newcomers turned negative quite soon due to their different lifestyle. The itinerant lifestyle of the Roma made it possible for them to practice traditional trades such as travelling craftsmen, yet prevented them from integrating into the majority population. The Government of Sweden-Finland took a negative stand towards the Roma. The church was following the same direction and denied all services from Roma, children were not baptised, marriages were not solemnised, they were not allowed to bury their dead in the sacred land and even health care was forbidden.

All these measures did not please the decision-makers in the Swedish Kingdom who wanted to get rid of the Roma and thus drafted laws against them for this purpose. The Hanging Law implemented in 1637 was held in force for a hundred years and authorised the killing of the Roma without trial, unless they complied with the order to leave the country voluntarily. The Hanging Law was, however, not much put into practice. In those days, the Roma drifted outside the society even more extensively than before.

During the Russian rule in the 19th century, the state objective changed into assimilation and control directed towards

III. 1

Romani Culture and Language students
at the University of Helsinki.

(photo by Sami Väättänen)



III. 2

Travelling Roma in Finland in the 1950s.



the Roma. The Roma faced legal measures which aimed at their integration into the society. Because of their itinerant life style they were treated similarly to tramps and beggars. When the decision-makers wanted to put an end to the travelling of both groups, a decision was made on placing them in labour camps. A law drafted later in 1863 hardened the attitudes towards the Roma to the extent of transferring them from the labour camps to the prison in Hämeenlinna.

It was not until in the previous century that the government gradually started to pay attention to the improvement of the living conditions of the Roma. At the end of the 19th century, the Romani issues appeared on the Senate's work list quite often, but no concrete decisions were made in order to improve their living conditions. The Senate found no other solutions than to transfer the responsibility of "taming" the Roma in practice in the hands of the clergy. The first census of the Romani population, ordered by the Senate and organised by the clergy, took place in 1863. A second and a considerably more precise calculation listed a total of 1,551 Roma. The calculation did not, however, reach all Roma since most of them lived in the countryside.

As late as in 1900 the State Committee gave the Russian Senate its report concentrating mainly on how the Roma could be as quickly and as efficiently as possible be integrated in the majority population. When Finland became independent in 1917, all groups, including the Roma, gained the Finnish nationality, but in spite of this the state authorities took an intolerant attitude towards the life style of the Roma. There were thus still efforts made to integrate the Roma into the rest of the population and to change them into "better" and "more sophisticated" citizens in the eyes of the state authorities. This attitude was prevalent in the society until the 1950s. The economic and social position of the Roma was further weakened since their traditional trades did no longer offer a living in the society that was rapidly changing after the World War II. Due to economic reasons, the Roma were gradually forced to settle down. The itinerant life style of the Finnish Roma ended in the 1960s as a result of the massive structural change that took place in the rural areas.

A new turn in the attitudes of the Finnish society toward the Roma took place at the same time. The first law prohibiting discrimination entered into force in the 1970s, and the state authorities adopted various measures in order to improve the socio-economic and cultural position of the Roma and the Sami,

which was on average weaker compared with other Finns. The Roma were granted special home loans from the state special funds, resulting in that no more than a fifth of the Roma lived in inadequate conditions by the 1980s. In spite of the measures adopted by the governmental authorities, it is still difficult for the Roma to find housing on the private market because of the prejudice towards them. The Roma have avoided education because of their fear of assimilation. It was not until the 1990s that the Roma started to change their attitudes towards education into a more positive approach as a result of the support introduced in the 1980s by the governmental authorities for the teaching of the Romani language and the Romani culture.

ROMANI LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

The radical change of the living conditions of the Roma during the previous decades and the cultural changes inevitably contributed to the reduction in the use of Romani. The Roma believed that the less the outsiders know about the group, its customs and language, the less they can harm the group. For this reason, the Romani language started to act as a 'secret language', meaning that the Roma did not allow teaching it to outsiders.

Until recently, Romani had no written form and thus it has been only orally passed to the next generations. Today, the use of the language and its knowledge decreased especially among the young generation. Following this, various education-focused policies were adopted aiming at language revitalization. The importance of the Romani language and the right to use it were taken into account in the Constitution Act of Finland of 1995. The same provision was included in the new Constitution of Finland of 2000, in its Section 17(3). This provision is regarded as a general provision safeguarding the minorities as it obligates the public authorities to allow and support, among others, the development of the Romani language and culture.

An amendment to the Decree on Children's Day Care entered into force in 1995. According to the decree, the educational objectives referred to in the Act on Children's Day Care also include support for the Romani language and culture. An amendment was also made to the act concerning education in 1995 which allowed for the teaching of Romani as a mother tongue to Romani children at school. The same provision was included in the Basic Education Act of 1999. The above-mentioned acts

III. 3

Clothing of Kaalo women at the end of the 20th century.

(from the archive of Romano Missio)



III. 4

A Romani family including several generations.

(photo by Valfrid Åkerlund)



have not, however, directly obligated municipalities to arrange Romani language teaching.

The Act on the Institute for the Languages of Finland was amended in 1996 so that the tasks of the institute also include research and planning of the Romani language. Minority language research was transferred from the Institute for the Languages of Finland to the universities at the beginning of 2012. At that time, two researcher positions on the Romani language were transferred to the University of Helsinki. University-level education in the Romani language and culture started in 2012 when it became an official subject at the University of Helsinki. Since then it has been possible to complete a 60-credit module in the Romani language and culture as a minor subject. The Act on the Finnish Broadcasting Company was amended in 1999 so that the duty of public services is to also provide services in the Romani language. When Finland ratified the Conventions on minorities of the Council of Europe, it also recognised the Romani language as a traditional minority language.

In 2008 the Finnish National Board of Education launched a still on-going project for supporting the basic education of Romani pupils. More than 30 municipalities have participated in the project. As a result, the level of education of Romani children has increased considerably over these years.

Today Romani parents encourage their children to go to school more than previously. A few young Roma are already participating in further education at upper secondary schools, vocational schools and different university faculties. The first generation with academic education has already entered the working life. Compared to the total number of the Romani population, the percentage is still not high.

FAMILY LIFE

The culture of the Finnish Roma is built around the family, relatives and community. All minority cultures have specific binding factors, such as the sense of togetherness and solidarity towards other members of the community. The Romani culture also puts a strong emphasis on relationships between people, customs and old traditions.

An important aspect of the Romani culture is also the fact that, like all other societies, it is in transition. The traditional lifestyle has started to change along with the changes in the

surrounding world. When the nomadic lifestyle came to an end around 50 years ago, this also meant a totally new era in the life of the Finnish Roma. All these great changes have in fact taken place during only one generation. Settling down after travelling for centuries has, however, required getting used to it. Romani culture emphasises good manners and getting along with all people. The Romani culture is based on respect for the elderly, and most of the customs and rules are somehow connected to this. Older people always eat first, go to sauna first, etc. The elderly are regarded as mental capital and an asset due to their life experience. Respect for older people is manifested in the use of decent clothing and respectful forms of address. The family usually looks after the elderly and seeks to take care of them at home as long as possible for health reasons.

Traditional Romani families have been large. In addition to parents and children, the family often consisted of grandparents, uncles and aunts, and sometimes even included cousins. The Romani family emphasises the position of the man, but women are also aware of their value and have a lot of power within the family. It could be said that the man is the head of the family and the woman its heart. There are clear roles within a Romani family. The man has the main responsibility for the family's income, while the woman takes care of the family's well-being and home. Parents are primarily responsible for raising children, although close relatives also have rather a significant role in their upbringing.

GREETING

The Roma do not greet each other by shaking hands or introduce themselves by their family name. A loud greeting at the doorstep ensures that everybody in the room will be greeted at the same time. Roma also greet other Roma who they do not know, and if they have time, they exchange news. A traditional Romani greeting is *Tsihko diives?* 'How do you do?', to which the other person answers *Deevel mo del.* 'May God allow it'. When saying goodbye the Roma say *Aahhen Deuleha!* 'Let God protect you!'

HYGIENE MANNERS

The Finnish Roma adhere to strict rules related to hygiene. It was especially important in the time the Finnish Roma led an itinerant way of life. Purity rules have maintained internal or-

der and unity and also functioned as guidelines in life. Cleanliness is both physical and symbolic. The hygiene tradition originated from the concrete need of the nomadic people to separate people and animals for health reasons in housing, eating and health care. The hygiene concept is also reflected clearly in the attitudes towards food and cutlery, which are not put in places where people sit or walk. On the other hand, nothing is lifted from the floor to the table. Tea towels and table cloths are not washed with other laundry. Table cleaning cloths are not used for wiping chairs or floors; there are separate cloths for them. The principle has always been that everything that is put in the mouth has to be clean.

CLOTHING

The Romani customs emphasise unity. Clothing expresses the originality and culture of the Roma. The most visible external symbol is the traditional dress of a Romani woman. It is important how a Romani woman is dressed since she has to take into account both traditional customs and the opinions of those belonging to another clan.

When a girl grows into a young woman, she usually starts to wear the traditional Romani dress which symbolises her adulthood. After this she is treated as an adult and has the corresponding rights and obligations. As daughters have grown up in a community where nearly all women wear a traditional dress, wearing it feels natural to young girls. Even though the Romani dress does not alone make the one who wears it a Romani person, it is one of the most important items that strengthen identity. However, the choice to wear the traditional dress is completely in the hands of the person. If a Romani woman does not wear the traditional dress, she would still wear a decent dress to show respect to older Roma in their presence. The dress of a Romani woman is an everyday dress which does not prevent her from participating in education

or working life. The Romani men also have traditions related to clothing although they are not as visible as those of the women. Men do not wear a short-sleeved shirt or only a shirt and trousers in the presence of older Roma. They wear either a vest, jacket or pullover over a shirt. The clothing for the upper body may be of any colour, and neither is the material important. As for the lower body clothes, men usually wear dark straight trousers.

SUMMARY

The Roma have for centuries been an oppressed and discriminated group excluded from society in European countries, including Finland. It was not until after the World War II that Finland recognised the Roma as an ethnic group whose living conditions should be improved. Afterwards the Roma have been recognised as a national minority.

The Roma have preserved their own Kaalo language and culture for centuries. The position of the Roma in present-day Finland has improved during the past few decades thanks to common efforts of the authorities and the Roma. Furthermore, participation of the Roma in social activities has increased interaction between the majority population and the Roma. The Roma have recognised the importance of education, which gives hope for a better future and is an effective way of preventing their marginalisation.

Preservation of the Romani culture and identity is a proof of resilience and perseverance in the midst of difficulties. Today's Finland is a multicultural and international country. The Roma have gradually been accepted in Finland and efforts are also taken to preserve their culture. The distinctive lifestyle of the Roma is a way to exist and survive. This way of existence nowadays includes the will and possibility of educating oneself, working for common goals and living according to common rules.

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