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# "I HAVE FAITH BUT I HAVE NO RELIGION" VS BEING 'REAL' ROMA AS JEHOVAH WITNESS.

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN NEGOTIATING BELONGING(S) AND CONTESTATION OF POWER AMONG ROMA MIGRANTS FROM POLAND TO THE UK.

7th ETNOGRAPHY AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH CONFERENCE / BERGAMO ( ITALY ) / JUNE 6 – 9, 2018

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

In the plethora of studies on post-1989 and especially the post-2004 emigration from Poland, Polish Roma migrants have been remarkably absent. Also only recently we can observe the growing interest in research of the religious life of Polish migrants abroad. Filling that scholarly gap we shed light on the religious continuity and change (conversions) of Polish Roma migrants to the UK. The "I have faith but I have no religion" and nominal belonging to the Roman Catholic Church represent the tradition and cultural norm, thus preserving the sense of community and continuity in the transnational setting. Becoming a Jehovah Witness from that perspective questions the intra-group cohesion, whilst some Roma claim that the narrow path they choose is a way of becoming a "real Roma". The inevitable tension which arises translates into intra-group relations (i.e. resistance against traditional leadership or obedience to Romanism). Important are also aspects related to identity construction and sense of belonging(s), legitimisation of Roma representation, and social positioning both in Poland and the UK.

## 2. METHODOLOGY:

- An ongoing ethnographic fieldwork and study on Polish Roma diverse migration/mobility paths;
- Several fieldwork sites in Poland and UK;
- Both major groups of Polish Roma (Polska Roma, Bergitka);
- Diverse sources of data – observations, formal and non formal interviews, casual conversations; participation in family/social events, social media, daily life rhythm, gossip;
- Biographical interviews and participant observation among both Jehovah's Witnesses and Roman Catholic Roma

## 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

The questions that guided us through our research and data analysis relate to identity construction and group cohesion, continuity and change, responses to change and challenges it brings:

- What is the role of religion for the migrants, here the Polish Roma?
- What attracts Roma to the Polish speaking JW Congregations?
- How Roma as a Jehovah Witnesses negotiate the relationships with their kin, Roma from other groups, non-Roma friends and wider society?
- How Roma deal or manage to explain the dilemma or questions related to their conversion?
- Does the "I have a faith but I have no religion" contradicts the "narrow path" in being a "real" Roma?
- How does the process of religious change affects the identity and sense of belonging in the transnational setting?

## 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS:

- the study shows, on the one hand – the process of privatization of religion among some Roma migrants, and on the other – examples of religious conversions which causes tension within the community.
- conversion and Bible reading sessions are made meaningful through Roma traditions of purity, honesty, piety and patriarchal family structure and a deeper significance of their marginalization in wider society (as Jehovah Witnesses are along with Roma most disliked groups in Poland).
- The converts reject the power of traditional leaders over them which causes tensions within the community and families.
- From the gender perspective, the power struggle between the converts and non-converts allows women to stand up and use the religion as a shield against the patriarchal traditional regime and discriminatory practices towards women,
- Some elements of JW dogma Roma find familiar and relatable, such as: patriarchy, the sanction of exclusion from the community for transgression (like magerdo among Polska Roma), emphasis on family, de-valuing of economic labour (evangelical work is always superior to earning), reluctance to engage with civic or political life, pacifism, prohibition of wearing uniforms or keeping arms (which in general is about contesting the power of the state).
- JW dogma and rituals emphasize the focus on scripture, reading, respect for the written word, argumentation and discussion. The order of sessions, rational planning, organisation of lectures are physical embodiment of modernity and are the elements which Roma appreciate seeing as social mobility.
- Paradoxically, then it can be argued that Roma JW community relationship with modernity leads through Bible readings sessions and participation in Jehovah's Witnesses rituals, meetings and sharing the dogma.

## 5. REFERENCES

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