

“REBUILDING TIES THAT EXISTED LONG AGO”: EXPERIENCES OF FINNISH ROMA DURING MISSIONARY WORK IN ESTONIA

LIDIA GRIPENBERG
 Postdoctoral Researcher
 Faculty of Arts
 University of Helsinki
 Unioninkatu 40, 00170 Helsinki, Finland
 e-mail: lidia.gripenberg@helsinki.fi

ABSTRACT

This article analyses Finnish Roma experiences of interaction with Roma in Estonia, in the period after the historic fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 through to the present. The research data rely on semi-structured interviews and informal conversations, as well as indirect observations of Finnish Roma missionising activities. The results show that Roma identity was seen as a unifying factor and a source of a feeling of belonging, but not as the major factor driving mission. The driving force of the mission stems from the urge to evangelise, inherent in how Pentecostal teaching is lived and directed. This study contributes to the understanding of the interplay of ethnic identity and spirituality in Roma communities in the context of missionising, as well as the role of missionising for the missionaries themselves.

KEYWORDS: Roma • ethnic identity • interaction • Pentecostalism • missionary work

INTRODUCTION

The inspiration for this work stems from my discussions with Finnish Roma in connection with my doctoral thesis, carried out between 2014 and 2019. Many of my interlocutors remembered with warmth and open enthusiasm the time immediately after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the period that followed in the 1990s, when several Pentecostal Finnish Roma families and individuals repeatedly visited Estonia and initiated contacts with the Roma in Estonia seeking to bring them the Evangelical message as well as humanitarian assistance and helpful advice related to life in a changing society. In addition, I indirectly followed the development of the Finnish Roma evangelical mission. During formal and informal Christian gatherings, many Roma Pentecostals testified about their trips to Estonia and their encounters with the local Roma. The missionary works of the Pentecostal Finnish Roma amongst Eastern European Roma were previously addressed by Raluca Bianca Roman (2017; 2018), Lidia Gripenberg (2019) and, specifically amongst the Roma of Estonia, Eva-Liisa Roht-Yilmaz (2019; 2020a).

The current study aims to answer the question, “What are the major factors influencing the experiences of Finnish Roma in their interaction with the Roma of Estonia during their missionary work in Estonia?” In this article, the term ‘Finnish Roma’ refers to the Finnish Kale, a distinct group with fairly specific, homogeneous cultural traditions. The research data were collected through informal conversations and semi-structured interviews. In addition, informal conversations took place in conjunction with participant observation-based fieldwork as well as in other informal settings such as religious gatherings and family visits over the period from 1993 to 2020. The interviews were conducted in the summer of 2020; I interviewed nine Finnish Roma in five separate interviews. The youngest of the informants were in their 30s and the oldest in their 70s.

The text starts with concise background information on the studied groups: the Finnish Kale and the Roma of Estonia. I then proceed with a discussion of the influence of external societal preconditions on the investigated phenomenon. I analyse the interplay of Pentecostal spirituality and ethnic identity in the interactions between the Finnish and Estonian Roma during the process of missionising. In addition, this study addresses the effect of missionary proselytising on the lives of missionaries. This article reports a portion of the outcomes from the Interaction in Romani in Everyday Speech Situations: Case Studies in Estonia project funded by the Academy of Finland.

THE FINNISH KALE AND THE ROMA OF ESTONIA

The Finnish Kale are a traditional Roma group who have inhabited the territory of Finland for more than 500 years. Whilst Finnish citizens, the Finnish Kale represent a national minority. Currently, an estimated 10,000 to 12,000 Finnish Kale live in Finland (Weiste-Paakkanen et al. 2018). Their primary language is Finnish, supplemented by a local dialect of Romani. At present, fluent speakers of Finnish Romani primarily consist of elderly Kale; passive knowledge of the language is prevalent amongst the younger generation, whilst active knowledge of Romani remains weak (Hedman 2009). The group has fairly specific cultural traditions. Concepts of ‘purity’ and ‘honour’ in opposition to ‘impurity’ and the ‘loss of honour’ are basic pillars around which social organisation revolves. Group members’ behaviour is regulated by the norms of shame and respect. In everyday life, customs such as respecting elders and observing ritual purity remain most visible, customs which include wearing traditional clothing on all occasions at which Finnish Kale elders might be present. From the 1970s onwards, women’s dress has consisted of a black velvet skirt containing no less than 18 metres of fabric and a beautifully decorated blouse. Men’s attire includes pressed trousers, a white shirt, a jacket and patent leather shoes (Viljanen 2012: 415–416).¹

Roma living in Estonia at present are not a homogeneous group. Nearly all of the Lajenge (Laiuse) Roma and most Latvian and Russian Roma in Estonia were executed during the Nazi occupation in the Second World War. More Roma, such as survivors from Latvia, began moving to Estonia after the war, which included 366 Roma, according to a census from 1959 (Lutt et al. 1999).² At present, the Roma in Estonia differentiate themselves as either Latvian or Russian Roma. The level of identification, however, depends on the context. Some kinship lines have preserved their self-appellation according to their land of origin, whilst others have accepted an ethnonym related to

their new country (Ross 2016). Linguistically, the Roma in Estonia can be divided into the Latvian Romani and the Russian Romani dialect groups, which belong to the north-eastern subgroup of northern dialects, which are also found in neighbouring countries (Tenser and Granqvist 2015: 3–4). Most Roma who identify themselves as Estonian Roma speak the Lotfitka (Latvian) dialect (Roht-Yilmaz 2020b: 91–92).

The number of Roma in Estonia at present is difficult to estimate. According to official statistics, it stands at around 456 or 593 people, with unofficial numbers of about 1,000 to 1,500 people (Roht-Yilmaz 2016). After Estonia joined the European Union in 2004, the Roma migrated in large numbers to other European countries, but also into Estonia primarily from Latvia. During the fieldwork for this project, the influence of Brexit in terms of the Roma returning from the UK to their land of origin – Estonia – was also noticeable. In this article, the term Estonian Roma is at times used to refer to the Roma of Estonia. The reason for this is that, in keeping with the arguments presented here, there is no need to differentiate between different Roma groups in Estonia. The Finnish Kale refer to the Roma of Estonia in general as *Eestin Kaaleet*, which roughly translates to Estonian Gypsies.

PRECONDITIONS OF THE FINNISH KALE'S MISSIONARY WORK AMONGST THE ESTONIAN ROMA

A strong zeal for evangelism across national and ethnic borders has characterised the Pentecostal movement since its very beginning in 1906, which occurred at Azusa Street in Los Angeles. Within half a year, 38 missionaries had already been sent to different locations (Cox 2001: 101–102). The idea of global expansion continues to be supported by many Pentecostals today (Anderson 2013: 2; Coleman and Hackett 2015: 12–14). The movement is known for its emphasis on powerful religious experiences perceived as supernatural and connected to spiritual gifts, speaking in tongues, healing and prophecy and understood as re-enacting the Acts of the Apostles. The Finnish Pentecostal Roma have implemented this call to missionary work by approaching Eastern European Roma in various countries, offering humanitarian assistance and Pentecostal teachings since the opening of the borders of the Eastern European bloc countries to influence from the West beginning in the early 1990s (Roman 2017: 190–191). Given that Pentecostal doctrine requires no formal education qualification in order to implement evangelising activities, all believers are called to evangelise both in mundane life and through missionary activities (Willems 1967: 108; Robbins 2004: 124).

The first attempts at missionary work by Finnish Kale Pentecostals amongst the Roma of Estonia can be traced to the 1980s. A more active period of missionary endeavour began in the 1990s. The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 enabled people from both sides of the border to travel and establish contacts with each other. That time period was also marked by a rise in interest amongst the Estonian population in supernatural experiences, occult sciences, New Age teachings, esoteric knowledge and a religious boom for the traditional churches of Estonia (Roht-Yilmaz 2019: 107–108). During the Soviet period, there was a constant shortage of goods, enabling the Roma to profit through trade. After the regime changed and the opening of the borders for trade as well, the market was satisfied and the Roma lost their opportunities to profit through trade (Marushiakova and

Popov 2003: 304–307). At the same time, the majority of Eastern European Roma, who were previously permanently employed, lost their jobs since they were no longer able to compete on the labour market (Barany 2002: 172–176). The Roma in Estonia at the beginning of the 1990s could be characterised as affected by displacement and deprivation. The new social organisation was unfavourable to them and many ended up deprived of even basic necessities such as adequate housing and daily food. Although most of the population of Eastern Europe was also effected by this change, which brought political insecurity and financial instability, the situation for the Roma, who had been marginalised before the sociopolitical shift, was significantly worse.

The idea that conversion to Pentecostalism is especially attractive to people affected by deprivation and displacement and the tendency to explain conversion based on those factors has a long tradition and is widely accepted in the literature (Willems 1967: 63; Lalive d'Épinay 1969; Anderson 1979: 235). The significance of marginalisation and poverty for directing the evangelising efforts of the Finnish Kale are apparent both at the beginning of their mission, and at present. Currently, Finnish Kale evangelising groups channel their support efforts (religious, financial and practical) mainly towards Latvia, since the Latvian Roma are currently at a more disadvantaged position than the Roma in Estonia.³

For most Finnish Kale missionising amongst the Roma of Estonia, their initial missionary work was intentional. For some, however, it occurred accidentally. This happenstance was, for example, the case for Olli and Seija Grönfors,⁴ an elderly Kale couple recognised as pioneers of the Finnish Kale Pentecostal mission in Estonia. The Grönfors were (and remain at present) members of the Free Church in the town of Iisalmi, Finland. It so happened that the town of Võru⁵ in Estonia was a so-called sister city to the town of Iisalmi. As such, in 1991, the Free Church of Iisalmi received an invitation to send a group of evangelical believers to organise Christian evangelical events at Võru's Baptist church, one week after the disintegration of the Soviet Union.



Photo 1. The Baptist church in Võru at the beginning of the 1990s. Archive of Olli and Seija Grönfors.

A group of five believers, led by the pastor of the Iisalmi Free Church Markku Hämäläinen, responded to that invitation. Olli and Seija, the only people of Roma origin in the group, were among them. Upon arrival to Võru, Olli Grönfors asked the local pastor whether any Roma lived in the town. His expectations were not high. Olli was told that there was a large Roma family living close to the Baptist church in Võru, although the members of the church had no contact with them since that Roma family avoided interacting with people from the main population. The Võru Baptist church pastor's wife decided to visit the Roma family and invite them to an event at the church, informing them that Finnish Roma believers were visiting. The Estonian Roma family, the Vinogradovs, showed up at the event, but only halfway through the event and remained standing at the door. According to Seija Grönfors, the Vinogradovs were so shy and scared, because of earlier experiences of discrimination, that they dared not enter the hall. The pastor, however, noticed them and invited them to sit in seats near the front. That evening, Georg Vinogradov, who later became the first Roma pastor in Estonia, his wife Ljuba and their children responded to the altar call and were converted.

SPIRITUALITY AS A DRIVING FORCE OF THE MISSION

A zeal for sharing the evangelical Christian faith with their fellow Roma of Estonia rapidly spread amongst the Finnish Kale. Soon other independent groups began travelling to Estonia with missionising intentions. Only a few months after the conversion of the Vinogradov family, a group of about ten Finnish Kale believers, amongst whom were Leif Isberg and Henry Nyman, organised a larger Roma evangelising event at Oleviste Church in Tallinn. Sami Valentin preached at the event and Georg Vinogradov shared his testimony. Witnessing and conversion can be viewed and analysed through the lens of searching for the justification of the role they play in fulfilling peoples' more fundamental needs, such as searching for a direction in life, meeting their financial needs and solving their health problems, amongst others, as noted by Simon Coleman and Rosalind Hackett (2015: 28–29). Witnessing and conversion may also allow individuals to find a new identity centred around the notion of becoming a 'child of God' (Robbins 1998; Burdick 2013 [1998]). However, there are other essential factors through which the process and outcome of conversion can be further understood. In my previous research on the interaction between the Finnish Kale and Eastern European Roma (Gripenberg 2019: 128), several participants viewed their conversion as a spiritual encounter resulting in a new internal moral code, 'a new heart'. Whilst fulfilling their personal needs, conversion brought new moral principles and changes to their everyday life practices, some of which could challenge even the basic needs of the convert. Likewise, Tatiana Podolinská (2014) suggests that, whilst deprivation can be an important factor in Romani Pentecostal conversion, conversion itself is a sophisticated process that takes place for primarily religious reasons. Amongst the Slovakian Roma she studied, Pentecostalism provides a set of religious and spiritual practices that feel familiar and thus are highly compatible with the traditional religious practices of the Slovakian Roma before conversion (ibid.:106–107).

Roman (2018: 50) elaborates on Western Roma evangelical missionaries' outreach to the Roma in Eastern European countries as shaped by a "spiritually-driven developmental outlook". In this section, I focus on this spiritually driven aspect of the missionary work of the Finnish Kale amongst the Roma in Estonia. I argue that this aspect of missionary work and other religious endeavours are often overlooked, shied away from or deliberately sought, and explained away in scholarly work. One example of this tendency in scholarly work lies in the analysis of Paloma Gay y Blasco (1999) on the efforts of the *Aleluyas*, Gitanos in Madrid, members of the local Pentecostal congregation. In their conversion, *Aleluyas* give up the old tradition of feuding, central to the social organisation of the group, as an outcome of local Evangelical preachers "reformulat[ing] Gypsiness" (ibid.: 54). In contrast, as a result of more than 20 years of friendship, social work and anthropological research among the Finnish Kale, for whom feuding and avoidance are known cultural practices (Grönfors 1977; Thurffjell 2014: 167; Berlin 2015: 155–157), I have gained an understanding of how the participants of my research experienced abrupt life transformations and abandoned feuding as a result of their spiritual encounter combined with the influence of social conditions (Gripenberg 2019: 131).

As seen from earlier studies on the Finnish Kale's missionising amongst Eastern European Roma in Finland, social explanations are important and necessary, but on many occasions insufficient to analyse the experiences of the people. Many of my informants felt that they had been influenced by a divine agent, 'The Holy Spirit' and the experience of acquiring a 'new heart', best understood as a new inner moral code. The 'new heart', in turn, urged them to cross social borders and reach out to fellow people they would otherwise have more or less politely avoided (ibid.: 143). The participants in this study were of the opinion that they had received 'love from God' (*Jumalan rakkautta*) towards the people to whom they were reaching out, which operated in everyday life situations and was clearly sensed by the Estonian Roma with whom they interacted. They viewed that supernatural experience as the driving force of the mission, which granted them the strength to overcome any obstacles they inevitably faced. During the first years of the mission, Olli Grönfors and his family travelled to Võru and other areas of the country each month or month and a half, spending several weeks at a time in Estonia in the summers and living with the Estonian Roma. In reference to this period, Tino Grönfors, the current coordinator of the Life and Light association⁶ in Finland, states that the Grönfors "weren't just visiting and preaching to the Roma of Estonia; they lived with them in their everyday life and loved them" (FM: 2020). "We were one family", Seija Grönfors declared (FM: 2020).

According to Kenelm Burrige (1991), who conducted an extensive anthropological study of missionaries, their goal is to build communities who settle, positively connected to each other in the love of Christ. They feel guided by the Spirit and are prepared to cross social borders or change the community structure if it prevents reconciliation. For the missionaries themselves, however, this is never seen as a personal or social challenge, but rather as the divine purpose to their lives. Burrige views missionaries' lives as containing more painful and disappointing experiences than fulfilled dreams and hopes, at least in relation to worldly matters. However, the value of being a missionary is not measured by the number of conversions or other achievements, but rather by dedication, patience, empathy towards others and sacrificing oneself. (Ibid.: 240–241)

In the case of the Finnish Kale, the 'love of God' they experience towards the Roma of Estonia has a quite practical dimension. For example, during the so-called Corona Spring of 2020 a mission trip to Estonia and Latvia was planned for Easter. The missionary team held out the hope that they could embark on the trip when restrictions on socialising due to the Covid-19 pandemic were gradually put into place, until the Finnish borders were ultimately closed to travel. At that point, the team decided to continue its humanitarian assistance to the Estonian and Latvian Roma with whom they were in contact. The missionaries found a creative solution by renting space on a truck travelling through those areas and began sending food to their fellow Roma every second week.

For some of my interlocutors, their involvement with the Estonian and Latvian Roma involved substantial sacrifices. The Grönfors family, for instance, were not well-off financially during their most active years in Estonia. Many times they were forced to sell some of their own property in order to afford the trip. In 1995 when the Vuolasranta family left for Estonia with three school-aged children for six months to conduct a social survey amongst the Roma, they ended up selling their house in Finland. Upon return to Finland, they lived in a van for several weeks in the middle of the Nordic winter, unable to rent a flat and denied Finnish social security benefits for several months (FM: 2020).

In short, I argue that in the analysis of the missionary work carried out by the Finnish Kale in Estonia, the informants' spirituality should be taken into account not as the only, but as a major driving force behind the mission. This adheres to the statement by Sonja Luehrmann (2015: 167), that "today, many historians and social scientists are concerned with whether disciplines committed to methodological suspension of belief can do justice to the religious world".

PERCEPTION OF A SHARED ETHNIC IDENTITY

In the case of Seija and Olli Grönfors, the family considered pioneers of Finnish Kale missionary work amongst the Estonian Roma, the call to evangelise actually initially came from pastors of a Baptist congregation in Estonia. Similarly at the beginning of the 1990s, the Vuolasranta family was approached by the pastor of a church in Rakvere and, in 1996, the Finnish Kale band *Taivaasta tuulee* ('Wind from Heaven') began their work in Kohila, where the local congregation needed help reaching the Roma population. Apparently, several spiritual leaders from the Estonian evangelical congregations viewed the Roma ethnic identity as a key factor in successfully proselytising amongst the Roma. In her research on missionary work amongst the Roma of Estonia, Roht-Yilmaz (2020a) outlines the importance of Roma evangelising to other Roma, since they "understand and know how they think", whereas majority population preachers may lack the necessary skills or their attitude towards the Roma may not be welcoming. Nevertheless, her work also points out that the perception of a shared ethnic origin is not always sufficient in the mission field: Kale or Roma missionaries may not always be accepted by the Estonian Roma. For example, since a mission typically proliferates along kinship and family lines, a family history can represent a hindrance in some cases (ibid.: 15). Earlier studies on the Finnish Kale missionary work amongst Bulgarian, Romanian, Estonian and Latvian Roma discussed how these communities search

for a commonality and attempt to create a perception of a common ethnic identity regardless of known difference in cultural traditions (Roman 2018; Gripenberg 2019: 93; Roht-Yilmaz 2020a: 13). In current research, the pioneers of the Kale missionary work amongst the Roma of Estonia explained how missionaries attempted to preserve their ritual purity without offending their fellow Roma from Estonia, despite differences in kitchen-related hygiene practices. Since Kale ritual purity regarding the handling of food involves extensive rules that are not self-evident for other Roma groups, this task required creativity and tact.

When we went to a house where there was no idea about brushes [meaning the house was not clean], we had kitchen towels and table cloths with us [...] We did it kindly so as not to offend anyone, yet still maintained our own purity traditions quite closely. And, that was fine, yes, it was only natural for the Estonian Roma [...] but at that time they were so poor. There was nothing there. (FM: 2020, Miranda)

My observation on the way Finnish Kale practice Pentecostalism is that their perceived Roma ethnic identity continues to play a quite central role in their daily lives even after conversion. Here, I am using 'perceived ethnic identity' to indicate that I refer to the way 'ethnic identity' or more often 'Roma identity' is used as an emic term. Preachers often refer to the Roma as God's chosen people and the 12th tribe of Israel.⁷ In her work on Pentecostal Roma in Slovakia, Podolinská (2017: 154) suggests that the Pentecostal denominations she studied coined the concept 'New Roma' as a "de-ethnicised and ahistorically constructed label with positive non-ascriptive connotations". This concept is largely "ethnically emptied" and filled with suitable content, which depends upon the goals and paths of the specific user on an individual or community level, in line with "the creed of good, moral, useful and decent life of a Christian=Human=Rom" (ibid.).

In contrast I argue that amongst the Finnish Kale the concept of Roma identity continues to be meaningful after being 'born again' and becoming 'Jesus' own'. Crucial ritual purity practices remain intact, since believers aim to preserve connections with their kin, characterised by Podolinská (ibid: 145–146) as "*strong social bonds with primary social networks*". Earlier in the 1970s and 1980s, Finnish Pentecostal Kale converts were urged to abandon the rules of ritual purity and comply only with the moral principles that derived from their interpretations of the Biblical principles they were taught. That often resulted, however, in ruptures to family ties (Gripenberg 2019: 142). Over time preachers reformulated their teachings to allow for the observance of Roma cultural habits as a form of showing respect to the family elders and unconverted relatives. Only potentially harmful Roma cultural traditions (such as blood feuds) were condemned as inappropriate for the 'children of God'. Some specific traditions were reformulated as more understandable or acceptable for non-Roma forms. For example, the period of ritual pollution amongst women following childbirth was reformulated as a period of rest, when a new mother is free from all responsibilities related to preparing food (Gripenberg 2019: 145).

Along with reformulating cultural traditions, converts may and frequently engage in 'double talk'. The concept of double talk as it relates to charismatic Christianity was introduced by Simon Coleman (2006) when analysing the way charismatic Christians live simultaneously in two spheres: congregation and the surrounding population. Since those two spheres have their own cultural traditions, they also employ a differ-

ent language. A convert may intentionally use statements with double meanings – one directed at converts and one at the civil public. According to Coleman, converts in general engage with two levels of reality simultaneously, similar to the Roma who live amongst the majority population and participate in two different cultural traditions. Coleman develops his argument further to make a comparison with anthropologists during fieldwork, living as ‘homo duplex’ in order to function within both of their environments, academia and the community studied (ibid.: 8–10). In my experience, the most common issue around which double talk is utilised is the ritual purity of the Finnish Kale. For example, when interacting with the majority population or representatives of another unfamiliar Roma group when issues arise connected to handling of food and kitchenware, ritual purity is reformulated as hygiene. When discussing the rules of conduct between different generations and genders, ritual purity is addressed in relation to respect. However, in both cases, those Kale present understand that the issue is connected to Kale ritual purity.

An interesting issue when considering Roma identity is the notion of fortune-telling as a traditional Gypsy occupation. The participants in this research viewed fortune-telling primarily as an economic activity, where fortune-tellers provided a well-meaning, comforting service to their fellow citizens without any connection to spirituality. They did not condemn this kind of activity, since they viewed it as a necessity for families’ abilities to provide for their basic needs, envisioning it as spiritually benign. That was, however, distinguished from ‘real divination’, which they understood as inspired by evil forces and thus inappropriate for the ‘children of God’. “It is even scary to enter the home of these people [a family that practiced divination]”, one informant commented (FM: 2020).

My experience is that when proselytising within a new Roma community, the Finnish Kale tend to encourage potential converts to preserve their Roma identity. In her work amongst evangelical Roma in Bulgaria, Magdalena Slavkova (2007: 237) described how accepting the evangelical faith changes the religious identity of the people she studied, but “consolidates in a new way” the identity of separate Roma groups. The boundaries between different Roma groups as well as the boundary between Roma and non-Roma remain, although converted Roma feel they are ‘better’ Roma than the unconverted (ibid.: 237). Similarly, the Finnish Kale take pride in being Roma, and insist amongst other things on remaining visible within society by wearing specific clothing in all situations. Their message to potential Roma converts is to preserve and improve their unique cultural heritage.

During practical encounters in the mission field, interactions amongst different groups of Roma do not rely entirely on similar cultural traditions since these may differ drastically between groups (Roman 2018; Gripenberg 2019: 93; Roht-Yilmaz 2020a: 13). The experience of a shared ethnic identity is based more on kinship, language and, rather importantly, a certain shared understating (Bashkow 2004: 452), and the perception of sharing basic values, described by Ian Hancock (2010: 23–24) as a “core Roma culture”. The following example provides a case wherein the cultural traditions of the Estonian Roma differed significantly from Finnish Kale traditions. Showing respect towards elders and abiding by the rules of purity remain crucial to expressing Roma identity within the Finnish Kale community. The meanings of the concept couples ‘clean–unclean’ and ‘honour–shame’ differ from the ways in which they are used in the

language spoken by the majority population. In Kale speech these concepts are used to form a complex network of moral and social norms. The concept of clean or pure can be utilised to denote both hygiene as well as ritual purity. They relate as well to the social hierarchy within the community (Viljanen et al. 2007: 460–461). In light of this theoretical background, the experience of a teenager when a young Finnish Kale woman visited Estonian Roma homes becomes clear.

For them it was very important that one must sit down and it was always requested in the Romani language as follows: “Besh, besh”. [‘Sit down, sit down, please.’] For me, it felt strange at first. At that time I was a growing young girl and old men could bring me a chair, so that everyone had a place to sit. And I have been brought up in such a way that young girls can stand or at least elderly men would not notice whether I had a place to sit. It was a bit strange, because I felt they respected me and valued me. (FM: 2020)

The gesture of elderly Estonian Roma men offering a chair to visiting young Finnish Kale girls can be viewed as an act of hospitality. However, according to Kale cultural traditions, elderly men sit at the top of ritual purity and the social hierarchy ladder and young women and girls respectfully occupy the bottom. The respect and care expressed by elder Estonian Roma men towards the visiting teenage Finnish Roma girls felt unusual and actually somewhat improper. Nevertheless, that did not significantly diminish the sense of belonging to a shared, larger Roma community. For someone unfamiliar with the Finnish Kale cultural tradition, this example may appear to exaggerate the differences from Estonian Roma cultural traditions. In real-life situations, however, the urge for young Kale women especially to respect and ‘be shamed’ by older people (especially men) is strongly experienced and quite visible. For example, if an elderly man enters a room where young women (who are not close relatives) are present, chances are the women will politely leave the room or alternatively line up and stand in some corner of the room where they can avoid eye contact with this elderly man.

When asked about the language used during their interaction with the Roma of Estonia, the Finnish Kale typically reply that for everyday issues they resort to Romani and Finnish. Finnish is useful because it belongs to the same language group as Estonian, featuring many similarities. The interviewees opined that only some elderly Finnish Roma can conduct meaningful conversations in Romani with the Roma of Estonia. Nevertheless, both groups appreciate being able to comprehend even a few words in a sentence. Language represents one of the basic pillars of experiencing commonality in (Roma) identity (Matras 2004; Hancock 2010: 23; Kyuchukov 2010: 8). The following statement highlights this understanding:

Finnish Roma have had a sense of kinship with Estonian Roma. At least, before it was true. It can be affected by the fact that they are so close. And their spoken language sounds to the ear somehow similar to Finnish Romani. In other Romani languages, long vowels, like that in the word *saare* are rarely spoken. And it invokes some kind of feeling, as if it were the Finnish language. (FM: 2020, Miriam)

Here, it is important to point out that the Roma identity in itself and the cultural traditions related to it are rarely sufficient factors to create meaningful and lasting interaction between representatives of different Roma groups. Whilst the participants in this

study repeatedly emphasised a feeling of belonging, they felt, in their own words, that they had been 'befriended' by the Roma of Estonia, although previous studies found that often the Roma might avoid representatives from other Roma groups. In most cases, they recognised them as "fellow Roma", but simultaneously define them as "not our type of Roma" (Stewart 2015: 748). Nevertheless, the Roma identity combined with additional factors such as religious identity (typically charismatic Christian) (Gay y Blasco 2002; Delgado 2010: 256–257), shared political interests (Vermeersch 2006: 43), alienation from one's own group (Kaminski 1987) or an external threat (Marushiakova 1992; Gripenberg forthcoming) can facilitate interaction.

According to Roht-Yilmaz (2020a: 13), the feeling of belonging to a shared ethnic community, even though to different subgroups, emphasising Roma culture and traditions "drives the mission". Here, I suggest a somewhat different understanding of the role to the Roma ethnic identity in missionary work. Whilst Roht-Yilmaz (ibid.) describes the "urge for Kale to missionize" as based on a feeling of kinship with the Roma of Estonia, my understanding is that the 'urge' itself can be found in the essence of teaching and practicing Pentecostalism in general. Missionising Kale feel that the 'love of God for lost humanity' drives them to reach out to their fellow people. Stressing the perception of a shared ethnic identity points towards the group of people, which symbolises being chosen to implement the mission. Much as a steam locomotive engine is powered by steam but directed by rails and a steering mechanism, the Pentecostal mission is driven by the experience of believers being "touched by the Holy Spirit" and encouraged to evangelise (McGee 2001: 73). The target of evangelisation is then directed according to additional factors, one of which is the ethnic background of the missionaries. The Finnish Kale perception of belonging to a similar although not identical, closely related ethnic group is essential to how the mission is implemented. Something else that deserves attention is the interplay between the directing force derived from the feeling of ethnic belonging and the desire to exploit the possibilities for social inclusion provided the egalitarian atmosphere characteristic of the Pentecostal movement. In his study on Romani ethnicity management within a Pentecostal mission in a village in Transylvania, Johannes Ries (2011) examined how for some Roma groups joining the mission is connected to downplaying ethnic differences and stressing social inclusion. Other Roma groups, however, view conversion to Pentecostalism as another way to stress "ethnic exclusiveness" by forming Roma-specific congregations (ibid.: 278).

In the case of the Pentecostal Finnish Kale, within the framework of missionising amongst other Roma groups, their aim is to combine two paths: achieve social inclusion whilst preserving a distinct ethnic identity. Their evangelising message stresses that, by converting, Roma do not stop being Roma, but become "better Roma" (Gripenberg 2019: 24) who are better able to function in society, express their needs and defend their interests. Like the Tigani group in Transylvania, studied by Ries (2011), Finnish Kale view conversion and belonging to a trans-ethnic congregation as an important possibility for social inclusion. The Finnish Kale do not form exclusively Roma congregations, but prefer to practice their faith in mixed congregations formed by the majority population. In part, this stems from the fact that the Kale population of Finland is not that large. The more important reason, however, lies in the desire for integration. Religious groups provide parishioners with a social capital bridge, granting them the possibility to enter professional and other networks within the dominant population (Podolinská

2017: 148; Slavkova 2018: 231). Many converted Kale who were previously unemployed subsequently acquire a professional education and enter the labour market. During that process, they are often supported by fellow believers who are members of the majority population. Whilst amongst the Finnish Kale the Roma identity is not viewed as a sufficient reason to form exclusively Roma congregations, that identity continues to play a central role in their lives. This is the message they convey to their fellow Roma when missionising.

THE ROLE OF MISSIONISING TO MISSIONARIES

The experiences of the Finnish Kale in their relationships with the Estonian Roma in the context of Pentecostal missionising activities can be viewed as empowering and rewarding. Recalling their memories from the 1990s and encounters with the Estonian Roma over several years, many of the participants in my research now entering retirement age spontaneously reacted to their mission work stating that those were the best times of their lives. For several members of the team led by Tino Grönfors, missionising currently in the Baltic countries has become a way of life, such that they describe their mission field as their home, to which they long to return again and again, stating “it was like coming home”. According to Olli Grönfors, that feeling persists for him, even after almost 30 years of work in Estonia and having reached retirement. “When this issue is in the heart, let’s say that one is like a horse, all of time chomping at the bit”, explained Leif Isberg when describing the urge a missionary feels to return to the mission field of their calling (FM: 2020).

Reflecting on the role missionising plays in a missionary’s life, I would like to note the argument presented by Liisa Malkki (2015) with respect to the “relation of self to self”. Malkki has studied Finnish Red Cross aid workers who deployed internationally as well as people engaged in international humanitarian aid projects from their home location, finding that international humanitarian work can also be viewed as a form of self-escape (ibid.: 11). This line of thought offers one explanation for the experience of participants in my research, whereby the years spent missionising the Roma of Estonia were amongst the best times in their lives. Knowing several of these people personally for an extended period of time, in some cases for more than 20 years, granted me an understanding that many of them were facing substantial challenges in their personal lives, regardless of their Pentecostal conviction. This was the 1990s, which was a period of severe financial crisis known as the ‘early 1990s depression’ in Finland. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Finland lost its largest foreign market and the economy tanked, leading to a banking crisis, the devaluation of the currency and an unemployment rate reaching as high as 17%. This period precisely matched the period during which the Finnish Kale mission to Estonia was launched. Like any other community, the Finnish Kale community also has its own struggles, such as difficulties in accessing the labour market, obstacles to acquiring accommodation, kinship feuds, marital problems and, last but not least, substance abuse especially amongst youngsters. My experience from more than 25 years of engagement with Pentecostalism is that conversion often helps to resolve several difficulties. Most often, this results in eliminating destructive habits, improving one’s self-discipline and moving towards positive devel-

opment in terms of education, employment and family planning. At the same time, conversion is not a universal solution for all of life's problems. Witnessing to 'unsaved' converts tends to focus on the positive aspects of their experiences after conversion. This is especially true when missionising takes place far away from home and in unusual surroundings where troubles can be easily ignored.

In my previous research, I described and analysed how being involved with Pentecostalism and especially being in close contact with other Roma groups in these contexts places the Finnish Kale in a new, complicated situation at their local congregations (Gripenberg 2019: 139). Functioning simultaneously in two realities – in the traditional Finnish Kale cultural environment (which is also continuously developing and changing) and the environment of Finnish Pentecostal congregations, especially when foreign Roma groups visit those congregations – may pose challenges. These 'different realities' place conflicting demands on what represents acceptable viewpoints and behaviours (Coleman 2006: 3; Robbins 2010: 648). I argue that among other things missionary trips offer the possibility to spend extended periods of time with likeminded people and to create a more harmonious microenvironment.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Finnish Pentecostal Kale have carried out evangelising, humanitarian and education work amongst the Roma in Estonia and Latvia since the 1990s. Evangelical congregations in Estonia have approached the Finnish Kale for support in their efforts to reach local Estonian Roma on several occasions. The missionising endeavours of the Finnish Kale amongst the Roma of Estonia have been influenced by three major factors: the societal preconditions of the time period in Finland and Estonia, respectively, Pentecostal teachings and spirituality and the perception of a shared ethnic identity. In this work, the primary focus lies at the interplay of ethnic identity and Pentecostal spirituality. In addition, this study addresses the role missionary work plays in the lives of the missionaries.

At the outset of active Finnish Kale missionary work amongst the Roma in Estonia, societal conditions in both countries were affected by the historical events surrounding the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989. In Estonia this event resulted in general political instability and financial insecurity. For the Roma, the loss of traditional occupations and trading opportunities lead to impoverishment and further marginalisation as well as feelings of displacement and deprivation. Simultaneously, there was a distinct increase in the interest of the Estonian population in supernatural experiences both within the frame of traditional Christian congregations as well as new religious movements entering the country. In Finland the period was marked by a severe financial crisis known as the early 1990s depression. This led to a high unemployment rate and even greater difficulties amongst the Roma in finding and maintaining employment. Within this context, the role of religious identity and spirituality as a source of stability and providing purpose and meaning in life were emphasised.

General societal conditions, however, are insufficient to explain the urge of the Finnish Kale to missionise or the desire of the Roma of Estonia to convert. I argue that the

primary driving force to proselytise is found in Pentecostal spirituality, combined with teachings that urge parishioners to evangelise. The interaction between the Finnish Kale and the Roma of Estonia is facilitated by a feeling of belonging and the perception of a shared ethnic identity amongst missionaries. That perception, however, is not based on a commonality of cultural traditions and language. In fact, the cultural traditions and dialects spoken by the Finnish Kale and Russian and Latvian Roma they primarily encounter in Estonia differ significantly. Returning to the title of this work, the Finnish Kale view establishing contact with the Estonian Roma as re-establishing “lost contact with their own people” (FM: 2020). Nevertheless, the sense of a shared ethnic identity directed the driving force of the mission to a specific group of people – in this case, the Estonian Roma – rather than serving as a driving force in and of itself.

An important finding is that the combination of the Roma identity and Pentecostal spirituality and religious belonging is more than the sum of its parts. In fact, the Roma identity alone in practice is rarely sufficient for the Finnish Kale to initiate an interaction. However, in combination with a Pentecostal or another charismatic Christian identity, the Roma identity becomes a uniting factor prompting the Kale to reach out to other Roma groups. Conversion to Pentecostalism alters the Kale identity so that converts envision themselves as becoming better Roma. Some of the Kale cultural traditions viewed as negative or inappropriate by the ‘children of God’ are abandoned, whilst others are reformulated possessing the same outwards expressions, but now carrying different reasoning. Roma identity continues to play a central role in the lives of Finnish Kale missionaries, which is also the message that they bring to the people amongst whom they missionise. They encourage new converts to preserve and improve their ethnic identity and exclusivity. Preserving Roma cultural traditions is also viewed as necessary in upholding the connection to kin. In practicing their Pentecostal Christianity, the Finnish Kale place a strong emphasis on social integration. For that reason, they prefer to engage with trans-ethnic congregations established by the dominant population. The Roma ethnic identity is not viewed as a sufficient reason to initiate exclusively Roma churches.

Missionary work plays an important, often central role in the lives of missionaries. In several cases it can be viewed as a form of self-escape as characterised by Malkki (2015: 11). Proselytising far away from home provides an opportunity to take a break from mundane difficulties and focus on the positive aspects of one’s life experience post-conversion. Thus missionising can also serve as an attempt to create a more harmonious microenvironment within the framework of the missionary team.

NOTES

1 For more detailed information on the distinctive culture of the Finnish Kale, see Viljanen 2012.

2 Anette Ross in personal communication 26/11/2020.

3 For similar experiences, see Wacker 1982; Chesnut 1997: 167; Holston 1999: 613; Owens 2001: 47 and Hunt 2002.

4 All of the interviewees were willing to participate in this research using their real names.

5 Võru is the capital of Võru County in southern Estonia, with a population of about about 12,000.

6 Life and Light is an organisation established in 1964 by Herta and Einar Virio under the name of the Finnish Free Romani Mission (*Suomen Vapaa Romanilähetys*). This organisation was launched in cooperation with the Finnish Pentecostal Baptist and Free Church. Subsequently, the name of the organisation was changed to Life and Light in order to connect it to the international Romani revival founded by Le Cossec in France (Thurfjell 2013: 42).

7 According to the Bible, Jacob had 12 sons, each one the antecedent to one of the 12 tribes of Israel. The land of Israel was divided between these tribes. According to historian Tudor Parfitt (2002), ten of the tribes disappeared from history centuries before Christ. However, the Bible promises that they will be reunited upon the final redemption of the people of Israel. This story has been offered as an explanation for the origins of several peoples around the world.

SOURCES

FM = Fieldwork material of the author. The materials are in the author's possession.

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