



Book review of Markkanen, Airi and Åberg, Kai (eds.) 2024. *The Culture of the Finnish Roma*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 137 pp.

BOOK REVIEW

MARKKU MATTILA

**Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article.*

HUP HELSINKI
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Edited by Airi Markkanen and Kai Åberg, *The Culture of the Finnish Roma* seeks to address the history of Finnish Roma culture, language and linguistics, and subjectivities and membership, as reflected in the book's main sections. Each of the three sections contains two chapters. In addition, the volume includes a Preface written by the editors and an Epilogue authored by Markkanen. I will introduce the individual chapters somewhat later; first, I will discuss the volume in general.

As a single volume, the book has a very broad focus. The editors state the aim of the book in several ways. According to them, the aim is fourfold: (1) to explore the history and roles of Romani people in Finnish society and community, (2) to analyse the role of gender in Finnish Romani studies, (3) to examine the meaning of the Romani language for Finnish Roma individuals and in linguistics, and (4) to highlight the importance of dialogue between Roma and researchers. In addition, the volume is said to target both academic and lay readers. In the broadest sense, the objective of the book is to bring knowledge of Romani life in general to the 'dominant European societal majorities' (pp. 9–10). Addressing four aims and audiences ranging from academics to a broad European readership is difficult to reconcile within a single volume.

The impression of a fragmented rather than a unified book is reinforced by the volume containing chapters of diverse academic levels, ranging from a master's thesis-based summary (Sirkka Mikkola: 'Finnish Romani Women's Pathway to Work'), to a specialised text by an established academic (Kimmo Granqvist: 'Themes and Methods in Finnish Romani Linguistics'), and to a contribution dealing with the fundamental aspects of Finnish Romani culture, based on over 30 years of fieldwork (Airi Markkanen: 'Travelling with Finnish Roma').

The fragmented character is further highlighted by the inclusion of one article written in a 'life and works' style and another employing an autoethnographic approach to summarise Finnish Romani studies. The former refers to Henry Hedman's chapter 'Romani Language in My Life'. Hedman, a Finnish promoter of Romani culture and

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Markku Mattila

Migration Institute of
Finland, Turku – Seinäjoki –
Vaasa, Finland

[markku.mattila@
migrationinstitute.fi](mailto:markku.mattila@migrationinstitute.fi)

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Mattila M. Book review of Markkanen, Airi and Åberg, Kai (eds.) 2024. *The Culture of the Finnish Roma*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 137 pp. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*. 2026; 16(4): 8, 1–4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.1221>

language, describes the development of Romani language education in Finland and Sweden. The latter refers to Marko Stenroos's chapter 'A Roma Scholar's Journey into Roma Studies in Finland', in which generations and approaches within Romani studies are reviewed through the lens of the author's academic career.

The observation concerning fragmentation pertains to the coherence of the book as a unified work. It is not, however, a criticism of the quality of individual chapters: the book and its contributions have been peer-reviewed, attesting to their academic standard. Still, for overall unity, it would have helped if the authors had been given stylistic guidelines or if the volume's objectives had been defined more narrowly by the editors.

In addition to the chapters mentioned earlier, the book includes two more. Tuula Rekola and Miika Tervonen summarise the history of the Finnish Roma, offering a good and elaborated synthesis of earlier research. However, I would like to correct one detail. The authors note that, despite the influence of racial theories in official interpretations of the Roma minority, no systematic eugenic policies emerged in the interwar era, meaning between 1918 and 1939 (p. 44). This is largely correct. However, the authors omit that Finnish eugenic policy began with the 1935 sterilisation legislation and continued until 1970. As I have shown (Mattila 2018), Roma, particularly Roma women in the 1950s and 1960s, were targeted under the Sterilisation Act. The systematic nature of the process was reflected in the fact that most 'voluntary' applications came from imprisoned Roma women.

In another chapter, Raluca Bianca Roman writes about the Pentecostal movement and Kale subjectivities in Finnish Roma religiosity. She notes that from the 1960s to 1970s onwards, Finnish Roma began affiliating with Pentecostal and other Evangelical movements (p. 93). I would have welcomed discussion of why Evangelical movements attracted Finnish Roma at that time and why this American-origin movement resonated within a traditionally Lutheran Finnish context. The author argues that Pentecostalism offers Roma hope and assurance beyond immediate circumstances, while also involving uncertainty and doubt (p. 101). While plausible, this interpretation does not fully explain the movement's appeal. Roma people's involvement in Free and Pentecostal congregations has a longer history, which is recognised but not elaborated by the author (p. 97, n. 4).

The book would have benefited from clearer reflection on how the issues discussed relate to Finnish society as a whole, especially given its aim to reach both lay and academic audiences across Europe. I will provide a few examples.

Airi Markkanen writes in the epilogue that, in the early 20th century, Roma families typically had many children (p. 123). Having many children was also typical for other Finnish people of that time. The average total fertility rate of Finnish women in 1900–1910 was nearly five children per woman (calculated from Statistics Finland, Births). Contraception was practically unavailable, and in rural areas, it was used less (e.g. Ritamies 2006). The reality of the time was rather that 'women of the common people mostly have many children whom they would not wish to have' (Suominen 2021: 85). It therefore remains questionable whether the number of children in Roma families was exceptional compared to that of the rest of the common people.

Markkanen continues that many Roma have experience with collective child-rearing, either as former foster children themselves or through foster care within their families (p. 124). This was the case in early modern Finland (c. 1500–1860), where the family

included not only kin but also foster and adopted children, in-resident sons-in-law, dependants under the rota system, and servants living in the household (Vilkuna et al. 2021: 103). The family extended beyond the modern nuclear family (Ilmakunnas & Lahtinen 2021: 13–15).

Several chapters highlight a hierarchical social order within the Roma community, prioritising men over women and elders over younger members. This resembles the social order prescribed in the New Testament household code, as reflected in Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* (1529). The code placed the husband at the top, followed by the wife, younger family members, and servants, while older members were accorded respect (e.g. Hanska et al. 2010: 13). This order was instilled in the Finnish people through compulsory Lutheran education and sermons (e.g. Laine & Laine 2010), and it began to dissolve from around the 1860s onwards (e.g. Vainio-Korhonen 2010). One of its last remnants was the husband's legal guardianship over his wife, abolished by the Marriage Act of 1929 (e.g. Pykkänen 2009).

Considering these examples, it appears that the so-called 'traditional' Roma culture and way of life include features that were once common throughout agrarian Finnish society but gradually disappeared by the Second World War. It seems that, while the rest of Finland transitioned into the modern industrial world, some traits of the 'old agrarian world' persisted within Roma culture. The relationship between 'traditional' Roma culture and old Finnish agrarian culture, and its longer survival within the Roma community, would merit deeper research in the future.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Markku Mattila

Migration Institute of Finland, Turku – Seinäjoki – Vaasa, Finland

REFERENCES

- Hanska, J., Vainio-Korhonen, K. and Rahikainen, M. 2010. 'Johdanto: Säädynmukaisen kasvatuksen ja koulutuksen aika', in J. Hanska and K. Vainio-Korhonen (eds.) *Huoneentaulun maailma: Kasvatus ja koulutus Suomessa keskiajalta 1860-luvulle*. Helsinki: SKS, pp.12–16.
- Ilmakunnas, J. and Lahtinen A. 2021. 'Perheen jäljillä keskiajalta nykypäivään', in J. Ilmakunnas and A. Lahtinen (eds.) *Perheen jäljillä*. Tampere: Vastapaino, pp. 11–29.
- Laine, E.M. and Laine T. 2010. 'Kirkollinen kansanopetus', in J. Hanska and K. Vainio-Korhonen (eds.) *Huoneentaulun maailma: Kasvatus ja koulutus Suomessa keskiajalta 1860-luvulle*. Helsinki: SKS, pp. 258–306.
- Mattila, M. 2018. 'Sterilization Policy and Gypsies in Finland', *Romani Studies*, 28(1), pp. 109–139. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3828/rs.2018.5>.
- Pykkänen, A. 2009. *Trapped in Equality: Women as Legal Persons in the Modernisation of Finnish Law*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society.

- Ritamies, M.** 2006. *Sinappikylvystä ehkäisy pilleriin: Suomalaisen perhesuunnittelun historia*. Helsinki: Väestöliitto, Väestöntutkimuslaitos. Available at: <https://www.vaestoliitto.fi/uploads/2020/12/40915a62-suomal-perhesuunnittelun-historia-pdf-kirja.pdf>.
- Statistics Finland, Births. Available at: https://pxdata.stat.fi/PxWeb/pxweb/fi/StatFin/StatFin__synt/statfin_synt_pxt_12dt.px.
- Suominen, R.** 2021. 'Liikaa vai liian vähän lapsia? Naisten reproduktiotoiveet ja pyrkimykset 1900-luvun alun Suomessa', in **M. Kaihovirta and T. Lintunen (eds.)** *Työväki ja seksi: Aatteet, normit ja kokemukset*. Helsinki: Työväen historian ja perinteen tutkimuksen seura, pp. 85–122. Available at: <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://trepo.tuni.fi/handle/10024/218870>.
- Vainio-Korhonen, K.** 2010. 'Huoneentaulun maailma tiensä päässä', in **J. Hanska and K. Vainio-Korhonen (eds.)** *Huoneentaulun maailma: Kasvatus ja koulutus Suomessa keskiajalta 1860-luvulle*. Helsinki: SKS, pp. 356–357.
- Vilkuna, K.H.J., Hemminki, T., Markkola, P. and Östman, A.-C.** 2021. 'Kotitalouden rajat varhaismodernin ajan yhteiskunnassa', in **P. Markkola, M. Niemi and P. Haapala (eds.)** *Suomalaisen yhteiskunnan historia 1400–2000, osa 2: Yhteisöt ja identiteetit*. Tampere: Vastapaino, pp. 99–122.

Mattila M
Nordic Journal of Migration Research
 DOI: 10.33134/njmr.1221

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Mattila M. Book review of Markkanen, Airi and Åberg, Kai (eds.) 2024. *The Culture of the Finnish Roma*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 137 pp. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*. 2026; 16(4): 8, 1–4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.1221>

Submitted: 3 March 2026

Accepted: 14 September 2026

Published: 28 October 2026

COPYRIGHT:

© 2026 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons NonCommercial-NoDerivatives Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0), which permits unrestricted distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, the material is not used for commercial purposes and is not altered in any way. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

Nordic Journal of Migration Research is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press.