

Latscho diewes baxhtale, hello everyone. Welcome to our lesson on „Romani Identity.“ Today, we will explore what identity means, why identity is such an important topic for Romani people and why we need to invest in exploring and modeling our own identity in order to create perspectives for marginalized groups. Our approach to identity is not finite.

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It will rather be an approximation to what identity is, what identity can be or could be. Identity is a complex topic, it is not simple.

The reason for identity not being simple is that nobody owns just one identity, but rather an unique composition of many identities that make a person an individual.

You, as a human, do have many identities through the factors that played a part in you becoming who you are. The factors that shape your self are for example socialization, history, cultural heritage, your individual experiences and interests, our values, limits, senses and many, many more factors.

Identity has enormous power. To know who we are helps us feel empowered and self-conscious when being faced with challenges in our daily lives.

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Identity has the power to bring people together as much as it has the power to divide groups of people. Identity can be a tool to bring us closer to other people who we share one or more parts of our identity with.

If we respect the parts of other peoples identities that we do not share and instead of de-valuing them for being different from us, cherish those parts equally to how we want our identity to be cherished and respected, identity helps us forming community and bonds of solidarity.

Putting a value-label on other peoples identities is what causes division, violence and eventually pain. In a world where all humans are equals, there is no need to label peoples different identities with different values, because all human lives share the same value in their entirety.

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Romani Identity is a very sensitive and special subject. The label „Romani“ is nothing but a meaningless umbrella-term to those whose identity we seek to define by it, as Romani groups are so very heterogenous and diverse. Sinti, Manouche, Kalderash, Romungre, Travellers, Romanichal, Kale, Beasch, Ashkali, Domari are just a few of hundreds and thousands other labels for Romani people that they may or may not identify with. How can it even be possible to find a common denominator inside of the manifold groups that are among themselves as diverse and different from each other as they are to all the other people on this planet?

In fact, identity plays a huge factor in what united all Romani groups in one way or the other, just different from the many approaches that there have been until today.

Without defining the particular content of Romani identity, it can be observed to be true for the vast majority of Romani groups, that they share to variable degrees an experience of identity-loss. Usually this loss of identity has been caused by violence, although the experience of violence for each group or even individual is an unique one. The violence can have been experienced in form of forced assimilation, pressure to hide their identity for safety-concerns, persecution, oppression or obliteration, as well as other forms of violence.

Also, nearly all known groups have in one form or the other preserved fractions of cultural heritage of their origin, may it be in shared language or fragments of language or may it be in shared traditions, values or other parts of cultural heritage.

What one could call a „very Romani experience“ is indeed the complete loss of identity, which is a regular observation in different groups that are known to be of Romani heritage. It is no surprise that the partial or complete loss of identity leads to an observable struggle to define what Romani-Identity is. You could say: Not knowing what exactly Romani-Identity is part of Romani-Identity.

Last but not least it goes without further notice that Romani people are intersectional characters.

Starting with the female Leaders of Romani communities to those people who consider themselves to be part of the LGBTIQ+-Movement, Afro-Sinti, Yewish Roma, Romani people who are autistic or otherwise body- and neurodiverse: To have an intersectional identity and, thus, being prone to be affected by multiple forms of discrimination, is not an exception but the norm for Romani people.

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Romblog Academy will not give a final answer to what Romani Identity is, neither can anybody else but the Romani people themselves. We want to encourage you and to assist you in exploring what Romani identity can or could mean for yourself to feel empowered, bold and strong.

We have started to create a platform to bring visibility to the intersectional realities of Romani people, thus we highlight and celebrate our diversity.

We do not define Romani identity by doing so, but rather give people who identify as Romani people a platform to speak for themselves on what is Romani identity. For this, we are regularly updating our page and embed Romani peoples public work, posts, videos here. Sometimes we will label them randomly to make it a bit clearer in a visual way how intersectionality works. If you feel you, your work or someone you know is missing here, please contact us.

We only exemplarily embedded peoples visuals here. We strongly recommend you to explore the activists behind the tagged posts and videos further on your own.

While we will gladly add whoever feels missing, we will not remove posts, videos or linked personalities just because somebody feels like they are not appropriately representing Romani identity. Every Romani person is defining what it means to be Romani in their own right. Each definition, each representation is equal.

This space is no space for white gaze. If you are a white person who happened to stumble across our page and is looking for nothing but validation of prejudice and stereotypes, we kindly ask you to leave and take those things with you. This space is not yours to judge.

As we know that there will be interested Gadge people looking here anyway, feel welcomed if you are ready to question what you think you know about who Romani people are, what they look like, what they do, what they dream of.

Last but not least, there is a group of Romani people missing here, but not because we want to hide them. There is poor Romani people, a lot of them. There is Romani people who are obviously bodily-impaired and living in poverty, living in bad housing-conditions, basically not even living a life worthy to be called life, but surviving on the worst possible health conditions.

Romani-people in precarious conditions are regularly shown on White media and exposed to the violent, judgmental white gaze of Gadje. We are not ashamed of our fellow Romani people, we do not hide you. But we will not sell out their dignity and portray them here to have their suffering consumed by the world another time. You will not see Romani peoples trauma-porn for your consumption here. We, the Romani people, are well aware of that and do not need to be reminded that these conditions do exist, in fact, you will see people here that have grown-out of surviving and started living thanks to their own hard work.

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Who is part of the Romani-community and who is not? This question has been hard on our communities for decades. We are torn between our value out of pure logic not to gate-keep, as gate-keeping the community will in one or the other way not only keep out Gadje, but Romani people as well. As it was elaborated earlier, identity-loss is a big part of Romani identity. How can we distinguish between a Romani person that has lost their identity and is indeed of Romani heritage, suffering all the disadvantages and impediments that come through a history of oppression in ones family and a Gadje person that pretends to be of Romani origin in order to gain access to the little identity, the little resources the communities have?

In order to create perspectives for Romani people and to power progressive dynamics, we have to ensure that Romani people do have safe spaces that are free of violence, which also means to be free of a white gaze, white spectators, white feelings being centered, white violence in any form. Thus, there is a need to keep Gadje out of Romani spaces, we need to gate-keep the spaces we particularly create for ourselves, although that means that some Romani people will be gate-kept as well as long as there is no solution for the dilemma.

The criteria for representation we recommend and implemented on this page are the following:

Romani people who can authentically represent Romani identity are those who a) openly self-identify their identity or one part of their identity to be of Romani origin b) those who are well-connected to the national and/or international Romani activists community and known to be of a trustworthy reputation regarding their heritage and c) thus likely experienced socialization as a Romani person consciously or subconsciously, the latter by the means of people who grew-up lost of their identity and re-connected later in life.

It is necessary to look twice on identity as a factor for emancipatory work for Romani groups to flourish. Wherever there are resources that are exclusive for Romani people to even out inequalities, there will be white people who suddenly remember that they had a Romani grandmother. It is note-worthy to mention at this point that a Romani-person in your family does not qualify you to be of Romani heritage if you lived all your life off on white privilege. Also, you can literally have zero genetic Romani heritage and be a Romani person, because you were socialized as a Romani person, which is common for children who were adopted by Romani families as small children.

You will never have white people lining-up to be Romani when it comes to living in poverty and segregated settlements, though.

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As we are talking about privileges, we will finalize our little digression on identity by reflecting on the differences between Romani groups. Not only are there cultural or historical differences in their identities, but privilege plays a huge role in the identities of Romani people. While from the perspective of white society Romani groups in their entirety are dehumanized to a point where there is no observable difference from the outside, in our communities we need to become aware of the principles of unequal distributions of power, access to resources and other factors that give us a more or less undeserved benefit compared to other Romani people or equally marginalized groups.

We need to do so in order to be capable of Romani Leadership by the means of leading by example, which must mean to acknowledge the differences in a respectful manner that aims to even out the inequalities among ourselves and others in an exemplary manner. Through sharing the privileges certain groups or individuals among us bear, we contribute to the empowerment and success of all of us and to the progress of general society towards a future where people are no longer artificially segregated by value by the means of their group-identity.

The wheel of privileges as an incomplete, yet easily-comprehensible guide to understand how intersectionality not only burdens certain groups and individuals with multiple marginalization, but how those who are unaffected acquire privileges that they can share with others who were not as fortunate as themselves.

I hope that you liked our lesson on identity. Feel invited to share the video and discuss its content with others. Your questions and thoughts on identity are welcomed as well. Thank you for listening! Mer dika men o wawar diwes! See you soon!