



PALM READING AND LOOKING AT THE PAST TO UNDERSTAND THE PRESENT. A CRITICAL REVIEW OF *CIGANOS: HISTÓRIA, IDENTIDADE E CULTURA* (2018)

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1. INTRODUCTION

The book *Ciganos: História, Identidade e Cultura* offers a fascinating and mysterious perspective on the journey of the Roma people throughout history, from the Iberian Peninsula to the point where the author directs her focus and research to Roma communities and groups in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The edition is meticulously crafted and presented by Editora Fi in 339 pages.

Débora Soares Karpowicz holds a Ph.D. in History from PUC Rio Grande do Sul, a master's degree in History also from PUC Rio Grande do Sul, and conducted research related to the history of the Madre Pelletier women's prison in Porto Alegre for her doctoral studies. In her master's thesis, the subject of her theoretical-empirical dissertation is the present publication, *Ciganos: História, Identidade e Cultura*, which explores the history of the Roma and their presence in the territory of Rio Grande do Sul.

In the introductory part, the researcher declares the methodological perspective, emphasizing the importance of the interview technique to delve into the Roma world, demonstrating a thorough understanding of the theme she will explore in her work.

2. CHAPTERS OF THE BOOK

In Chapter 1, the author discusses the bibliography in Brazil, Portugal, and worldwide about the origins of the Roma. From hints of ancient texts referring to them as Egyptians to linguistic studies indicating their origin in the Indian subcontinent, ethnographic and anthropological studies traverse the troubled history of a people struggling to maintain their cultural identity but persecuted as an ethnic and sociocultural entity distinct from the civilizations around them: "The purity of languages and races is emphasized by the theorists of the time. New scientific conclusions will highlight the inequalities and inferiority of some, to the detriment of the superiority of others" (Karpowicz, 2018, p. 79).

This discrimination which, as the author reports, extended from exile and even death in the case of non-emigration to enslavement in some countries, is a constant in Brazilian historiography, from the colonial period, with the presence of the Inquisition in Bahia and Sergipe, for example, to the Imperial period, where the presence of Roma or "canarinho" blood was researched to prevent the granting of noble titles (Mott, 2013). Karpowicz (2018) succinctly summarizes this situation of pain and hardship:

Studies on migrations show that the waves of people who circulated in search of better conditions or fleeing governmental or religious reprisals often lacked documentation or, in many cases, when they had documents, they were false (Karpowicz, 2018, p. 71).

These absurdities, characteristic of a civilized humanity struggling to deal with the complexity of cultural differences, are the same outrageous disparities that led Nazism to arrogantly proceed with the Holocaust of Jews, Roma, homosexuals, and Jehovah's Witnesses.



In Chapter 2, drawing from rich records of 19th-century travel literature in Brazil, the author develops a historical description of Roma groups and their involvement in the slave trade in the Brazilian Empire.

The description portrays the Roma as an element marginalized from the stereotyped social standard, indicating European ethnocentrism imposing an ideal societal model:

To analyze the appearance of these groups from the perspective and representations of travelers is, in a way, to analyze the construction of the Roma identity itself since we understand the construction of identity based on differences with the “other.” Thus, to become aware of our culture, it is necessary to confront ourselves with other cultures (Karpowicz, 2018, p. 110).

The ending of this chapter takes on a somewhat descriptive tone from the wise authors of travel records. The author could have delved a bit more into the matter of the Roma religion and beliefs from the perspective of these authors, comparing them with the songs and folklore of that people.

In Chapter 3, Karpowicz (2018) introduces the theme to be discussed, addressing the ethnocentrism that involves labeling and discriminating due to the inability to understand a worldview diverse from the Eurocentric paradigm:

“From a historical perspective, studies on Roma denounce a process of constant cultural clashes and social exclusion. A significant problem in understanding what it means to ‘be Roma’ is unraveling the multicultural mosaic that often amounts to nothing more than a construction of the imagination of non-Roma” (Karpowicz, 2018, p. 129).

This discussion about the perception of Roma culture disrupts the dynamics of interaction between different peoples and cultures, maintaining the reader’s interest. The now-real description of groups residing and working in tents is accompanied by photos, capturing one’s attention. Moving from more theoretical sections to visually witnessing the group’s routine through photographic records, the flat fields of Rio Grande do Sul in Alvorada and Gravataí evoke the Asian prairies where the ancestors of the Roma wandered.

Describing the main denominations or branches of Roma in what the author calls “unity in diversity,” Karpowicz (2018) presents the groups ‘Calon,’ ‘Rom,’ and ‘Sinti,’ which, according to the author, “do not speak the same language, not all live in camps, not all light fires and read fortunes, yet all identify themselves as ‘Roma’” (p. 143). And so, Chapter 3 concludes, weaving an analysis of various aspects of domestic economy, clothing, customs, to understand what it means to ‘be’ Roma.

Chapter 4 presents the methodology and results of an interesting field research conducted with the aim of gathering the perceptions of Brazilians about the Roma people and the perceptions of the Roma people about Brazilians:

Brazilians and Roma, of which, regarding the former, there was a reproduction of stereotypes or distorted representations of the Roma, an aspect already evident in the study of travelers’ accounts. Therefore, although a significant number of Brazilians claim to know Roma traditions, this knowledge is based on common sense, and the constructed images are remnants of age-old stereotypes transmitted through oral accounts (Karpowicz, 2018, p. 227).

The work concludes, the result of Karpowicz’s short master’s dissertation period, with curiosity on the status of the Roma in other states of the Federation, from north to south and from east to west in the vastness of these varied regions of Brazil.



3. CONCLUSION

In this critical review, the author and her work were presented to contextualize the reader. Subsequently, the themes were introduced chapter by chapter, from the history of the Roma's pilgrimage in the world to their arrival in Brazil and specifically to Rio Grande do Sul.

The author conducted extensive bibliographic research, meticulous document analysis, and qualitative research using in-depth semi-structured interviews, providing a wealth of data on such a captivating and important subject for understanding the Roma people.

Although, in the author's words, *the work does not intend to exhaust the subject*, the reading of *Ciganos: História, Identidade e Cultura* manages to take the reader from the origins of Roma traditions, with their Ibero-American presence, to the contemporary era, walking through the streets and fields of Rio Grande do Sul.

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DECLARAÇÃO ÉTICA

CONFLITO DE INTERESSE: Nada a declarar. **FINANCIAMENTO:** Nada a declarar.



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