

UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN  
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES



# Bottle Hunters

An Ethnography of Law and Life Among  
Homeless Roma in Copenhagen

PHD THESIS 2018 | CAMILLA IDA RAVNBØL

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## **An Ethnography of Law and Life Among Homeless Roma in Copenhagen**

Camilla Ida Ravnbøl | PhD Thesis

Supervisor: Inger Sjørslev  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Copenhagen

*The photos in the thesis are taken by the author with the consent of the Roma women and men*

*Cover photo: "Hunting" bottles at the annual Roskilde music festival in Denmark*

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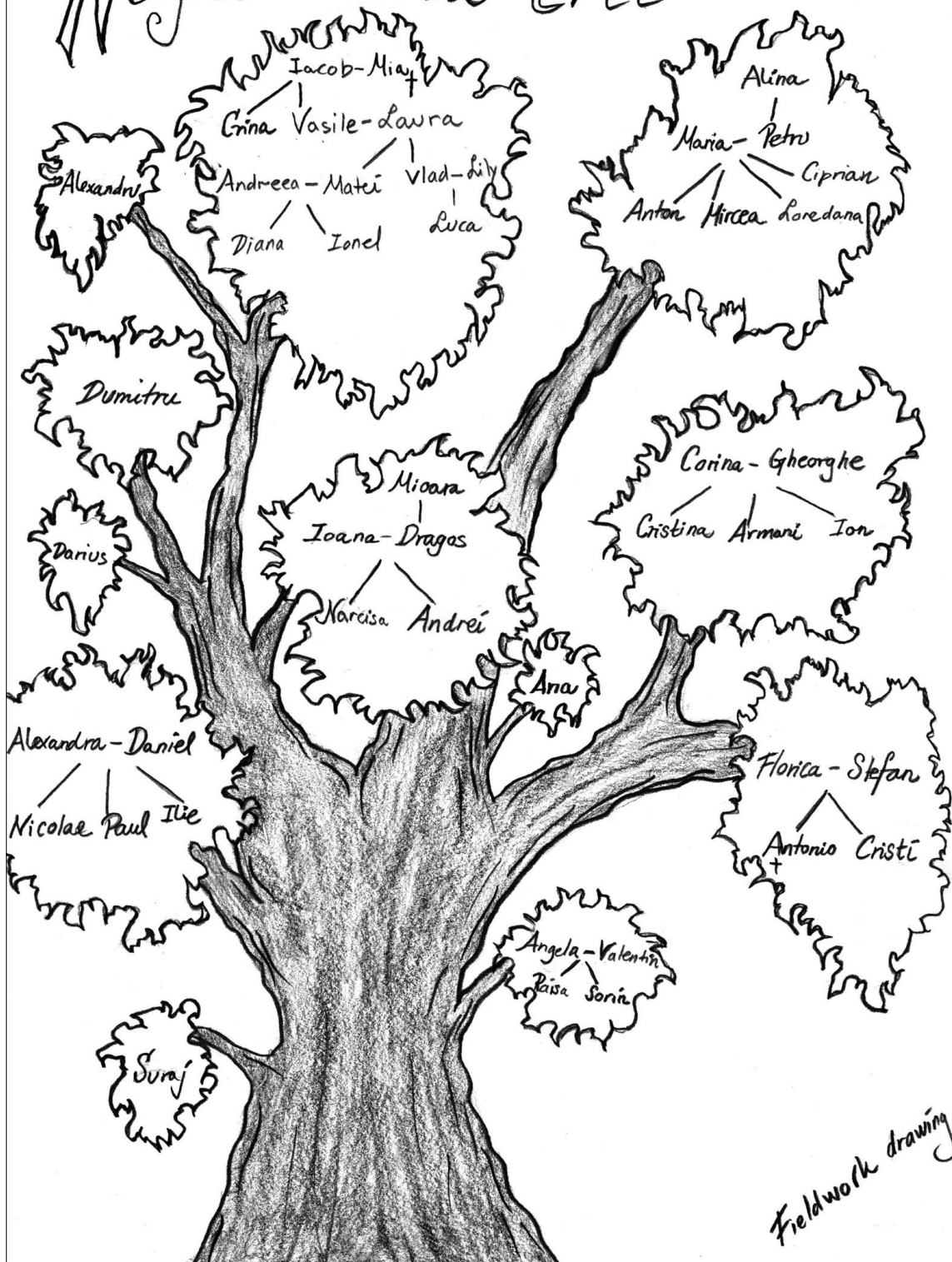
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# Neighbourhood tree





# Chapter one

## Introduction



*Photo taken on the request of a Roma man. In his words, he wanted me to show to the world how homeless Roma live in Copenhagen, including when they sleep roughly. It is late November and he sleeps on top of cardboard paper to insulate himself from the cold ground. A bag of refundable bottles and cans sits next to him.*



## Introduction

*Who makes the laws?  
May they have only sorrow  
They do not think of the children  
As without their mother they grow up*

*This is what I said good mother  
That I will go to work between foreigners for a month  
So for the holidays at home  
We have what to put on the table*

*Cine face legile?  
Calce-i supărărite  
La copii nu se gândesc  
Că fără mama lor cresc*

*Aşa-am zis maicuţă bună  
Că lucru-n străini o lună  
Şi de sărbători acasă  
Avem ce pune pe masă*

*(Excerpt of Romanian song "Who makes the laws" (Cine face legile) by Paula Pasca)*

It is a late winter evening in a centrally located neighbourhood in Copenhagen, Denmark. The voice of a young man, Costi, resonates in a high-pitch and vibrating tone as he interprets a Romanian folk song "*Who makes the laws*" in a slow and plaintive rendition. His eyes are half-closed and his upper lip trembles as he performs a vibrato at the end of every second strophe. Costi's voice is soft and slightly out of tune, and yet it leaves a stark silence in the cold winter air as he ends the final verse. Just a few blocks away from Costi, a married couple called Maria and Petru sleeps underneath a half-roof of an office building. They have wrapped themselves in warm blankets and lie on top of cardboard paper to insulate themselves from the frozen ground. Their personal belongings and plastic bags containing empty refundable bottles are stacked on top of an old stroller next to them. Around the corner from where Costi sings, a group of women and men stand outside a social café, which offers free meals to the homeless in Copenhagen. They are wrapped in multiple layers of clothing and have bags of refundable bottles placed at their feet. They shudder slightly in the cold and their breaths resemble thin clouds in the dimmed light from the street lamps. Tonight the group is engaged in a heated discussion. A woman furrows her eyebrows and asks me "*Why are the police always chasing us?*". A man exclaims angrily "*And why will no one hire us or rent us a place to live in?*". He then supplements his question with a sarcastic comment "*Oh, so you are from Romania - no no, not here, go home!*". The group laughs a brief and equally sarcastic laughter. For lack of a more substantive reply, I comment that it seems to be difficult for the Romanian migrants to earn a livelihood in Copenhagen. "*We are not migrants!*" (*Nu suntem migranţi!*), exclaims a middle-aged man called Vasile, who sleeps on a street corner a few blocks away from where we stand. Vasile sends me a sharp look and continues in a harsh tone of voice: "*Migrants are those from Africa and the Middle*

*East. We are in the European Union and we are EU citizens!*“ (*Suntem în Uniunea Europeană și suntem cetățeni ai UE*).

Costi, Maria, Petru, and Vasile are some of the Romanian Roma whom I met in Copenhagen between 2014 and 2018. They come from Romania, which is a member state of the European Union (EU). They also belong to the Roma minority, who constitute the largest ethnic minority population in Romania and in the EU as a whole.<sup>1</sup> Roma are however also among the poorest populations in Europe, and in the country of Romania: 70% of the Roma live below the national at-risk-of poverty threshold.<sup>2</sup> The Roma whom I followed in my fieldwork live in conditions of poverty in a segregated Roma neighbourhood located on the margins of a larger city in Romania. When they migrate to Denmark and settle in Copenhagen, they live in homelessness and sleep roughly in the city's side streets or in green areas. They primarily earn revenue from the deposit of refundable bottles and cans that they locate outside the nightclubs and in the garbage bins across the city. These Roma women and men call themselves “badocari”, which is a self-defined plural term that relates to their economic occupation with refundable bottles in Copenhagen. Badocari directly translates to “bottle people,” since it originates from the Romanian word “bottle” used by this group (badoaca).<sup>3</sup>

As I joined the badocari in their everyday lives in the streets of Copenhagen and in their many travels back to their homes in Romania, I learned that they are the protagonist of the folk song “*Who makes the laws*” (*Cine face legile*) that Costi sings on that cold winter evening. They constitute mothers and fathers who leave their children behind in Romania in order to provide for their families by working abroad. I also learned that the questioning of what the law is, and of who makes the law, is not only central to Costi's song but also elemental to the everyday practices, reflections and experiences of the badocari. In fact, I learned that the emic category of badocari, to which this group of women and men identify, emerges from and reflects their relationship with the law.

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<sup>1</sup> Roma constitute the largest ethnic minority population in Europe with an estimated 10-12 million. An estimated 6 million live within the European Union (EU), with largest concentrations in Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary. “Roma” is an international umbrella term to encompass groups who identify as being: Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari, Balkan Egyptians, Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal) as well as people who identify themselves as Gypsies (FRA <http://fra.europa.eu/en/project/2018/roma-and-travellers-survey-2018>).

<sup>2</sup> “The at-risk-of-poverty rate is the share of people with an equivalised disposable income (after social transfers) below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold, which is set at 60 % of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers” (FRA report 2016:14).

<sup>3</sup> According to interviews with the Romanian historians Petre Petcuț and Mariana Sandu, “badoaca” originates from the term *badarca*, which refers to a large bottle/container used as wine deposit in the past. In some regions, “badoaca” is still in use (incl. among my interlocutors) but the most common term for bottles in Romania is “sticle”.

## Aim and arguments

I present the above glimpses of street encounters with the badocari by way of introduction to the central concern in this thesis; namely to investigate how the homeless Romanian Roma, who work with refundable bottles, experience and respond to the legalities that influence their everyday lives. I define legalities as written law and practices related to the implementation of written law.<sup>4</sup> I argue that the self-defined and self-ascribed term badocari is not only a reference to an economic occupation relating to bottle refund deposit but in fact emerges from, and reflects, the relationship that these women and men have with legalities in Denmark and in Romania. It also reflects ethical norms concerning the persons that they aspire to be in this relationship with the law respectively. In this thesis, I therefore approach badocari not only as an emic and self-ascribed category of identification but also as an analytical category. I scrutinise how and why this group of women and men use the term badocari to define themselves and the meanings and practices that they associate with the term. I argue that badocari emerges as a form of collective social identification shaped in relationship with the law, including in response to legal structures in society and ethical norms associated with lawfulness. For example, Vasile in the above points to an important aspect of how the law influences his self-perception when he points out that he is an EU citizen and not a migrant from outside the EU. In other words, he regards himself as a rights-holding subject according to EU law. However, as Vasile's group of friends exclaim in the above, they also share a range of concerns about limited access to rights as EU citizens once the law reaches street level, in a very literal sense. As I will show over the course of the coming pages, critical notions of being included or excluded from rights-holding categories constitute one aspect of how my interlocutors shape their self-perceptions as badocari in response to the legal subjects that they become. Other aspects of central importance to how the badocari are shaped include moral reflections on the social subjects that they aspire to be in their relationship to others in the Copenhagen street milieu; in the Roma neighbourhood in Romania and in their relations with close kin at home (especially their children). In these reflections, ethical norms of lawfulness and religiosity are complexly intertwined with moral obligations and personal moral concerns about being a "clean" and socially responsible individual.

I illustrate how badocari is a form of social identification in relation to the law that is based on a certain set of practices (bottle refund work), which also ties into how my interlocutors shape their subjectivities, since it is based on a range of ethical norms that influence their personal

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<sup>4</sup> Including national legislation such as the Constitution, statutory law, and regulatory law in Denmark as well as transnational legislation such as European Union law (Rosenkjær et al. 2002).

moral strivings (Mattingly 2012; Das 2012). In this context, I am inspired by Sherry Ortner's approach to subjectivity, which she defines as a cultural and historical consciousness that should be analysed "*both as the states of mind of real actors embedded in the social world and as cultural formations that (at least partially) express, shape, and constitute those states of mind*" (Ortner 2005:34,46). This perspective allows me to understand the relationship that my interlocutors have with the social world and particularly to the forms of power that saturate their everyday lives (Ortner 2005:46). Such relations and forms include the legal framework of free mobility within the EU; Danish national legislation; citizens' rights in the nation state of Romania; norms of social conduct within the Danish street milieu and within the local Roma neighbourhood; and finally moral obligations towards close kin. I illustrate how the particular decision to become badocari – persons who collect refundable bottles – is of high ethical importance to my interlocutors since it is a *legal* form of earning a livelihood. At the same time, the occupation generates inadequate revenue to mitigate their families' poverty. In this way, I argue that the badocari category is an extremely fragile construction since it is constantly under pressure to change due to economic concerns. The category is also fragile because it is based on moral ideals that are difficult, and for many impossible, to maintain over the long-term, and moreover because the legal structures that it is shaped in relation to are continuously altered to limit the presence of homeless EU citizens in Denmark.

More precisely, over the arc of the thesis I illustrate how the badocari women and men relate moral concerns to a cultural formation that takes shape through legal, political and economic structures. This includes circumstances where they experience both inclusion and exclusion from different legal subject categories in EU law and in national legislation in Denmark and in Romania. The badocari are "rights-holding "EU citizens" but experience these as a "solitary" right to travel without corresponding rights to create a viable livelihood in one location. Rather, free mobility rights translate into a moral obligation to provide for their children by way of travelling abroad to work. According to EU law, the badocari eventually become rights-denied "inactive subjects" yet they are simultaneously "hyper-active subjects" in Copenhagen's street economy. In their encounters with the Danish police, the badocari are approached as undesirable "criminal subjects" which is a category the badocari explicitly reject as morally "dirty" and "anti-social." These women and men are critical of their low social status as badocari and envy the economic status of other social actors who engage in criminal activities. Yet they strive towards the moral ideals that they ascribe to being badocari, who in their eyes are morally and legally "clean" although they are physically dirty from living on the street. The category of badocari thereby emerges as moral ideal type: a socially responsible caretaker of close kin and legitimate citizen in the eyes of God and of