



The Struggle for the Control of Identity

by Ian Hancock

In the ongoing debate over what it means to be a Rom, one person's definition of Romani history, image, and identity is another's distortion.

Nine or ten of us were sitting in a semicircle on folding chairs, beer bottles in hand, glad that it wasn't any one of us who had the responsibility of keeping the 30-pound pig turning over the coals under the blazing Texas sun. That obligation belonged to the young boys.

The conversation was about two movies with Gypsy characters that had shown in 1996 in cinemas all across America: the adaptation of Stephen King's *Thinner* and Walt Disney's cartoon version of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The responses were varied. One person was angry and suggested that legal action should be taken against the hurtful stereotyping. He wanted to know whether they'd dare make such films about any other minority population. Someone else said it wasn't worth worrying about, because the characters depicted were nothing at all like real Gypsies. Someone else said he enjoyed both films simply as entertainment and didn't make a connection with any experience in his own life. Overall, the older men were less upset by the films than the younger men. Their point was that Romani life was so far removed from that of the *gadje* (non-Roma) that it didn't matter what they thought. Several of the younger men disagreed.

The discussion gradually turned to the question of where we had originally come from, our status as a "legitimate" ethnic minority, and whether we were really recognized as such by the U.S. government. And we talked about Roma as a world population and about numbers. One estimate of 40 million was proposed, which pleased everybody, but when it came to what the total was for America, the generally acknowledged figure of about 1 million was challenged on the grounds that not everybody really qualified, because a good many of those people called *Gypsies* were not actually Roma but *Bayash*-a cover-term for the various non-Romani-speaking American groups, including the *Romanichals*, the *Bashalde*, and the *Romungre*, besides the actual *Bayash* themselves.

The talk at that *slava* (saint's day feast) in May highlighted some anomalies: first, that there was no single, acceptable designation that served to include all populations who define themselves as Romani except a foreign-and for some people a pejorative-"Gypsy"; second, while all Roma were Gypsies, not all Gypsies were Roma; and third, that when it came to estimating how many of us there were globally, those considerations didn't matter if it made us appear to be more numerous. But what particularly stuck in my mind was the pinpointed great dissimilarity between the lowercase "gypsy" of Hollywood and actual Romani people and its repercussions in terms of perceptions of identity.

Prejudice Everywhere

The understanding of the Gypsy identity among the non-Roma is vague, which usually results in prejudice. There are many reasons for that: the association of Roma with the Islamic takeover of parts of the Christian world; color prejudice, specifically the association of darkness with sin; the exclusionary nature of Romani culture, which does not encourage intimacy with non-Roma and creates suspicion on the part of those excluded; fortune-telling, which inspired fear but had to be relied upon as a means of livelihood in response to legislation curtailing Romani movement and choice of occupation; the unchallenged function of the "gypsies" as a population upon which mainstream notions of immorality and lawlessness can be projected and thereby serve to define that mainstream's own boundaries; the fact that Roma have no territorial, military, political, or economic strength and are therefore easily targetable as scapegoats because they cannot retaliate; and the fact that the "gypsy" persona has an-again unchallenged-ongoing function as a symbol of a simpler, freer time, a representation that is becoming more and more attractive in an increasingly complex and regimented world.

Various of these factors have combined over the centuries and in different places to become part of the fabric of the Western world view. People who never met a Gypsy in their lives are nevertheless able to provide a fairly detailed picture of how they think Gypsies look and how they live. Their mental image, partly negative and partly romantic but mostly inaccurate, stems from a Romani identity that has become so institutionalized in Western tradition that it has become part of Western cultural heritage. The racism directed at Romani populations is intrinsically a part of that heritage and therefore is not recognized for what it is. Just as no one would question the fear of trolls or goblins or argue for their rights, the fear of Gypsies likewise goes unchallenged. And although trolls and goblins are never encountered and the six million or so Roma throughout Central and Eastern Europe are highly visible, it is still the storybook and film Gypsy image-not the real population-that people think of.

This re-identification of Gypsies as "images" in the cultural fabric is best illustrated by an interaction between Diane Tong, a scholar visiting Romani populations in the Thessaloniki area of Greece and a local Greek Orthodox priest. After having rallied against racial intolerance in the United States, the priest brushed aside Tong's remark that Greece was similarly bigoted toward its Romani minority by saying that prejudice toward Roma in Greece didn't count; it was a different thing entirely, because "they were only Gypsies." This kind of shocking moral insensitivity on the part of a representative of a church may surprise us, but it is nothing new. The Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches legislated against Roma for centuries; the priest was merely reiterating an attitude rooted in tradition.

Once ideas become institutionalized, they are seldom challenged, and misinformation can easily become the conventional wisdom. This is particularly true in the case of Roma, about whom the most bizarre things have been written and presented as fact. These range from wild statements-such as claims that Gypsies originated on the moon (or in Atlantis); that they have an intrinsic horror of water and washing; or that they have no concept of obligation or danger or ownership-to such self-serving ones as maintaining that Gypsies don't feel pain; that they enjoyed slavery; or that they have no interest in organization, education, or leadership. Jozsef Vekerdí, the most frequently cited Hungarian "expert" on our people, has notoriously relied on this conventional wisdom in his work. The beginning of his 1988 article on "the Gypsy problem" in his country (published in *Hungarian Studies Review*) is highly illustrative:

The Gypsies' ancestors began leaving northwest India probably about the seventh century AD. They are characterized as robbers, murderers, hangmen and entertainers. These professions were prescribed for them by the rules of the Hindu caste system. Thus they belonged to the so-called "wandering criminal tribes" of India and were obliged to lead a parasitic way of life. Among the numerous outcast groups, they occupied the lowest rung on the social scale.

But the Romani origins assumed in it are quite wrong, and the time of the exodus out of India is off by four centuries. His acceptance of a false history is reflected in the scorn that characterizes his writings, and one must wonder whether his scholarly approach would have been more charitable had he known the true history of the Romani people. Racism is everywhere, but when it is expressed in the academic domain, to which policy-makers turn for their information, it acquires tacit institutional acceptance.

Despite the usually evident physical differences and the less obvious but hardly hidden factors of language and culture that distinguish the Romani minority from the surrounding population, administrations have generally classified Roma in terms of social behavior rather than by ethnic or racial distinctiveness. That is again the result of attitudes becoming ingrained before notions of "race" began to take shape in the 19th century. The glaring exception to that method of classification was the Nazi era, when racial considerations provided the rationale for genocidal obliteration.

Hiding Identity

One man taking part in the conversation at the *slava* claimed that the reason he was not upset by the two films was that he believed nobody would associate their content with him because nobody in the non-Gypsy world knew that he was a Gypsy. In fact, he found it amusing that the *gadje* were so excessively ignorant of true Romani identity. I know of very few Roma who weren't warned as children to keep their ethnicity to themselves outside of the community. I was reminded repeatedly at home that telling *gadje* what I was wouldn't help me and would almost certainly have the opposite effect. I was told the same thing by my mentors in the academe, people who thought in all sincerity that they were offering good advice.

In the cases of my mentors, their own negative stereotypes and their desire to help my career were the motivating factors. But the cases of my own family and of my friend, who essentially claimed that he didn't care about anti-Gypsyism because he could pretend to the outside world that he wasn't a Gypsy, reveal an institutionalized response to a deeply rooted racism. The friend's response, however, was atypical in one respect: he did not care about anti-Gypsyism because he could hide his ethnicity. In most cases, however, Roma care very much about anti-Gypsyism while having to hide their identity. For example, I know a successful businessman who asks for all Romnet-a Romani Internet mailing list-messages to be forwarded to him but is quite unwilling to subscribe to or participate on Romnet himself out of fear that his Romani identity could be revealed. That man is a tireless collector of anti-Gypsy press cuttings and lives with a frustration that has no outlet.

Imposed Identity

For a very long time, Gypsy identity has been in the hands of the non-Gypsy specialist, especially politicians and academics, whose ideas about who and what we are have given sustenance to the Gypsy image. Non-Romani folklorists and anthropologists select those aspects of their subjects that they find appealing, while ignoring others for a number of reasons. Some might simply be more attractive or exotic. The extent to which that selectiveness can place the expert in the position of bystander is well illustrated in Susan Lepselter's 1996 article in *Roma* magazine ("The Poetics of Folklore Discourse"). Analyzing the topics covered during a ten-year period embracing the Holocaust (1937 to 1947) in *The Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, the leading publication devoted to Romani studies, she found that the contributions dealt with, inter alia, "Welsh and New York Gypsy life, Hungarian Gypsy fiddlers, linguistic work on the Spanish Gypsy dialect, and Polish Romani vocabulary." She went on to ask "Why would professional Gypsiologists [maintain] an essentially apolitical journal at such a crucial moment in the lives of their subjects? Scholars of Romani culture did not, or could not, vigorously protest the fate of those they studied and befriended. They did not engage in political critique which might have led to action."

Claus Schreiner's introduction to the 1990 U.S. edition of his *Flamenco: Gypsy Dance and Music from Andalusia* shows that the kind of thinking where the real Gypsy experience takes second place to the expert's pet interest is alive and well among Gypsiologists: "Lately a new wave of anti-Gypsyism has reportedly again raised its head in Andalusia. If so, it might prove beneficial for Gypsy-Andalusian flamenco for pressure creates counter-pressure which could well lead to a revitalization of flamenco from within."

Non-Gypsy scholars have always striven to control and define Romani identity. When Gypsy behavior has asserted itself in ways contrary to the specialists' expectations, it has been seen as a shortcoming on the part of the Gypsy. Thus, Alexander Paspati, a 19th century Gypsiologist, claimed that "works published in Europe, several of them even by authors who wrote down what the Gypsies dictated to them, are often inaccurate because of the stupid ignorance of the Gypsies." A century later, Doris Duncan, writing about the difficulties of analyzing the Romani verbal system, attributed this to the fact that the "major problem is that no Gypsy really knows what a verb is." Government officials haven't shied away from using that line of thinking. As *The San Antonio Express* reported in March 1984, a Czechoslovak government spokesman defended his government's program of taking Romani children from their families and placing them in foster homes by saying that it was "the Gypsies' fault for refusing to let their children be civilized."

Because of a history of exclusion of Roma from education and because of cultural restrictions on greater integration of Roma in the mainstream, the Gypsy image has taken on a life of its own and real Romani populations have been administrated and studied through the filter of that image. There is another, more disturbing political aspect to the created identity, which is reflected in the increase in the presentation of the Gypsy as an illiterate, inarticulate buffoon in post-communist Europe. Such characters-played by non-Gypsies-appear in variety shows on television in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and elsewhere. Like the turn-of-the-century black and white minstrels in America, they help maintain a status quo in which Roma are merely figures of fun and are therefore non-threatening.

Image Deconstruction

Only in the past few decades have the Roma been in a position to resist the manipulation of identity. But while we are now beginning to speak out against anti-Gypsyism, we have a long way to go before our voice is taken seriously. Examples abound. When the London-based publisher of Shel Silverstein's 1984 book of children's verse, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, was asked to remove a poem called "The Gypsies are Coming," with its accompanying illustration of a hag-like Gypsy woman with hooked nose, earrings, and scarf carrying a sackful of stolen children over her shoulder, the only concession was that subsequent editions changed the word "Gypsies" to "Googies." The illustration remained. When a British comic publishing company, John Brown Ltd., was asked to remove its 1990 cartoon strip entitled *The Thieving Gypsy Bastards* it replaced it with the sarcastic *The Nice Honest Gypsies*, keeping the offensive cartoon characters. The producers of the films *Thinner* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* didn't respond to a single request for fairness and accuracy from Romani organizations, at least six of which wrote to them while the films were still in production.

In order for things to change, the Gypsy image must be deconstructed and replaced by a more accurate one-in the bureaucratic structures as well as in the textbooks. Education, both of Roma and of *gadje*, is clearly the key to avoiding another catastrophe involving our people, and the means of attaining some measure of understanding, if not respect, for Roma and Romani history and culture. But identifying the solution goes only a short way to resolving it. Before educational programs can be put in place, the facts of Romani history must be understood and the notion of identity made acceptable to both Romani and non-Romani populations. Given the great number of differing interpretations of those very basic considerations, reaching a consensus will not be easily achieved.

European or Asian?

Lepselter concluded from her analysis of mid-20th-century gypsiology that the Gypsies are both "the 'heart' of Europe and radically 'other' to it." The debate surrounding that paradox has centered around the "real" identity of the Romani people, both in terms of genetic descent and in terms of our status as "true Europeans" (as a 1996 declaration by European parliamentarians put it).

The idea that Roma are really local people who have intentionally darkened their skin and who speak a deliberately concocted secret jargon dates from at least as far back as the Renaissance. In his book *The Gypsies*, published in 1973, Werner Cohn maintained that "Gypsies are thoroughly European a majority of their ancestors probably came from old European stock." Judith Okely and Wim Willems are currently the most vocal champions of that view among those who study Roma. Both of them maintain that Gypsies are "a motley rabble of diverse origin," an indigenous Western population whose identity was "invented" over time by writers and policy-makers. But neither Willems nor Okely denies an ethnic identity (or series of identities) for Gypsies; the argument is simply that Romani origins are ultimately mixed and mainly European, and that the "Rom" is a product of 19th-century European Orientalism and ideas of human-group classification.

Although the Indian origin of the Romani people is beyond dispute not only on the basis of linguistic but also of cultural and serological evidence, the issue remains largely the concern of academics. While early Romani populations on their arrival in Europe were able to say that they had come from India, that fact has become lost over time and is still generally unknown to the vast majority of Roma, many of whom have internalized instead the notion of an origin in Egypt.

For very particular reasons, I have been among the most vocal in insisting that Roma are a people who originated in Asia. I take the position of the sociolinguist, who sees language as the vehicle of culture. And we indeed speak a language and maintain a culture whose core of direct retention is directly traceable to India. The acknowledgment of that position is essential, because the alternative is to create a fictitious history and to have, again, our identity in the hands of non-Romani policy-makers and scholars.

Furthermore, those who minimize the Indian connection are not linguists or historians, although they frequently feel entirely qualified to make linguistic and historiographical pronouncements. (That has been a major criticism of Isabel Fonseca's recently published *Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey*). The most elementary linguistic evidence, such as the fact that the Romani word for "cross" (*trushul*) originally meant "Shiva's trident," is left unaddressed. It is hard to reconcile such facts with the "indigenous origin" argument that Romani language and culture were passed like a relay runner's baton from population to population along trade routes, rather than being brought with one migrating people.

Besides being scientifically defensible, the pro-Indian-origin position was corroborated in practice by Indira Gandhi's open acknowledgment of Roma as an Indian population outside of India. Moreover, the Indian government was instrumental in helping our people achieve representation in the United Nations and in creating the First World Romani Congress, and it is currently supporting our claims for the return of gold and other possessions taken from Romani Holocaust victims and currently on deposit in Swiss banks.

Quest for Compromise

For the majority of Roma, the identity issue is overridden by the more pragmatic concerns of work, shelter, safety, and providing for the family. For the average Rom, whether we are European or Asian, or neither, or both is not a matter of much consequence. For the leaders, however, it must be. The future of the Romani population is in the hands of those Romani intellectuals who interact with the representatives of national governments and human rights and educational agencies.

There are three approaches to formalizing a consensus on Romani identity: either that we are European, or that we are Asian, or that we are both. The case for being considered European rests upon our widespread dispersion throughout Europe, as a truly transnational people. But as the Romani scholars Andrzej Mirga and Nicolae Gheorghie have pointed out, we are a global-not just a European-population. Are the Roma in Peru also "true Europeans?"

One's identity has to be evaluated in terms not only of what one perceives oneself to be, but also by whether members of the population one identifies with share that perception. In other words, one might identify with a group that doesn't want to open its doors. In the late 1970s, Guyana-an English-speaking South American country with an almost entirely African and Asian population-mounted a national campaign to re-identify itself as a Latin American nation. The rest of Latin America, however, did not see Guyana as being a part of their cultural and linguistic world, and the attempt withered and died.

The arguments for stressing the "Indian connection" seem clear. In these times, when Europe is divided into nation-states, being identified with an actual homeland brings legitimacy and a measure of security. Furthermore, it is the Indian factors-linguistic, genetic, and cultural-that different Romani populations share; it is the more recently acquired non-Indian factors that divide us. If I want to speak in Romani to a speaker of a dialect different from my own, it is the European words we must each avoid, not the Indian ones.

But are Roma, in fact, Indians? From the very beginning, the population has been a composite one, and acknowledging that fact constitutes a third approach. Evidence points to Dravidian, Scythian, and even East African (Siddhi) input into the early mix of militia and camp followers. Once in Europe, the migration-by this time a conglomerate ethnic population whose diverse speech had crystallized into one language-encountered other mobile populations and in some cases joined and intermarried with them. Sometimes the Romani cultural and linguistic presence was sufficient for the newly encountered populations to be absorbed and become Roma in subsequent generations; sometimes the Romani contribution was not sufficient to maintain itself, and other, non-Romani populations such as the *Jenisch* emerged. During the centuries of slavery in Moldavia and Wallachia and under conditions of oppression elsewhere in Europe, Romani women bore unwanted babies by non-Roma fathers. Cohn has estimated the mean percentage of European "blood" in the European Romani genetic makeup to be 60 percent (the non-African representation of the African-American gene pool is about 30 percent).

That very capacity to absorb and acculturate disparate populations is particularly characteristic of the Roma. The truly remarkable thing is that it has been possible, despite this kind of incorporation of outsiders and despite the lack of a national territory, to maintain a linguistic and cultural cohesiveness that stretches back for a thousand years. As weak as it may be, it remains strong enough to identify all Romani groups as being exactly that-Romani groups. Many of the problems that Roma are having with non-Roma are rooted in the vague and muddled notions of who and what Roma are, and what the Romani experience in Europe has been, and what Roma have contributed to European culture. One step toward ensuring a safe and productive future for Romani populations in Europe is to develop educational programs for the schools, both Gypsy and non-Gypsy, where Romani history and culture can be taught and the findings of current historical and linguistic scholarship made better known. Legitimization will lead to respect, and in that way the foundation will be laid for a clearer understanding of Romani identity, and a more credible image of our people.

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