

# Gypsy Roma Traveller

**HISTORY MONTH**

June 2008



## “Listening to ourselves”: the Gypsy, Roma, Traveller History Month opening seminar, University of Greenwich, London, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2008

A recent publication about the Roma as a European people, was drawn from papers presented at a conference in Israel where the scholars, researchers and academics gave erudite and closely argued opinions regarding the topic. In this instance, this was a political and ethnographic definition, reflecting current borders and not aspirations for future expansion, as no mention was made of Turkey's large *Gypsy* communities for example, a candidate for entry to the European Union – perhaps not so surprising as information regarding *the Romanlar, Domlar, Lomlar* and *Göcebe or Gezginler* (what might be described as ‘Traveller’ groups) is only beginning to emerge in the wake of my research over the past few years for the Swedish Consulate General in Istanbul, the British Council, the Open Society Institute and the European Roma Rights Centre. Perhaps a little more surprising, though by no means unusual, was the absence of any Gypsies, Roma or Traveller representatives involved in the planning and organization of the event (to the best of my knowledge), despite the fact that there are communities of Roma and Dom in Israel, and these are organized themselves into important community associations. What was most surprising about this event, astonishing even was the absence of any Gypsies, Roma, Travellers, Dom, Lom (or members of any other groups), presenting papers at the actual proceedings that might have become part of the final publication.

Surely this is not possible, I (and you) might justifiably ask, in this day and age that a serious scholarly event, organized to examine issues and questions concerning identity, ethnicity and culture focused upon a particular series of groups, should have no representative presenting some of the views of these groups, a ‘voice’ from these communities? *Haydi canım! Olmaz!* (Come on my dear! Impossible! As we would say in Turkish). Who would even consider organizing an event about modern European Jewish communities (or Saami, Basque, Sorbian or Kvaerner), without engaging in some meaningful way with representatives or individuals from these communities? Who would organize a conference exploring questions of identity and

ethnicity amongst European Jewish populations without presenters and presentations from at least some of these populations and people? In the case of 'minorities' in Europe, how useful or perhaps even justifiable would a symposium be that did not ensure the 'voice' of members from these groups was heard?

By direct contrast, the seminar that launched the UK's Gypsy, Roma, Traveller History Month at Greenwich University in London, was an almost entirely Romani affair. Every one of the presenters was from one, sometimes two of the communities themselves, and the event had been organised by Dr Thomas A. Acton, Professor of Romani Studies and Ms Felicity Bonel, Manager of the Greenwich Gypsy, Roma, Traveller Education Service (part of the education and children's support services in the London Borough of Greenwich) – two people who are in daily dialogue and long-term relationships with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people.

The Chairperson for the event, Mr Gregory Kweik, from Sweden introduced the day's programme with some timely remarks about the current state of Romani history, its foundation for all other research and its importance in connecting directly with the wider Romani emancipation movement, as the basis for many of the demands for equality, rights and recognition for Roma, Sinti, Gypsies and Travellers in all countries.

The first speaker, Dr Brian Belton is perhaps less well known than he deserves to be, as his work has been challenging the myths and misconceptions around Gypsy and Traveller identities both amongst the *gorgios* and Gypsies themselves, in what are undeniably critical and sometimes controversial works. Dr Belton has sought to define the nature of identity in ways that bring new insights to the processes of social negotiation and group definitions, as a response to the political changes that have characterised European societies since the Enlightenment. His assertion of the rights of Gypsies, Travellers and Roma, drew upon the experiences of the civil rights movement in the USA, most especially the leadership of the African American writers and activists, such as Eldridge Cleaver and George Jackson, the Soledad Brothers. Identity is a complex process of self-ascription and external identification; "we are who we claim to be and whom others accept or define us as" he remarked. This proposition might be said to underlie the whole conference, as the importance of moving away from the monolithic, singular notion of *Rroma*, to recognising the differences and diversity amongst Gypsy, Traveller, Manouche, Yenische and other populations, even celebrating these, is going to be at the heart of including other groups that have most often been excluded or unrecognised until recently, such as the large numbers of Muslim *Romanlar*, *Domlar* and *Lomlar* across the Middle East and Central Asia.

Professor Ian Hancock focussed upon the important changes in the writing of Gypsy history or histories that have taken place in recent years and the rising awareness that the origins of our peoples have always been (as they remain), diverse and complex. Reiterating the linguistic evidence that demonstrates this complexity in Indian ancestry and Byzantine, Ottoman and Balkan origins in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, he chose once again to insist upon a wider definition of Gypsy, Roma, and

Traveller identities that both recognises the common elements and the diversity of historical experiences in populations that have been separated by many centuries and miles, developing cultures, languages and beliefs that, while part of the whole, must be recognised as legitimate expressions of the Romani world. This gave strength to the community not weakness, as the essential nature of Gypsy survival had always been adaptation and change in the face of monolithic ideologies from totalitarian states for assimilation or extermination. Identity is always fluid, maintaining a core of notions regarding cultural norms but these were configured in new and innovative ways with each generation and each migration, resisting the external forces that demanded compliance and conformity with the non-Gypsy population and the eventual loss of selfhood in the nation-state. Like Dr Belton, he presented Gypsy identities as a form of resistance to assimilation, and the presenting of new Romani histories, like that of Dr Adrian Marsh, as the fundamental requirement for understanding these processes.

Dr Adrian Marsh made his presentation drawing upon the research and Roma rights work he has been carrying out in the Republic of Turkey since 2002, to illustrate further the need for recognising the diversity of Gypsy identities in the world today. Bringing his insights from, historical research that underpinned his thesis on Gypsy ancestry as a series of composite, quasi-militarised groups under the Caliphate in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries (the Dom) and the Ghaznavid Empire in the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries (the Rom and Lom), he stressed the importance of Islam in the reconfiguring of various Hindu and Ismaili Indians in the process of becoming Rom, Dom and Lom Gypsies. The crucial impact of Byzantine culture upon the emerging 'Egyptians' in Constantinople in the 11<sup>th</sup> century effectively ascribed an identity to the groups that arrived there from the east, the origins of the Gypsies. In bringing the story of Gypsies in these lands into the modern period, Dr Marsh illustrated that such processes were still at work in the changing picture of Gypsy identities in Turkey, where the *Lom*, *Dom*, *Rom* and *Gezgin*, *Abdallar*, *Geygelli* and other groups are reaching tentatively towards securing rights as equal citizens in the Republic, though never at the cost of undermining their identity as Turkish and Muslim peoples.

Lively debate followed these presentations that reflected the themes brought up by the presenters but the commonality of diversity, difference and *complimentarity* was constantly reaffirmed; respect for the experiences of groups that came from the various histories they had passed through and the choices these individuals and communities made to define themselves as part of the greater group yet maintain distinctive attributes that made them what they were. Also emphasised was the point that in order to do this it was necessary that we listen to ourselves and understand our history, as it is being newly produced by Rom, Dom and Lom, Travellers and other Gypsy scholars and researchers, not by others about us.

The afternoon sessions began with Mr. Valdemar Kallinin's exposition of the work in the Soviet period regarding the history and origins of the Roma in Russia and elsewhere, and the impacts upon Russian Gypsy identities of such work, including

the cultural expressions such as the great Moscow Roma Theatre that took place in this period. Again, this is a part of our history that many do not know and fewer appreciate and Mr. Kallinin's timely presentation reminded us all how much of the experience of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers remains little understood by those outside of the individual communities themselves.

Mr. Damian le Bas Jr. offered a nuanced and challenging perspective on the possible implications of diasporic consciousness for Romani identity, some of which were the dependence of identity upon one series of overly nationalist sentiments that attempt to uncritically connect Roma with India in the modern context. Origins notwithstanding, the presentation of such notions too easily 'buy into' the ideas of the nation-state, the very institution that has sought to most often subjugate and oppress the Gypsies as outsiders and others. India and Pakistan may be the points of origins in the varied and extraordinary journey of the Rom, Dom and Lom, but to continue to make emphatic connections with these territories ignores the fact that many of the adaptations to cultural forms, belief patterns and social organisation amongst Gypsy groups that have developed, as the Gypsy peoples have themselves, outside of the boundaries of the sub-continent.

Mrs. Janet Keet-Black presented a fascinating history of the establishment of the Romani-Traveller Family History Society, a national organisation in the UK that has now over 600 members and is active in researching the roots of individuals' families that illuminates and for many, explains some of the mysteries of their own pasts. The Society assists in scholarly research, though it is not made up of scholars and academics but ordinary Romani and Traveller people themselves with a passion for the past, their past. As a model for other groups, the Society demonstrates that it's not just the academics who are writing our own history, but everyday Romani people who contribute to this process.

In his final remarks, Mr. Gregory Kweik made the point that might be said to summarise all that had gone before; whilst he would never call himself a 'Gypsy' and would always be a 'Rom' he had come to understand that there were those who would *and* do, and that this must be respected and understood as part of the wider answer to the question of, 'Who are the Romani people? Such a question itself, he suggested, betrayed a limited understanding of the complexities that surround Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller identities and sought to impose definitions that were not of our making, but that we had come to accept from without the community we all live amongst. We must change these definitions amongst ourselves and with each other, to bring a wider understanding and appreciation of who and what we are, and to change the misconceptions, misapprehensions and misunderstandings of non-Romani people about us.

Dr Adrian Marsh, Istanbul June 2008