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# Research and the Many Representations of Romani Identity

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*“The dust of many crumbled cities  
Settles over us like a forgetful sleep,  
but we are older than those...”*

**T**HIS epigram from Mevlana Celaladdin Rumi<sup>2</sup> leads me to the consideration of Romani identity in scholarship and research,<sup>3</sup> and suggests one of the principle phenomena that appear in these, namely the construction of *Gypsies*<sup>4</sup> in the imagination of the observer. Like beauty, the image of the various peoples described as *Gypsies* is frequently to be found in the eyes of the beholder. The repetition of various attributes of Rom, Dom or Lom<sup>5</sup> that are the subject of research,<sup>6</sup> concerning all manner of behaviour that is defined in ‘ethnic’ or cultural terms (both of which are often thinly disguised alternatives to the less acceptable term ‘race’), is another. To the extent that these represent consistent concepts applied or implicit in the research findings, they are the dust of Mevlana’s

“crumbled cities”, or as Italo Calvino might suggest, the “imaginary cities”<sup>7</sup> that academia has in the past, and continues in the present in some cases, to construct as the sites for their interpretations of who and what are *Gypsies*. Within these carefully (or not so carefully) built edifices, *Gypsies* are positioned, assigned the role of players in the drama of symbolic action that constitutes the attempt to portray an understanding of their lives. This is ‘smoothed’ over almost inevitably to ensure a degree of consistency (and those of us engaged in field research will know that one contradiction is worth a great deal of smooth consistency) and provide what are in the end, a series of conclusions often designed to demonstrate the necessity for intervention, or strategies almost always defined by a wider socio-cultural and institutional context, what Acton has recently termed the “[...]”

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<sup>2</sup> *2007 is the international year commemorating this extraordinary mystic and saint.*

<sup>3</sup> *Drawing upon my experience from the European Roma Rights Centre/Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly/Edirne Roman Association project “Promoting Romani Rights in Turkey” and research carried out with the support of the Economic and Social Research Council UK (Project RES-000-22-1652), with Professor Thomas A. Acton, University of Greenwich.*

<sup>4</sup> *As an imaginary construct the term is italicized.*

<sup>5</sup> *Or the various ethnonyms by which groups are described as Travellers.*

<sup>6</sup> *Lom and Dom appear all too infrequently in what is a predominantly Eurocentric discipline; for examples, see Nabil Sobhi Hanna. 1982. “Ghagar of Sett Guiranha; a study of a Gypsy community in Egypt.” In Cairo Papers in Social Science. Vol. 5/1, AUC Press; and Voskanian, Vardan 2003. “The Iranian Loan-words in Lomavren, the Secret Language of the Armenian Gypsies.” In Journal of Iran & the Caucasus. Vol. 6/1-2, Brill.*

<sup>7</sup> *Calvino, Italo. 1978. Invisible Cities. Orlando, Florida: Harvest Books.*

shifting and uncertain sands of ‘citizenship’ and ‘social inclusion’ policies.”<sup>8</sup> In more concrete terms, research often seeks to identify *Gypsies* according to an *a priori* set of criteria – frequently based upon previous academic research – before proceeding to observe the group, interview and collect data and subsequently establish a framework in which to construct narratives of ethnicity and identity with the prerequisite elements of music, dance, language, religion, and cultural practices.<sup>9</sup>

Other aspects often make their appearance in research, such as the notions that *Gypsies* represent a social ‘problem’ (or more euphemistically, a series of ‘challenges’) in terms of integration and what might be described as the citizenship or social inclusion paradigm (see the numerous reports considering this conception of the issues from largely uncritical [of the conceptions of social inclusion and citizenship] perspectives), such as this objective from the Government of the Principality of Asturias: “To approach real situation of gypsy [sic] community, its needs and their deficiencies [...] in order to jointly define proposals for the social incorporation of gypsies and to move from the social exclusion to the real citizenship [...]”<sup>10</sup>

The questions that underlie this kind of research are about how well or poorly *Gypsies* ‘fit’ into non-Gypsy societies.<sup>11</sup> There is also a clear concern about control of movement and migration, and in much research the question of crime and its relationship to Gypsy communities is at the heart of the inquiry, frequently viewed through the prism of statistics and quantitative data, or the distinctive gaze of the state.<sup>12</sup> The particular consideration here is how we as researchers, both Gypsy/Traveller and non-Gypsy/Traveller,<sup>13</sup> choose to portray (or sometimes betray) the communities and individuals we are working amongst and how, in the context of this issue of *Roma Rights*, we as a community of scholars and researchers confirm, create or refute the prejudices, stereotypes and misconceptions that exist about *Gypsies*, through our [mis]representations. In the sense that research, as I suggested above, has a very direct bearing upon policy and practice (and most importantly government spending, NGO budgets and philanthropists’ donations), the responsibility of researchers is one that is often treated lightly, though mistakenly so. Representation through research is the primary means by which international and national policy-makers, advocates and activists perceive the peoples we describe as *Gypsies*, as if

<sup>8</sup> Private communication from Thomas Acton dated 31 July 2007. See also Acton’s critique of the general approach and, in particular, the UNDP 2002 report “Avoiding the Dependency Trap” in Acton, Thomas. 2006. “Romani Politics, Scholarship and the Discourse of Nation-building.” In Marsh, Adrian and Elin Strand [eds.]. 2006. *Gypsies & the Problem of Identities: Contextual, Constructed & Contested Istanbul: SRII Transactions 17*, I.B. Tauris.

<sup>9</sup> For his discussion on elements of Gypsy identities and the problem of terminology and definitions, see Mayall, David. 2004. *Gypsy Identities 1500-2000: from Egipcians and Moon-men to the Ethnic Romany*. London: Routledge.

<sup>10</sup> Government of the Principality of Asturias. 2006. *Intervention with Ethnic Minorities*. Available online at: <http://www.asturias.es/portal/site/Asturias/menuitem.fe57bf7c5fd38046e44f5310bb30a0a0/?vgnextoid=30ce4eaa73010110VgnVCM10000097030a0aRCRD&i18n.http.lang=en>.

<sup>11</sup> With the concomitant notion that there is a homogeneous society against which they are measured and evaluated; see Swedish ethnologist Birgitta Svensson for an example of a social sciences approach. Svensson, Birgitta. 1993. *Bortom all ära och redlighet: tattarnas spel med rättvisan*. Stockholm: Nordiska museets handlingar; Nordiska museet. Its critique in Montesino, Norma. 2002. *Zigenarfrågan: intervention och romantik*. Lund: Lund University. And its antithesis in Hazel, Bo. 2000. *Resandefolket: från tattare till traveller*. Stockholm: Ordfront.

<sup>12</sup> See ethnologist Arnstberg, Karl-Olov. 1998. *Svenskar och zigenare – en etnologisk studie av samspelet över en kulturell gräns*. Stockholm: Carlsson, and the critique by Strand, Elin. 2001. “Swedes and Gypsies – an ethnological study of the interplay over a cultural boundary.” In *Romani Studies Journal*. Series 5, Vol. 11, no. 2.

<sup>13</sup> To the best of my knowledge, there are as yet no Dom or Lom researchers working in the field at present, though it is to be hoped that the first young Dom university entrant in Diyarbakir will carry out his intention of investigating the history of Dom music and culture in the region during the course of his studies, and that a young Lom woman currently at university, from the Lom communities of north-eastern Turkey, will also examine some issues related to her background.



they were in fact real, and not the interpretation of the researchers who depict them in the pages of reports, in many cases debating over the representations as if they were, in and of themselves, a *totality*. These representations take the place of the actual people and come to stand for them as symbols or sometimes ciphers for a series of notions,<sup>14</sup> related to the overall trope and *emplotment* being used by the researchers – the frameworks by which the research has been formulated.<sup>15</sup>

What are the assumptions present in our research that we use to *emplot* our narratives, and the tropes that we construct? Clearly the *Gypsy* in the social sciences imagination of much research is the major trope – in the case of the work of van de Port for example, *Gypsies* are understood to stand for ‘wildness’, ‘licence’ and a people ‘unbounded’ by what are perceived to be the conventions surrounding behaviour in the ‘majority’ society, in this case the Serbs of Novi Pazar.<sup>16</sup> van de Port is, in this instance, using the trope of *Gypsies* as a means of examining Serbian people, emplotting his work through a narrative of tragi-comedy and post-modern irony. In many cases, the use of the imaginary *Gypsy* is a device to examine the non-Gypsy, to actually explore the psyche of the *gadje*.<sup>17</sup> The 2002 UNDP report so deftly critiqued by Acton referred to above tells us more of the conception of police officers, social workers, local government administrators and UNDP researchers as to who

they perceive as *Gypsies* and what they understand or actually assume to be the criteria for defining them, than it does about *Gypsies* as individuals and communities experiencing the particular circumstances in which they live. This is a recurring problem with much of the research conducted by albeit (mostly) well-meaning individuals in the field of social sciences. It tells us about the people conducting the research, those funding it and the audience it is intended for, through re-presenting the *Gypsy* using tropes we have come to expect – excessively poor, often itinerant, ignorant and under-educated, disenfranchised politically and marginalised economically, socially excluded and culturally appreciated in a very narrow context. Research that offers other perspectives is far less prevalent though of course it exists; in a presentation at Istanbul Bilgi University in 2004, Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov provided examples of a counter-narrative from their recent (at that time) field work in the Crimean region and Ukraine that challenged the expectations of the audience significantly. Does research that brings us information about those *Gypsies* who may present alternative or contrasting perspectives to these dominant tropes have an impact upon the wider body of scholarship? Despite the fact that such research does go on,<sup>18</sup> little of this finds a resonance within wider social policy research apparently. So it would seem to be the case that research, funded by academic scholarships or major NGO’s,

<sup>14</sup> *Often graphically reinforced through accompanying photographs, reifying individuals even further “[...] in picturesque discussion with Roma and Dom in tea-houses, tents and elsewhere” in what Acton has recently remarked as “[...] a diversionary post-imperialist indulgence.” See Acton, Thomas and Adrian Marsh. “The Development of Roma/Gypsy/Traveller Identity during the candidacy for EU membership of the Turkish Republic.” Paper delivered to the Annual Conference of the Gypsy Lore Society. Manchester: 7 September 2007.*

<sup>15</sup> *For his discussion of form as a powerful determinant of language and the mediator for knowledge, the prime constitutive element of constructing the ‘truth’ in scholarship, see White, Hayden. 1990. The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.*

<sup>16</sup> *van de Port, Mattjias. 1998. Gypsies, Wars & Other Instances of the Wild: Civilisation and Its Discontents in a Serbian Town. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press. See also Onaran, Emine Incirlioğlu, “Where exactly is Çin-çin Bağlari.” In Marsh, Adrian and Elin Strand [eds.]. 2006. Gypsies & the Problem of Identities: Contextual, Constructed & Contested. Istanbul: SRII Transactions 17, I.B. Tauris.*

<sup>17</sup> *Gadje (sing. gadjó, feminine gadjá) meaning non-Gypsy in many dialects of Romani; also ‘gorgio’ and ‘gadji’ in Anglo-Romani; ‘perv’ in Domari, and ‘aturba’ in Lomavren (as they are both spoken in Turkey where, curiously the feminine form of ‘gadjá’ is used by both Romani and Lomavren speakers).*

<sup>18</sup> *Kinga D. Toth’s 2001 doctoral research at Manchester University about successful Romanichals in the UK or Nidhi Trehan’s doctoral exploration of the notion of international non-governmental organisation personnel as elites and their relationship to the Roma and Gypsy grassroots movements in Europe, are two examples I can think of.*

trans-national bodies or national governments is concerned with presenting Roma, Gypsies and Travellers as *Gypsies* – a set of notions surrounding the researchers' ideas of who these people are. As Brian Belton has remarked about research in a Czech radio programme, "It's an empire of written words. It's an empire of writing that exists separately from people [...]."<sup>19</sup>

However, the notion that all research is negative and pervaded by stereotyped representations of Roma, Gypsies and Travellers is itself something of a stereotype. Stereotypes are specific products of time and place that appear to offer simplistic and all-too-frequently negative explanations for specific phenomena, by generalising them and distorting them. Frequently following the word "but [...]", stereotypes are results of these phenomena. Discriminatory and prejudicial stereotyping about *Gypsies* is couched in these pseudo-explanatory terms, when in fact it is a product of exclusion and marginalisation, not an explanation of them. Obvious as this seems, the frequency with which these appear in both research and the responses to it is surprisingly high, and many critics of researchers or their research, perceive both to be inherently stereotypical in their portrayal of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers. As a recent conversation about a particular researcher amongst the Dom of south-eastern Turkey suggested, the stereotype of the unscrupulous, invasive and self-serving researcher is widespread enough to reach even these largely unappreciated people.<sup>20</sup> The explicit comparison being made was with the research I was carrying out as a Romani person (though as a thoughtful reflection on this mission made by one of the researchers with me pointed out,

despite a critical perspective regarding identity politics and the mobilisation of ethnicity as the prime factor in resilience and the continuing resistance of Gypsy communities to the demolition of their homes, marginalisation from education, employment and health services, and a score of other problems, my discourse during research is entirely bounded by the wider one of Gypsy politics in general). The stereotype of the 'bad' researcher is one that may be reflective of the very real negative experiences of people on the outside of the "empire of written words", but it nevertheless offers little in the way of explanation about why these should be so.

Research and researchers operate within significant constrictions during research projects or field missions, and these may be some of the reasons why they seem to reflect the stereotype of 'bad' researchers. The determinants of the research are frequently in the hands of the funding bodies of the programme, and as such this can have a negative, sometimes deleterious impact on the results (and thus the perceptions presented in findings and recommendations). Research criteria is often telescoped to view a very narrow set of questions, ignoring the wider considerations that might modify or radically alter the outcomes, and the question of funding is almost always a major criteria for how much, how long, how extensive or how frequently people are interviewed or who is being interviewed.<sup>21</sup> In short, the funding and resources underlying any research will often determine the kind of limitations that researchers operate within, and affect the results.

This, of course, is not the only reason that researchers may present ambiguous or negative perceptions of Gypsies through their reports

<sup>19</sup> Belton, Brian. 22 January 2005. "Telling Lies". Part of a radio programme produced by Evans, Simon and David Vaughan. *We Still Breathe The Air*. Radio Prague. Available online at: <http://www.radio.cz/en/article/62579>.

<sup>20</sup> Most frequently portrayed in terms of "lost" or "forgotten" Gypsies: See a recent article posted on the Roma Virtual Network by Mr Amoun Sleem, Director of the Dom Society of Jerusalem. Dated: 6 August 2007.

<sup>21</sup> The UNDP report "Avoiding the Dependency Trap" illustrates the problems with this question, whilst the 2004 report "The Situation of the Roma in an Enlarged European Union", written by Focus Consulting Ltd, the European Roma Rights Centre and the European Roma Information Office, demonstrates that these can be overcome with careful research design and methodology. See European Commission. 2004. *The Situation of the Roma in an Enlarged European Union*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Community.

or publications; in some cases the agendas of researchers are apparent from the very outset in the titles for their publications (the example of the UK's Communities & Local Government Office 2007, "Gypsy and Traveller Task Group on Site Provision and Enforcement: Interim Report to Ministers", where the section entitled "Community leadership" states, "We have identified skill and people shortages in planning, enforcement and inspectorate agencies", clearly suggesting the importance of 'enforcement' with regard to Gypsies and Travellers). In other cases, the hidden assumptions behind the research that surface in the kinds of questions asked, the kind of material gathered and the conclusions drawn from it, tell us much about the views of those who conducted the research in the first place and their intended audience.<sup>22</sup>

The impact of historical contingency in many studies is frequently subsumed under a generalised abstraction that is ultimately self-referential – *Gypsies* are a marginalised and socially excluded group because they have always been so. The relationship between modernity, the nation-state and exclusion is rarely examined as a context for much research,<sup>23</sup> possibly reflecting the perspective of the audience for much of the reports produced.

The concerns of the modern nation-state and trans-national, supra-states are to improve upon the model and ensure social inclusivity, rather than reflect upon the historical realities of nation-state construction as inherently exclusivist in the promulgation of 'the nation' and ethno-nationalist ideology.<sup>24</sup>

All research is not restricted to the presentation of negative stereotypes or notions that reinforce common prejudices of course; in some cases academics and researchers are keen to present certain data in the context of their own agendas for mobilisation or organisation of Gypsies, or to support the arguments made elsewhere regarding origins, ethnicity and identity, for example. The research into Gypsy history is one such area where competing agendas and conflicting interpretations may reflect this to a much higher degree than in some others perhaps. In the sense that the audience of this kind of research may be broader (in that much social science research is directed at a non-Gypsy audience and intended to achieve change through mobilising it), it is an arena where a series of counter-narratives to the dominant themes of the nation-state, social inclusion and citizenship, have been presented as the historical experience of Gypsies.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, the work of Zoltan Barany (Barany, Zoltan. 2002. *The East European Gypsies: Regime Change, Marginality and Ethnopolitics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) wherein the audience is clearly located in the realm of political science and Barany's construction of types of polity in his first chapter – "[...] regime type determines state policy explains change in the conditions of the marginal group [...] this is the text from a diagram" – reifies relationships between states and Gypsy groups within them in order to meet the perceptions of the audience, but then presents the "abundant variation" in minority policies between these various regime types as a result of a series of deviations from these ideal types. See also Thomas Acton's criticism of Barany in his "Romani Politics, Scholarship and the Discourse of Nation-building". *Op.cit.*

<sup>23</sup> The work of Ussama Makdisi about sectarianism and violence in Lebanon is a notable exception. See Makdisi, Ussama. 1996. "Reconstructing the Nation-State: the Modernity of Sectarianism in Lebanon". In *Middle East Report*. July-September Issue.

<sup>24</sup> For a reflective discussion of Roma 'nation-building' and its consequences, see: Horvath, Aladár. 2006. "Gadjo Nation - Roma Nation". In *Roma Rights 2/3 2006*. Quarterly Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre. For a discussion about the International Roma Union's Prague 2000 adoption of the Declaration of a Nation Without a Territory, see Acton, Thomas and Ilona Klimova. 2001. "The International Romani Union: an east European answer to a west European question." In Will Guy [ed]. *Between Past & Future: the Roma of Central & Eastern Europe*. Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press.

## History, Ethnicity & Identity

History is identity, the primary means of acknowledging sameness, membership of the group and difference from others. It is always established, whether in part or wholly, through the sharing of a narrative of origins, of journeys of migration, or anti-migratory narratives of *autochthony*, and of 'present' as related directly to 'before'. Shared origins in the heart of northern Europe for a number of peoples, such as Swedes, Danes, Norwegians, the English and Germans may be acknowledged broadly, but it is the trajectory of the narratives of journey from this point, both geographically and conceptually, that begins the discourse of identities and ethnicities for these groups. There is no "geography of significance", as Maja Frykman has called it,<sup>25</sup> in defining this as a common point for Swedes, the English or Norwegians; in fact these narratives of journeys are frequently and positively *anti-diasporic* in their conception of origin. There is no appeal to the "folk-wanderings" of *proto* Anglo-Saxons, Jutes, Svea or Göta as a building-block of common identity, no attempt to create the sense of commonality, whatever the linguistic connections that patently indicate otherwise. Instead, notions such as the "cradle of Sweden", or dates (1066 CE in England), are treated as axiomatic in the narrative of identity. Ethnicity, as a central component of identity, is frequently established through what Siân Jones has called a process of "archaeology",<sup>26</sup> the attempt to demonstrate the existence of direct lines of inheritance from the present-day group to the past occupation of territory, and a common culture, echoes of which are to be found in the artefacts and cultural expressions of the modern *ethnos*. Again, notions such as the "ancient Britons" – the *Eceni*, *Brigantes*, *Trinovantes* or other pre-Roman groups, or the *Cwen* or *Kväner* (a minority group in northern Sweden and Norway that frequently adopt a counter-narrative to the Saami assertions of historicity in the Swedish case, arguably due to land-rights issues) – become integral to interpretations of modern ethnicity and to a direct lineage with an *ethnicised* past (thus effectively *ethnicising* all social, economic and political issues and actually undermining social equality within the discourse of equality of opportunity). Identity and ethnicity are then history, the narrative sum of the series of past events ascribed to particular groups, and given legitimacy through the "major [...] democratic contest" of defining culture, in what Edward Said described as "a disputed history of identity."<sup>27</sup> In a way that clearly transcends notions of identity and language as the fundamental nexus of identity, or a common culture, shared religion or other criteria, history as it is constructed in narratives of origins is the *major* conceptual framework for identity and ethnicity.

Is there a Gypsy history? A record of a whole series of past events associated particularly with people defined by themselves as Romani, Dom, Lom or Travellers (or a plethora of other associated terms), or more often by others, as *Gypsies*? The question may seem one that is self-evident to those scholars and researchers working in the field of

Romani Studies, but I would suggest here that it is a necessary one, essential even, especially in the context of who produces this research, who is it produced for and why. A great many words are produced purporting to describe, define and delineate what is suggested are histories of the *Gypsies* (and thus establish legitimacy through

<sup>25</sup> Frykman, Maja. 2005. "Balkan Connections: Towards An Ethnography of Immigrants' Transnational Practices" at Towards a New Balkan Cultural Studies Conference, Istanbul Bilgi University: 27-30 October 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Jones, Siân. 1997. *The Archaeology of Ethnicity*. London: Routledge. See also Seeman, Sonia Tamar. 2006. "Presenting "Gypsy", Re-Presenting Roman: Towards an Archaeology of Aesthetic Production and Social Identity." *Music & Anthropology the Journal of Musical Anthropology of the Mediterranean*. Number 11. Available online at: [http://levi.provincia.venezia.it/ma/index/number11/seeman/see\\_0.htm](http://levi.provincia.venezia.it/ma/index/number11/seeman/see_0.htm).

<sup>27</sup> Said, Edward. September 2004. "US: a disputed history of identity." In *Le Monde Diplomatique*. Available online at: <http://mondediplo.com/2004/09/04history>.



*ethnogenesis*), sometimes by Romani authors themselves (although most frequently not), but as the poet David Morely writes, these are “[...] haunted by falsehood from the start [...]. Fiction was the poached life-history of travelling folk.”<sup>28</sup> We might take this as a *leitmotif* as we concede that what is presented as research about Gypsy peoples, what has been “poached” from them, in fact is more likely to be the record of contact between non-Gypsy people and their imaginative re-construction,<sup>29</sup> or fiction they define as Gypsies with their “[...] fantasies and longing for disorder.”<sup>30</sup> In this ‘history’, we can find a record of racism, the mechanisms of misconception, prejudice and exclusion, and attempts to construct narratives of journey as an explanatory device for discrimination (thus justifying the criminalising of mobility in sedentary nation-states and, of course, promoting the dominant trope of *Gypsies* as ‘wanderers’ or purposeless travellers), an exoticised and orientalist version of groups of people who have actually been in proximity to others for centuries, mostly through the experience of sedentarism. The idea of Gypsy identity being confusing or indefinable is posited with very little comparison to other identities, yet we may trace ‘Egyptian’ identity to Constantinople from the second half of the eleventh century,<sup>31</sup> arguably earlier than the establishment of ‘English’, ‘Swedish’ or many other identities. The variation in origin myths that have abounded from quite

early periods, have ascribed the most banal or bizarre of explanations to the *ethnogenesis* of Gypsy people.<sup>32</sup> Words then, are not to be trusted, are fictions; as Calvin Martin, the great American ethno-historian of native peoples and European encounters suggests, “[...] words. I have grown suspicious of them [...] and am growing increasingly distrustful of what I myself have been saying.”<sup>33</sup> History and historical research is then “[...] a discourse [...] cultural, cultivated, fabricated and thus ultimately arbitrary [...],”<sup>34</sup> a way of delineating the parameters of discussions about, in this case, identity and ethnicity.

The notion of Gypsy history is one that is not secure though, academia has not always been accepting of the legitimacy of such (much as other areas of study have been ‘ghettoised’). The ‘establishment’ in this instance might be defined as Historians, academic practitioners of writing History, and in ways similar to those contests that have marked the definition of other “hidden” groups in Sheila Rowbotham’s seminal phrase,<sup>35</sup> Gypsy history has been frequently suggested as ‘missing’, ‘lost’ or ‘forgotten’. The idea that Gypsies have little history has been extremely influential and is behind some of the misapprehension of non-Gypsy peoples about them. Ian Hancock notes what he describes as “[...] the vague understanding of Romani origins [...],”<sup>36</sup> and other writers have implied ambiguity,<sup>37</sup> or Gypsies as being without legitimacy, through

<sup>28</sup> Morely, David. 2007. “Fiction”, In *The Invisible Kings*. Manchester: Carcanet Press.

<sup>29</sup> Okely, Judith. 1983. *The Traveller-Gypsies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>30</sup> Malvinni, Dominic. 2004. “The Gypsy Caravan : from Real Roma to Imaginary Gypsies in Western Music and Film.” In *Current Research in Ethnomusicology 11*. London: Routledge. See also van de Port, *op.cit.* and Okely, *op.cit.*

<sup>31</sup> See the many repetitions of the story of the *Atsinganoi* at the court of Constantine Monomachus in literature about Gypsies, originally from the *Life of St. George the Athonite* written in 12<sup>th</sup> century Byzantium.

<sup>32</sup> For discussions of these, see Mayall, *op.cit.*; Hancock, Ian. 2002. *We Are the Romani People (Ame sam e Romane dzene)*. Interface Collection, Vol. 28: University of Hertfordshire Press; and Fraser, Angus M. 1992. *The Gypsies. Peoples of Europe Series*: Blackwell.

<sup>33</sup> Martin, Calvin Luther. 1992. In *The Spirit of the Earth*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

<sup>34</sup> Jenkins, Keith. 1995. *What Is History?* London: Routledge.

<sup>35</sup> Rowbotham, Sheila. 1992. *Hidden From History*. London: Pluto Press. For a recent example in Romani studies, see also Tebbutt, Susan. 1998. *Sinti and Roma: Gypsies in German-Speaking Society and Literature. (Culture & Society in Germany 2)*. New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books.

<sup>36</sup> Hancock, *op.cit.*

<sup>37</sup> Fonseca, Isabel. 1996. *Bury Me Standing*. London: Verso.



this lack of history.<sup>38</sup> In contradistinction to other histories, conceived of as the absent object of inquiry and signified by their remaining fragmentary traces, organised (produced) by professional historians, archaeologists, archivists, librarians and academics,<sup>39</sup> the Gypsy 'past' is a lack of history behind, as Hancock argues, the ability of non-Romani people to ignore or leave out Gypsies from many aspects of society, "in the absence of a well-recognised history and clearly understood ethnic identity."<sup>40</sup> Once more we might suggest that Brian Belton's phrase of a people outside of the empire of written words is apposite in this case.

Historical research however, may be argued to be irrelevant to some Gypsies themselves in this context. To know the family lineage, the relationships between groups and the status of those relationships, whether cordial or antagonistic, might be what is important though frequently absent from the kind of research that concentrates upon resolving 'problems' or 'challenges' to social inclusion. To know whose family one's own ancestors once travelled with, or married into, these things may have meanings, as Monica Kalderas of the Romska kulturcentret i Malmö [Romani Culture Centre of Malmö] told me on one occasion, and the idea of an abstract record of the events stretching back into the past, as a symbol of collective identity, seen to be of the non-Gypsy world. This is the language of nationalism, of imagined homogeneous communities tied to territories, of conceptions about when towns, farms, rivers, mountains and valleys stop being one's country, to become "one's un-country".<sup>41</sup> In the perspective of national identities, what is Gypsy history? Is it a pan-European or even pan-global history? The demand for understanding the

past of particular groups, through constructing narratives of ethnicity and identity, is part of a discourse of resilience and authority, of claims to resources or rights based in linguistic conceptions charged with non-Gypsy notions of place and even time. The intellectual constructs of many non-Gypsy scholars are those that are employed in an attempt to encompass experience and events that are without the socio-cultural matrix of the academics and researchers producing research reports about *Gypsies*, for the most part. Those of us writing history should be constantly mistrustful of what we say, what we describe as we seek to elaborate the fragmentary glimpses of Romani people set down in non-Romani records, as we construct a narrative of events that links movement with meanings, time and what has transpired. Our desire to make a coherent picture of the past, one that we can refer to when faced with demands for explanations as to who, where and how is, in its very inception, an acceptance of the legitimacy of such logic, to agree with the notion that *authenticity* relies upon demonstrable chronologies, maps and recorded *evidence*.

Yet, are we in danger of creating a new kind of *essentialism*, one that suggests that this process is flawed and fraught because it has been produced by non-Gypsy people to non-Gypsy conceptions, and must be re-written by Romani scholars to be authentic and legitimate? The debate between scholars in the recent past has clearly been contested over this ground, and there are suggestions that in the interests of the Romani emancipation movement and political activism associated with securing rights for Romani people, this is the case.<sup>42</sup> The notion of Romani history itself is an exclusivist approach, one that

<sup>38</sup> For his discussion of this as an aspect of perceptions by non-Gypsies and researchers in Romania during the Soviet period, see Beck, Sam. 1986. "Tsignani-Gypsies in Socialist Romania." In *Geissener Hefte für Tsignanologie*, 1-4.

<sup>39</sup> According to Tony Bennett's analysis of the "historical past". Bennett, Tony. 1991. *Outside Literature*. London: Routledge.

<sup>40</sup> Hancock, *op.cit.*

<sup>41</sup> Phrase from *Le Guin, Ursula*. 1980. *The Left-Hand of Darkness (Remembering Tomorrow)*. New York: Harper Collins.

<sup>42</sup> See the review of Ian Hancock and Zoltan Barany, in Matras, Yaron. December 2004. "A conflict of paradigms: The East European Gypsies (Zoltan Barany) and We Are the Romani People (Ian Hancock)." In *Romani Studies. Series 5, Vol. 14, Number 2*.

presupposes a unique Romani perspective that can be discerned from others at points in the past, elucidated from documentary evidence and textual sources. For a historically non-literate population for the most part, this is a position that is clearly open to question. The perspectives of those who recorded the encounters with Romani peoples historically are the dominant ones, even when they are directly quoting Gypsies themselves, as in Andrew Boorde's c.1547 "The Fyrst Bake of the Introduction of Knowledge, the wizeche dothe teache a man to speake parte of all maner of languages, and to know the usage and fashion of all maner of countreys. And for to know the moste parte of all maner of coynes of money, the whych is currant in every region. Made by Andrew Borde, of Physycke Doctor. Dedyicated to the right honorable and gracious lady Mary daughter of our soverayne Lorde Kyng Henry the eyght", or Lionardo di Niccolo Frescobaldi's account of meeting Gypsies in the Morea, in 1384.<sup>43</sup> Gypsy historiography hasn't yet addressed the textual implications of the writing of that history, as it simply relies upon a nomological or narrativistic approach (frequently both), whatever the underlying ideological position of the authors. Scholarship about Gypsies has always been produced by non-Gypsies, and many works have been instrumental in defining much that we accept as the bedrock of Romani history and culture. Others have been significant in defining what many regard as the propagation of stereotypes and anti-Gypsy prejudices,<sup>44</sup> and their critics have challenged this aspect of their

works.<sup>45</sup> To challenge racism and discrimination is it inevitable that an essentialism based upon equally exclusive notions of belonging be created? That a counter-narrative of ethnicity and identity be constructed?

If the record of the past that exists is one that largely misrepresents this experience for Gypsy people, is there corpus of Romani historiography that addresses these misconceptions and misconstructions? Increasingly, the presentation of Romani histories is one that is being undertaken by Gypsies themselves, and there is a body of work that we can define as Romani historiography being added to the narratives of Gypsy people recorded and interpreted by non-Romani authors, especially around key recent historical episodes such as the experience under Stalinism, or Nazi atrocities against Roma and Sinti in occupied Europe.<sup>46</sup>

What are the problems of a Romani historiography? And what are the issues that confront researchers and scholars writing Gypsy history or histories, at present? The notions that practitioners of history writing have attempted to address, particularly as a result of the challenges from postmodernism, post-colonialist theories and subaltern studies, challenging the legitimisation of a conceptual framework for professional historical enquiry, have been almost absent from many of the recent works engaged with Romani history.<sup>47</sup> As David Mayall notes in his study of Gypsy identities, this may be less a

<sup>43</sup> See Manzi, G. [ed]. 1818. *Viaggio di L. di Niccolo Frescobaldi In Egitto E In Terra Santa*. Rome.

<sup>44</sup> Arnstberg, *op.cit.*; and Svensson, *op.cit.*

<sup>45</sup> Montesino, *op.cit.*; Hazell, *op.cit.*; and Strand, *op.cit.*

<sup>46</sup> See Lewy's argument that Gypsies were not targeted by the National Socialist regime on the same basis as the Jews in: Lewy, Gunther. 2000. *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. For an example of the process, see Hancock's earlier counter argument in: Hancock, Ian. 1989. *Jewish Responses to the Porrajmos*. Available online at: [http://www.chgs.umn.edu/Histories/\\_Narratives\\_Documen/Roma\\_\\_Sinti\\_Gypsies\\_/Jewish\\_Responses\\_to\\_the\\_Porraj/jewish\\_responses\\_to\\_the\\_porraj.html](http://www.chgs.umn.edu/Histories/_Narratives_Documen/Roma__Sinti_Gypsies_/Jewish_Responses_to_the_Porraj/jewish_responses_to_the_porraj.html). Domino Kai, Fred Taikon and other Roma in Sweden have adopted an alternative to the term "porrajmos", which they consider to be extremely offensive, using instead the phrase "Sa o Mudarimós" or "Sa o Mudaripén" ("the final killing"), which they consider more accurate in conjunction with a reconsideration of the mechanisms of exclusion, which they term "anti-Romaism". Private communication from Domino Kai dated 22 August 2007.

<sup>47</sup> See Incirlioglu, *op. cit.*, for a critical engagement with Foucault's concept of heterotopia as an example of research that has attempted to address wider conceptual issues; also Seeman, *op. cit.*, for a response to Gayatri Spivak's critique regarding the 'voice' of the subaltern being heard.



*Dom from Kiziltepe, Mardin region in south-eastern Turkey. Tattoos are common amongst men and women and are originally an influence from the Christian Suriyani population, suggestive of changing religious identity amongst the Dom.*

PHOTO CREDIT: IDAVER MEMEDOV

lacuna on the part of those writing Gypsy history and more to do with the relative absence of historians in Romani studies. The works of Gypsy history that have been published have often reflected a perspective that might be described as “a-historical”,<sup>48</sup> at worst as an exercise in myth-making, and yet the process of historical writing in general is one that has encompassed much of the latter in the development of national histories.<sup>49</sup> The shift away from nationalist

historiography of the nineteenth-century, to a more inclusive historiography in many instances (history-from-below in 1960’s Britain, for example), has been one that has not survived the dramatic changes in political complexity in south-eastern Europe, for example. As Milena Dragicevic Sestic has argued, the discourse of diversity in the region, fostered by international organisations and others in an attempt to address the results of the conflicts of the 1990s, stands

<sup>48</sup> *Mayall op.cit.*

<sup>49</sup> *I am reminded of Konrad Berkovic’s statement in his 1929 “The Story of the Gypsies” in which he writes “[...] every historian has lied when telling the story of his [sic.] own people, and lied again when telling the story of another [...].”*

in direct opposition to ethnically-based cultural policies and national cultures.<sup>50</sup> The significant others in this context are the neighbouring Serbs, Bulgarians, Albanians, and Romanians, but *Gypsies* are also part of the narratives of ethnicity throughout the Balkans, as van de Port has shown frequently as the ultimate ‘other’ against which ethnic identity in any of these instances is measured or ‘forged’.

There are then, a number of issues to be addressed by Romani researchers producing Gypsy historiography. Can these be seen differently for Romani writers of Gypsy history, as opposed to non-Gypsy authors? Here I have tried to reflect upon aspects of the writing of Romani history as an example of research and representation in a historiographical context, and argue the case that there are a number of significant issues to be addressed by Romani researchers themselves. The first is that Romani history (and research) *is* being produced differently by Romani and non-Romani authors, and that it is being defined through practice, whilst the debates concerned with questions of what history or research is, remain largely unacknowledged by the scholarship in Romani Studies. I am suggesting here that there are apparently competing demands between Gypsy activism in the political sphere and the desire to construct a coherent narrative of ethnicity and identity in the interests of addressing inequality, and the concerns of researchers attempting to examine the historical or contemporary experiences of Gypsy peoples. There is a relationship here, and the question is one of *complimentarity* or conflict. I would suggest that the necessary engagement with the theoretical implications of modern historiography, for Romani history writing, is one that must be undertaken, as part of the shift towards a more critical Romani studies. This shift

is one that the Romani writers of Gypsy history may be best placed to undertake, for reasons I shall discuss below.

From Angus Fraser’s seminal 1992 history of Gypsies, to Ian Hancock’s 2002 work, lies not only a temporal separation, but a paradigm shift in the approach to the writing of Romani history. The “grand narrative”<sup>51</sup> of Fraser’s sweep through time has been replaced by the adoption of a thematic structure, suggesting an emphasis from the perspective of Gypsy people themselves, by a Romani author. The ‘traditional’ historicism of Fraser’s work maintains the fiction of the objective voice, reflecting something of his attitudes as regards aspects of various notions of origins, for example, and his characterisation of the movement of Gypsies into central and western Europe as ‘The Great Trick’ (*o xanxanó baró*). This, Fraser suggests, was “the greatest trick of all [...] played on western Europe in the early fifteenth century.”<sup>52</sup> This strikes a chord that is echoed elsewhere in the work, one of roguish mendacity when it comes to claims made by Gypsy people about identity or belonging throughout the whole of the recorded history of the Gypsies. This is not the place for a review of the volume; the underlying trope is one of ironic scepticism, and the text is *emplotted* as a tragic and heroic journey, clearly defining the resilience and resistance of Gypsy peoples in the face of almost overwhelming oppression and suppression. The link with resilience and therefore *authenticity* is, however, slightly contradictory in view of the sceptical position adopted in Fraser’s analysis.

The challenge of the post-modernist Dutch school<sup>53</sup> has forced a recapitulation of the arguments about origins and identity that, to some extent, was left open by Fraser’s scepticism.<sup>54</sup> Ian Hancock’s most recent work has sought to define the question emphatically, and has brought strong reactions

<sup>50</sup> “*Balkan crossroads: for a new ethics in cultural policy making and international relations*” (2005). Paper presented at Towards A New Balkan Cultural Studies Conference, *op.cit.*

<sup>51</sup> *Term from Lyotard, J. F. 1979. The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. Manchester: Manchester University Press.*

<sup>52</sup> *Fraser, op.cit.*

<sup>53</sup> *For example, Willems, Wim. 1998. In Search of the True Gypsy; from Enlightenment to Final Solution. London: Frank Cass.*

<sup>54</sup> *Acton, 2006, op.cit.*



from the social historian David Mayall<sup>55</sup> and, more particularly, Yaron Matras.<sup>56</sup> In his review article,<sup>57</sup> Yaron Matras challenges Ian Hancock's claims to present a convincing case, and argues instead that activism, rather than scholarship, is the driving agenda in this recent discussion of origins and

identity. Thomas Acton's response<sup>58</sup> suggests that the arguments are in the nature of "classic positivist" debates, familiar in Romani Studies since the speculative considerations of W. R. Rishi in 1983 (see text box on page 22 and 23), began to represent the modern *kshatriya* (Rajpūt warrior) position.

### The kshatriya debate

The notion of a military origin of Gypsies is, of course, nothing new; Richard Burton writing on a number of occasions<sup>59</sup> suggested this from the 1840's onwards<sup>60</sup> and others followed for the next sixty years to repeat or develop this. W.R. Rishi's own discussions sought to draw new inferences from some surprising connections.<sup>61</sup> The writing of Romani history remains a contextual and highly contested arena, where the discourse of "authenticity" and "resilience" jostles with that of "social isolation" and "marginality". Scholarship and activism are contrasted as two opposing poles, with the engagement in one argued by many as compromising the other.<sup>62</sup> In this sense, Romani 'self-writing',<sup>63</sup> can be seen as the necessary corrective to *gadje* derived scientific criteria, and positivist notions of objectivity. In this context, Gypsy researchers' positions are very similar to that of other writers from minority ethnic backgrounds; it is the assumption that the activist agenda is always to be identified at the heart of the argument, the inability to stand 'objectively' above the debate. The problem that such a position also embodies (in that any attempt to pursue objectivity is seen largely as the product of an exterior, or unrepresentative perspective that cannot adequately supply us, the readers, with an insight from a genuinely *ethnic* voice) is, of course, the flip-side of this particular counterfeit (in the sense that notions of scientific objectivity have been undermined by the assault of post-modernism) coin.

In the wider Romani political movement, the 'traditional' approach to the history of Gypsies has largely maintained its teleological narrative, through the tropes of journey, persecution and the need for redemption through political and social emancipation, delivered by non-Gypsy institutions (European Union, Council of Europe, Organization for Security & Co-operation in Europe and the UN), as mobilised by Romani activism and influenced by research reports and studies. Web-sites dedicated to the dissemination of information about Roma of Europe frequently include varieties of historical background that continue to reflect the emphasis on mobility and marginalisation. Contemporary music, as an aspect of the reproduction of what one might term popular Romani history, constantly refers to the "Roads of the Roma", or the "Thousand Year Journey", reinforcing the separate nature

*continued on next page* →

<sup>55</sup> Mayall, *op.cit.*

<sup>56</sup> Matras, Yaron. 2001. "Typology, dialectology and the structure of complementation in Romani." In *Trends in Linguistics, Studies and Monographs* 153.

<sup>57</sup> Matras, 2004, *op.cit.*

<sup>58</sup> Acton, Thomas. Forthcoming. "Has Rishi gone out of style? Academic & policy paradigms in Romani Studies." In *Roma. Delhi*.

<sup>59</sup> For the most definitive presentation of his arguments, see Burton, Richard. 1898. *The Jew, the Gypsy & el Islam*. London: Hutchinson.

<sup>60</sup> As Ian Hancock himself made clear in a recent posting on the Roma Virtual Network dated 23 July 2007.

<sup>61</sup> Rishi, W. R. 1983. "On the Indian love of buffalo milk." In *Roma. Delhi*.

<sup>62</sup> Mayall, *op. cit.*; and Matras, *op.cit.*

<sup>63</sup> Phrase from a 2005 symposium at Umeå University's Department of Modern Languages. See: <http://www.eng.umu.se/raoul/Call.pdf>.

of Romani experience through alternative narratives of journey, or counter-structures of community governance and self-regulation, with collections of music by “Gypsy Queens” or “Kings”. Conversely, these seek to integrate this cultural expression under the general category of “world music”, again as an alternative to ‘mainstream’ (non-world?) music.<sup>64</sup> The possibility of Romani music that expresses more “conventional” forms, such as the Mozart, Brahms and Liszt played at concerts by Robbi Lakatos or Gabor Boros’ ensemble, finds only a limited market, whilst those musicians who work in a more nationally-defined genre, such as Swedish dance-band music, are not recognised as Romani or Gypsy at all (despite the fact that very many of the dance bands’ personnel are *Resande* (Travellers)). The extreme example of this is in the situation of English Romanichals, whose musical heritage has become almost wholly absorbed as “folk music” since the latter was re-fashioned in the 1960’s, and English Gypsies now often identify closely with American country and western music. This form of Romani presentation as an expression of historical experience has become detached and de-contextualised to the extent of being unrecognised as such in the Swedish and English contexts. The particular descriptions of the shifting relationship of Travelling peoples from rural to urban communities, as a consequence of industrialisation and urbanisation, are now taken to be part of the overall narrative of population dislocation and (frequently) emigration in the restructuring of these nation-states during this process. In these examples, the research undertaken into these musical forms leaves aside such considerations.<sup>65</sup> Sonia Seeman has argued that contemporary Gypsy music in Turkey, produced by the *Romanlar* themselves, is both responsive to and reflective of the non-Roman “iconic stereotypes” that emerge in the struggle for control over representations of the ‘Gypsy’ (*çingene* in what is considered to be a pejorative term), in what she suggests is a fluid “[...] contingent, negotiable and contestable [...], relational and conjectural rather than essential” process of establishing Gypsy cultural identities.<sup>66</sup>

In the purveying of popular ideas of the Romani past, the imaginary *Gypsy*, and his/her connection to “the wild” or exotic, maintains its hold on both the European conception of Gypsy people, and the understanding of how they came to be. The current prejudice and discrimination displayed towards Gypsies in Europe utilises this discourse in order to mobilise the notions associated with it, underpinning stereotypical representation through the media of feckless, irresponsible parasites. The portrayal of Gypsies in terms of history is significantly undercut by reference to delegitimised “travellers”. A great deal of research and reports published engage critically with this discourse, arguing for a rights-based approach that ultimately challenges some of the conceptions surrounding notions of social inclusion and citizenship, especially as these are frequently *ethnicised* across social, economic and political factors further marginalising Gypsy communities.

The representation of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in research is as many-faceted as the research itself, but the current plethora of texts that focus upon social inclusion is less an indication of the needs of Gypsy peoples themselves and more a reflection of where it is possible to gain funding for research and what kind of research is being commissioned. In this context, the production of research is always an aspect of those producing it, not those about whom it is produced. These many representations have a clear impact upon how people perceive Gypsies, and how Gypsies more and more perceive themselves. As Acton has suggested, the solidity of a rights-based model of research (such as that pursued by the ERRC) stands in stark contrast to the smoke-and-mirrors that are preferred by many researchers and donors, the essentially nationalist notions of social inclusion and citizenship.

<sup>64</sup> Malvinni, *op.cit.*

<sup>65</sup> *Scottish research by contrast, under the auspices of Edinburgh University’s Centre for Scottish Studies, has an unrivalled archive of recordings from Gypsy-Traveller singers such as Bell Stuart and many others.*

<sup>66</sup> See Seeman, *op.cit.*; see also Marsh and Strand, 2006, *op. cit.*