

1 Historical categories and representations

The Gypsies or Travellers have scarcely written their own history. Theirs is a non-literate tradition, so their history is found fragmented in documents of the dominant non-Gypsy or Gorgio society. (Gorgio is the word Gypsies use to describe non-Gypsies and means outsider or stranger. It is often pejorative.) The history of the Gypsies is marked by attempts to exoticise, disperse, control, assimilate or destroy them. The larger society's ways of treating and identifying Gypsies are fundamental constraints on if not determinants of the Gypsies' actions. Persons who live under the shadow of the title 'Gypsy' or its equivalent will make the appropriate adjustments to the larger Gorgio society in which they are embedded.

Some introductory remarks concerning the complexity of locating the persons called Gypsies or Travellers come as a warning. The Gypsies' history cannot be a simple chronology of non-Gypsy written records; these can only provide clues for interpretation. Nor can the complexity be resolved by looking for the 'real' Gypsies, who are usually those who fit best the stereotypes of the observer. The very notion of the 'real' Gypsy raises more questions than answers.

Long-term participant observation among persons called or calling themselves Gypsies or Travellers can however be informative for both the present and the past. In this study, I shall be drawing on the various records and writings concerned with Gypsies or Travellers¹ mainly in Britain, in order to put my own fieldwork among Gypsies in southern England in the 1970s into context. In turn, such fieldwork should also throw light on the historical records.

The different ways in which Gypsies have been identified and recorded, whether the document be a legal order or a folklorist's piece, have depended on the wider context. The Gypsies' first appearance in the British Isles is defined and fixed by the first written records in the early sixteenth century of a category of persons called 'Egyptians'. The word 'Gypsy' derives from 'Egyptian'. Records of Gypsies are of two broad types: first, the legal definitions, public statutes and later government reports; secondly, by the nineteenth century, the literary and folklore sources.

The legal and government records are witness to the struggles between the state and the minority group. The state has attempted to control

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and exercise force against Gypsies, partly because they avoid wage-labour, are of no fixed abode, and because they seek intermittent access to land. Those who confront the prevailing order, be it in small ways, those who demonstrate alternative possibilities in economic spheres, in ways of being and thinking, those who appear as powerful symbols, must, it seems, be contained and controlled. Although in fact the Gypsies' threat is trivial, their presence exposes profound dissatisfactions in the dominant system.

Folklore and exotic literature often convey the ideological and symbolic disorder which the Gypsies appear to represent. The Gypsies are shown in either positive or negative form. Their apparent differences from non-Gypsies are elaborated or simply imagined, for example the beliefs that the Gypsies are 'closer to nature' and 'wild and free' (see Okely 1981a).

Whether legalistic or exotic, all of the non-Gypsy records and representations can be treated as artefacts to decipher. Even when the information appears to be obtained directly from the Gypsies it also requires interpretation. The Gypsies acquire maximum manoeuvrability if they give the outsider that which pleases him or her and resembles his or her presuppositions. The Gypsies appear to conform, while retaining a certain independence. Yet they are never free of the dominant system. For instance, since a travelling people are seen to defy the state's demand for a 'fixed abode', they are seen as both lawless and fascinating. In turn it may suit the Gypsies to *be* fascinating, while concealing their own way of ordering their lives. Thus stereotypes of Gypsies and accounts from them, whether 'lies' or 'truths', may be inversions or mystifications rather than reflections of 'reality'. Images of and information transmitted by Gypsies to Gorgios may speak more of Gorgios than of Gypsies.

It has been claimed that literate people have history, while non-literate people have myth, but in the case of Gypsy–Gorgio history there is a fusion of the two. The literate tradition of the dominant society has assisted in myth making, especially with regard to the myths of the Gypsies' origins. A number of places of origin have been attributed to Gypsies in the British Isles, as elsewhere in Europe. Gypsies in Britain were at first said to have come from Egypt. Perhaps the Gypsies played along with this. By the nineteenth century, the theory of an Indian origin emerged, thanks to diffusionist ideas and to studies of the dialects or 'secret' languages used by Gypsies mainly among themselves. Whether all those persons calling themselves and called Egyptians from the sixteenth century on were from overseas is a matter of considerable conjecture and controversy. Today, the extent to which Indian origin is emphasised depends on the extent to which the groups or individuals are exoticised and, paradoxically, considered acceptable to the dominant society.

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Foreigners and counterfeits

The 'Egyptians' were first recorded in the British Isles in Scotland in 1505 in the accounts of the Lord High Treasurer. They presented themselves to James IV as pilgrims, their leader being lord of 'little Egypt' (Vesey-Fitzgerald 1973: 21). In England, this category of persons was first recorded in 1514 in the form of an 'Egyptian' woman who could 'tell marvellous things by looking into one's hands' (Vesey-Fitzgerald 1973: 28). One origin for this Egyptian label, both in the British Isles and elsewhere in Europe, is, according to Clébert, that well before Gypsies or 'Tsiganes' were publicly recorded in western Europe (in the fourteenth century) 'all mountebanks and travelling showmen found themselves dubbed "Egyptians"' (1967:27). Persons believed by many Gysiologists to be the first Gypsies arriving in western Europe presented themselves as pilgrims, some from 'little Egypt', understood to represent the Middle East (Vesey-Fitzgerald 1973:13; de Vaux de Foletier 1970: 20-1). Acton, who supports the theory of the Gypsies' Indian migration, nonetheless gives an explanation as to why such 'Egyptians' might be encouraged to feign exotic origins, namely that at the period the stereotype image of an 'Egyptian' apparently fleeing from pagan persecution would have been 'favourable' (1974:61).

The Egyptian connection was further elaborated. It was said that Gypsies had to leave with Joseph and Mary in the flight from Egypt, or that Gypsies learnt their magical arts from a country renowned for such skills. These early 'Egyptians' in the British Isles were associated with exotic occupations, for example fortune telling, which they exercised 'with crafte and subtyltie' (Statute Henry VIII 1530), and James V paid 'Egyptians' who danced for him at Holyrood House in 1530.

Within a few decades, 'Egyptians' were ordered to leave the country, and deportations were carried out. A similar treatment had been imposed upon the indigenous mad in the fifteenth century (Foucault 1971). If not deported, Egyptians were imprisoned and their goods forfeited. By 1554, Egyptians who did not depart were to be judged felons and executed. But the problem for the authorities was that these Egyptians then asserted that they had been born in England and Scotland. In 1562, an order 'for the avoiding of all Doubts and Ambiguities' was introduced so that 'all such sturdy and false vagabonds of that sort living only upon the spoil of the simple people' might be punished, and the death penalty was extended not only to those 'in any company or Fellowship of Vagabonds, commonly called or calling themselves Egyptians', but also to those 'counterfeiting, transforming or disguising themselves by their Apparel, Speech or other Behaviour' (Thompson 1923a). This suggests that the Egyptian title was nothing but an assumed identity for many persons with no foreign origin. Since, in many instances, vagrants were subject to the same harsh

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treatment as so-called Egyptians, there was no advantage in dropping the assumed title merely in order to escape the authorities. Moreover, money could be earned from the 'simple people', as well as from royalty, by presenting an exotic identity as fortune teller and dancer. The term 'Egyptian' or later 'Gypsy' could have been useful as a means of self-identification and it was not likely to be just a stigmatic label imposed by persecuting outsiders.

Further evidence collected by Thompson appears to support my suggestion that the foreign origin of many 'Egyptians' is questionable. Thompson's examination of constables' accounts and other sources reveals specific examples of persons recorded as vagabonds but convicted of felony for calling themselves by the name of an 'Egyptian', e.g. Robert Hylton of Denver, Norfolk in 1591 (Thompson 1928:37). Here self-ascription is acknowledged. Earlier in 1549 a John Roland was recorded in County Durham as 'oon of that sorte of people callinge themselves Egyptians' (1928:40). Around 1610 a pamphleteer declared that 'they goe alwais never under an hundred men or women, causing their faces to be made blacke, as if they were Egyptians' (Thompson 1928:34, my emphasis).

Thus the popular view that the early Gypsies were inherently different in physiognomy or so-called 'racial origin' should be treated with scepticism. It seems that persons calling themselves Egyptians found it useful to adopt not only a foreign title but also a foreign appearance.

Nonetheless, Thompson supported the notion of 'true-blooded' Gypsies who were entirely of foreign origin. He found many convictions of vagabonds recorded under names later recognised by 'experts' or Gypsiologists as 'true gypsy', e.g. Heron, White, Smith, Brown, Wilson and Young. These he suggests were really persons with 'a dash of Gypsy blood' or more, but disguised as vagabonds. Thompson does not consider the possibility that many Gypsy families may have emerged from the indigenous vagrant population as an ethnic group using the principle of descent and other self-defining features.²

Vagrants: an alternative category

The death penalty for Gypsies remained until 1783. However, Gypsies were not so easily eliminated: other measures had to be taken against them. The Gypsies' prosecution as 'vagrants' rather than as foreigners became clearer in the seventeenth century. Special orders were given to parish constables to chase Gypsies from their area, but with minimum success (Thompson 1928). In 1622, for example, the Bishop of Lincoln wrote to the Earl of Shaftesbury and other J.P.s in southern England, near my fieldwork area in the 1970s: 'His majestie is justly offended at you who ... do suffer your countrey to swarme with whole troupes of rogues, beggars, Aegyptians and idle persons.' The J.P.s were ordered to enforce 'these lawes for ye punishing, imploying,

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chasetising and rooting out of these idle people, symptomes of Popery and blynde superstition'. On 30 September an order was made for the provision of a marshal 'for the better clearing the county of rogues', and with authority to 'punish and chase away all rogues and vagrant persons'. It was also declared that 'All such persons as shall harbour such rogues and vagabonds shall be prosecuted' (Sessions Rolls 1581-1698:vol. I).

One focus was on the Gypsies' apparent idleness which, throughout Europe in the seventeenth century, was condemned by both Catholic and Protestant ideology and equated with rebellion (Foucault 1971: 56-7). As an alternative to execution, some Gypsies were to be put to 'honest service or to exercise some lawful work, Trade or Occupation' (Thompson 1923a). Those deemed idle were to be sent to the House of Correction established in the mid seventeenth century, and later to workhouses. There are examples of Gypsies being arrested and so punished in 1655, near my subsequent fieldwork area: 'George Brugman late of little Malvern Co. Worcester, Henry Hall born at Fairfield Co. Derby, Edward Morrell, William Morrell and Alexander Morrell born at Calne Co. Wilts were taken as "Egyptians" and sent to the House of Correction at [—], in order that they shall be "well whipped" and after sent by pass to the places aforesaid' (Sessions Rolls 1619-1657). A non-Gypsy was also punished for associating with Gypsies: 'Recognisance for the appearance of John Bourne at the next quarter sessions, to answer for "entertaining and harbouring several Egyptians in his House"' (Sessions Rolls 1619-1657). In March 1703 there is a further record of Gypsies: 'Warrant to the keeper of the county gaol to receive Thomas Ingroom, Margaret his wife, Easter Joanes and Susan Wood, the Head of a gang of about 50 gypsies travelling about telling fortunes and calling themselves Egyptians' (Sessions Rolls 1699-1850).

In contrast to isolated individuals, it seems likely that the Gypsies were (as they are today) a self-reproducing ethnic group with an ideology of travelling (the 1554 Statute describes how they go 'from place to place in great companies' (Thompson 1923a)), a preference for self-employment and a wide range of economic activities. It was however expedient for the state to deal with them as workless vagrants. In 1786, for example, in a special order to constables in my subsequent fieldwork area, Gypsies were classed with other persons also appearing to have lucrative occupations, and likewise condemned for their unconventional or 'unlicensed' form. Those deemed 'vagrants' included: 'Persons going about as Bear wards, or exhibiting shews, or players of Interludes, Comedies, Operas or Farces without authority, or Minstrels, Jugglers or Gypsies wandering in Form or Habit of Egyptians or Persons telling Fortunes ... and all Petty Chapmen and Pedlars not licensed ...' (Sessions Rolls 1752-1799). If such persons were found returning they were to be treated as 'incorrigible Rogues and Vagabonds'.

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'Depraved' and ripe for conversion

In the nineteenth century, divergent approaches to Gypsies emerge in the literature. Some European scholars had begun to suggest that the various forms of 'language' or dialects found among Gypsies and sometimes labelled Romanes could be traced to a language of Aryan origin connected with early Sanskrit. This was publicised by the German author Grellmann (translated in 1787). In 1816 John Hoyland published the first English survey of Gypsies, using much of Grellmann, together with the results of written enquiries around England and just one visit to a Gypsy encampment.

Hoyland, a Quaker, alongside the Reverend J. Crabb and the M.P. George Smith, supported alternative forms of control to the policies of deportation or dispersal, namely conversion and assimilation into the prevailing order. 'The period in which banishments were generally pronounced on this people was too unphilosophical for any preferable mode of punishment to be suggested' (Hoyland 1816:195). Hoyland considered Gypsies to be 'depraved' (1816:158), and for them philanthropy and education should be the new policies. According to him, their wandering life originated 'in a scrupulous regard to the institutions of their ancestors' (1816:233). Here foreign origin was beginning to be used in the Gypsies' favour in a plea to the state. Since Gypsies had no parochial settlement, Hoyland demanded that they be treated as a special exception under the Vagrancy Acts, but only temporarily; Gypsies who had been introduced to the 'comforts of social order' and acquired 'mechanical professions which would render them useful and respectable' but who still 'indulged' in wandering would deserve maximum punishment (1816:233-4). Meanwhile, Hoyland declared: 'It is worse than useless and unavailing to harass them from place to place when no retreat or shelter is provided' (1816:161).

Hoyland's reprint of correspondence from the *Christian Observer* (1816:199) indicated the popular concern for the 'conversion' of Gypsies. J. Crabb referred to Gypsies as 'these poor English heathens' (1832:ix). Mission schools were established by the mid nineteenth century with uncertain success (see Acton 1974:104, Windstedt 1908:319). Crabb was one of the first to use pseudo-genetical theories to account for the Gypsies' alleged moral decline:

Gypseys which originally came to this country, have been on the decrease in number and are gradually becoming less distinguishable as a peculiar race of people ... A description of vagabonds and itinerant tinkers, repairers of umbrellas and vagrants of the worst character have of late found admission among the Gipsies ... the standard of morals ... is of course much lowered by such intermixtures.

(1830:9, quoted by Acton 1974:89)

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Here 'real' Gypsies are distinguished from vagrants and even Tinkers, but due to alleged miscegenation, the categories were no longer distinct sets of people. Elsewhere, Crabb claimed that 'fifty years ago they were considered useful by the peasantry and small farmers ... their outrages and depredations were very few' (1832:23). The theme so familiar today, that in their 'proud' past Gypsies were once tolerated (see the Hampshire Association of Parish Councils 1961, and Okely 1975a:31), had already emerged by the 1830s.

In the 1870s and 1880s George Smith chose to deprecate Gypsies, and partly because of their alleged Indian origins (Smith 1880). Dismissing the early charitable efforts of the missionaries, he believed legislation was necessary to transform radically the Gypsies' way of life (Acton 1974: 108–9). Smith failed in parliament to ensure compulsory schooling and the registration of vans. The latter reflected most poignantly the problem for a sedentary society. Although Gallichan, a Gypsiologist, argued much later, 'The Gypsy is not dangerous simply because he has no fixed dwelling place' (1908: 358), this appeared to be precisely the point of friction. Perhaps the dominant society's attempts to give Gypsies a single place of origin also reflects this problem.

Cultural differentiation

In contrast to the reformists who tended to deny exoticism in contemporary Gypsies, but who instead wanted them to be converted and assimilated either by charitable institutions or by direct state intervention, other writers elaborated the Gypsies' exotic potential. The full romance of exoticism, combined with the detail and authenticity that comes from first hand experience, are found in the celebrated works of George Borrow, e.g. *Lavengro* (1851) and *The Romany Rye* (1857). His first publication, *The Zincoli: Gypsies in Spain* (1841), helped fix the favourable English stereotype of the 'real' Gypsy as Spanish, later assisted by Mérimée's *Carmen* (1845) and Bizet's opera of 1875. Borrow also affirmed and publicised an Indian origin for persons who were in some cases referred to as Romanies in England and Wales. Other 'Gypsiologists' who were interested in Gypsies in England and elsewhere included Leland (1882, 1891 and 1893); and Hindes Groome (1880). Smart and Crofton compiled the first dictionary of Anglo-Romany, published in 1875. All contributed to the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society (J.G.L.S.)* founded in 1880, the year of Borrow's death. This offers a rich store of Gypsy material, randomly presented – folklore, rituals, details of parish records, first hand accounts, examples of the Romany 'language', genealogies and comparisons with Gypsies beyond the British Isles. The journal also contains some of the fantasy writings by persons who had rarely if ever met Gypsies.

Some of this literature which emerged in the nineteenth century,

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whether its authors were concerned with Gypsy 'culture' as a means of differentiation, or whether they were concerned with greater external control in order to eliminate difference, should be viewed as a record of collective misrepresentations. The production of these misrepresentations has sometimes required the Gypsies' collaboration. Some of the descriptions of meetings with Gypsies are important because they reveal the gullibility of the authors and the Gypsies' well-developed skills in defending themselves against outsiders.

The Indian connection

Diffusionism underlies the claim that within the British Isles the 'real' Gypsies found in England and Wales, and strangely not in Scotland and Ireland, are the descendants of migrants from India around 1000 A.D. Studies of the language or dialects of Gypsies in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries revealed a connection with a form of Sanskrit said to have evolved around or before 1000 A.D. The different forms of 'Romany' found throughout Europe have also many words from Persian, modern and Byzantine Greek, Slavic and Rumanian. These other ingredients have been perceived by scholars as 'corruptions' of a once 'pure' Indian Gypsy language.

Scholastic weight was given later to the alleged Indian origin of some Gypsies in Wales thanks to the etymological work of John Sampson (1926), who believed that migration routes could be reconstructed according to vocabulary content (1923). The number of loan words in English Romanes, Sampson claims, 'even furnishes some indication of the length of their stay in any particular region' (1926:411). Although Sampson recognises that one group or nationality may simply take over words from others, for example 'in the Balkan provinces we find so many floating loan words borrowed by one race from another' (1926:411), yet he cannot consider that the same could have happened to a form of Indian vocabulary or language encountered on the well trodden trade routes between East and West.

Language has been equated by the Gypsiologists with 'race'. It has been implied by some that those Gypsies who use the most Romani words (whether or not these have traceable Sanskrit 'roots') have the closest genetic links with India. The underlying assumption is that language is transmitted or learnt only through biological descent. Edmund Leach, in a commentary on my scepticism concerning the Gypsies' alleged single Indian origin (Okely 1979b), presents in my support a convincing parallel: 'Forms of English are spoken in all parts of the world ... We do not on that account try to argue that the native speakers of true and creolised and pidgin English must all be descendants of fifth-century migrants from Jutland!' (1979:121).

It is not clear how many of the first recorded 'Egyptians' used a second 'secret' language that was nothing more than an indigenous slang,

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an underworld back slang or in some cases a version of Gaelic (later identified as Shelta among Irish Tinkers). There is one early record of some Romani phrases mistakenly called Egyptian collected by Borde (1547), who also travelled in France. It is not known from whom he collected this vocabulary, but the Romani links in his list were only generally recognised in 1874 (Sampson 1930:351). Otherwise Smart and Crofton give records of some Romani vocabulary from the 1780s (1875:1-2). The single case before the late eighteenth century is not sufficient to indicate the speech of all the early 'Egyptians'.

More recently Ian Hancock (1970) has suggested that Anglo-Romany may be a creole. But he still supports the notion of a 'pure' Indian language existing in slightly modified form, perhaps on the other side of the English channel:

Certainly the wave of Romanichals to arrive in the British Isles during the mid-fifteenth century spoke their language in its most conservative form, allowing for the considerable amount of lexical and structural influence which had been affecting it during the three or four centuries of development outside of India; that this was so is indicated by the existence of 'pure' Romanes in North Wales today. (1970:42)

I suggest that the so-called 'pure' Anglo-Romany recorded by Sampson among some families in Wales at the beginning of the twentieth century could also have been imported by Gypsies who migrated from Europe more recently than the sixteenth century. In any case, Hancock's suggestion that Anglo-Romany is a creole could be extended beyond the British Isles. Further research is needed here. Perhaps many forms of Romanes might be classified as creole or pidgins which developed between merchants and other travelling groups along the trade routes. These served as a means of communication between so-called Gypsy groups.

Given the special economic niche of all Gypsies who can never approximate to economic self-sufficiency, but must always trade with outsiders in the surrounding society, their language usages have to be consistent with this position. In order to earn their living, the Gypsies need to be fluent in the languages of non-Gypsies. It would be of little use for Gypsies to tell fortunes in Romanes to non-Gypsies, their major clients. Thus, any forms of Romanes used between Gypsy groups cannot and can never have been the sole nor necessarily the dominant language of a Gypsy group. In the British Isles, for example, English is the dominant language.

The Gypsiologists make the same mistakes as the nineteenth-century anthropologists in the general study of languages and racial distribution. Some believed in the notion of a united Indo-European race with a 'real' language of which many European and Asian forms were considered to be mere fragmentations. Similarly, Gypsy language and

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the 'original culture' have been located as things once intact in India. It is assumed that Gypsies existed in India many centuries back as a 'pure' group or separate society with language, customs and genetic structure hermetically sealed, until some 'mysterious event' caused their departure from their mythical homeland. From then on they are said to have been 'corrupted' in the course of migration and during contact with non-Gypsies. Thus any custom which seems strange to the Gorgio observer is explained not in terms of its contemporary meaning to the group, but according to some 'survival' from mythical ancient Indian days, or even the contemporary caste system. Any cultural similarity between Gypsy and Gorgio is explained away and denigrated as 'contamination'.

There are similar problems and claims in discussing the origins of Gypsies elsewhere in Europe. The use of some form of vocabulary, dialect or 'language' identified as Romanes is found in varying degrees among some groups classified as Gypsies. Some 'dialects' are mutually unintelligible. Some groups, whether or not they are acquainted with such dialects or vocabulary, are credited with no Indian origins. For instance, the Yeniches travelling through Belgium and France are attributed with German origins. A group to be found in Rumania, often considered to be the location of the 'real Gypsy', is said to have been formed from members of the indigenous population (Beck and Gheorghe 1981:19). The Woonwagenbewoners in the Netherlands and the Landfahrer in Germany are attributed an indigenous origin, and since they are not identified as 'Rom' or by any of the other 'foreign' tribal titles used by some Gypsy groups, and presumably since they do not appear to have any visibly exotic customs, they have been denied status as an ethnic group by a number of social scientists reporting to the European Commission (Okely 1980:79). This was asserted without any apparent investigation into whether any of the Travellers themselves used specific criteria for membership based on descent.

Similarly, the Tattares of Sweden are said to have little or no foreign, exotic ancestry. In his study of the genealogies of the Tattares, who prefer to call themselves Resande, Heymowski (1969) found a high proportion of ancestors of Swedish nationality. These included a few peasants, but were mainly persons with itinerant occupations and also German mercenary soldiers. Heymowski therefore suggests that the Tattares are not really an ethnic Gypsy group. He gives proper status as 'real Gypsies' to those Travellers or Gypsies who identify themselves as Kalderash, allegedly from eastern Europe (see Acton 1974:22). Yet Heymowski admits that the Tattares appear to use the principle of descent to identify themselves in contrast to anyone vaguely called 'Tattare' by the surrounding sedentary population. A later study of Gypsies in Sweden reveals the considerable flexibility in the Gypsies' choice of labels presented to outsiders. For instance, Gypsies originating from Poland, without any previous claims to being