

# 1 Historical categories and representations

Judith Oakely

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 Travellers 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

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.

*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 Gypsiologists 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 subtyltic' (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.<sup>2</sup>

### *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, majestic 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: 'Recognition 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'.

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 the M.P. 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 Zingali: Gypsies in Spain* (1841), helped fix the favourable English stereotype of the 'real' Gypsy as Spanish, later assisted by Merimée'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

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 Gheorge 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

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Kalderash, adopt Kalderash names upon arrival in Sweden because such persons are given exotic and favourable status by the dominant society (Kaminski, personal communication 1975). Indeed Tattares were excluded from lucrative welfare programmes (see Acton 1974:22). Elsewhere in Europe, e.g. in Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Germany, it also seems that groups or 'tribes' who refer to themselves as Rom, Kalderash or Lovari are most likely to be credited with eastern, Indian origins and given 'real' status, if only by Gorgio scholars and political representatives.

Those observers who seek to prove Indian origin will sometimes attempt to identify traces of Indian 'culture' among European Gypsies. Thus Irving Brown, in trying to prove the links between the Rom and an Indian group called the Dom, whom he visited in the 1920s, naively produced such evidence as; the similar 'musical propensities of the race' (1928:173); ancestor worship; consumption of pork and liquor on all ceremonial occasions; eating of horse-flesh (actually the opposite to European Gypsy beliefs, see chapter 6); bride price (1928:174); 'greater vivacity' than the surrounding population; and their use of a council (1928:176)!<sup>3</sup> This highly respected Gypsiologist could not even in this case point to a potentially more plausible trait like language:

The words used by Dom are different from those of other Indian Gypsy tribes and ... are not found in European Romani. [This is] no proof either of a lack of relationship between these tribes or with the Gypsies in the outside world. Like most thieves' cant, such vocabularies are purely artificial, and spring up and die like mushrooms. (1928:175)

Thus the original search for Indian links based on language links is turned on its head when it suits the Gypsiologist!

The theories of race and those concerning both Romanes and Indo-European non-Gypsy languages all rest on the presumption of a single origin in space and time. The Gypsiologists were probably influenced by the more general theory concerning the origin of non-Gypsy Europeans, but although the latter has been discredited, the single 'birth place' for 'real' Gypsies is today still upheld by Gypsiologists, government administrators and some members of Gypsy organisations. Indian origin was used in the 1970s by the World Romani Congress, based in Europe, when requesting special ethnic status within the United Nations.

This uniting theme was exploited in the British television programme 'Romany Trail' (B.B.C. 2, The World About Us, November 1981). The extremely varied religious practices and occupations of the groups, who were all identified by the researchers as 'Gypsies' and filmed in Egypt, Europe and India, were given a common eastern and Indian origin. This was asserted despite the fact that aspects of their allegedly shared yet 'isolated' culture indicated many more marked

resemblances to aspects of the culture of the surrounding non-Gypsy population; for example, specific healing practices and dances, and the use of certain musical instruments. Their culture was more visibly syncretic than one which could be explained as random 'survivals' from India.

It was even claimed in the television programme that the Gypsies had brought the 'Punch and Judy' puppet show from India centuries ago. The programme opened with scenes of English Gypsies at Appleby Fair. Viewers were informed that the original Rom who had allegedly migrated to the British Isles were few and far between, having intermarried with the surrounding population. The implication was that the majority of Gypsies in Britain were therefore not authentic. There was little or no attempt to explore the similarities likely to be found between any mobile, non-wage-labour, non-peasant, ethnic groups, *regardless* of their real or mythical origins from a single location.

Paradoxically, there is very little evidence that Indian origin had been indicated or used by Gypsies until it was first given to them by Gorgio scholars (see Vesey-Fitzgerald 1973:16). Even today the title 'Romany' is not generally interpreted at the local level as of Indian origin. The most frequent explanation which I was given by Gypsies was: 'We're Romanies 'cos we always roam.' A nomadic travelling identity was thus given priority over any exotic point of departure. But for nineteenth-century scholars and still today in the ideology of the dominant non-Gypsy society, exotic origin, safely many centuries ago (as opposed to more recent immigration by other persons from India), has become a mythical charter for selective acceptance of members, usually a minority, of a potentially threatening group.

Less interest has been shown in the capacity of a sedentary economy or in the western case a capitalist mode of production to generate and sustain its own nomads. It seems more than coincidence that throughout Europe 'Egyptians', 'Saracens' later called Tsiganes or Gitanes, 'Bohemians' and 'Tattares', and other wandering bands variously named and later identified by Gypsiologists, were officially recorded and were thus made visible at the time of the collapse of feudalism, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. So far this appearance has only been explained in terms of waves of nomads migrating in linear fashion from a single eastern locality. My own suggestions can only be conjectural and abbreviated in this study, and will be controversial to the *aficionados* of Gypsiology. My scepticism about some of the conclusions from the etymological evidence is shared in part by Vesey-Fitzgerald (1973:4-11) who nonetheless supports the Indian origin.

It may be the case that groups of people brought or appropriated some linguistic forms, Creole or pidgin related to some earlier Sanskrit in the movements along the trade routes between East and West, but it does not follow that all 'real' Gypsies or Travellers are the genealogical

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descendants of specific groups of persons allegedly in India nearly a thousand years ago. It is of course exciting that such linguistic links can be made between some Gypsies and 'magical' Asia. The Gypsiologists have thus given exotic status to persons who labour also under negative and banal images.

A common Indian origin has also been seen, especially by Gorgio members of the World Romani Congress, as a strategy for international solidarity among Gypsies. There are major advantages to be derived from international solidarity among Gypsy groups who face common problems of persecution, but an appeal to non-Gypsy governments in terms of common exotic origins might have negative results. The already existing hierarchy of 'real' and 'counterfeit' Gypsies might be further exaggerated. As already indicated in the case of Sweden and the Netherlands, travelling Gypsy groups without claims to exotic origins risk losing their rights as ethnic groups and may be more vulnerable to assimilation programmes. Moreover, even those groups attributed with 'real' Indian origins might find themselves dismissed as 'inauthentic' or 'corrupted' whenever non-Gypsy observers fail to find sufficiently alluring signs of exotic 'culture' among the persons they actually encounter. The Gypsiologists' emphasis has already led to fictitious divisions in Britain between the 'true-blooded' Romany and the rest, including the counterfeit or drop-out, 'half-blood' or mere 'Traveller'. (The Gypsies have themselves played along with this and indeed those I encountered in fieldwork entertained some ideology of 'pure' blood, but this was not connected with alleged Indian origin.)

In the long run it would seem to be more productive for international Gypsy pressure groups to emphasise the common rights and contribution of all Gypsy groups, regardless of their alleged geographical and 'racial' origins. A sentimental appeal to Gorgio tastes for exotica and based on very speculative evidence is likely to be counter-productive. Moreover, a focus by non-Gypsies on the Gypsies' alleged foreignness and exoticism usually ignores the groups' own criteria for membership and as likely or not neglects the full history of the different groups' appearance and survival within the countries they inhabit.

The following section is concerned mainly with the case of Gypsies in Britain, but some aspects may be applicable to a discussion of the origin of Gypsies elsewhere in Europe.

### *Some indigenous origins?*

It is not clear whether the first recorded 'Egyptians' in the British Isles, nor indeed many of their equivalent on the European continent, were all foreign immigrants. Within the British Isles in the fourteenth century, there is plenty of evidence of large numbers of 'wayfarers' or 'rovers' (Jusserand 1889). These included performers, pedlars, peasants out of bond, preachers, mendicant friars, and pilgrims. The Gyp-

siologists acknowledge the presence of Tinkers' (not necessarily from Ireland) before the first records of Egyptians (Vesey-Fitzgerald 1973; Acton 1974:66; McCormick 1907:394). Shakespeare's Henry IV refers to Tinkers and their 'language'. 'Tinker' and 'Tinkler' were recorded as trade names or surnames as early as the twelfth century (*Oxford English Dictionary*). But the first mention of 'Tinkers' as a group appears in a statute in the mid sixteenth century (Jusserand 1889:128).

What does seem clear is that there were plenty of indigenous recruits for nomadic groups who could have chosen to organise themselves to exploit economic opportunities on the road. In addition to earning a living as pedlars and performers, and as casual agricultural labourers, 'Egyptians', seemingly from a mysterious foreign land, could present themselves most successfully as exotic fortune tellers and gain freedom of movement as pilgrims and penitents. There were more likely to be opportunities of this kind for groups of persons who were brought up as nomads within kin based groups using the principle of descent than for isolated individuals and families. The most successful would be self-producing and able to use kinship connections for group cooperation, mutual aid, and protection against rivals or the persecuting authorities.

Already in the fourteenth century, there were increasing numbers of 'rovers' who had fled the village or the farm to which they belonged. Escaped villeins or serfs provided the 'wandering class' with most of its numerous recruits. If not practising a 'definite craft, nor having wherewith to live', they were vulnerable to conscription of labour (Statute of Labourers 1351). At the same time as state legislation was initiated to prohibit any persons going out of their 'own district', labourers were actually sought out by landowners who paid them by the day and at wages other than those of the tariff (Jusserand 1889: 144-8).

Later, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, throughout Europe the uprooted population of the middle ages was considerable. This population has been counted among the ancestors of the modern proletariat. I am suggesting that some might also be considered as ancestors of many Gypsies; for instance, those who were neither bound as serfs, nor absorbed into the trades and guilds, and who, like the rovers or escaped villeins found in the fourteenth century, were selling their labour on an hourly or daily basis (see Mandel 1969:34).

Marx gives another origin of the modern proletariat, which might also suggest the origin of some Gypsies; a group which chose to reject wage-labour rather than be proletarianised: 'The prelude of the revolution that laid the foundation of the capitalist mode of production, was played in the last third of the 15th and the first decade of the 16th century. A mass of free proletarians was hurled on the labour-market by the breaking-up of the bands of feudal retainers' (1887:718). Thus, former servants and clerks to the feudal nobles became wander-

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ers and beggars. A third origin of the proletariat, and possibly of Gypsy groups, was from dispossessed peasants, after their land had been changed from agricultural cultivation to grazing for sheep, during the development of the wool industry (Mandel 1969:35).

It seems not impossible that this mass of potential free labourers, the majority of whose descendants were to become wage-labourers, might also have provided the majority of recruits, through association and incorporation by marriage, into groups who were identified and who identified themselves as 'Egyptians'. Elsewhere in Europe, for example in France, historians have noted that 'the arrival of some "Bohemians" coincided with the establishment of the "corporations de gueuserie", or "guilds of beggars"' (Clébert 1967:63). Although it is argued by Clébert that the beggars, pedlars and 'Bohemians' remained distinct (1967:65), it does not necessarily follow that all these peoples were of entirely different origins. Moreover, people could still cross the boundaries of each group without weakening the organisational and ascribed boundaries (see Barth 1969).

Since beggars and others banded together for survival, it may be the case that groups of so-called 'Egyptians' were composed also largely of disenfranchised and indigenous persons. In this case they may have adopted an exotic nomenclature, parts of a second secret 'language' - either a creole or pidgin which had crossed many national frontiers of Europe; and exploited certain occupations, such as fortune telling and entertainment which were consistent with a magical, mysterious nomenclature. In so far as there may have been some foreign immigrant families it would have needed only a few to introduce some 'Romany' Creole into the argot and thus consolidate this novel identity. The newcomers would in any case have been compelled to make close liaisons with the indigenous population, including wandering vagrants, and learn the dominant non-Gypsy language in order to tell fortunes and to earn their living in other ways within the larger economy.

My suggestions will appear controversial. Obviously more research would be necessary to confirm the sources of recruitment to various Gypsy groups. At this stage I remain sceptical concerning some of the exotic criteria for identifying the 'real' Gypsies. I question the implicit assumptions that an ethnic group needs to be defined on the basis of its claims to foreign origins and claims to any vestiges of exotic 'culture'. An ethnic group's right to self-determination should not have to rest on that kind of romance. The following sections show the confusions concerning the identification of the 'real' Gypsy by even those persons who considered themselves to be the Gypsies' supporters in the British Isles.

#### *Romanies or half-castes*

Both in the nineteenth century and after, the Gypsiologists claimed the existence of a 'pure-blooded' minority who had almost never married

Gorgios. It was no accident, and indeed part of the logic of Gypsy-Gorgio interaction, that the Gypsies who chose to befriend the Gypsiologists were classed as 'real Romanies' while others who perhaps chose to avoid them or who offended them in some way were rejected and branded 'didikois' or some other pejorative term.

In the 1870s, Smart and Crofton first recorded the word 'didikois', referring to a group allegedly consisting of 'half-breed' Gypsies who were said to mispronounce a Romany word (1875:51). Their racial mixture was by implication the cause of their misuse of the 'traditional' language. The Gypsiologists appeared to believe that 'racial purity' and knowledge of the most archaic Romany were closely connected. In the 1920s, John Sampson also presumed a similar relationship (1926:xi). Racial 'outbreeding' was believed to bring proportional cultural decline.

The Gypsiologists' racial theories conflicted with their own evidence; the 'pure-blooded Romany' was nothing more than a category. Hindes Groome was to some extent aware of these problems. While he supported the notion of 'full-bloods' and 'half-bloods' (1880:249) and classified 'Gypsies' by 'the Romani look, language, habits and modes of thought' (1880:252), at the same time he noted the difficulties in equating specific physical or 'racial' attributes with knowledge of the Romany language and traditions. Moreover, he recognised that Gypsies married outsiders (1880:250), and drew attention to the pedigrees of the Romany families recorded by Smart and Crofton. In one, marriages with Gorgios actually outnumbered those with Romanies (1880:251). The pages of the *J.G.L.S.* also give frequent examples of Gypsy-Gorgio marriages. Nevertheless the majority of Gypsiologists used the category 'pure-blooded' or 'true Romany' as if empirical fact. As recently as the 1960s, Duff classified British Gypsies into four social groups on the basis of their alleged genetic inheritance (1963:260-1). Paradoxically, the least sociable group in his Gorgio terms were considered to have the least Romany 'blood'.

The beliefs in a mythical minority of 'real Romanies' and a genetic explanation for culture were recorded in government documents through the 1950s and 1960s. For example, the first government survey of Gypsies in Kent in 1952 considered that only 10% of its eleven hundred Gypsies appeared to be 'members of the Romany families' (Adams 1952). The Gypsiologist Vesey-Fitzgerald was brought in for advice, thus making a direct link between the concerns of government and those of Gypsiology literature. He affirmed the distinction between 'Romanies' and 'Travellers', using the traditional but unscientific category 'full-blooded' to describe the Romanies for whom he advocated preferential political support. He argued that 'any attempt to abolish nomadism in Romany families (I am not of course referring to Travellers) would have disastrous consequences both in health and morals' (Adams 1952: Appendix III).



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This survey set the tone for other local authorities. The fiction of the 'full-blooded' Romany was used to condemn the majority, if not all of the Gypsies in the locality, and even to justify making no site provision when the 1968 ruling required it (see Okely 1975a:33). In practice of course it has been impossible to identify 'Romanies' by their physical or 'racial' features. The physiognomy of the majority of Gypsies is very



English Gypsy men and boys. *Evening Post-Echo Ltd*

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much like that of the average English Gorgio. Although the occasional individuals with dark hair and brown eyes might attract attention, the favoured 'real Romanies' are just as likely to have blue eyes and fair hair. But these facts are not 'seen' by the Gorgio observers for whom the racial theory offers a pseudo-scientific basis for social selection. 'Real Romanies' are those families who reflect best the observers' preferences (Okely 1975a:32).

### *Travellers, Tinkers, Gypsies and exotic origins*

In the sub-classification of groups of Gypsies or Travellers within the British Isles and Ireland, a mythical Indian origin has been invoked to discriminate between the 'real Romanies' or 'Gypsies', and the 'Tinkers'. The English and especially the Welsh Gypsies are given the exotic Indian or Romany origin, while it is said that the Irish and Scottish Travellers or Tinkers are 'merely' descendants of vagrants and victims of the Great Famine or the Highland Clearances. It is conveniently forgotten that the first 'Egyptians' were recorded in neither England nor Wales, but in Scotland.

Sometimes, the evidence presented for this classification is linguistic. The Tinkers frequenting Ireland and Scotland have their own Cant or 'secret language' including 'Shelta' and 'Gammon', which linguists have sometimes contrasted with 'Romany' or 'Anglo-Romany'. But whenever Romani words are found in these other 'languages' or dialects, they are dismissed as the result of English influence. My own evidence indicates that the use of Romani vocabulary varies *within* each group, and that there is both short- and long-term movement of all Travellers or Gypsies between territories within the British Isles and Ireland. This was especially the case during the two world wars.

There is considerable inter-marriage between groups. Moreover the incorporation of Gorgios or 'Flatties' occurs in all groups. The Travellers or Gypsies do tend to identify themselves according to one of the four national divisions of the British Isles, but this does not mean that one is more 'Indian' or Romany than the other. National labels are manipulated according to context, as is the 'real Romany' identity.

The term 'Traveller' does not imply a drop-out from the sedentary society, as is so often supposed by outsiders, but full membership of an ethnic group using the principle of descent (see chapter 5). The term emphasises a travelling, nomadic identity. Those Travellers who associate themselves with Ireland or Scotland tend not to adopt the nomenclature 'Gypsy'. They are labelled 'Tinkers' and, although they may use this among themselves, they frequently use the less pejorative term 'Traveller', especially in communications with outsiders. McCormick employed the term 'Tinkler-Gypsies' to refer to Travellers in Scotland (1907).

Generally the term 'Gypsy' is more frequently given to and adopted

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today by Travellers associated with England and Wales. Gypsies may use this title privately, but, like the Tinkers, often prefer the less stigmatised term Traveller, again especially when relating to outsiders.

During the 1960s, among some authorities, the label 'Tinker' completely replaced the 'didikois' or alleged half-breed as one of contempt (see Acton 1974:206-11). As with any Gypsies, the Irish Tinkers of the present were unfavourably juxtaposed with 'authentic' ones of the past. Worcester County Council reported that the 'Irish Tinkers' in their area bore 'little resemblance to the tinker of Irish legend who seems to have been something of a character and as such regarded with affection' (Worcester County Council 1966). In practice, the Irish label was conveniently attached to *any* Travellers coming up against the authorities (Okely 1975a:33). The Tinker became synonymous with every unpopular or stigmatised aspect of any Gypsy groups: scrap work, travelling, urban proximity, law breaking, elusiveness and independent life style.

This view of the Tinker appeared in the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (M.H.L.G.) report on Travellers in England and Wales. Whereas the English-born Gypsies were defined in terms of 'racial' types (revealing the familiar conceptual muddles), the Irish Tinkers were defined in terms of their alleged living patterns which, by no coincidence, were those most offensive to the sedentary authorities. The author(s) moved from merely recording others' allegations to presenting them as objective description (M.H.L.G. 1967:3, quoted also in Acton 1974:202).

The policies of deportation and banishment of Gypsies prevalent in the sixteenth century also reappeared in the twentieth century. Enoch Powell, calling for the abolition of the 1968 Act, suggested that 'alien' Gypsies or Travellers should be dealt with 'through the laws of nationality and immigration' (*The Times*, 12 December 1970). Given the limited movement of Gypsies from the continent, it is unclear what 'foreign' Gypsies Powell was concerned about. Here the romance of foreign origin was used against Gypsies.

### *Non-ethnic, 'universalistic' categories*

In the 1960s, liberal 'universalistic' categories competed with the racial and genetic ones. This cannot be explained by any greater enlightenment about the 'chimera of race' (Bohannon 1963:185). Certainly Dominic Reeve had repudiated the Gorgio discussion of 'didikois' as 'just racial nonsense' (1960:ix-x), but reviews in the *J.G.L.S.* reaffirmed the Romany myth. Moreover, Reeve still gave credence to the terminology associated with racial theories. 'Many of the "flash" travellers are of the deepest and most pure-bred Romani blood in the country' (1960:104).

At a public health inspectors' conference on Gypsies in 1968, a lec-

turer in education reaffirmed the existence of three racial categories: pure-blooded, mixed and housedweller drop-outs, but at the same time emphasised the educational 'disadvantages' of all and suggested no discrimination in new government measures towards them (Wade 1968:117). The honorary assistant editor of the *J.G.L.S.* endorsed the differentiation between groups, but regretted that this led to a 'kind of inverted racialism' when local authorities justified the closing of stopping places (Wade 1968:120).

The shift towards an all-embracing category rather than the repudiation of the theoretical foundation of racial categories coincided with renewed interest in integration or assimilation programmes for Gypsies. Here recognition of the Gypsies as an independent ethnic group would be under-played. The advisers to the Plowden Committee on primary school children asserted that Gypsy children 'are probably the most severely deprived ... in the country' (1967:vol.2. Appendix). The category 'deprived' had replaced Hoyland's early-nineteenth-century 'depraved', and both were associated with rather similar policies of assimilation, once called conversion. Sartre provides a useful parallel to the case of the Gypsies in his *Reflexions sur la question juive*, where he discussed the 'bad faith' of the democrat who wishes to universalise and humanise all groups:

There may not be so much difference between the anti-semite and the democrat. The former wishes to destroy him as a man and leave nothing in him but the Jew, the pariah, the untouchable; the latter wishes to destroy him as a Jew and leave nothing in him but the man, the abstract and universal subject of the rights of man. (1973:57)

Interest in policies of integration, if not complete assimilation, coincided paradoxically with increasing awareness of the rights of 'racial' minorities as embodied in the 1965 Race Relations Act which hardly benefited Gypsies; they were merely redefined. The 1959 Highways Act section 127 had stated: 'If without lawful authority or excuse ... a hawker or other itinerant trader or gypsy ... encamps on a highway, he shall be guilty of an offence.' This could clearly be challenged on the grounds of racial discrimination. Therefore, in 1967 three High Court judges ruled that a 'Gypsy' is 'a person leading a nomadic life with no fixed employment and with no fixed abode' (Mills v. Cooper, Queen's Bench Division, 9 March 1967).

The non-ethnic definition of a Gypsy as a person of no fixed abode was merely the old category 'vagrant' in a new guise. Although Gypsies and their supporters were able to take action with the Race Relations Board against publicans who banned entry to Gypsies, they were not able to challenge the Highways Act, and later the discriminatory clauses in the 1968 Caravan Sites Act.

The link between Gypsies and vagrants took a peculiar turn at a

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meeting of an urban council in 1967. It revealed that even a demand for concentration camps was not considered illegal under the Race Relations Act, so long as Gypsies were given a non-ethnic label. A councillor vigorously opposed provision for a permanent Gypsy site and was reported as follows:

‘It’s not gypsies we are talking about. We are talking about vagrants – relatively and basically worthless people’ ... When he was a young man, he said gypsies were hardly ever seen throughout the country ‘But today, you will see many thousands of vagrants ... They are beatniks of the worst possible type ... If you had to ask not just a German, but any other national in Europe today, as to what he would do with these people, he would give you one answer. He would say a concentration camp until they had mended their ways.’

*(Hitchin and Letchworth Pictorial, 28 April 1967)*

When the Secretary of the National Council of Civil Liberties complained to the Race Relations Board, the Attorney General rejected any prosecution: ‘No matter how inflammatory and intemperate words are used they must be directed against an ethnic or national group ... the words used in this context were directed against “vagrants, worthless people and beatniks” ... the problem did not involve gypsies’ (Letter from the Greater London Conciliation Board, 20 October 1967).

The non-ethnic definition was sustained in the 1967 Ministry of Housing and Local Government census and report on Gypsies. The racial categories were not discredited by the Ministry, but they were considered ‘of little practical importance: information was needed about the entire traveller population ... who in large measure follow a common way of life, *making the same demands on land*’ (M.H.L.G. 1967:3, my emphasis). The last phrase reveals one of the major concerns of the sedentary society and of the state, and which was masked by the general theme of the Gypsies’ ‘deprivation’, thus echoing the Plowden Report. The Ministry suggested that improved ‘amenities’ might ‘exert a growing pull on the persistent travellers so that they will choose gradually to settle down, first on a site, and eventually in a house’ (M.H.L.G. 1967:67). Thus the non-ethnic definition of Gypsies was associated with a policy of assimilation at Whitehall, while at local authority level, it was used to justify non-provision, if not dispersal and harassment.

### *Laws and policy in the twentieth century*

In the first half of the twentieth century, attempts to pass legislation concerned specifically with the control of Gypsies, namely George Smith’s revived Moveable Dwellings Bill, failed on several occasions.

However, there were a number of Acts not specifically addressed to Gypsies, which offered a potential means of control. These included Planning and Public Health Acts in the 1930s. Emphasis was on living space and sanitation. Acton states that these had 'very little effect on the Gypsies' (1974:120). After the Second World War, however, such legislation was often used against Gypsies or Travellers, as a means of dispersing them (see chapter 7 and Acton 1974:133). Earlier, thanks to the informal intervention of a member of the Gypsy Lore Society, Dora Yates, the 1908 Children's Act excused Gypsy children from compulsory school attendance during the summer term, if their parents were travelling (Acton 1974:121).

From the late 1940s, coinciding but contrasting with the nostalgic rural literature on the 'real Romanies' (see below), the M.P. Norman Dodds showed an interest in the living and working conditions of Gypsies, and in conjunction with Gypsy representatives, and some evangelists, formed a 'Gypsy Committee' with a Gypsy Charter (Dodds 1966:39-40). In 1951, the new Conservative government agreed to a pilot survey in the single county of Kent.

The 1959 Highways Act had specifically singled out the Gypsies for prosecution for camping on the roadside. The 1960 Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act, although not specifically addressed to Gypsies, radically affected them. Tighter controls were introduced for private sites, all of which now required planning permission. As a consequence, many Gypsy encampments, used for either short- or long-term stays, were closed (Adams *et al.* 1975: 9-10).

The same year, planning permission was given for the first official site for Gypsies run by a district authority in West Ashford, Kent. By 1962, the Ministry of Housing and Local Government had begun to recognise the Gypsies' problems in finding legal sites. A Ministry circular of 1962 encouraged local authorities to conduct surveys and provide sites. It was even acknowledged that Gypsies had 'the right to follow their traditional way of life' (quoted in M.H.L.G. 1967), although only those whom the Ministry labelled the 'true gypsies and romanies'. A few sites were opened, but prosecutions against Gypsies continued on a large scale (Adams *et al.* 1975:11).

Partly in response to Dodd's persistence, the Labour government of 1964 agreed to the first national census of Gypsies in England and Wales. Questionnaires were administered by local officials and sometimes the police. The total count revealed about 15,000 individuals. Given that the survey was conducted often by persons responsible for dispersing Gypsies, it was not surprising that this was considered an under-count. The main findings were publicised in the 1966 Ministry circular which again encouraged official site provision. In the same year the Gypsy Council was founded. It affirmed 'the essential unity of travelling people, irrespective of group and origin', and their

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right to 'self-determination ... their traditional mode of life ... and a legitimate need for camp sites' (Gypsy Council 1967).

The report based on the census, *Gypsies and other Travellers* (M.H.L.G. 1967), emphasised the Gypsies' absence of legal sites and public health facilities, and gave momentum to the second part of Lubbock's 1968 Caravan Sites Act which for the first time required local authorities to provide sites for Gypsies. In exchange, the local authorities would, after specified provision, obtain 'designation' which relieved the authority of any further provision and gave it new 'control powers' to ensure the eviction of any person 'being a Gypsy' stationing a caravan on unauthorised land. Although the Act was ostensibly that of a private member, the sections concerning Gypsies originated from the Labour government in exchange for free drafting (Adams *et al.* 1975:16-22). This new 'welfare' intervention marked a major shift in national policy towards Gypsies. Some of its implications and effects are explored in chapter 7.

### *Literature and social science*

The literature on Gypsies in Britain<sup>4</sup> in the twentieth century shows something of the earlier contrasting concerns; either to control or to exoticise Gypsies. Policy questions and the legal categories of the state were placed gradually in the setting of detailed (although not always well informed) official reports, for example, the Kent survey (Adams 1952); the Plowden Report (1967); the M.H.L.G. Report (1967); the report on Scottish Travellers (Gentleman and Swift 1971); and the Cripps Report (1976). Both the exotic and folklore tradition, as well as the controlling or reformist traditions, were affected by the growth of social science, especially sociology and to some extent social anthropology.

From a social science perspective, one of the most brilliant contributions to the study and history of Gypsies is that of T.W. Thompson, a member of the Gypsy Lore Society, whose articles appeared in its journal mainly in the 1920s. He made close contact with a number of Gypsy families over a period of time and painstakingly sifted parish records and other historical and contemporary sources to present a systematic and ethnographic approach to aspects of the English Gypsies' social organisation, beliefs and ritual. His references to Frazer, Rivers and Malinowski indicate a varied social anthropological influence (1913, 1922, 1926, 1930b). His articles have since been much plagiarised.

In addition to the literature by Gorgios, there are now a number of autobiographies and contributions from mainly literate Gypsies, some of whom have found a place as special individuals within the Gorgio world. The evangelist Gipse Smith (1901), for example, gives a detailed account of his Gypsy upbringing and his later work among both

non-Gypsies and Gypsies. While keen to exploit and elaborate his Gypsy origins, he disassociates himself from them (1901:363). 'Gipsey' Smith was fully incorporated into the social reformist perspective of non-Gypsies found in the nineteenth century. Indeed, there are several other Gypsy autobiographical accounts of childhood in the travelling community which the authors have later left, e.g. Petulengro (1935), Wood (1973) and Whyte (1979). In some there are insights into the authors' dilemma as to whether to exoticise or denigrate Gypsy identity for the dominant Gorgio readership. All are informative documents; some more than others, and notably the accounts from Boswell (1970), and Connors (1973), which transcend the problems of authenticity. Dominic Reeve, who claims Gypsy descent though not upbringing, depicts the travelling life in narrative form, but is not explicitly autobiographical (1958, 1960). Although each detail is ethnographically accurate, the content is limited compared to Boswell and Connors.

Given the difficulties in gaining an inside view of the Travellers' way of life, it is not surprising that this is largely absent from most of the Gorgio literature, including much of that with some social science research pretensions. Some authors have synthesised and popularised the existing material, and supplemented this by a few descriptions of personal encounters (Vesey-Fitzgerald 1973; Duff 1963). In the period immediately after the Second World War, a number of popular writers linked Gypsies with a 'vanishing' rural England. These writers, often with gentrified names (Vesey-Fitzgerald 1973; Croft-Cooke 1948; de Baracclai Levy 1958), and living in the home counties, described a few Gypsies they met on their country rambles. There is always the danger of generalising from a few incidents and conversations, especially when Gypsies must be adept at confusing strangers. Much of Sandford's collection records what Travellers say on first encounter (1973). Long-term acquaintance and day to day immersion in the group(s) are really the only ways of getting near an inner perspective of the Travellers. This will also help to make sense of their relationship with the dominant society.

Viewed only casually. Travellers may find themselves described in patronising ways even by well-meaning liberals. For instance it has seemed to be complimentary to place Gypsies in terms of a theory of social Darwinism. Thus Sandford claims: 'Their nomadic life-style goes back further than our settled one. They represent our remote past in human form' (1973:5). He implicitly draws upon an evolutionary typology which places nomads lower down a single ladder of progress. Nomads are seen sentimentally or negatively as 'hangovers' from some hypothetical linear development in which sedentary living is considered to be the single superior future.

One of the first social scientists to apply the social anthropologist's method of long-term participant observation among the Gypsies in the British Isles, and indeed in Europe, was Farnham Rehfisch, whose



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study of the Scottish Tinkers (1958) remains largely unpublished. A portion appears in his 1975 collection *Gypsies, Tinkers and other Travellers*. Rehfisch drew attention to the Tinkers' criteria for membership, their contempt for wage-labour and their tradition of misleading outsiders (1958). Barth had given an imaginative account of the Tattares or Gypsies in Norway and of the functional adaptability of large sibling groups scattered over a wide area (1955). He discussed the question of recruitment and 'passing'. However, his description of the Travellers as a 'typical parasite group' or 'typical pariah section of the population' (1955:286) lacks any major consideration of the Travellers' economic contribution.

The work of social anthropologists who use a small sample to be studied in depth contrasts with the quantitative pretensions of surveys, including that of the 1965 government census. In the latter, the chances of gaining accurate quantitative information were slight. Moreover, the researchers writing up the report had to interpret the census returns largely without direct contact and acquaintance with the Travellers. Some of this difficulty was handled by discussions with a few non-Gypsies who knew Travellers. As with the earlier writings of Gypsiologists, generalisations are made about Gypsies on the basis of a few observations. In the case of the Ministry, the generalisations are stretched over England and Wales and given scientific status by appearing on pages decorated with numerical charts and tables (M.H.L.G. 1967). Nevertheless, this first census stands as an invaluable information source for the Travellers' geographical distribution, family size, locations, etc. The subsequent report on Travellers in Scotland is also an important reference book (Gentleman and Swift 1971).

A sociologist's perspective is provided by Acton (1974) in his study of activities and policies at government and national level in England. He moves from the 1880s through to the post-war developments and the formation of Gypsy pressure groups. An historical chronology of events is presented with the aid of considerable and careful library research, as well as the use of local government literature and the files of the Gypsy Council as major sources. There is an excellent classification and critique of the phantom of the 'true' Gypsy, showing how the labels 'didikois' and 'Tinker' were misused by the Gorgio authorities. Acton admits to some participant observation among Gypsies at grass root level, but states that his argument rests 'as much as possible on documentation rather than merely on personal observation' (1974:3). The latter has been used in his account of the Gypsy Council. This account comes over largely as the personal biography of its first secretary, a Gorgio, Grattan Puxon. It is unfortunate that the day by day descriptions of individuals and factions who are given status by the metropolis should masquerade as the research into the 'wider issues' which sociologists are keen to accuse anthropologists of neglecting.

Acton felt that the 'great need was not for another detailed study of some small group of South Essex Gypsies' (1974:3), as if any such studies ever existed. When obliged to make observations concerning the Gypsies' local social organisation, recruitment, marriage patterns and economic activities, he has to depend heavily on published material, which in other contexts he recognises as inadequate. He is correct in insisting that 'a sociology of minorities must also be one of majorities' (1974:2), and his study is mainly about the powers and policies of the dominant Gorgio authorities through their own written sources. Acton would also surely accept that there is a need for the voices of the minority at the grass roots to be transmitted through the printed word; if only initially via a Gorgio participant observer and mediator. There is of course a similar need for participant observation among the Gorgio authorities (Okely 1980).

There are examples elsewhere in Europe of studies of the Gorgio authorities' documents, which piece together the Gypsies' recent history. Kenrick and Puxon (1972) have investigated the Nazi policies which led to the extermination of over a quarter of a million Gypsies, and the outrageous legal loophole which enabled the German government to deny reparation to many of the survivors. A detailed study of Gypsies in German-occupied Netherlands has also, like those of Kenrick and Puxon (1972) and Puxon (1976), suggested that post-Nazi policy and legislation 'have not risen very much above the tenor of what the Germans imposed ... in their decree of 1944' (Sijes 1979:173). A brilliant study has been made by Guy of the shifts in the Communist government's policies and practices towards Gypsies in Czechoslovakia and the refusal to accord the Gypsies the rights of an ethnic minority (1975, 1978). Liégeois' work mainly in France ranges from the investigation of state policies (1978b) to Gypsy national leadership (1976), and the attitudes of social workers, local officials and the general public towards Gypsies (1977; *Études Tsiganes* 1980; see also Okely 1980). Beck and Gheorghe have embarked on a study of the history of the Gypsies in Rumania (1981).

The research by Adams *et al.* on Gypsies in England (1975) included participant observation with Gypsies, Gorgio officials and supporters at local level in two regions. There were interviews with every council providing a Gypsy site, studies of local authority policies and circumstances in three areas, and an account of the national political manoeuvres leading to the 1968 legislation.

From the mid 1970s there emerged a number of publications mainly by social anthropologists and based on long-term participant observation with Gypsies. Sutherland's monograph is on Gypsies in California (1975; for a review see Okely 1975g). Gropper (or Cotten) focuses on Gypsies in New York (1975); Sharon and George Gmelch have each completed studies among the Travellers in Eire (1975 and 1977). George Gmelch especially supports the theory that the 'rapid modern-

*Historical categories and representations*

ization of rural Ireland resulted in the obsolescence of most of the Travellers' traditional skills and services' (1977:157). Gmelch considers that if Travellers were able to obtain wage-labour employment 'many of the problems which currently confront them would be eradicated or minimised' (1977:161). Studies of Gypsies elsewhere imply some scepticism of this type of analysis (Sutherland 1975, Gropper 1975, Okely 1975c and chapters 2 and 4 below).

Significant research based on long-term fieldwork has emerged from Scandinavia. Grönfors has published rare details of feuding patterns among Finnish Gypsies (1977). Kaminski combined his experience of Gypsies in Sweden, Poland, and Czechoslovakia to examine the ways in which they manipulate their ethnic and national identity (1980). A number of articles and papers provide further comparisons: Barnes on Irish Tinkers (1975), Liégeois (1971a) and San Roman (1975) on Gypsies in Spain, Rao on the Manus in Alsace (1975), Miller on the Rom in the U.S.A. (1975), Viljanen Saira on the cultural symbols of Gypsies in Finland (1978) and Reyniers and Gilain on Gypsies in Belgium (1979). The association, Les Amities Tsiganes de Toulouse, has produced a joint report for the European Commission on its action work among the Gypsies in the area (summarised in *Etudes Tsiganes* 1980 and Okely 1980). Detailed anthropological studies of Gypsies in Afghanistan and Egypt by Rao and Nabil Hanna respectively have not as yet been published.

Some common aspects emerge from many of these studies of Gypsies on several continents. Invariably the Travellers or Gypsies differentiate themselves from Gorgios, Gajés, payos, 'country people' or Flatties. Many are found to have pollution beliefs which express and strengthen this separation. There is usually an ideology and practice of self-employment and occupational flexibility. Many groups exploit geographical mobility, although not all could be labelled nomads. Indeed nomadism is officially banned in the Communist countries of eastern Europe. Perhaps one aspect common to all groups is that they have had to survive hostility and periods of persecution from the dominant society. They have also been the objects of fantasy and romance. The form which either persecution or exoticism takes changes with historical context.

## 2 Modern misrepresentations<sup>1</sup>

The Gypsies and Travellers decorate their homes with mirrors and dazzling chrome. Gypsies are reached by way of mirrors, through which they pass and where non-Gypsies see only reflections of themselves. Alternative glimpses are carefully deflected. In Gorgio print, distorted views repeat themselves. Contrary evidence must needs be overlooked. Plain facts are real illusions. On each side of these reflections there is vested interest in distortion.

### *Alleged isolation*

Common misrepresentations of Gypsies have tended to include assumptions that the 'real' Gypsies were formerly or ideally in a state of isolation, with unique, self-contained 'traditions'. The 'true' Gypsies are also depicted in only rural settings, despite the industrial revolution. Croft-Cooke presents the stereotyped view of English Gypsies as historical fact: 'In Stuart times they split into smaller convoys but remained isolated from the housedwellers and spoke English imperfectly if at all... in the last century they were much as Borrow found them, a secret people, choosing lonely places, respecting their own laws and customs' (1955:113). According to Croft-Cooke, in the nineteenth century the Gypsies became 'far more dependent on trade' with housedwellers 'than they had been heretofore' (1955:113).

Gypsies today are portrayed as victims of cultural disintegration and as helpless in the face of industrialisation modern technology and urban advance. Trigg, for example, has written of English Gypsies: 'such isolation caused partly by the need for protection and partly out of desire to preserve cultural integrity has kept the gypsy ignorant of the outside world' (1967:43). Similarly, the sociologists Goulet and Walshok, describing Spanish Gypsies as 'under-developed marginals', consider that their contact with 'modern sectors' has been largely through coercive and formal institutions like the police and school (1971:456). As recently as 1973, Vesey-Fitzgerald asserted that 'mass communications have removed the barriers ... Education, economic pressures and, in due course, miscegenation will do the rest. The long, long history of the Gypsies of Britain is coming to an end' (1973:254).

The isolation model persistently ignores the Gypsies' dependence, as always, on the larger economy and the necessity for continuous rela-



Reflections. *Evening Post-Echo Ltd*

lions with outsiders, based on detailed knowledge and flexibility in the face of change. The notion of isolation gives credence to a separate and complete 'culture'. Signs of change are interpreted as loss of independence, and development is described as disintegration. The Travellers' strategies of survival, only recently closely observed, are interpreted solely as the desperate measures of a dying group. The fictive, hermeti-

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cally scaled group has also been perceived as biologically distinct, indeed a separate 'race'. Marriage outside or into the group, bringing offspring of 'mixed origin', has been thought to bring cultural change, along with genetic variation, and in equal proportions.

The notions of economic, cultural and 'racial' isolation of the Gypsies or Travellers within western capitalism seem hardly plausible. The Gypsies, when first identified in Europe, and indeed their equivalent anywhere else, have never been self-sufficient. They are dependent on the larger economy, within which they took possession of or created their distinct niche. The Gypsies can only survive as a group within the context of a larger economy and society, within which they circulate supplying occasional goods and services, and exploiting geographical mobility and a multiplicity of occupations. Instead of elaborating their alleged 'Indian' origin, it is more relevant to examine the economic and political circumstances of the Gypsies' appearance and continuity within the different countries where they now exist. Indeed, as I have suggested in chapter 1, it is likely that their first 'appearance' as persons called 'Egyptians' in the written records was as much a response to changes within Europe as to some monocausal and linear migration from beyond Europe.

A common 'explanation' for some of the so-called 'traditional' occupations associated with the Gypsies and Travellers throughout Europe and elsewhere is that they were 'those which were cursed or prohibited to upper castes in ancient India' (e.g. M.H.L.G. 1967:2). But any explanation for the Gypsies' appropriation of fortune telling, horse-dealing, tinsmithery and entertainment lies less in the Gypsies' alleged origins than in the structural similarity which these occupations possess when seen in relation to a larger, usually sedentary economy.

Given the Gypsies' interdependence with non-Gypsies, they have always had to develop and change in accordance with changes in the dominant economic and social order. Adaptation to modern conditions merely demonstrates a continuity of adaptation. The Gypsy group cannot be presented as once self-contained within Europe and then suddenly impinged upon by outside forces, since persons called 'Gypsies' emerged in Europe at the end of feudalism and flourished with industrialisation and within capitalism. (Indeed, even the Indian caste model cannot posit a theory of isolation.)

### *The rural image*

Recent fixed images of Gypsy rural crafts and leafy locations conflict with evidence of Gypsies or Travellers residing and working in urban areas from the earliest times. The 'traditional' Gypsy was not exclusively rural. Indeed, in the early nineteenth century, Hoyland recorded the opinions of a lawyer acquainted with Gypsies north of London. He described how even then they were being forced out of urban areas by the authorities:

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The situation of this people daily becomes increasingly deplorable ... the fear of apprehension as vagrants and the progressive inclosures near towns and villages had a tendency to drive them to a greater distance from the habitations of man ... (as they) were expelled from Township after Township without any provision being made for their refuge. (1816:iv)

Far from the Gypsies choosing rural 'isolation', it was often imposed upon them. Elsewhere, we find a continual traffic of Gypsies in towns. Borrow wrote of the 'Metropolitan Gypsyries' in Wandsworth in 1864 (1874:207), Leland of Gypsies in London in the 1870s (1893:36-7) and other towns (1882; see also Smith 1880). Smart and Crofton asserted: 'Most of our gypsies cease their roving habits during the colder months of the year and take up their abode in or near our larger towns' (1875:xiv). They recorded urban groups both in London and Birmingham (1875:xi). Depending on whether the local economy is mainly agricultural or industrial, the Travellers or Gypsies make the necessary adjustment in the goods and services offered, and may move between rural and urban-based work, according to season.

The close connection between the Travellers and the wider economy is confirmed by their choice of location. The 1965 census of Gypsies living in caravans in England and Wales indicated certain concentrations in the more industrialised or heavily populated zones: 43% in the south east and 17% in the west midlands, with only 8% in the northern York: shire and Humberside regions. There were also a few concentrations of Gypsies in less industrialised and less populated areas, for example, the Vale of Evesham, where there were regular opportunities in casual farm work (M.H.L.G. 1967:8). The majority of Gypsies were located within easy access of industrial and residential areas, on the urban-rural fringes, where encampment was less restricted by the non-Gypsy authorities. Later, in 1980, the Department of the Environment's regular counts indicated that 60% of the caravan dwelling population of Gypsies in England and Wales was concentrated in the south east (including East Anglia).

The decline in some 'traditional rural' occupations does not mean the inevitable shattering of the Gypsy or Traveller 'culture' and economy, as has been too often suggested. Moreover, the extent of Gypsy rural 'handicrafts' and rural 'skills' has been grossly exaggerated. Too often, only the exotic and easily visible 'Gypsy occupations' have been recorded. Those occupations where it has suited the Gypsies to conceal their identity have more often been overlooked (Okely 1979a).

### *Horse-drawn caravans*

Another recent stereotype of 'real' but defunct Gypsies is of inhabitants of ornately decorated horse-drawn caravans. But these belong

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only to a passing phase in the Gypsies' history. The Gypsies in England and Wales used horse-drawn caravans for only about a hundred years of their history. Previously they travelled with pack-horses and tents, resorting to tilted carts as the road surfaces improved. Carts were gradually modified to the enclosed living waggon with stove and bed. These do not predate 1800, and few Gypsies used them before 1850 (Ward-Jackson and Harvey 1972:28). Moreover, the Gypsies' appearance with such vehicles was hardly heralded with enthusiasm. On 11 July 1833 *The Times* reprinted an extract from the *Devonshire Chronicle* as follows:

Gypsies, impelled by the march of intellect, seem resolved no longer to march a-foot, and now travel the country in capacious machines larger than a Paddington omnibus, drawn by two or more horses. A numerous gang of these itinerant thieves located themselves a few nights ago in Stoke Lane, near Taunton, having no less than 17 horses among them.

(Quoted in *J.G.L.S.* 1908:96)

During the 1950s, the majority of Gypsies and Travellers opted for modern caravans which they called 'trailers', drawn by motor lorries. Some Gypsies, mainly in Humberside, retained their horse-drawn bow top waggons, and were to be found in considerable numbers in the 1970s. But they were not given a friendly reception by the local population as has been alleged for the Gypsies of the past. The switch to motorisation meant that the Gypsies' nomadism was enhanced, not diminished. They could travel faster and greater distances. Technology was harnessed to their needs. Thus modern capitalism generates nomads, it does not simply inherit them.

### *The notion of a separate culture and economy*

Evidence of the persistent adjustments by Gypsies to changes in the larger society confronts those who uphold the images of a 'traditional' and isolated Gypsy culture. Those of the exoticist tradition have tended to construct a minority remnant of 'real' Gypsies from the past and disown the others, perhaps the majority, who also call themselves Gypsies or Travellers. One such stereotype, for instance, is that of the 'real Romany' who is alleged to live in rural Wales. Other observers, often using social workers as their main informants, explain the apparent loss of clearly recognised 'traditions' in terms of 'acculturation' or assimilation by the dominant society. An intact culture is projected on to the past. In this way the notion is not discredited.

The term 'acculturation' is used to describe what happens when groups of different cultures are believed to come into continuous first hand contact, and when there are subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups. This term has been adopted



as an explanatory principle for example by Marta (1979) in a study of Gypsies in Italy and Sweden. It is especially inappropriate, since it rests on the premises that Gypsies once existed independently of the dominant culture and society. Thus industrialisation is seen as one of the mechanisms for acculturation and the destruction of the Gypsies' alleged autonomy. Marta writes: 'Industrial society has irretrievably jeopardised the Gypsies' economy. Activities such as the Lovara's [a group of Gypsies] cannot subsist within a capitalist mode of production' (1979,1:10). This perspective which fixes, for example, the Lovara's identity as redundant horse traders overlooks both the Gypsies' history of adaptation and their continuing potential for adapting. Some of the so-called 'traditional' Gypsy occupations include horse-trading, fortune telling and casual farm work. Some may be less important today, but fortune telling is not necessarily jeopardised. The vicissitudes of life in a capitalist system continue to encourage people to resort to fortune telling. New occupations have replaced the old ones, e.g. tarmac laying, car dealing, scrap metal salvage and antique dealing (see chapter 4).

The Travellers' skills and 'traditions' in occupations lie not in the content of their occupations, but in their form. Some of the key factors which are overlooked include the Gypsies' preference for and successful practice of self-employment and occupational flexibility. This way of earning a living is consciously chosen, and cannot be explained merely as the result of 'prejudice' against Gypsies and their unjust exclusion from the 'opportunities' of the wage-labour market. The Gypsies' use of the 'informal economy' provides the material context for their cultural identity, which is bound up with their rejection of wage-labour (see chapter 4).

The Travellers' skills have been underestimated or overlooked because too much emphasis has been put on illiteracy and their lack of formal schooling. Thus the Gypsies have often been seen by educationalists, who use their own ethnocentric criteria for education and training, as handicapped. Scant attention is paid to the alternative education and training which the Gypsy children receive, precisely because they do not attend school. Moreover, absence of or infrequent schooling does not necessarily mean ignorance of the wider society. The children accompany their parents and other adults on their work rounds. They are also witness to the visits to the camp sites by non-Gypsies who wish either to evict the Gypsies or do trade with them (see chapter 9).

The word 'culture' can be variously defined to cover the totality of the Gypsies' social and economic organisation or be restricted to beliefs and rituals. In either case, the group's culture is not self-contained. The Travellers' economy is directly dependent on the wider economy, even though self-employment gives a measure of freedom from non-Gypsies, mobility and flexibility. The group's beliefs and

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rituals are not an abstract totality floating separately from the material circumstances and relations of production with non-Gypsies. Moreover the Gypsies' beliefs and rituals should also be seen in the context of their ideological relations with the wider society. Since Gypsies are not a separate society, they can hardly be attributed with an autonomous culture. This absence of autonomy should not preclude the understanding that the group's beliefs and practices have coherence and form a meaningful whole. The coherence comes also as a response to the dominant society and ideology.

In order to protect themselves as a distinct group within a society which is always trying to assimilate or destroy them, the Gypsies uphold specific ethnic boundaries. These are based on the principle of descent, the practice of self-employment, a commitment to certain values, an ideology of travelling and pollution taboos. Their ethnic identity and beliefs are neither a passive nor a random construct, but a coherent system which when affirmed as daily practice both reflects and reinforces the boundaries between Gypsy and Gorgio. Unfortunately, some beliefs and practices, for example ideas of good luck associated with specific animals, have been labelled as mere 'superstitions'.

Beliefs and symbolic ideas should not be explained merely as examples of 'culture lag', nor as passive reflections of the ideology of the dominant society. There is systematic selection and rejection. Some symbols may parallel those of non-Gypsies, but their meaning may be transformed. To suggest that some of the Travellers' beliefs are senseless leftover flotsam and jetsam from the 'advanced' and literate society is an insult to the minority group's mode of thinking. One task of the social anthropologist is to make sense of the ways of other peoples, and to dispose of ethnocentric and paternalist judgements of others' systems of thought (see chapters 6 and 12).

Thus 'culture contact' between Gypsies and non-Gypsies does not operate as if the allegedly untouched and isolated Gypsy group is helplessly changed by the dominant culture. Even a subordinate group must make sense of its position and use symbols which are meaningful. Such symbols can be rationalisations of subordination, or they may be a potential source of power and inspiration for overcoming oppression.

### *The notion of a 'pure-blooded race'*

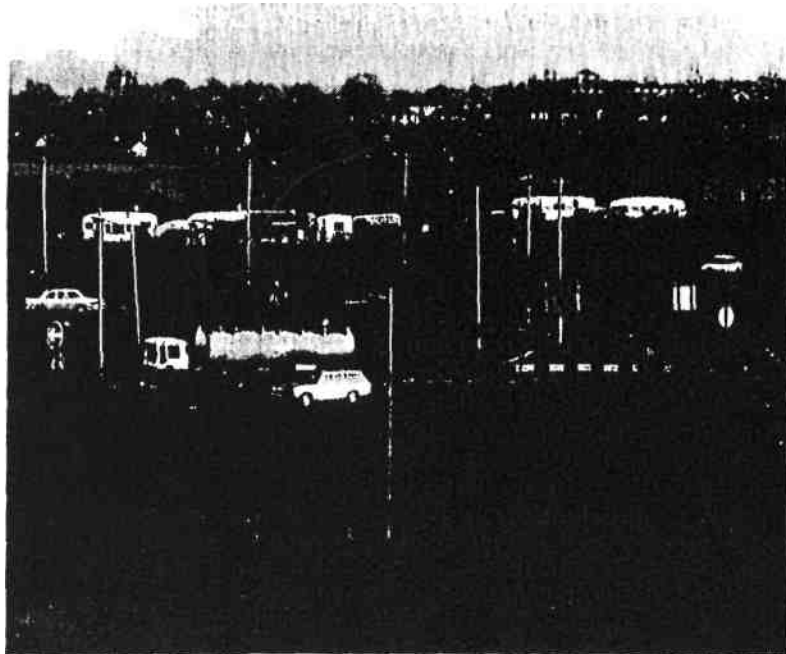
The notion of a bounded 'race' mistakenly fixes Gypsy identity in biology. The evidence of mixed marriages and the passage of personnel across the ethnic boundary, just like the notion of a 'traditional and independent culture', has been used to discredit the existence of a contemporary Gypsy group, and to reify the former existence of some 'pure-blooded race'. Race in any case is no more than a social category, it is not a physical reality for any group (Bohannan 1963:185). The Gypsies

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or Travellers can maintain an ethnic boundary which manipulates or ignores biological descent. They use 'blood' as a metaphor for ethnic continuity. Evidence from this study (chapter 5) and elsewhere (Rehfishch 1958; Okely 1975a) reveals the Gypsies' manipulation of genealogies, their regular practice of 'passing' into the dominant society through marriage and the relinquishment of Gypsy identity. Similarly there is the practice in all groups of the absorption through marriage of Gorgios whose offspring may then claim the right to Gypsy identity. Thus the Traveller groups are as much a social construction as a genetic or biological entity. While not a separate race (and no such entity exists) they are still an ethnic group (see chapter 5).

*The myth of land scarcity*

The Gypsies appeared and survived largely because of the possibilities available to an occupationally and geographically mobile group who were self-employed and who used kinship and descent to transmit a certain monopoly. Their survival problem has been not so much that of securing trade from the larger economy, as of gaining legal access to



A temporary site. *Harold Turner*

land for intermittent residence and work purposes. As already indicated, the Gypsies were prosecuted from early times for apparent 'idleness' and for having no 'lawful work, Trade or Occupation' (Thompson 1923a), i.e. they rejected wage-labour and those occupations approved by the state. Nonetheless, they were able to find individuals and groups who paid for their goods and services. Legal controls against them as self-employed workers within the 'informal economy' have been less effective than the increasing controls during this century over their use of land. In so far as they are nomads, they are freed from the burden of tenure, rent, land ownership, rates and identification which comes from a fixed abode. But they have a continuing and varying need for access to land which is controlled by laws reflecting the concerns of the dominant housedwelling society. The Travellers' special land requirements are a hidden factor in their relations of production. The main threat to the Travellers is less that of adjustment to providing goods and services within an advanced industrial economy, as has been so frequently suggested, but the state's increasing controls over land occupation and usage (see chapter 7).

Thus the economic advantages of mobility and self-employment are counter-balanced by the political and legal constraints on caravan dwelling and movement. Fixed notions of land ownership and usage make no accommodation for the occasional and variable use by irregular visitors. The Travellers' use of land for living space and, for example, for scrap metal sorting conflicts with such basic planning laws as the separation between residential and industrial zones. There are additional official controls even where no scrap metal work messes up the planners' maps. Travellers may often obtain the consent of the non-Gypsy owner to reside on his or her land, or they may purchase their own land as a base from which to travel at times, and yet in either case they can be prosecuted for residing there. In terms of a sedentary society, caravans suggest no fixed abode and a potential evasion of state control. In terms of a housedwelling ideology, caravans are defined as makeshift, transient eyesores; either temporary holiday accommodation or proof of inadequate municipal housing provision. The stigma of the caravan is not inevitably visual, since planning permission to *park* an empty caravan is not required. However, decades of public health and now planning laws prohibit caravan dwellers from *living* in them. Thus there are added frictions in the Travellers' relations of production. The Gypsies may find work in an area and Gorgios willing to pay them for it, but simultaneously they may have no legal place either to reside or to complete the work.

Even when it is acknowledged that Travellers have adapted their occupations to changes in an industrial economy, it is sometimes claimed that there is no urban land available to ensure such adaptation. Here the rural image restricts the Gypsies to the countryside and woodlands where it is alleged there was both space and convenient invisibility.

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The alleged absence of urban land is merely a rationale for the stigma of the mobile caravan and modern nomad. There are in fact ample plots of urban land suitable for encampments either in the long or short term, and frequently owned by central and local government (Okely 1976). The problem is not that of available space, but that of permanent and official acceptance of the presence of this minority of caravan dwellers or nomads who comply with neither the work nor the residence patterns of the dominant system.

Deviants from the dominant system and self-ascribed minorities are not, as the functionalists would claim, exceptions which merely reinforce the general rule. They can be seen as images of opposing systems. In practice, Gypsies or Travellers, who are dependent for their livelihood on non-Gypsies who are the majority, can remain only a minority. But such reasoning does not suffice. The Gypsies' symbolic work is seen as subversive, although their number is small.