

THE POWER OF DEFINITION. STIGMATISATION, MINORITISATION¹ AND ETHNICITY ILLUSTRATED BY THE HISTORY OF GYPSIES IN THE NETHERLANDS*

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Introduction

Various groups of immigrants have settled in the Netherlands over the past centuries. This process generally took place without big problems, apart from the almost ritual phase of a not very flattering stereotype, with the result that none of the original immigrants still exist as a group. There are no German, Huguenot or southern Dutch minorities left. The history of Jews and gypsies was quite different. Although they have lived in the Netherlands for centuries, they have always stayed minorities. The question is why? Was integration or assimilation blocked because they were totally 'different', or was the attitude of the host society to blame? In this article I will restrict myself to the gypsies and try to shed some light on this hitherto unsolved problem by means of an historical analysis.

I use the term 'stigmatisation' (following Van Arkel 1985) because there was (and is) a lot of confusion about *who* should be considered 'gypsies'. Contrary to studies that start from the assumption that it is mainly a matter of self-definition, I consider that stigmatisation can stimulate group formation – and along with it ethnic consciousness – to a great extent. Two aspects of 'stigmatisation' are distinguished for analytical purposes: a) the *dissemination* of negative ideas about a specific group (stigma) by an authoritative body; and b) the *attachment* of this stigma on specific groups (labelling). A separate analysis of labelling is of paramount importance in situations where it is unclear who is considered as a group-member; this was the case not only with gypsies, but also with other groups such as homosexuals and political opponents. Relative 'invisibility' can cause the authorities to clarify repeatedly, for policy ends, who is to be counted as member of a certain group. This can vary from physical attachment of the stigma, as was the case with the mark on Jews' (and also Moslems') clothes after the fourth Lateran

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Council of 1215 and during the Nazi-regime; to registration and sometimes legislative stipulation as to who is to be reckoned within a certain category (for example, the Coloureds in South Africa). A second reason to distinguish between stigma and labelling is that they can change independently from one another. It is possible, for example, that the significance of the stigma remains the same for a certain period, while the groups considered eligible for the label by the government change.

In the following section I will first present the results of my research into the history of gypsies in the Netherlands, and then indicate what consequences these results may have for current minority studies.

The early history: 1420–1750

The period 1420–1750 can be seen as the ‘first stay’ of gypsies in the Netherlands. Nomadic groups travelling *en famille*, who were called ‘heathens’ or ‘Egyptians’, were initially given a favourable reception. From about the year 1500, however, the attitude of the authorities slowly changed, giving way to a more repressive policy. In contrast to what is generally found in the literature about gypsies,² it cannot be proved that the change in policy was caused by the (alleged) criminal practices of heathens (and other ‘vagabonds’). It is more likely that the turn-about was simply due to the general hardening of government policy with respect to nomadic groups which, in the eyes of the authorities, refused regular jobs and lived as parasites off the (rural) population. A vicious circle of repression and criminal behaviour only began when the edicts, which even declared their presence punishable by law (from ca. 1600 on), drove these groups into a corner. The escalation of repression in the Republic reached a head at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when there were large-scale organised hunts for heathens in various districts, killing many of them without trial. The authorities believed, from about 1750, that the ‘problem’ had been definitively solved in this way and that the Republic was now rid of heathens. This situation persisted until 1868, so that there was no separate policy for dealing with heathens, or gypsies, during this period.

The fact that the heathens disappeared, however, did not mean that they had been forgotten. Their image was kept alive—partly nourished by foreign sources – throughout the nineteenth century. While this image was not without romantic aspects, it was their parasitic and thieving character which was most emphasised.

The ‘second stay’ and the reaction: 1868–1902

When groups of Hungarian tinkers crossed the Dutch border in March 1868

followed shortly after by Bosnian bear-tamers, they were categorised almost immediately as 'gypsies' by the government (the Justice Department and the procurators general). One remarkable aspect of this reaction was that the newcomers were associated with the 'heathens' who had been expelled from the Netherlands since 1750; another was that they were labelled with the term 'gypsy' which had until that time, only been used in Germany. This was a loaded term which soon took the form of a *stigma*, that is, a group designation with negative associations. The country was, according to the government, being overrun by destitute foreigners who were, moreover, harassing the (rural) population. Although the newcomers often complied quite explicitly with the criteria of the Aliens Act (1849) – which were interpreted even more rigorously in their case – a restrictive policy of acceptance was adopted.

Not all the authorities adopted such an antagonistic attitude. The municipal authorities, in particular, took a more neutral position. An explanation for the more open attitude on the local level is found in the behaviour of the three groups which were stigmatised as 'gypsies': Hungarian tinkers (Kaldarasch), Bosnian bear-tamers (Ursari) and Italian animal-tamers (Piedmontese Sinti). They demonstrated their competence in supporting themselves legitimately, in contrast to government thinking, and the municipal authorities had little cause to consider their behaviour troublesome. Their economic position was slowly undermined only when discriminatory policy at the national level had gained the upper hand. It was not, as is frequently argued, decreasing demand for their specialist activities which led to their worsening position; it was much more the result of repressive central government reaction. A significant reason for this difference in reaction was that the stigmatising attitude still extant in central government could not be corrected by actual contact with gypsies.

A second reason for the widely divergent reactions on the part of local and national authorities lays in the difference in responsibility and function of these respective levels. Whereas mayors and police chiefs were mainly concerned with implementing management, the procurators general and the Department of Justice were much more occupied with policy-making. Law and order and public morals were of special importance. The conviction that gypsies were undesired aliens increased from 1880 on, partly due to the anti-gypsy policy in other countries, in particular the United States, Germany and Belgium. This policy meant that the Dutch authorities were increasingly confronted with groups of gypsies who had been sent back to the Netherlands from these countries, resulting in a stalemate at the borders, which sometimes dragged on for months. As a consequence of this, the predominantly neutral stand taken by local authorities sometimes changed into rejection. One cannot, however, assert that there was a structural policy in the

nineteenth century. The Department of Justice only reacted to incidents and restricted itself to issuing some circulars against gypsies (1887 and 1900).

The Kaldarasch, the Ursari and the Piedmontese Sinti were not intending to settle in the Netherlands. Western Europe was seen by most groups as an intermediate station between about 1860 and 1890, followed by emigration to the United States and other overseas countries. From the turn of the century, groups of tinkers and bear-tamers arrived only sporadically in the Netherlands. This did not, however, mean that the 'gypsy problem' had disappeared. On the contrary, from 1902 on the government was regularly alarmed by reports about gypsies, only this time they concerned a 'new' group.

Continuation of the ad hoc policy: 1902–1928

There were no essential changes in gypsy policy, which retained its ad hoc character, during the first decades of the twentieth century. Despite new circulars (1904, 1912 and 1924), it was difficult to get gypsies out of the Netherlands. The municipal authorities issued travel and residence papers on a large scale, which meant that a new group of 'gypsies' – horse-dealers from Germany, France and Scandinavia (the Lowara) – were able to settle quite legitimately in the Netherlands for a while. This development can be explained by the fact that the Lowara were not initially labelled as gypsies. The Military Police in particular, who were responsible for supervising aliens, still associated gypsies with a people originating from Hungary or the Balkans. They did not consider aliens with German or French passes to be real gypsies. Even when labelling assumed a more definite shape and the government propagated a more repressive stand against these gypsies, the attitude of the local authorities remained predominantly neutral. One reason for this was that the Lowara supported themselves by dealing in small draught horses called cobs.

A significant difference with the previous period was growing interference by the Military Police with the policy pursued against the gypsies. This force had been expanded in the 1890s, and thereafter its job of implementing the Aliens Act became increasingly important. The prejudiced ideas still held by division and district commanders could easily and effectively influence the local brigades, due to the military set-up and hierarchical power structure. The gypsy stigma found a better breeding ground within the ranks of the Military Police, on account of their task of maintaining the peace and deporting undesired aliens, than among mayors, for whom this job was one of many.

There were additional developments which affected state policy toward gypsies in the long term. One of these was the 'caravan problem'. There have

been calls for something to be done about the growing numbers of people housing themselves in caravans and houseboats, which had also served as a base from which to make a livelihood while travelling, since the end of the nineteenth century. This resulted in the Caravan Act of 1918. It is significant that the existence of caravan dwellers was seen as a problem and that the central authorities increasingly treated these people as a separate category, whose lifestyle was sharply condemned.

A second structural development was the *specialisation of the aliens policy*. This came about particularly as a result of the problems concerning (Belgian) refugees during the First World War. For the first time a government service was established which would occupy itself solely with aliens and border control, under the supervision of the Administrator for Border Control and Aliens Service (AGVD). The years immediately after the war were fully absorbed with the problem of Belgian refugees and military, and the 'gypsies' were left alone. This was, however, soon to change for the worse.

The specialisation of the anti-gypsy policy: 1928–1940

September 1928, like March 1868, can be seen as a rift – a second break – in the policy towards gypsies in the Netherlands. It was then that the ad hoc reaction made way for the *specialisation of gypsy policy*. The AGVD had 'discovered' that a number of gypsy families (known, in the literature about gypsies, as the 'Sinti') were residing in the Netherlands, and many of them had been doing so for a good many years. The Administrator then began attempts to rid the Netherlands of these undesirables, as he saw them. His activities resulted in the registration of all persons who, according to the Military Police, were eligible for the term 'gypsy'. The Department of Justice left this registration entirely in the hands of the new office, which was where 'know-how' concerning aliens in general and gypsies in particular was assembled.

Why the Sinti were labelled as gypsies so late can only be established by systematic comparison with the other three 'gypsy-groups', and with those who eventually escaped such branding. This leads us to the conditions under which labelling takes place. These are inextricably bound up with self-definition: did the Sinti already consider themselves an ethnic group before 1928 and, if so, since when? In more general terms, are people called gypsies because they *are* gypsies, or did they begin to consider themselves as such because that was what they were called?

In the current, mainly anthropological, literature on gypsies a distinction is made between Rom(Kaldarasch, Lowara and sometimes Ursari) and Sinti (or Manouches). The latter category denotes gypsies in France, Germany and

Austria who have lived there since the eighteenth century. These studies assume (implicitly or explicitly), almost without exception, that Sinti as a group exist for centuries, originating from the so-called 'Egyptians', thought to have left India between 1000 and 1400, who appeared in Western Europe in the early fifteenth century.³ Few scholars seem conscious that nineteenth and twentieth century group formation may be mainly the product of stigmatisation.⁴ Although very relevant for the other three groups, this question cannot be tackled due to the lack of research in Hungary and the Balkans. This is different in the case of the Sinti. Their group formation can be studied to some extent thanks to their long and continuous stay in the Netherlands (since about 1840). There are no direct sources, such as diaries or letters, which can tell us how Sinti defined themselves before 1928. The relation with labelling must thus be approached indirectly.

One way is by tracing their origin. The idea behind this is the following. Most of the gypsies who escaped the eighteenth century West European persecutions, arrived in the so-called 'gypsy colonies' in German states and France. These were built by the authorities to force gypsies to adopt a sedentary lifestyle. The literature on this subject assumes that the twentieth century Sinti stem from these 'colony-gypsies'. This implies that the ancestors of contemporary Sinti already considered themselves as a separate (gypsy) group, the formation of which had already taken place in the eighteenth century. This assumption is not, however, supported by the Dutch sources. An examination of Dutch Sinti birthplaces shows that only 12 (1,6 per cent) of the 737 persons can be linked with these colonies. This weak relation, and the probably great role of labelling, are not exclusively Dutch phenomena. It is, for example, demographically impossible that a few hundred gypsies swelled to a group of tens of thousands of people by the end of the nineteenth century. The authorities in Germany counted more than 5000 gypsies around the turn of the century, and by 1926 some 14,000, most of them Sinti (Dillmann 1905 and Hohmann 1981: 67). The development in France was still more spectacular. Whereas the number of 'tsiganes' at the beginning of the nineteenth century was not more than 500, an extraparliamentary commission concluded on March 29 1898 that there were more than 25,000 'nomades en bande' in France (Vaux de Foletier 1981: 180). My assumption is that the most of these 'gypsies' were labelled as such after 1890. That they define themselves nowadays as a separate group does not automatically mean that this was also the case a century ago.

The data on origin and group formation are only one way to determine to what extent self-definition was important for the labelling of the Sinti. A second important line of approach is the way in which this group has been stigmatised through time and the arguments used. What strikes one first is that Sinti deviated on essential points from the 'Kaldarasch-image' that

predominated from 1868 onwards: big groups living in tents, with a strange language, striking appearance and originating from Hungary and the Balkans. Sinti, however, travelled in relatively small groups, and even in cases where their groups were as big as the average Kaldarasch, the chances of being labelled as such did not increase accordingly. The type of dwelling was also different. Whereas the Kaldarasch lived in tents and the Lowara in caravans, the Sinti stayed in boarding-houses. The sources after 1865 regularly mention 'carts'; caravans only appear from 1880 onwards. The gradual transition to caravans took place at the end of the nineteenth century, by which time this was already a common sight. But Sinti in caravans did not automatically become 'more gypsy'. Although their nomadic lifestyle was for the most part concealed from view, immunising them against the label, the caravan was not a sufficient condition for labelling. Whereas the appearance of Kaldarasch, Ursari and Lowara was quite eye-catching, the Sinti seem to have been more conventional in this respect. The women did not for the most part dress in conspicuous way and are only described as 'gypsy-like' in a few instances. There are no descriptions to match the numerous portrayals of Kaldarasch and Lowara women, with their jewels, coloured dresses and bare feet. Nor was the skin colour of some of them ('yellow', 'brown', 'dark') decisive for labelling.

Despite the limitations of the historical sources as far as providing definitive information on group formation, it is clear that the view held by most tsiganologists (see Note 4) is not very convincing. Stigmatisation by the authorities was decisive, moreover, for the visualisation of the Sinti irrespective of whether or not they existed as such. A further argument for the idea of a 'constructed group', is that the authorities were blind for (possible) ethnic characteristics. This can be illustrated by the AGVD's definition of gypsies in the thirties. He was not in the first place interested in family ties or specific cultural traits, such as language and so on, but focussed on their dwelling and the kind of lifestyle attached to it. The extension of labelling had not yet reached its limit with the Sinti. This can be seen from the discussion about defining the term 'gypsy' arising from the proposed establishment in 1937 of a 'zigeunercentrale'. One of the proposals was to include *all* caravan dwellers. The decisive criterion for this was their nomadic lifestyle. It was only the lack of money which persuaded the government to stick to a limited definition. The registration (with fingerprints and photographs) of all caravan dwellers was considered too costly.

Not only did the definition change, but also the stigma itself. The notion that gypsies were to be considered as (born) criminals found general acceptance as a consequence of policy specialisation. A clear pattern is discernible from the cases dealt with by the AGVD. He generalised behaviour of one person (family or group), without any hesitation, to all 'gypsies'.

The formal sentence passed on the Lowara Petalo family, for example ('they are terrorising the country'), can be found in every letter he wrote about all other gypsy groups. There was no distinction between individual and group behaviour. Apart from this generalisation, he interpreted behaviour of gypsies without exception in a negative way. Peddling was equated with 'begging', while negotiating the price of services rendered was seen as cheating. This interpretation must be classified as a prejudice as is evinced by the fact that every time local authorities refuted his accusation – for example, by pointing out that the tinkers were asked back every year by the same clients despite the problems concerning the fixing of prices – the AGVD did not alter his vision at all.

The policy after 1928 is not fully explained by the monopolisation of the Aliens policy by the Military Police. It must also be set within the context of more general developments, especially the changing attitude towards nomadism. The central government considered an overtly nomadic lifestyle as undesirable. The 'gypsy problem' was often compared with the growing group of indigenous Dutch caravan dwellers. This explains the point of departure for the specialisation of the anti-gypsy policy. Gypsies had always been conceived as aliens by the AGVD who was, until 1927, only charged with the supervision of the border patrol. The discovery around 1928 – when his function was extended to the supervision of aliens staying inside the country – that quite a lot of them had acquired Dutch nationality changed the 'gypsy problem' into a domestic one. This was all the more alarming since he was convinced that gypsies – because of their allegedly parasitic nature – were an even greater threat to society than the indigenous caravan dwellers. The threat consisted in two elements: a) the idea that gypsies and caravan dwellers sponged on the sedentary (rural) population and intimidated them with their impudent behaviour; and b) their allegedly shameless moral behaviour. Many letters, especially from the AGVD, mention obscure family relations – many of them outside wedlock.

The result was that the 'gypsy' way of life in and of itself was considered a criminal problem. Comparison with Germany and France shows that this thinking was much stimulated by policy specialisation which had already taken place at the end of the nineteenth century in these countries. Ideas originating from international police conferences in the 1930s were warmly welcomed in the Netherlands and laid the foundation for more thorough-going stigmatisation: not only did the label 'gypsy' come to apply in principle to *all* nomadic persons, but the implication of the stigma itself was that those who, until 1928, had merely been considered as unwanted aliens, were from then on regarded as innately criminal.

Persecution and extermination: 1940–1944

The start which had already been made with disciplining the caravan-dwelling population in the thirties, was zealously pursued by some government officials after the German invasion. The result (in 1943) was registration of all caravan dwellers and the imposition of a travelling prohibition upon them. There were, however, no plans for deportation – much less genocide – and gypsies were not given any special treatment. This was too marginal a group for the Aliens Department to concern itself with in view of the ‘Great Event’. The German initiative of enforcing a raid might have been a *necessary* step for persecution, but it cannot be said that the deportation of the 245 Dutch gypsies in May 1944 was solely a German question. In the first place, its implementation was left to the Dutch authorities; and in the second place, the labelling since 1928 had not been completely ineffective. No advantage was taken during the raid of the fact that the gypsies had been registered since 1937. The activities of the AGVD had brought about an increased awareness of gypsies among municipal authorities and the Military Police, however, so that certain officials were well aware of who was and who was not to be considered a gypsy.

If we compare the persecution in the Netherlands with that in the rest of Europe (Kenrick and Puxon 1972), we find that only a relatively small group was stigmatised. This can be explained by the late and half-hearted specialisation of the anti-gypsy policy in the Netherlands. Whereas all nomadic groups were in principle lumped together in Germany and France, gypsies (aliens) and caravan dwellers (autochthones) were still seen as two separate groups in the Netherlands. Gypsies were considered aliens or stateless and subject to a restrictive and discriminating aliens policy. Caravan dwellers, on the other hand, were part of the Dutch population and as such a domestic problem, along with ‘antisocial people’.

Conclusion

Analysis of the history of gypsies in the Netherlands yields two conclusions. Firstly, the negative image, the *stigma*, was crucial for the government's antagonistic attitude. The image of gypsies as being by definition poor and parasitic aliens was so deeply rooted that the actual situation could not alter it. The crux of the danger was the overtly nomadic lifestyle of the gypsies. Their permanent travelling habits, with family and all, was almost always associated with parasitism and profligacy: two traits which, when coupled with aliens, were always considered undesirable. The negative image was increased by the policy enacted against the gypsies, which made it increas-

ingly difficult for them to earn a livelihood, thereby enacting a self-fulfilling prophecy.

A second important conclusion refers to *labelling*. A comparison of the five 'gypsy groups' which entered the Netherlands in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, make it possible to draw the conclusion that the foundation for labelling was composed of several characteristics: an overtly nomadic lifestyle combined with an exotic appearance and a penchant for permanent travelling *en famille*. With this observation we have stumbled into the heart of the stigmatisation: overtly nomadic behaviour, which is expressed in lifestyle and travelling habits: *en famille*, without an obvious sedentary basis. The first group which fulfilled these conditions in the nineteenth century was the Kaldarasch, and to a lesser degree the Ursari. This was why their group characteristics were seen from that moment on as typical for gypsies in general. Another condition was also decisive for a time in addition to those mentioned above: originating from Hungary or the Balkans. These three elements formed the core of the nineteenth century Dutch gypsy policy. Groups which did not comply with these conditions, such as the Sinti and other Dutch and Belgian caravan dwellers, were not therefore labelled and treated as 'gypsies' by the government until 1928.

The fact of Balkan origin was replaced in the twentieth century by a less specific condition: non-Dutch origin. This development meant that the label could also be applied to Sinti and other foreign caravan dwellers. The only buffer against labelling for nomadic groups was Dutch origin. This is why Dutch caravan dwellers always remained a separate group. The analysis made in this study contests the view held by most tsiganologists that people are termed 'gypsies' because they are gypsies, that is, define themselves as such. This view needs to be adjusted, since otherwise there can be no explanation for the late labelling of the German, French and Italian (Piedmontese) Sinti.

This historical analysis has demonstrated that the stigmatisation perspective offers a fruitful way of explaining the antagonistic attitude towards the groups which were combined under the label 'gypsy', not only in the Netherlands, but throughout Western Europe. Labelling by the government of certain groups of newcomers as undesirable or even dangerous can therefore have major consequences for the persons included in them. Not only does it become very difficult for them to settle in a country – and should this happen, to improve their position on the social ladder – the government's power to categorise and stigmatise people can even initiate the forming of minorities. Those who never would otherwise, or rarely, associate can, as a consequence of labelling, be driven into each others arms becoming a minority in the course of time. The group formation of Dutch caravan dwellers is proof of this, but the same applies to the English Travellers, the

German and Swiss Jenisch (Huonker 1987; Meyer 1988), and so on. Further research will indicate the extent to which Kaldarasch, Lowara, Ursari and Sinti group formation over a much longer period (1400–1900) is more a result than a cause of labelling.

To what extent can the conclusions of this case study be generalised to other stigmatised minorities? The idea that minoritisation can be stimulated by stigmatisation is not new, and it is important to recognise this. The Sinologist Ter Haar, for example, reached more or less the same conclusion in his study of the autochthonous Japanese Burakumin. After a process of stigmatisation that lasted several centuries most Japanese, not least the Burakumin themselves, are convinced that the Burakumin descend from the widely despised Koreans and that they have always kept themselves apart from the rest of society in separate villages, practising their scorned occupations. Although it can be proved that the Burakumin are autochthonous Japanese, stigmatisation was so strong that they became indeed an ethnic group, whose members define themselves in the same terms as those who stigmatise (Ter Haar 1990).

A second interesting example can be extracted from the British historian Ranger, who concluded that the racial thinking in ‘tribes’, imbued with qualities such as ‘bellicose’, ‘lazy’, ‘docile’ and so on, were imposed by white colonizers in South Africa (including Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique) at the end of the nineteenth century. This classification has been accepted and internalised within a century both by the white minority and the black majority and nowadays tribes as such really *exist*. Prior to the twentieth century, however, tribal classification was only weakly developed and was dominated by matrilinear alliances. Ranger explains this imposed ethnicity – conscious and unconscious – in terms of the divide and rule policy of the colonizers, that served both political and economic goals. Playing people off against each other proved a particularly effective means of countering the growth of the class consciousness. This was not a one-sided process, though, passively undergone by indigenous people. Tribal classification has also been elaborated by Africans themselves to serve certain interests. These ideas appealed, moreover, to existing ethnic symbols (Vail 1989). It is nevertheless clear this was a reaction to stigmatisation and Ranger therefore concludes: ‘Overall it has amounted to a dangerous and distorting internalisation of European concepts’ (Ranger 1982: 134).

Although these examples are somewhat arbitrarily chosen and systematic comparative research is scarcely out of the egg, I think that the conjecture based on the history of gypsies in the Netherlands is worth testing and may be fruitful to studies in the field of racism and ethnicity, both historical and contemporary. I would like to finish by recapitulating the main hypothesis. The labelling by authorities of certain categories as different, unwanted or

even dangerous, not only influences their position in society in a negative way, the power of definition by the authorities can even initiate group formation and minoritisation. People who at the outset felt no, or only very weak, ties with one another can be driven towards each other and in the course of time become a minority or project themselves as one.

NOTES

1. The process of becoming a minority.
2. See, for this approach, in Germany: Döring 1964, Arnold 1965; in France: Vaux de Foletier 1970; in the Netherlands: Van Kappen 1965.
3. See, for a recent example of this school of thought, Mayerhofer 1990.
4. Some scholars have, in various degrees, been able to withdraw from the suffocating 'paradigm' that has been constructed by tsiganology (the field of scholarship occupied with the study of gypsies). See, for example, Okely 1983 and Mayall 1988.

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