

# The Roma Community in the United Kingdom - its History, Culture and Contemporary Situation :

*an introduction for service  
providers*

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# A. Why I am the wrong speaker here

- a) a tired old voice, - part of a “40 year failure to solve the Gypsy problem”, not the fresh eye government consultants seek but an accumulator of meaningless titles
- b) a career mostly spent helping Roma/Gypsies/Travellers to deal with the government, not the other way round: a sociological gun-runner.
- c) been doing it so long, I’ve forgotten what ordinary people don’t know

# Why I am the wrong speaker here

- d) Getting criticism from Roma who've looked at the programme and said "What is he doing there when we should be there?"
- e) Attempting the impossible: I developed a whole M.A. course to deal with what I have to tackle here in 30 minutes. It doesn't work because the problem is not so much what you don't know, as what you think you know which ain't right. (e.g the concept of "True Gypsies") A quick survey of Gypsy history will simply overlay, not replace your previous stereotypes.

# Why I am the wrong speaker here

- So, if you think this will be a quick fix for your ignorance – you're not only ignorant but lazy-minded, and probably semi-literate:
- the spoken word has always been more a tool of manipulation than communication;
- there is no substitute for serious, humble-minded diverse study – even if you are a Rom, Gypsy or Traveller yourself.

## *Why is this relevant to social service providers, teachers, police officers and work with children?*

- Because of the query “Is this behaviour an individual pathology or a cultural aberration?” Social workers make errors both ways: and because child protection and other social service reports are always confidential, building cumulative wisdom is hard.
- So we compare the behaviour with a series of narratives about cultural norms.

**BUT**

**Between different groups the culture varies 100% - every generalisation is wrong.**

- AND
- It is families who have problems who turn to social workers and the police
- SO
- Social worker and police and narratives are biased towards families in the process of dropping out of Romani Culture, and tend to reinforce negative stereotypes. These sometimes conflict with idealisation by educationalists
- AND
- Families who are self-reliant are even more likely to remain hidden from view.

# *So – how do we approach the understanding of culture? Through history.*

- Why did they migrate from India? Traditional explanation was they were pariah nomads who wandered a bit further, *but why is a mystery*.
- Challenged by Romani nationalism: We were warriors who adventured to Europe – *but why is a mystery*.
- The solution of historical revisionism “Mystery” is unacceptable, even racist: any speculation must be sociologically plausible – as is the theory of a multi-cultural Indian militia in the service of Mahmud of Ghazni, with Romani language emerging from a military koine.
- Social collectivities with some military-political autonomy give rise to continuing identities in a way in which individual migrants do not.

# *Diversity is only understandable historically*

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- What happens to the original Romani-speaking collectivity?
- It accretes other Indic migrant populations.
- It loses any political autonomy by 1361 at the latest
- Its component sections – metal workers, musicians, grooms, carpet specialists pursue their traditional non-military survival strategies under other local feudal rulers.
- It runs into the catastrophe of the 16th century W.European invention of the genocidal nation-state.

# How do Roma/Gypsies Travellers survive the 16th century catastrophe?

- a) As slaves: (Christian Ottoman fringes, esp. Romania and Serbia)
- b) As taxable communities (Ottoman heartlands, Poland, Russia, Baltic)
- c) As marginalised commercial nomads (N. Western Europe – but also in small minorities combined with (1) and (2))

## And then came industrial capitalism (and the steam engine)

- From the late 19th century the ghetto/caravan marginalisation is no longer acceptable:
- the 20th century genocides render unviable the survival strategies from the 16th century genocides:
- post 1945 comes the new Gypsy politics, gathering pace from the 1960s.

# What are the sources and dimensions of Roma Gypsy Cultural Diversity today?

- Tradition vs Consensus vs Personal Autonomy in structures of social control (related to Sedentarism vs Nomadism) (So most Polish Roma have different social control norms to most Romanian Roma – but there are crossovers – it depends on sub-ethnic group, not nationality as such )
- European Regional Origin
- Religion: Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic, (nominal Lutheran and Anglican), Pentecostal, Jehovahs Witnesses.
- Education: The legacy of state socialism
- Politics and Class

# “New Roma” since 1989

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## Some Communities:

- Bosnian Chergashe
- Polska Roma and Lovari
- Kosovar Khorakhane + Albanian Roma
- Slovakian Romungre
- Romanian Roma
- Bulgarian Khorakhane/Arlija Roma

# **“Old” Roma communities in London: Kalderasha, Romungre, Cypriot Khorakhane, Rudari**

- **Some organisations:**
- Slovak, Bulgarian and Romanian Roma organisations: Lobbying and civil liberties approaches, often ephemeral/ and/or linked to church work.
- Roma Support Group: A casework + cultural politics approach
- Church groups: Pentecostal self-help now linking tentatively with the Churches Network, esp. in Luton



