



## Nomadic and sedentary

Michael Teichmann

### Scientific History

The Roma and Sinti are considered as exemplary examples of European nomads in both scientific and social discussions. They are supposed to live following an "innate migratory instinct", this concept being constantly used to legitimate opposing political interests throughout the course of history. [→ Stereotyping and Folklorisations] The cliché of the "eternal Gypsy" who is permanently migrating has developed into being one of the most effective and lasting stereotypes especially in the German speaking area. By means of numerous references in operas and operettas, as well as in photographs, films and song texts, they have become a common property. In the "Duden" the German word "zigeunern" ("roaming around like gypsies") means "roaming, also: hanging around". In Austria the variant "roaming around" is used for people that, instead of working in a serious and intended way, lead a life of idleness.

The number of nomadic peripatetic Roma has always been below the number assumed by politicians and scientists. Due to the comparably Roma-friendly policies followed by the Islamic sovereigns, the *Arlje* in Prizren found conditions that guaranteed a settled existence already by the 12th century. [→ Economic Communities] Also some Slovakian and Hungarian Roma groups have been leading a settled life since the 14th century. In the German speaking areas some Roma and Sinti groups have had a settled existence working as traders or dealers since the middle of the 15th century.

Chronicles, reports, and conclusions drawn from research, or census which revealed that the Roma and Sinti were/are partly settled, have not for the most part been recognised by opinion-forming people. A Slovakian census from 1893 documents that from the 36,000 Roma of that time, less than 2% were nomads. Even if the fact is taken into consideration that many nomadic Roma did not want to declare themselves, the outcome of the survey is unambiguous. [→ Servika-Roma]

At the same time a census was seriously carried out on Hungarian territory resulting in a similar conclusion for hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Roma. Both conscriptions (surveys) have rarely been included in relevant literature, although such information would have helped to eliminate a prejudice that has been passed down for centuries: "TheGypsy" had to be nomadic because all other stereotypes and prejudices depended upon this image.

### Racist and culturalistic approaches

The most influential "Gypsy expert" up to the 1970's Hermann Arnold has applied nomadism to the Roma and Sinti by introducing the term "prey-or of game" (hunter - gatherer). Since Arnold – according to the national socialist ideology – considered race as the determining factor for social and cultural behaviour, he speculated that there was a "Gypsy gene" that determined the nomadic existence of certain Roma and Sinti groups. In this context Arnold used explicitly racist patterns as well as folkloristic and exotic stereotypes. According to him, the nomadic way of living and the language are characteristic of the "real Gypsy" who is "less criminal" than the "sedentarised – settled" one. This "pure race, nomadic Gypsy" is not only confronted with the "assimilated and settled Gypsy", but also functions as a polar opposite to the middle-class, industrialised and consequently "culture-less" modern age.



Also in the context of National Socialism, attention was initially given to the settled and assimilated groups, like the Burgenland Roma. They were reproached for endangering the "sane body of the people" by mingling with the majority population. They were the first to suffer extermination. [→ "Racial-biological evaluation of the Gypsies"]

One and a half centuries before, Gypsy policies pursued a completely different objective. According to the central idea of the Enlightenment, the Roma and Sinti should be freed from their "exclusion caused by themselves" and forced to lead a settled life and to "mingle". [→ Maria Theresia and Joseph II]

In order to integrate the Roma and Sinti into a serious ethnological theory, the ethnologist Rao Aparna tries to extend the common definition by the term "peripatetics" (commercial nomads). Characteristics of peripatetic nomads are their local mobility and their professional flexibility in terms of commerce as well as endogamy (in-group marriages) in the cultural and social sense. In contrast to dependent workers working for wages, they offer the respective majority society services and trade, which are mainly part of niche professions (showmen, traders, acrobats, mobile workmen etc.). [→ Professions]

Aparna, however, qualifies this quite differentiated point of view by undue generalisations and exoticisms. The number of Roma and Sinti among the peripatetic nomads is overestimated, and cultural conditions are assigned an unproportionate relevance at the expense of economic and social issues.

## **Political and socio-cultural background**

On the one hand, the Roma and Sinti who are classified as nomads correspond to the above mentioned romantically transfigured image of the "real Gypsy". On the other hand, they are more easily harnessed for certain scientific and political purposes since it is supposed that they consciously positioned themselves outside society, and that it was impossible to integrate them into society, that they would live in an anarchic way, and would not keep to the laws or pay any taxes. Accordingly, two completely different approaches to life meet and are not compatible. The image of the "nomadic Roma" emphasises the dissimilarities and does not admit the common aspects and similarities with the respective majority society.

The real facts have always been different. There have always been constraints that forced the Roma and Sinti groups to migrate. Economic necessities as well as their flight from warlike disputes, from discrimination and being hounded forced the Roma and Sinti to leave the original settlements.

In 1498 the Roma and Sinti were declared "outlaws" (without any rights) by the Freiburg Reichstag. Consequently, it was prohibited for them to stay anywhere within the whole empire. The reason for this edict was the suspicion that the Roma and Sinti were spies of the Turks. This accusation evolved from the propaganda of everyday politics that was meant to stir up fear within the population and emotionally prepare them for war. Basically, every citizen was allowed to turn them out, to beat or to kill them without any legal consequences. In further edicts and chronicles the "Freiburg Charta of the Reichstag" has always again been valued as a documentation of the "innate criminality" of the Roma and Sinti.

Since that time their nomadic existence has been closely linked to the reproach of criminality. Discriminating decrees further limited the professional field of many Roma and Sinti groups. The



Roma and Sinti have always been hindered from settling down within city walls. They were not allowed to enter trade guilds and furthermore they could not purchase any farmland.

In the course of time different groups have made a virtue out of necessity and have chosen such professions, which logically require mobility and independency. Even today, the cohesion of extended families at a social level [→ Traditional socio-organisation] and professional co-operation for economic purposes creates an independently acting network, which is quite immune against the control of the state. Consequently, the risk of being exposed to discrimination, hostility and pogroms is significantly diminished. In relation to the respective economic and political conditions, the risk of losing a job and becoming impoverished can be of minor importance. A wage-dependent worker or an employee is not only exposed to economic conditions, but also to the permanent arbitrariness of their employer. A mobile trader or a service provider, on the other hand is less related neither to one place from the emotional point of view nor to a stationary possession from the material point of view.

The longing for autonomy, either in a cultural or in an economic sense, is of central relevance for those Roma groups who have always lived a very traditional life, like the *Lovara* and the *Kalderaš*. Niche professions that guarantee independency and flexibility often are mobile activities (e.g. dealing with antiquities on flea-markets). For many who were originally eastern European → Vlach-Roma, a settled existence is synonymous with slavery and exploitation.

In contrast, a settled existence facilitates assimilation or integration, and renders it possible to participate in the state vocational system, increasing the chance of inter-cultural contacts, but it also bears the risk of losing cultural autonomy. In contrast to long lasting opinion, a settled existence does not automatically lead to the loss of language and culture. There are numerous Roma groups that are living in a nomadic-peripatetic way who do not speak *Romani* (e.g. the *Boiash-Roma*, who have been travelling for a long time and been speaking a Romanian dialect for centuries). On the other hand, *Romani* language knowledge is completely present within groups who settled centuries ago, such as the *Vend Roma*, the *Prekmurje Roma* or the *Dolenjska Roma*. The socio-culture of the → *Kalderaš* settled in Austria is still completely intact, although many of them had to give up their traditional and often mobile trade – *tinker* – and had to change to conventional professions that consequently lead to a settled existence (e.g. plumber).

More factors lead to the consequence that the number of nomadic peripatetic Roma has diminished through the centuries. Forced assimilation, industrialisation and the Holocaust caused sustainable gaps. In addition, changed economic and social conditions after 1945 promised jobs and affluence, which made the settled life seem more attractive.

Nowadays, only a small percentage of all Roma and Sinti live a traditionally mobile way of life, and survive economically as showmen, cutlers, musicians etc. Nevertheless, the dichotomy of settled/nomadic still represents the central criterion of → *romanipe* – the "real Roma existence" even within the Roma communities. *Vlach-Roma* groups like the *Kalderaš* or the *Lovara* consider those Roma groups like the → *Burgenland-Roma*, who have been leading a settled life for centuries, as assimilated and not committed to the traditional socio-culture. The *Lovara* and the *Kalderaš* on the other hand, see themselves as those who represent and preserve this traditional Roma culture. As a consequence an internal hierarchy has been established, which is almost not recognised by non-Roma but coincides with their stereotyped view. On the other hand, especially in times of neo-liberal employment policy, many so-called settled Roma and Sinti are forced to practice a remarkably higher level of mobility than the real "nomads" have ever practiced. *Burgenland-Roma* who commute to



Vienna for the whole year or *Prekmurje-Roma* from Slovenia who commute to Burgenland are considered settled, although the *Ursari* (Bärenführer) who were connected with one single place for the whole winter and only in the summer months practiced their traditionally mobile profession were denominated nomads.

Due to a lack of serious surveys it cannot be said how many of the Roma are really settled or live a peripatetic nomadic life. It is considered certain that the vast majority are settled. According to estimations made, a maximum of 5% of about 10-12 million Roma in the whole world, can be denominated peripatetic nomads.

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