

Gypsies

Although intermingled with other populations, the Gypsies are a distinct ethnic group that originated in northern central India. At first known as the Dom in India, they were a low CASTE and earned their living by singing and dancing. The Dom began migrating from India in the ninth century, first as minstrels in Persia and later to escape the havoc wrecked by a series of Muslim invasions. As they migrated through the middle East, the "D" of Dom was replaced by an "R." The Gypsies today refer to themselves as the Rom, meaning "Man." Their language, Romany, is a mixture of Sanskrit and loanwords from various countries in which they have lived. All Gypsies speak Romany. Today there are an estimated 8 to 10 million Gypsies in more than 40 countries, an estimated 1 million of them in North America.

Early History and Customs

At the time of their first migrations into Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries, these landless wanderers--colloquially called Gypsies in England--earned their living as entertainers, magicians, blacksmiths, and horse dealers. They rejected agriculture and other settled occupations and pursued work that would avoid direct competition with surrounding populations. They were excluded from all craft and trade guilds, and the Roman Catholic church forbade association with Gypsy fortune tellers.

Gypsies have succeeded in preserving their own identity by adhering to their own social and religious laws, which govern every aspect of their lives. Their Gypsy religion, Romanism, is an oral tradition passed down through generations. The Gypsies are monotheistic and worship a patriarchal god they call Del. They do not make graven images of Del, nor do they have a clergy or fixed place of worship. They follow strict purity laws--marime codes--and shun violence. They are not involved in wars except as victims. Intermarriage or any nonsuperficial dealing with non-Gypsies, or gaje, was traditionally forbidden.

Persecutions

The Gypsies' unwillingness to settle, assimilate, and become Christian made them targets for persecution. In the Middle Ages they, like the Jews, were accused of bringing bubonic plague into Europe. The Spanish INQUISITION was aimed at Gypsies as well as at the Jews and the Moors. In 1761, Maria Theresa, ruler of the Habsburg empire, devised a scheme for the mass assimilation of the Gypsies by forbidding them to travel or trade horses and by forcing them to become farmers. In the Balkan principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, under Turkish rule, Gypsies were made slaves of the state.

In the 19th and 20th centuries the Gypsies suffered many further injuries and ultimately, again like the Jews, were victimized by

Nazi Germany. During World War II they were subjected to deadly medical experiments, and many were forced to undergo forced sterilization. By the end of the war more than 500,000 of them had been exterminated.

After the war Gypsies faced continued persecution in Eastern European Communist societies, several of which tried policies of forced assimilation. In the USSR, during Nikita Khrushchev's premiership, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet decreed that Gypsies lead a settled life. Moreover, with the collapse of Eastern European Communism in 1989, renewed ethnic violence victimized Gypsies as well as other minorities.

Gypsies in North America

The first Gypsies arrived in North America as deportees from England. The earliest evidence of their residence is a 1695 court record in Henrico County, Va. They were mentioned in colonial newspapers as a "Gypsy problem" as well. Between 1801 and 1803, the French emperor Napoleon transported hundreds of Gypsies, mostly men, to Louisiana. Spain and Portugal likewise banished their unwanted Gypsies to the New World.

Most of the Gypsies living in the United States today, however, descend from immigrants of the Eastern European diaspora of the 1880's, 1890's, and 1900's. Even after the restrictive immigration laws of 1924, Gypsy immigration to the United States continued on a diminished scale, through undocumented Latin American byways.

The Gypsies of North America, as well as those of Europe, live and work in extended family groups, known as kumpania. Each of these is governed by a hereditary chief, Rom Baro, who attempts to uphold traditional law while seeking consensus. North American Gypsies practice a strict form of economic territoriality wherein they divide regions into units of economic opportunity. This ensures that all Gypsies can earn a living free of competition with other Gypsies working in similar pursuits. Whenever possible, they resist working as wage laborers. They prefer to be self-employed. The most common occupation for the women is fortune telling, usually by palmistry. A common occupation for the men is buying and selling used cars and trucks. Some groups are involved in real estate investment.

American Gypsies have their own legal system. Legal matters are adjudicated before the kris, a tribunal of elders that hears and decides cases. Complainants represent themselves; Gypsy attorneys do not exist. Banishment from the community is the ultimate sanction.

Gypsy marriages are normally arranged, and involve a bride-price, in which the groom's family must pay a large sum to the bride's family. In North America the bride customarily joins the groom's household in a patrilineal arrangement.

Conflicts have occurred between Gypsies and local governments over educating children, welfare benefits, and military service.

Although in the United States systematic persecution of Gypsies has not occurred, official discrimination against them persists in the local statutes forbidding them to practice fortune-telling.

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