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A **Staff Report** by the Straight Dope Science Advisory Board

Who are the Gypsies?

26-Jun-2007

Dear Straight Dope:

What are gypsies? Before I left the good ol' U.S. of A., I thought they were just carnies and traveling bohemian types. Turns out that in Europe, where I have seen them all over, they have a totally different language, clothing, and everything – in fact, they are considered here to be of a completely different ethnicity. Also, are the traveling carnies of the U.S. any relation ethnically? —Jim

Dear Straight Dope:

My mother grew up in the late 40s and early 50s in south Philadelphia. She says she remembers gypsies living on the outskirts of town – dark-haired, dark-complexioned, gold-laden people she was warned about time and time again. She wasn't allowed to get her ears pierced until college because she was admonished that she'd look like a gypsy. Where did they all go? Did they just decide to take out the earrings, sell the ponies, and join mainstream America? —B. Devon, Oakdale, CT

Dear Straight Dope:

Who or what is a gypsy? Gypsies have been featured in countless movies and books but those depictions seem to be very different from the modern-day ones turned up by a simple Internet search. And the term "gypsy" seems to have been made over to convey a spirit of romantic wanderlust... but I'm betting the first gypsies weren't so taken with life on the road. So what's the truth? What race of people, if any, does the term refer to? When was the term coined? Who really, does it refer to today? And was Johnny Depp's character in *Chocolat* anything close to the real thing? —Andrea Gonsalves

Dear Straight Dope:

How come we never hear about gypsies anymore? How does one go about becoming one? Are they accepting applications, and if so where would I turn one in? —Briguy

SDStaff Gfactor and guest contributor Silenus reply:

*All that is gold does not glitter,
not all those who wander are lost;
the old that is strong does not wither,
deep roots are not reached by the frost.*
—J.R.R. Tolkien

We'll take these questions in order:

1. It's complicated.
2. Yes, basically.
3. About as close as Jack Sparrow is to a Caribbean pirate.
4. They're still around, but they aren't recruiting.

Seriously, this is a complicated subject. If you saw *Borat*, you saw some Romani people, the ethnic group most often associated with Gypsies. Borat's home town was really a Romani village in Romania, but the Romani were portraying Kazakhs, not themselves. (Just the same, they weren't happy – they [sued the filmmakers](#) over it.) How did the Romani people come to be called Gypsies? Anthropology professor Anne Sutherland in *Gypsies: The Hidden Americans* (1975) says the word Gypsy derives from the time when the Romani entered Western Europe and "represented themselves as Egyptians," the name subsequently evolving into Gypsies.

In *The Gypsy-American: An Ethnogeographic Study* (2002), cultural geographer David Nemeth of the University of Toledo adds some color to the story, which dates back to Romani prehistory, when the first traveling bands arrived in medieval European towns. Their "leaders professed to be Christian [royalty] of a kingdom in the East, which they called 'Little Egypt.' They claimed to have been driven from their Christian land by infidels, meaning the Islamic Turks." Professor Ian Hancock of the University of Texas says there are a few other explanations for the association between "Gypsy" and "Egyptian": One is that Europeans of the time called lots of foreign populations Egyptians; another is that the Romani people stayed in an area called Little Egypt when they first entered Europe.

That brings up a related point: Is the name Gypsy offensive? Another complicated issue. On one hand, although the Romani call themselves by other names in their own language, most would translate these names into English as Gypsy. On the other hand, many don't like it – the label, as we will see, has often led to persecution and stereotyping. In an e-mail to one of the authors of this report, Ian Hancock pointed out that "Gypsy has been acknowledged as an incorrect and offensive ethnonym (the Library of Congress for example changed its main subject heading from Gypsies to

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Romanies)."

Who exactly are the Gypsies? Here's where things start getting really complex. Sutherland says:

There are many distinct groups of people who are brought together under the word 'Gypsy' or who in some way refer to themselves as 'Gypsy' or 'Romanies'. In America some of these groups are the Kalderasha, Machwaya, Lowara, Xoraxai, Romanitchal (English Gypsies), Gitanos (Kale), Boyash, Ungaritzta, (Hungarian Gypsies), and so on, and in Europe there are also the Scottish Travellers (Tinkers), and others.

In this [online exhibit](#) Nemeth (2005) gives a taxonomy of the Gypsy populations in the U.S. and Canada, which he attributes to Dr. Matt Salo, head of the Gypsy Lore Society: "Rom, and Roma, Ludar, Romnichels, English Travelers, Irish Travelers, Scottish Travelers, Hungarian-Slovak Gypsies, Cale or Gitanos, Roaders or Roadies, Sinti, Yenisch." He notes that the category is blurred: some authorities "might also include a variety of small 'g' (non-ethnic) 'gypsies' in their researches." Among these, he includes "snow birds," migrant workers, footloose and/or unlicensed cab drivers, dancers, lumberjacks, and even boat peoples who dwell on various mobile watercraft and barges. Beyond these, anyone who self-ascribes as a "Gypsy" is free to do so in our presently fluid multicultural society of constantly shifting identities."

Andrea's question helps us understand how blurry the definition is. In *Chocolat* (2000), Depp was trying *not* to be a Gypsy. He'd played a Romani Gypsy in *The Man Who Cried* the same year, and set out to be an Irish boat person instead. (Hey, why not?) But by some definitions, both characters are Gypsies. Similarly, the Midland County, Michigan sheriff's department recently issued a warning about a "Gypsy scam" involving "a family of gypsies" (note the small g) that "has been passing through Genesee and Saginaw County, stealing from elderly people." The warning notes that these "gypsies" are of "Mexican heritage."

Not to intrude on anyone's sense of self, but this I'm-a-Gypsy-if-I-say-I'm-a-Gypsy business is precisely why matters are as confused as they are. Some people who call themselves Gypsies are ethnically unrelated to the Romani (the Irish Travelers and Scottish Travelers, for example, are ethnic Irish and Scots), whereas some Romani don't call themselves Gypsies. For the balance of this article, we'll treat Romani and Gypsies as synonymous, but be aware that in reality things aren't anywhere near that neat.

The Romani can be traced back to India of roughly the 11th century through linguistic, genetic, and cultural evidence. Current theory holds that the Romani left India during the 11th century as Hindu armies comprised of various non-Aryan peoples sought to escape the encroaching forces of Islam. Language evidence suggests that the Gypsies migrated west along the Silk Road through Persia and Armenia, finally entering Europe in the early 1300s. As these groups penetrated further into Europe, a few were absorbed into the local population, losing their Romani identity (the Jenisch, for example), while others became more distinct, absorbing local groups into the Romani. There's also evidence of a second and third migration from India, starting as late as the 1300s.

Are all Gypsies wanderers? No, but many are. Part of the reason is surely their long history of persecution. To this day some jurisdictions in Europe won't allow them to settle permanently.

Estimates of the Gypsy population vary widely. Nemeth says the U.S. population is probably between 50,000 and 2,000,000 – a range so wide it barely qualifies as an estimate. In Europe Gypsies are thought to number between eight and 15 million. Part of the difficulty in counting is that many Romani are unwilling to be counted. A 2000 U.S. Census Bureau memo says, "Culturally, the Romani are very suspicious of census-taking activities. Many people still recall the persecution of the Gypsies under Hitler and view a census as a method of identifying Gypsies for potentially negative consequences."

There's no single Romani language, rather a collection of dialects related to the languages of northern India, notably Punjabi. In some cases Gypsies speak the local language mixed with Romani vocabulary. There's no single Gypsy religion either – generally the Romani have adopted the local religion and added some of their own beliefs.

The Romani have an elaborate culture, which includes its own legal system. Traditional Romani culture separates itself from non-Gypsies, which are called *gaje*. Much of the Gypsy legal system is based on the notion of defilement. They must avoid becoming defiled by *gaje* and contaminated by the unclean. If either of these things happens, a Gypsy is considered *marime* and shunned or banished by other Gypsies.

In addition to dividing their group from outsiders, Gypsies divide the body into clean and unclean parts. As you might guess, the dividing line is the waist. Different towels must be used to wash each half, at different times. As you might imagine, oral sex is out of the question (although some authors point out this just makes it more attractive for young gypsies). Women are considered unclean during menstruation, and their lower parts are pretty much always considered defiling.

A Romani woman, according to traditional mores, must not walk in front of a man who is seated. Romani women have managed to turn this fear of defilement into power. A Romani woman who is wronged can toss her skirt over a man's head (or sometimes her underwear or even just expose her genitals). Skirt tossing defiles the recipient, making him an immediate outcast. He must make peace with the skirt tosser before he can reenter the group. Defilement from skirt tossing is permanent; the only way to remove it is to pretend it never happened. The skirt tosser does just that once peace is made. In 1975, Carol Miller wrote that "skirt-tossing pollution was probably more effective before the days of sanitary pads. Shoe-tossing seems equally common these days, and the exposure of the female genitalia, although less lethal, is also popular. A pubic hair, applied to the face of a Rom, is also a very strong sanction at present and indicates 'real hate.'" By 1993, though, the practice was rare among American Romani. In fact, the skirt-tosser would herself become *marime*.

Similar rules apply to encounters with *gaje*. If a person spends too much time with non-Romani or has too much contact, the person is *marime*. Outsider guests to the home of a gypsy must bring their own towels, but that's just the beginning. Even involuntary contact can make a Romani *marime*. Prisoners returning home may find themselves outcasts. The documentary *American Gypsy* tells the story of Grover Marks, the leader of a Gypsy community in the U.S. The police searched his family's home without a warrant, as well as individual family members and their belongings. Marks and his son Jimmy were charged with misdemeanor theft and pleaded guilty. After the search, their community shunned them because they'd been defiled by the *gaje* police.

It's this feature of Romani culture, and a few others, that explain their persecution, says Ian Hancock. In *We Are the Romani People* (2002) he explains where anti-Gypsyism comes from. "The first laws curtailing the movements of Romanis date from 1416. Both institutional and personal anti-Gypsyism are still common today," says Hancock, himself a descendant of Gypsies. He says some of the causes are:

1. Romanis were originally seen by Europeans as enemies – foreign intruders and non-Christians. The Romani still lack a country of their own. According to Hancock, "At best, a people without a country must forever be guests in another's homeland, and at worst unwelcome intruders. In more modern times, people without a country receive less attention and lack an international arena in which to make their voices heard."
2. Their dark skin has counted against them over time. "The early Romanis identity as non-white, heathen outsiders became incorporated into Christian European folklore, which only served to institutionalize and encourage the prejudice against them."
3. As we've already said, Hancock attributes some of the discrimination to the Romani culture's own anti-outsider bias. This bias led others to conclude that the Romani had something to hide. It also led to the Romani culture's continuing perception as foreign.
4. Because laws forbid Romanies to settle, they had to adopt portable means of generating income. Fortune-telling was a popular choice, but it "only helped to reinforce the image of mystery and exoticism that was growing in the European mind."

Hancock omits another explanation for anti-Gypsy sentiment that bears some discussion: the widespread belief that Gypsies are thieves. In the U.S., typically the only time you read about them is when they're being accused of a scam or other crime. (Some believe the word "gyp" derives from Gypsy, although [World Wide Words](#) says "direct evidence is lacking, and the term arose in the U.S., where gypsies have been less common than in Europe.")

What basis if any this stereotype has in reality is difficult to say; police report forms don't provide a "Gypsy" check-off box.

In any case Gypsies have long been considered undesirable, facing discrimination and oppression in virtually all countries they've traveled in. In Romania they were enslaved for many generations. In 1926, Swiss authorities began systematically taking Romani children from their parents to provide them with a "better life." An organization named Pro Juventute sponsored a program called "Operation Children of the Road" for many years, with the intention of destroying the Romany way of life – a program not halted till the 1970s.

Germany set about systematically persecuting Romani during the latter years of the Weimar Republic. In 1927, for example, Germany passed a law requiring all Gypsies to be photographed and fingerprinted. They were forbidden to travel in family groups, depriving them of their preferred lifestyle. Gypsy civil rights were totally stripped from them in 1933. The rise of Hitler brought greater oppression. Eugenic sterilization laws were passed to prevent the propagation of "lives not worth a life." Gypsies were to be sterilized, along with anyone having a "genetically determined" illness. The Nuremberg Laws affected Gypsies as well as the Jews. If you had two grandparents who were even part gypsy, you were condemned. During "Gypsy Clean-Up Week" in 1938, hundreds were beaten and imprisoned.

Probably the greatest challenge to the Romani way of life came in 1942, when Heinrich Himmler ordered all gypsies sent to concentration camps. Here they fell into the hands of Dr. Josef Mengele, who had established a special "Gypsy Family Camp" at Auschwitz/Berkeinau. In this camp they were experimented upon, in horrific examples of what a "superior race" is capable of. Estimates of the total number of Gypsies killed in the Holocaust range from 500,000 to 4 million (80% of the population of European gypsies). The total number may never be known, as many of the condemned were entered into the records with merely a "Z" to represent them.

To this day, the remaining Romani in Europe have been seen as "a problem to be dealt with." Countries including Spain, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia have established agencies to handle what these countries refer to as "the Gypsy problem." In an article entitled "Hungary's Gypsy explosion" in the *World Press Review* for October, 1983, a spokesman for the Hungarian government expressed fears that if Romani nationalism were encouraged in that country, "we could have pogroms, with Gypsies killing Hungarians, and vice-versa." The collapse of Communism in many cases has worsened the plight of Gypsies, many of whom have fled unfriendly new regimes in eastern Europe for the west, the UK in particular. The refugees frequently are poorly educated and impoverished; there have been news reports of Gypsy women and children begging in the streets of London.

Gypsies in the U.S. have had fewer problems, and a common perception is that they've disappeared. As professor Hancock noted in email correspondence with us, that's not really true:

The "Gypsies" you aren't seeing so much these days are the Hollywood stereotypes, not real Romanies. The widespread popular perception of a "Gypsy" in this country is that it is a fantasy figure, defined by behavior and appearance rather than by ethnicity. The image is commonly encountered in movies, cartoons and at Renaissance fairs ... [K]eep in mind that we're not a homogeneous population; there are several quite distinct subgroups (just as there are Hispanics, Jews, etc.). The Bashalde Roma, for example, very numerous in the northeast, don't engage in fortune-telling; the Kalderash Roma on the other hand, do. Some may conform to what's expected by the public if it's going to bring clients into the parlor, but it's show.

He said the best comparison is to the Jews, some of whom adhere to tradition more strictly than others, but all of whom consider themselves Jews. Similarly, "There are Roma who maintain purity / pollution separation behaviors, and some who only do so a little. Generalization will be misleading – we have lawyers and professors and politicians as well as fortune tellers, and are usually mistaken for Hispanics." To which the smart aleck in us can't help but add: Lawyers! Politicians! Won't these people ever take up honest work?

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