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The Roma: Forced Integration of a Group into Existing Cultures

“I was born in the wagon of a traveling show, my momma used to dance for the money they’d throw... gypsies, tramps and thieves, we’d hear it from the people of the town...” is the chorus to the song “Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves”, written by Bob Stones and sung by Cher.

The song talks about how the gypsies were always ridiculed by the townsfolk due to their way of life (Stones). The gypsy culture that Cher sings about, though, is not as unusual or imaginative as people believe. The Roma, the people who are known as gypsies, are a culture that is very much alive and thriving. They have different ethnic and social beliefs than most and, as a result, have suffered drastically throughout time. They have been forced to assimilate into various societies in an effort to survive. The assimilation of cultures into society is detrimental because, after time, those smaller cultures that were overtaken by the larger cultures may begin to die out or worse, become extinct. The Roma are a prime example of that catastrophe.

The Roma were (and in some places still are) a nomadic group, consisting of groups of families called a *kumpania*. The *kumpania* would travel together in a large caravan, trading with buyers for goods and services as they went on their way. People in the countries they traveled to originally thought they were from Egypt, so they were given the name “gypsy”, which led to widespread use of the word. Other names that have been used for the Roma throughout time include “Igano, Gypsies, Gipsies, Rom, Roma, Romani, Tsigani, Tzigane, and Zigeuner”, to name a few (B.A. p. 2).

The Romani hold many beliefs that most other cultures do not, such as having “pure” and “impure” parts of the body. For example, the upper half of the body is considered pure, while the

lower half, especially for women, is viewed as “impure.” Clothing is always washed downstream from the rest of the dishes because of this belief; if a woman is menstruating, her clothing is washed separately from everyone else’s so as not to dirty the rest of the people’s things (Romani p. 8). Running water is an important part of their culture; bathing or washing of anything must be in water that is constantly moving so as not to keep the impure on the person or object. Bathing in a bath is not allowed, nor is washing dishes or clothes in a bucket of stagnant water (Romani p. 9-10).

Women always wear skirts in an effort to cover the lower half of her body, the impure half, many times wearing multiple layers. Clothing of many colors was and still is worn by both men and women because, when traveling, they were able to trade goods and services for cheap fabric in different colors. To show that they are married or being courted, a woman would (and in most cases still does) wear what is called a *diklo*, a square or triangular piece of cloth tied around the head to cover the hair. A substantial amount of jewelry was and is usually worn on the person because, in many cases, they were not able to carry money on them, so they essentially wore it (Romani p. 16).

The Roma were and still are known for also engaging in diverse activities such as singing, dancing and fortune-telling. They would play music for everything, and there was always a reason to have a celebration. These parties would consist of families and friends coming together, cooking, eating, sharing stories (usually around a fire) and playing lots of music. Fortune-telling was and usually is reserved only for the *gadje*, or non-Roma, but the Roma did and still do believe in omens and curses. For instance, horse shoes and pieces of bread are considered good luck in their culture (B.A. p. 26). These unique customs and traditions would and still do often alienate them from the surrounding populace.

There is very little recorded history about the Roma. The earliest records state that they emigrated from India, eventually crossing Asia and spreading throughout Europe. Though it is still unknown as to why they began this long journey, the Roma still made the excursion and were discovered to have come as far as the Byzantine Empire, which is now modern-day Greece and Turkey (Patrin p. 6). By about 1300 ACE, the first Roma were recorded in Europe. From there, they spread throughout the various different areas of Europe and continued to move as time went on.

They were considered to be evil people to the people who lived in Europe because they were very dark-skinned, dressed differently, and followed customs considered unusual from the perspective of the Europeans. As a result, the “gypsies” were constantly discriminated against for their beliefs and customs. Sergio Franzese, an anthropologist who studied the Romani culture, found many different stories telling of how the Roma were dreadful. Stories such as “... ‘the Bible was called upon in order to consider them descendents of Cain and therefore cursed (Genesis 9:25).’ The legend also spread that they made the nails that were used to crucify Christ; or, according to another version, that they stole the fourth nail, making the crucifixion of the Lord more painful” were told in an effort to try and scare people into thinking the Roma were nothing but wicked (Franzese).

Soon, because so many people believed the stories that were told about the Roma, they were thrown out of towns and cities. Laws were made as early as 1471 in an effort to keep them away from others (Patrin p. 26). They were soon forced to become nomadic, or travelers, as opposed to willingly following the lifestyle that most people would lead when living in a single place. They would go from town to town, stay on the outskirts in their wagons, and trade with

the few who would barter with them. Life was difficult for the Roma, especially when more and more towns chose to create anti-Gypsy laws to keep them away (Patrin).

Eventually, the laws restricting the Roma became persecution laws. Gypsy hunts were set up, similar to the witch hunts practiced by the Americans in the early 1800's. Between the years of 1496 and 1498 alone, since it was declared by Parliament in Landau and Freiburg that the Roma were "...traitors to the Christian countries, spies in the pay of the Turks, and carriers of the plague," hunts became more intensive, leading many times to the torture and deaths of them (Patrin p. 31).

The details about the persecution of the Roma are long and recorded throughout Europe. People feared this unique group of people with their colorful clothing and their lively, loud music. Many people found ways to hurt them, such as (As explained by Robinson, B.A., a member and writer for the *Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance*) Gypsy hunts being organized by Emperor Karl VI of what is modern-day Germany in 1721 and the torturing and killing of 45 Roma for the murder of some Hungarians in 1792, when those were said to be murdered were in fact alive and well. Europe did not feel a need for a strange, new culture, so the people who lived there would try to rid them of it.

Finally, in an effort to stop the violence and keep the customs and culture of the Romani people alive, they would assimilate into the towns that they would be in, attempting to "hide" who they really were. They would act and dress like the townspeople and as a result many were able to finally settle down without being harmed. However, many did not like the idea of blending with another culture if their own beliefs were lost. As stated in an article entitled *Romani (Gypsy) Customs and Traditions: Romani Beliefs,*

“Although they need and depend on contacts with their host countries as a source of their livelihood, the Roma do not want to be part of these societies in any sense that would involve compromise of their basic beliefs. If there is any semblance of compromise, it may be in the Roma willingness to adapt to the requirements of their surroundings. Many Roma fear that over time integration could lead to assimilation, and the eventual disappearance of *Romaniya*”.

Many Roma followed in the assimilation and their lives were lived in more peace than before, despite the fact that they had little to no rights. This assimilation has been going on and is still occurring today.

The cultural assimilation of the Romani people can be considered both beneficial and detrimental to the Roma and to society. In an interview with Patricia Hamrick, an anthropology student graduating with honors from the Ohio State University, she brought up the idea that “... when cultures blend, one is usually privileged over the other, so rather than creating a new culture that comes from both equally, the more dominant culture simply wipes out and replaces the other”. She goes on to further describe how this will cause reductions in world variance, leading to a world-wide uniformity (Hamrick). Cultural blending can cause one culture, such as the Roma, to become extinct after a long enough amount of time.

For a culture that would appear to have disappeared off the face of the Earth, many people know about the Roma than most would think. In a survey done at the University of Arizona, out of 22 students, over half knew of the Roma and had some sort of idea as to who they were. However, in retrospect, many did not know that this group of people chose to integrate in an effort to save themselves and their culture. A majority also felt that just because a culture was misunderstood did not mean that they should be ostracized or persecuted. Complete cultural assimilation “...is a complex issue that is not easily reduced” (Hamrick). While most

students believed that the Roma should not be condemned, their views were more about the past issues with them as oppose to current events.

Currently, the Roma are trying to gain back many of the rights that were lost to them and overturn laws that were made against them in the past. They have created many support groups and unions to help with their crusade. Groups such as the Association of Gypsies/Romani International, the European Roma Rights Centre and The Roma National Congress have put forth petitions, created treaties, amended laws and more to protect the Romani rights (Association). They have been working to not only help the Roma gain their rights back that were lost, but to also encourage those who still live in hiding for fear of being persecuted for their ethnic background to be proud of where they come from and, in essence, “show off” that pride. Cultural groups along with other organizations are working to enforce equality for all, especially for the Roma.

The Romani people are a group that have endured years of persecution and, until recently, chose to assimilate into other cultures. They are a people unique in their beliefs and unlike almost any other culture in the world today; rather, they are a blending of many different cultures because of all they have been through. By choosing to “blend in” with others, many of their customs and traditions became mixed up in the melting pot of cultural blending. Some choose to fight for their rights and gain more than they had before. The task is a difficult one, though and will continue to be hard as time goes on. The importance of keeping those customs alive is one crucial to society because, without multiple customs from different backgrounds, there would be no benefit to everyone living the same lifestyle.

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