The Romani

When one hears the word ‘Gypsy’, the mind usually wanders to an image of dirty men and women with sickly children in their arms, begging for money, asking to read palms, or of a cunning thief, deceiving a gullible public, promising fantastic feats while raiding the pockets of the unassuming. It’s a rarity for the common person to immediately recognize the hateful connotation the word ‘Gypsy’ has. But, in fact, ‘Gypsy’ is a slur on par with calling an African American a ‘nigger’. According to Dr. Ian Hancock, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, where he is the director of the program of Romani Studies and the Romani Archives and Documentation, and the Roma ambassador to the United Nations, the term ‘Gypsy’ was derived from the idea that most Romani or Roma people-the correct term for this group who descended from Indian immigrants-came from Egyptian descent. “At the first World Romani Congress, it was voted unanimously to reject all externally-applied labels for our people, including ‘Gypsy’, since it had such stereotypical and negative associations.” It also served as a cruel nickname, someone who would “gyp” you, when the myths first began to circulate that the Romani people were fortune telling swindlers and baby stealers, ready to rob you at a moment’s notice.

The misunderstandings of the Roma people are due to the legends surrounding them, their unique traditions, and their separatist attitude towards non-Romani people.

One of the main reasons that the Romani are often so misunderstood is because they receive so much negative attention. Most stories that circulate portray Roma as a group of peddlers who thrive on deception. While the United States has roughly enough Roma to fill the entire city of Chicago, they’re thankfully not given nearly as much unfavorable press time as other tribes in different countries. In Europe, the history of Roma oppression dates back centuries, and they are in present day still greeted with incredible prejudices. Stories have been cited about being
arrested without due cause, unfairly barred from public venues, or repeatedly stopped and questioned, even in places as seemingly tolerant as England. A MORI (Market and Opinion Research International, the second largest survey research organization in the United Kingdom) poll in 2003 stated that 35% of the population in the city of Bristol alone admitted that they had undisclosed prejudices against Romani people. Recently in BBC Scotland news, an article was published about a young Roma boy named Tommy, who said this.

“There’s a lot of misunderstanding about gypsy travelers. In Iraq, there might be some people who want to bomb the country, but that doesn’t mean they are all bad. That’s how it is with [us] too. One does a bad thing and then it seems like all of us get blamed for it.”

Tommy also said he usually spent isolated lunch periods on the sidelines at his school in Scotland, because most of the kids, with the knowledge that he was a member of a traveling Roma tribe, claimed they were scared they would “get germs” from him. Due to their nomadic lifestyle, there has also been a rather unhealthy stigma attached to them, many people believing them to be personally diseased, if not carriers. This also is fueled by the idea that most Roma tribes usually avoid hospitals and modern medicine unless absolutely necessary. While the Roma on a whole statistically have an unusually large number of people with heart disease, diabetes mellitus, and hypertension, no infectious diseases are more common among them than any other group of people. Most of the damaging myths come from the press. Surprisingly, 32% of the people interviewed through the MORI survey cited newspapers and 42% television as the main sources of this prejudice.

Another reason the Roma people are often misunderstood is due to their unique traditions, which are often perceived as “weird.” A lot of their culture centers on the idea of avoiding a state of *marime*, or impurity. Particularly their customs in regards to birth, marriage, death, and
healthcare are the most peculiar to an outsider. Because the act of menstruation is considered impure, the marime state is transferred to a woman who is impregnated. This state of impurity lasts for the duration of the pregnancy, and once the baby is announced, a strict set of instructions must be followed in order to preserve vujo, or purity. The wife immediately is isolated from the community and her husband, and instead lives with other women from the group, while the husband takes over all domestic duties. Due to her perceived impurity, the woman can only touch what are deemed “essential” objects-cooking utensils and the like-which then must be destroyed post-birth. Births also cannot take place in the home, because it could bring a state of marime upon the entire household. The father also cannot leave the house between sunset and sunrise, because of the belief that evil spirits, called tsinivari, might attack the infant during the night. Once the birth has taken place, the household is not considered vujo again until the baby’s baptism, which can be anywhere from several weeks to several months. After the baptism, the house is considered clean again. With marriages, it is often left up to the parents to find mates for their children, something seen in the 21st century by outsiders as oppressive and controlling. However, great care and consideration goes into choosing a husband or wife that they believe will not only be someone valued by their child, but also an asset to the new family. It’s common for the father of the groom to pay a dowry to the bride’s family-not as a means of purchasing her, but instead a way to compensate for the loss of a money-earner as well as child. Most children are married between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, the wedding ceremony specifically celebrating the creation of a new, pure household. Deaths are treated with incredible care, not only out of mourning for the loss of a love one, but also to make sure that the spirit and the family of the deceased remain vujo. A person cannot die in their own home, for it provokes bad spirits and the dreaded state of marime. In addition, all their personal items must either be given away or buried with them. When it comes to
healthcare, they usually request famous name physicians, and demand specific treatment that they’ve heard of, regardless if it’s actually the treatment they need. People often view this as reckless behavior, when in reality, it is simply their way of remaining pure, by trusting the lives they believe they cannot mend on their own to doctors and medicine that have been known to save thousands of others. Since many of their traditions appear outdated, people create their own opinions of the Roma lifestyle without allowing room for tolerance of cultural diversity. Add to that the poor image the Roma receive from the media and it fuels even more so the cloud of prejudice and misunderstanding that the Romani seem forced to live under.

The most important reason that the Roma have such a difficult time in today’s society is because they have a somewhat isolationist attitude towards outsiders. Their mistrust however, is not without good reason. Up until this point, there has not been a single country in the world which has fully embraced the Roma culture, and without such acceptance it would be difficult for any tribe of any race to fully embrace the outside world in return. The Roma have faced centuries of persecution, particularly in European countries. In 1589, the King of Denmark set forth a law that put to death any leaders of Roma tribes throughout the country. During that same century, the English ordered all Romani to either leave the country, or they faced imprisonment, because they were believed to be sorcerers, thieves, and cheats. Slavery of many Romani groups was common practice in Romania, until 1864. The unfortunate climax of hatred came between 1933 and 1945, when 1.5 million Roma were murdered by Hitler, during his purge of all non-Aryans in Europe. If any two of a person’s eight great-grandparents were Roma, Hitler stated that they had “too much Gypsy blood to be allowed to live”. To this day, there are still places in and around Europe that monitor or completely restrict Romani presence, with signs bearing the phrase “No ‘Travelers’” posted on their doors. It is because of all the negative feelings they have received from non-Roma
that the idea of marime, as a kind of self-defense mechanism, has extended itself to all outsiders. Due to this philosophy, they make a great effort to keep to themselves. Non-Roma in turn take this as an indication of poor breeding or bad manners, which seems to justify their poor treatment, claiming it’s okay because the Romani groups don’t care about being involved in the outside world.

Most of the developed countries in the world pride themselves on being respectful of minorities, giving a voice to the people who cannot speak for themselves. However, it is unfortunate that many groups were overlooked, for one reason or another, when these great civil rights revolutions took place. One such group was the Roma. With eight to ten million people worldwide, it’d be expected that they’d be given the same respect that most advanced governments attempt to give minorities today. Yet despite such advancements in society, the Romani remain some of the most neglected and misunderstood minorities in the world. Dr. Ian Hancock said it best when he simply stated this;

“We are here, and we are real.”