

CHOOSING THE RIGHT WORDS

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Roma, Manuch, Gitans, Gypsies, Traveling People.. and also Nomads, Romanichels.. Who are we talking about ? Which words should we use ?

The variety of names is a reflection of the diversity of these peoples, as well as the way in which they have been represented by the societies in which they have lived, according to historians, for more than 600 years.

National and European institutions have used administrative, political and ideological reasons, to assume that these social groups or communities (which are by the way extremely diverse) have identical behaviours or experience the same difficulties, as members of the same generic group (Roma, Tsigans).

Generic terms and institutional vocabulary

In the early 19th century experts began to group these diverse peoples, spread out over all of Europe, under the term Gypsy, believing in their common distant ancestry and origin from outside Europe. Slowly this terminology moved from political language to everyday usage.

Today it is usual to distinguish three major groupings of the roughly 10 million European Gypsies, according to the names they give themselves :

- The Roma (or Oriental Gypsies) : Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia, Kosovo...:85%
- The Sinti and Manuch (or Germanic Gypsies) : Eastern France, Germany, Austria, Northern Italy : 4%

- The Gitans and Iberian Kale (Iberian Gypsies) : Spain, Catalogna, Portugal : 10%

This classification is clearly very simplified and should not be allowed to disguise the very major differences within the major groups, and even within the same country.

In Europe

The historical and socio-cultural diversity of the so called Gypsies complicates any attempt to simplify the generic term that should or could be used.

From this point of view, the language used by the Council of Europe and other European institutions has changed much since the early seventies : « Gypsies and other nomads » (1969), « Populations of nomadic origin » (1981), « Gypsies » (1993), « Roma people (Gypsies) » (1997), « Roma/Gypsies » (2000), Roma/Gypsies & Travelling People », (2002), « Roma and Travellers » (2004).

The appearance of the generic term « Roma » instead of « Gypsy » has been linked to the growth of associations promoting the recognition of the specific history and identity of these groups (The 1st International Romani Union Conference was held in 1971). The same term is

used today to refer to all Gypsies (Roma = Gypsies) as well as a subset of the group (Roma = Oriental Gypsies).

In France

The generally accepted terminology is currently a source of confusion in France, which does not recognise minorities.

« Travelling People », an administrative term, designates all groups with a nomadic life style. This term covers different groups of Roms or Gypsies (Roms, Manuch, Gitans...) as well as other populations. French citizens thus classified, that were previously described as « Nomads » (from 1912 to 1969), are subject to specific laws aiming to ensure stronger supervision: the obligation to have travel documents approved by police service officials, the requirement to stay in certain designated sites (that aren't enough), some limits on the right to vote...

« Roma » or « Migrant Roma » are terms commonly used to designate groups of people, in a precarious situation, of Romanian, Bulgarian or Yugoslavian origin, which have left their home countries since the early 1990s.

These terms are inaccurate, as they suggest that all Roms are in a precarious situation and will probably remain so, which is not the case. Or that all Roms from the East are destined to become migrants, whereas only a small minority choose to do so.

Additionally, certain politicians and institutional leaders have not hesitated in associating the terms « Rom » and « delinquent ». Thus the word Rom has come to stigmatise even though it was initially intended to positively reinforce the identity of these groups, when it was chosen as a generic term, replacing the word Gypsy – which was generally considered as derogatory in eastern Europe.

We thus observe that the terms used can have a positive or negative connotation according to the historical or political context, which itself varies with time.

In western Europe, the term Gypsy is generally less charged than other terms (Gitan, Romanichel, Bohemian) and can even suggest enthusiasm when used in connection with music or dance, whereas it can be considered as an insult in eastern and central Europe.

So what to choose ?

The choice of course belongs above all to those concerned, who can refer to themselves using different words according to the situation and to whom they are speaking. Thus the same person can refer to himself as Manuch, Traveller, Gypsy, Gitan or even Rom.

We must however distinguish endonymous terms, those used by these groups to refer to themselves : Gitans, Kales, Sinti, Manuch, Roms, Tschura, Travellers, Yeniches etc... from exonymous terms, those used by outside populations : Gypsies, Bohemians, Romanichels, Rabouins, Nomads etc...

Additionally, we must not lose sight of the fact that an endonymous term may become exonymous when it is used to designate all of the groups: thus in France the Manuch or « Travellers of France », who generally reject the term Rom, and therefore prefer, even though it is generic, the word « Gypsy »..

At the European level, the expression Roms/Gypsies is well accepted. Jean-Pierre Liégeois, in a recent publication, has justified the use of the term Gypsy, as it is: « less tainted than others with negative connotations and as the communities themselves have no other overall term to refer to themselves and that they use it themselves on the political level ».

Finally we should be careful in the choice of terms and to logic they imply. As no term is neutral. To say that a person « is a Rom » or « is a Gypsy » is to categorise them in a way that gives no information as to the individual's personal or family situation, and that gives no indication as to what course of action is therefore appropriate. Unless of course we wish to transform categorisation to discrimination.

de Michèle Mézard,
with the contribution of Olivier Legros and Martin Olivera.

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