

**Distr.  
RESTRICTED**

**E/CN.4/Sub.2/AC.5/2003/WP.17  
5 May 2003**

**ENGLISH ONLY**

**COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS  
Sub-Commission on Promotion and  
Protection of Human Rights  
Working Group on Minorities  
Ninth session  
12-16 May 2003**

**THE ROM IN THE AMERICAS**

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Working Group or the United Nations

## THE ROM <sup>1</sup>IN THE AMERICAS

### ROMANI HISTORY IN THE AMERICAS:

#### The Americas as a whole. Similarities.

Roma resistance has been a particularly strong feature because our nomadic ancestors have had contact with so many cultures along their migratory paths.

The search for a better life has inevitably brought about many changes: “O lungo drom le Romengo” – the long road of the Rom – is an “extraordinary record in view of the overwhelming number of cultures reported to disappear under exposure to forceful persuasion. (*Gypsies in the city –culture patterns and survival* – by Rena C. Gropper 1975).

Today the Rom do exist, we do speak our own language and do have our particular traditions. Currently we inhabit Europe, the Americas, Australia, Africa and some parts of Asia.

From the above, the Rom could be said to be one example, amongst others, of separated societies: Human societies which for many centuries manage to remain apart from a larger mainstream society, as a general rule helped by geographical isolation. In the case of the Rom however, we are dealing with a culture which is spread all over the world, and which has coexisted and interacted with larger surrounding societies for more than one thousand years (since the Romani people left India), avoiding assimilation.

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<sup>1</sup> See Hancock, Ian; *We Are The Romani People*, University of Hertfordshire Press, Hatfield, 2002, preliminary words by Jorge M. Fernández Bernal.

Additional preliminary words – “Growing up as a Rom has been a difficult task, the racism, hatred, violence, prejudices and discrimination that we face in daily life in some of the countries of this beautiful planet where we live, don’t allow us in many cases to find the place for a good life that all human beings deserve.

I grew up in Argentina, South America, facing discrimination and prejudices from others too, mainly at school, because of the language and all the false ideas the non-Romanies had developed about our people. My country and its inhabitants shared the same prejudices as their ancestors in Europe who had conquered these lands where I live, and our elders who came from Russia, Greece or Serbia, who were already familiar with these, taught us that interaction with outsiders was not so easy and recommendable at all, and for that reason we learnt how to hide our origins, and to seek invisibility, stating that we were of Greek or Italian descent, and saying that our language was Ancient Greek, etc., etc., Even though at the same time we were proud of what we are –Rom- we many times felt a fear of openly showing our identity, origin and culture, mostly in dealings with institutions and public powers. In the early 1980s I was encouraged by many people to continue working on our fairytales, language, and later in politics and in seeking our destiny, something I had begun strongly and openly in 1982/1983, and even before this, timidly when I was a teenager who loved his own culture but who was somehow afraid of the outsider’s world.”

For many centuries, the language spoken by the Rom was considered a simple jargon used only to communicate secretly in front of others. Even nowadays in the Americas, many people still think of the Romani language as something less than a formal language.

This is despite the fact that its Indian origin has been determined – albeit by accident – since the turn of the XVIIIth century. Stephan Valyi, a Hungarian theology student at the University of Leiden in Holland, noticed that three exchange students who were with him from Malabar, India, spoke a similar language to that of the Rom who lived in Győr, his own town. From this the Indian origin of the Romani people was inferred and thus, the formal analysis and research of the language and culture of the Rom by some European scholars began.

The arrival of the first Rom to the Americas was really similar to their original exodus from India and subsequent nomadism in Europe: these always were the consequence of racist harassment and systematic persecutions, which in some cases ended up with banishment orders, to be carried out in the American lands. By the turn of the XVIth Century there were numerous cases of deportations of Rom (Kalon) from Portugal to the colonies in America. Spain tried similarly to get rid of its Romani population, when assimilation was resisted they were sent to Africa or to America:

*An edict in 1528 once again confirms the order of banishment for all those who didn't have known professions, and the Rom were threatened with the galleys if they don't abandon their nomadic life.*

*Philip IV of Spain, with a 1633 edict forbids the Rom to live in communities, to speak their own language, to dress according to their usage and customs and to believe and practice their traditions, under penalty of three years' banishment.*

*Charles II in 1695, clearly forbids the Rom to have their own traditional professions, like smithing and the forging of metals, to keep horses and to abandon their villages under threat of being conducted to the galleys for three years.*

### **Romani groups in the Americas from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego**

The Romani groups present in the Americas arrived here from many European countries since the early times of the conquest. Spanish Rom arrived in the Caribbean in 1539. It is additionally possible that, on Christopher Columbus' third voyage to that place in 1498, he had brought with him Antón, Catalina, Macías and María of Egypt, who, it seems, were Spanish Kalé (Rom) mentioned on the ship's log, who could therefore be the first Rom to step on the American continent.

The presence of Romani groups, brought to the Americas since the very early days of colonization, is undeniable. Deportations to the new colonies brought Portuguese Kalons to Brazil and Spanish Kalé to the countries conquered by the Spaniards. Later though and due mostly to excessive persecutions in Europe, many families themselves decided to venture into the new territories and embark in the direction of the New World even if

persecution was already known there too. For instance, some years after the conquest, the Indian Legislation ordered the capture and subsequent deportation of all the itinerant groups discovered within the continent.

Many years later, at the end of the XIXth, and the beginning of the XXth Century, came the time of voluntary immigration of other European Romani groups, in search of new horizons, spreading out all over the countries of this continent. Those groups were: the *Kalderasha* (from Russia, Sweden, France, Serbia and Moldavia), the *Machwaya* (from Serbia), the *Lovaria* (from Hungary, Germany, Russia), the *Rom Xoraxane* (mainly from Serbia, becoming Christians once in the New World upon arriving in the 1900s), the *Boyash* (from Rumania, Serbia), the *Sinti*, and once again, but this time voluntarily, the Spanish and Portuguese Kalé who had never stopped arriving. In recent times, during the 1990s, escaping from communism but especially, the poverty and the racism of the new regimes of Eastern Europe and wars, have arrived many Rumanian, Serbian, Bulgarian Rom and so on.

It is also important to note that most of the groups existing in the Americas are related among themselves by kindred or origin, and also due the permanent contact they have nowadays, which is also extended to other similar groups, e.g.: between *Kalderasha* and *Machwaya*, *Lovaria* and *Kalderasha*, *Kalderasha* and *Xoraxane*, *Kalderasha* and *Boyasha*, and so on. The Spanish and Portuguese Kalé only maintain contact within their own groups.

It is also worth mentioning that, although it exists, discrimination in the Americas cannot realistically be compared with that which our people have suffered along our history, particularly in the middle of the XXth century with the Nazi Holocaust. The entrance of the Rrom in Europe and the stereotypes created by Europeans faced with an unknown people resulted in all the prejudices and persecutions that have faced the Rom until today in most of the countries of the world.

Since then no official census has been undertaken in any country of the Americas as far as we know. These are some of the figures our associations manage in South America. There are 8.000 Rom living in Colombia, from 800.000 to 1.000.000 in Brazil, 15.000/20.000 in Chile, 300.000 in Argentina, 5.000 in Ecuador, around 5.000 in Uruguay, as well as in other countries from where we don't have the exact numbers.

Countries such as Mexico would deserve a chapter apart, because the number of Rom existing there is still a real mystery. What we know is that there one can find all the Romani groups existing in Europe, but as in other countries of this continent no census has been taken to date. SKOKRA and other Romani organizations, in consultation with other local organizations thinks that one of the largest Romani populations probably exists there, where one can find Spanish Kalé, *Boyasha*, *Machwaya*, *Lovaria* and *Kalderasha* among others.



(Pierre Verger, Mexico City 1936)<sup>2</sup>

The USA also has Rom from everywhere, and its Romani population has been estimated by SKOKRA and the Romani Union at around 1.000.000 persons. We have no precise, reliable figures for Canada, or for many countries in Central and South America, but the entire population in the Americas is around 4.000.000 (sources, UNESCO, RNC, Romani Union, SKOKRA and federated Organizations).

As mentioned above, most of the Romani groups in the Americas maintain permanent contacts among themselves, because of that, there are not significant changes in the

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<sup>2</sup> Hopkinson, Amanda (ed. + trans); *A Hidden View, Images of Bahia, Brazil*.m, Frontline States , Hertfordshire, 1994.

Romani traditions of the different countries of the region, except for the influence of the major local languages spoken in the continent, mostly Portuguese and Spanish in the South and English in the North. Besides, mutual influences are strong and even reinforced nowadays by the International Romani Pentecostal church, and also due to constant trips made by many Romani families all along the continent. For the latter reason, within the same family the father can be an Argentine citizen, the mother a Brazilian, and the kids Argentineans, Uruguayans, Mexicans, North-Americans or even Europeans.

Contacts are also maintained with many European countries, including Germany, Spain, Sweden and France. Aside from others where the Latin-American Rom have relatives and travel often, this allows the Romani people to keep the language and culture alive through permanent contacts with relatives abroad. Besides, Romani people are a very mobile people. When this permanent movement is forbidden by differing national policies, Romani culture starts to suffer the consequences. Contact among all the groups in the different countries is felt to be vital for the continuity of Romani traditions, because this way new economic alliances, marriages and so on can be arranged.

## **COUNTRIES**

### **THE SITUATION OF ROMANI PEOPLE IN ARGENTINA**

Argentina is a country which has been conquered and largely inhabited by people of European background, and which has several minorities living in its territory; Arabs, Jews, Armenians, Irish, Roma, etc., without mentioning national minorities such as descendants of the original inhabitants of the country (at 1 percent or less, there are no real figures about these.), and the marginalized mestizos (half white-half Indian), who according to the statistics make up approximately 10-12 percent of the entire population of the country, but whose very existence is often denied.

The truth however, is that this country has never had a real policy regarding the preservation and recognition of its minority languages and culture, neither favorable nor unfavorable, but in the country minorities' schools flourish everywhere, fighting against the lack of a real program by the government to keep their mother tongues and cultures alive: English, Armenian, German, Jewish, Japanese Schools, etc.

The resident Roma in Argentina are approximately 300.000 persons, belonging to the following groups: Greek, Moldavian and Russian Kalderash, some Lovari families and some Chilean Xoraxane Roma (all these groups speak Romani, the last group), Argentinean and Spanish Kalé (both groups came from Spain in different times and speak only Spanish) and Boyash who came from Serbia and Rumania and speak only Rumanian among themselves.

### **Argentina: Groups:**

The *Greek* Kalderash arrived between 1880-1890. They were the first among the Kalderash Rom to do so. This group also includes some Serbian Kalderash. At their arrival all of them were nomads and used to sell horses and agricultural tools, and worked as coppersmiths. In the 30s they started to move to the big cities and discovered new opportunities in car trading. This is what they mainly deal in today.

The Romany language is preserved within this group, despite the introduction of some Spanish loanwords.

Currently, these Rom are settled in the major cities of Argentina. At the beginning of their arrival they were Orthodox, later becoming Catholic, and have in the last few years been participating in the powerful Evangelical movement, which was born in France in 1961, with its own pastors and churches.

Kalderash Rom culture is to a large extent preserved thanks to the role played by women within and outside the Romani community. Their traditional colorful way of dressing is seen as a sign of their pride and a mark of their self-esteem as Romani women. There are no temptations towards current extravagant fashions.

Greek Kalderash are economically well inserted in society. For instance, many of them exhibit 50 or 60 vehicles for sale at a time in their own shops. These Rom have established a working network among themselves all over the country. One can buy a car from a Greek Kalderash in the South of Argentina and later pay for it to another one (relative or partner of the seller) in the capital, 3.000 km. from the place where the vehicle was first bought.

The arrival of *Moldavian* Kalderash occurred between 1900 and the 1920s. As Kalderash they identify with the same cultural patterns and traditions, and male and female roles within the community. Although, this group arrived later than the above-mentioned one, they do not take as much care of the language. Families preserve Romanes, but speak much more in Spanish or in a mixture of both languages, because they do not see the necessity of using it except in social gatherings.

Economy: Part of them work as independent traders with new and second-hand cars, with metals, and repairing hydraulic machinery, etc. But most of them work for non-Rom in many kinds of professions: engineers, employees, mechanics, etc.

*Russian* Kalderash: Part of them came at the beginning of the century and another wave later around the mid-20s. Many of them arrived from Russia after a certain stay in countries like Sweden and France; and even now have many relatives abroad with whom they are in contact. The cultural aspects and traditions are similar to the other Kalderash here. Though this is the smallest group, it is considered the most prestigious one among the Kalderash here. They preserve the language, and contribute to its conservation among

all the groups. It is these who started the local Evangelical movement among the Rom here in the '60s, at the moment of its beginnings in France.

Following Kalderash custom, their incomes come from car-selling, metalworking and other independent businesses.

An important role within this community is played by the Romani Kris (the Romani Court). This specific body operates strongly among the entire Kalderash Rom. The Romani Kris and the Evangelical church are the most respected institutions among all the Kalderash clans.

Generally, the Kalderash in this country are considered to be wealthy people, even though in many cases this is not truth, and those who do business with them see them as good and trustworthy businessmen; but there is a small percentage of the local population which displays suspicion, prejudice and distrust towards the Romani community.

Although each group has its own distinct Romani identity, there are strong ties between the various groups. Being Kalderash, they have something very important in common. Marriages between different Kalderash groups and now with other Romani groups is absolutely normal. Many times the Kalderash Romani group is considered the most prestigious one.

*Boyash*: They started to immigrate at the end of the last century from Rumania and Serbia. Certain cultural aspects, such as Romani self-identity, type of women's clothing, etc. are the same as those of the Kalderash. But they do not follow the "marime" rules nowadays (concepts of purity and impurity which regulate the life of many Romani groups throughout the world. Among them it is called *spurcat*). They are not so strict regarding masculine and feminine roles and relationships within the group.

Economically, they have the lowest status among the Romani groups in Argentina. Most of them are taxi or bus drivers, truckers, photographers, etc. But their biggest difference with the Kalderash group apart from the economical one is the language. They speak Rumanian (nowadays almost forgotten). They have substituted it completely with Spanish. Their marriages with non-Roma are more frequent.

Currently, in Argentina, something like 5% of the Rom live a semi-nomadic life. Among the Boyash this stems from financial problems, while among the Greek Kalderash, it is mainly because of the business they do at harvest time, when they sell trucks, tractors and other agricultural machinery, over a period lasting only a number of weeks.

As a matter of fact, in the 50s the nomadic life was forbidden through a law by General Perón and the Rom in Argentina were forced to settle.



*Spanish Kalé*. The two subgroups here are known as:

a) *Argentineans*

b) *Spaniards*

Both of the subgroups have Spanish background. The subdivision comes from the time of each's arrival in Argentina.

a) *Argentineans* reached the country at the end of the last century, and some even before this. Many say that they have arrived at the time of the conquest, but there is not available record of that. They are, however, the first Rom, Spanish and non-Spanish, to have arrived and settled here.

Their women use long colorful skirts, which are distinct from those of Kalderash women.

*Argentinean Kalé* run small construction businesses where they employ Gadjé. Another kind of income is from bulk selling. They practice the Catholic religion. Among them they speak mostly Spanish with an Argentinean accent, but they know the Kalé dialect even better than those Roma Kalé who live in Spain. They have preserved flamenco as their Romani music.

b) *Spaniards* came from Spain in the 60s but they travel constantly between Spain and Argentina. Though they have the same background as the *Argentinean Kalé* there is no mutual interaction between the two subgroups.

The language they speak is Spanish with the same accent as in Spain. There is no acceptance of marriages either with Rom of other groups or with non-Rom.

They are good traders of textile products. Some of them have small textile factories. They also have good flamenco musicians. Their women dress in a fashionable way but are more conservative in some aspects. They put aside the trousers, and the skirts have to reach a little bit beyond their knees.

These Kalé reside in the downtown area of Buenos Aires, which in the past was inhabited by Spanish revolutionaries who had fought in the Spanish Civil War.

In the last five or six years a big crowd of Rumanian Rom has arrived. They do not practice any kind of profession – they beg on the streets. They claim to have been humiliated and treated as second class people in Rumania during all the years of oppression, and especially in the last years of changes and intolerance extended as in the majority of the Eastern European countries.

While they are begging, these Rumanian Rom identify themselves as Rumanians in front of the Gadjé, mainly to avoid ongoing racial problems. As a consequence, representatives

of the local mass-media visited the Rumanian Embassy in Buenos Aires for more information. The answer of the Embassy was that those people are not Rumanians – that they are Gypsies.

The local Rom demonstrate compassion in response to the new wave of Rumanian Rom, but there is no acceptance of the everyday begging. Begging is antithetic to the conception of work that Argentinean and Kalderash Rom have in general. Of the locals, it is only among some Boyash women that one can see this.

The Rom here fight daily to integrate within wider Argentinean society, whilst preserving the culture, traditions and Romani language in the face of rejection by the Gadje.

As already mentioned, Argentina is a country with a strong presence of Jewish, Armenian and Arab communities which differ regarding other Argentines of Spanish or Italian descent amongst others things, with their traditionalism. Those communities always have been an example of preserving cultural identity. And in that sense the Rom community is no exception. Awareness of their own Romani background and heritage increases their chances of a better position within civil society. Most of all, self-esteem as Rom has to determine Romani nature.

### **Romani children at school: integration, rejection and impact on the Romani language and culture.**

The educational situation of Romani children, both in Argentina and in other parts of America, is quite atypical compared to the rest of the world; so this presentation will attempt to explain some of the reasons for the difference.

For those who have access to it, education in itself opens many possibilities everywhere. Practically all children in Argentina attend school. For their parents it has been an obligation since the 3rd. quarter of the last century; if they did not send them they had to pay a fine, and from now on according to a new project in the Senate they could be imprisoned for that fault: Argentinean law establishes that this as a parental responsibility.

From the very beginning, Rom avoided this duty, because of the fact that the elders among them considered that the measure could destroy the equilibrium of the group, through the influence of an alien group (the Gadje) on the Romani culture, (One can observe this attitude as well among many groups all over the world, as, e.g.: The Amish in the U.S., a Mennonite group, whose children don't attend school far beyond the eighth grade). For Rom the important things to learn were: to write, read and mathematics, but not to take the whole school system as a means of constructing the future, because Romani tradition foresees it, and besides, a strange fear toward an alien culture persisted above everything.

At the turn of the last century, and up to the '20s, life in the country was very hard: the vast majority of the inhabitants were European immigrants running away from poverty, wars, persecutions, etc., and everybody wanted to make a new life in Argentina, to improve their existence and their own children's.

Rom, since they arrived here, had chosen continuity with their lives in Europe: they would travel through the vast native plains, selling goods, horses and agricultural tools to the farmers, ranchers and gauchos (Argentina's cowboys), and the question of education, practically remained within the group.

But even then, principally among the men, Rom have always been skillful at reading and writing, often learning with non-Romani friends, or kind-hearted people who visited the encampments (the old men and some old women also knew how to read in Russian), but at that time, as with many other immigrants, most families kept their children from going to school, because of the needs faced by households, which were really great, though smaller than in Europe. For that reason, parents required the help of their entire family to enhance the possibilities of making a living in the country of their choice.

In the late '20s and early '30s Romani clans moved to the cities, because they saw a huge possibility of progress in those places. The principal contributing factor being that the elders felt that their people at the beginning had been treated 'as Europeans' without any kind of discrimination, since so many of the surrounding groups were like themselves seeking a new life in the new country.

When in the '40s General Perón legally forced the Rom to settle; after initially being seen by them as the destruction of the Romani way of life, with the passage of time it proved a blessing, because the Rom started to see the benefits of having one's own place to live. At the beginning there had been a rejection against all things that came from the Gadjó world, but school was not possible to reject because of the legal consequences for the parents.

It was little by little that Romani children started to be sent to the schools, mainly from the '40s 'til today, like a flow that began timidly, through fear of the authorities, and which is now incessant. Certainly, as time went by, Rom understood the opportunity of acquiring a new tool to reinforce their culture without suffering a whole acculturation, or something even worse, such as being wiped away from the surface of this planet as a community.

Research carried out on this among many families suggests, that from the very beginning, integration into the class was a reality: at school, boys met with the baker's son, whose parents were Italian, with the factory worker's son, whose father was Polish and the mother Spanish, and with other examples like these for instance; so, in that way it was not so hard for the Rom at that time to integrate into school.

Despite that, the first generations that formally attended school, brought home with them a degree of accurate information about the outside world, its history, its formal and informal language, its traditions; that way they saw not only the differences but also similarities.

But mutual knowledge in itself brought many times a certain negative impact upon the Romani families and groups, for example, the role assigned to Romani women has always been that of fortune-tellers, and to a lesser degree saleswomen; offering products made by their husbands; and this contributed a lot to the household's economy, but in this new life in the cities, and under the pressure and influence from school and neighborhood, their maternal and housewife roles became far more pronounced, just as the working attitude of the Romani men increasingly approximated that of the Gadjé, despite work always having been shared between women and men within the Romani world. The change of the traditional roles nowadays are negatively affecting the Romani cultural patterns and the economical status of the families, being that the women's affairs were considered of vital importance for the surviving of the group and nowadays we are in a period of transition by copying a cultural Gadjo behavior of the '40's when at the same time these roles would like to be changed within the gadjo world.

Rejection of school is more marked among Romani-speaking Roma, like the Kalderash, some Lovari families, the Xoraxane Roma and some recently arrived Rumanian Roma who want to base themselves upon their own traditions, fairytales, songs, etc. The preservation of the language and culture, and the complexity of Romani Society's mechanisms of survival (*kumpania, vitsas, natsia, kris, marimé, etc.*) added to good economical possibilities Roma encountered upon their arrival in this country, made a rejection of formal education something common among almost all members of these groups, quite the opposite of the Brazilian case.

What mostly provokes rejection of school is the fear of loosing traditions and language. As many parents realize these things happen among new generations despite removing them from school as children. The usefulness of school in preserving language also counts: many parents have observed how children who attended school even improved their use of the Romani language, paying more –not less- attention to it and Romani traditions.

As explained above, the expectations Romani people had and largely still have regarding school are quite utilitarian, so most Romani parents decide to send their children to school only until they finish primary school. After that, in case of boys, they enter the family business, while women try to continue their mothers' traditions, selling, fortune telling, housekeeping, etc. depending on the group. But little by little Romani parents have realized that the future of their children depends upon the family business, so that school is increasingly seen as a real tool to guarantee the future of their business and family.

Not until recent times, and due to the International Romani church, was it that Romani Pastors and parents expressed the need for the creation of a Romani weekend school, to complement the normal schooling boys and girls receive during the week, by emphasising maintaining language, traditions and the development of necessary skills to manage the future, such as computer science, and not a carrier, at least in Argentina. This school could use the Romani literature, evangelical texts and tapes that Romani people and the churches produce all over the world.

Schooling in many individuals has also encouraged Romani awareness of their own identity, consolidating traditions, e.g.: “marimé”, respect, etc. within the group<sup>3</sup>: wearing of traditional female clothes by the women, increased attention paid to the Romani language, due to in-depth learning of Spanish at school, through which, despite the consequent impact on vocabulary, Romani language has gained strength.

It should be added that our people in Argentina are very much aware of the importance of school for children despite the fear to it, for the future development of life, and for fighting against prejudices and discrimination. For this reason, the vast majority of Romani boys, at least, are completing primary school, now even encouraged by their parents; and a small minority are finishing secondary school, while a further number are pursuing their studies at the university level. The relevance of education to our community is undeniable, and we must agree with those who say that paying this price to reach the 21st. century is really worthwhile.

### **Housing and Economy**

Since their arrival in Argentina, Romani people have developed an independent economy, and some of their professions now include: the repairing of hydraulic machinery, metalworking for industry, selling and buying of old and new cars and agricultural machinery, and general retail, etc., Good economic possibilities brought with themselves a better life for the Romani population since its arrival from Europe 100 years ago or more.

Most Romani people, among almost all the groups existing here now practice the evangelical religion.

Romani people live in the main big cities all over the country, between middle-class neighborhoods, though Romani houses can be found in most neighborhoods in the cities. Among the Kalderash, these tend to be bigger than the Argentinean average: two-three-floor houses with porch, garage and a big garden in the back, no iron bars on the front entrance, etc.. Relationships with neighbors are generally good, but there is a kind of hidden discrimination against Rom and Jews, less so against Arabian descendants in an increasing minority of the Argentinean people, which can be shown in dealing an economical affair or in some public places, despite the anti-discrimination law, but which almost always is hidden, - the house was sold, - there is no place at the restaurant, excuse me and rarely an insult are the common discriminatory expressions. In a poll which was made here our people appeared as the most discriminated alongside the mestizos.

### **The current political situation in the country.**

Argentina in the ‘60s was considered a large middle class country with a good future, but the political situation which followed worsened life in the country, and brought with it

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<sup>3</sup> Despite eliminating or changing many of these: the duration of parties, or some protocols that are now closer to non-Romani ones.

impoverishment, insecurity, an increasing in criminality and discrimination, mainly against poor people, (the vast majority being mestizos of Indian and white blood), bringing all Argentineans to the crisis which we are facing today. Romani people never participated in the country's political affairs, except on rare occasions, but this is seen as something really strange to the Rom and is rejected mostly by almost all the elders of the community for not being part of the Rromaniya (the Romany culture, beliefs and way of living).

The last 4 years of crisis have affected the lives of the majority of the inhabitants of the country, many Jewish, Arabian, Italian, Spanish, English descendants, Rom, and so on have left the country in search of better opportunities. Romani people have moved to the States, Spain or France, where many have relatives.

The last days of the crisis of the former president de la Rúa, until the day of his resignation on the 20th December 2001, a big fear entered the mind of the Argentineans and the memory of those who lived during the military government, especially, as always, the poor and marginalized people, mostly the half Indian-half white had to pay the price of the country's erroneous leadership, and mistakes in economic policies.

## **THE ROM OF BRAZIL**

There is much ignorance about South America; and one fact little known among many people is that Brazil is full of Rom. The Romani presence in Brazil can be traced back to the XVIIth century at the time of the banishment of Portuguese Kalons to the Colonies.

Today the figure of Romani people from this country of 8.512.000 km<sup>2</sup> is between 800.000 and 1.000.000 souls. According to UNESCO data, in 1991 the Romani population of Latin America was approximately of 1.500.000 individuals, taking into account that many Rom deny their origin and that any real census has been made the numbers our organizations manage are closer to the reality than that. We also have to consider that, given the scarce or nonexistent knowledge that most Brazilians have of Romani traditions and cultural traits, the importance of existing studies and publications on the culture of our people is a precious thing. But the current bibliography on Brazilian Rom is scarce in the country, and much dispersed through time.

Local racist attitudes toward the Rom are among the most ignorant in history. The desire to conceal their Romani origin I have frequently noticed elsewhere, and it is probably a relic of days of persecution. Fortunately, in most civilized countries today the Rom can count equal rights with others. The Rom must be seen as a bearer of values, of a thousand years of tradition. Only in this way can true coexistence with the Gadjé be achieved. That is why international Romani organizations are needed; mostly to reaffirm Romani ethnicity and to unite the different groups dispersed all over the world.

### The social situation of the Rom in Brazil

In accordance with Historical records, the Rom started to arrive in Brazil in the XVIth century. The earliest records of their *presence* in Brasil date to 1591<sup>4</sup>, though we have deportation orders from 1561 and 1574. At that time Brazil was a Portuguese colony in need of colonisers, and King Sebastião of Portugal ordered the Rom to be banished to this new land, discovered the 22 April 1500 by the Portuguese navigator Alvares Cabral. Subsequently the law was enforced with much greater vigour, particularly during the reign of King João V.

Brazil has strong African and native cultural influences, the africans having been brought there as slaves, and both groups having old and noted mystical traditions which influence Brazilians regardless of their origin. And it is precisely from this mystical point of view, so widespread among Brazilian people, that the Rrom are normally perceived.

As in other South-American countries, there is a huge lack of interest on the part of Brazilian authorities, not only regarding the Rom, but generally towards all ethnic minorities.

For example in Brazilian Portuguese-language dictionaries when they define the word Rom (*cigano*) they routinely do so pejoratively.

*Revisamos para este ensaio dicionários de português brasileiro, achando abundantes 'definições' de Cigano e palavras derivadas Cigan[e]ar/ Ciganagem/ Ciganice) que essencialmente refletem preconceitos crus<sup>5</sup>. Alguns exemplos:*

*“Cigano[... ]lajota, [...] Pl. Povo errante e miserável, de procedência indiana[...] empregando se agora em enganar vendedores ou compradores de gado nas feiras[...].<sup>6</sup>” ; “[...]sujeito que faz negócios de compra e venda de animais, porém sempre de má fé<sup>7</sup>”; “Sin. astuto, velhaco, trapaceiro<sup>8</sup> ” “esperto, vivo<sup>9</sup>”[...]*

The Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics does not collect specific demographic data about the Rom, including them in the category denominated “Others”. This is not

<sup>4</sup> Data of the Saint Inquisition , where three Romani women are mentioned as deported to Brazil even earlier.

<sup>5</sup> Fato comum, não universal: da Cunha (1982) por exemplo, demonstra possível informar, não nutrindo, neste caso, estes preconceitos. O *Dicionário Brasileiro de Insultos* (Aranha, Altair J.,2002) prescinde da palavra “Cigano”!

<sup>6</sup> Silva 1980.

<sup>7</sup> Entre 1970 e 1998, ‘Melhoramentos’ não melhorou essa definição.

<sup>8</sup> Tampouco mudou esta, entre edições de 1946 (Porto Alegre) e 2001 (São Paulo) no Francisco Fernandes.

<sup>9</sup> Aurélio, 1999.

helped by the fact that most of the Romani population, when asked about their nationality, tend to answer that they are Brazilians or European immigrants, maybe because of distrust and concern with potential future problems.

Rom can be found everywhere in this country, in the main cities as Belo Horizonte, Salvador, Goiania, Curitiba, Vitoria, Porto Alegre, Sao Paulo, Campinas, Rio, Salvador, as well as in many parts of the countryside.

### **The Romani groups:**

#### *Nomadic Kalons:*

The first to arrive in Brazil, deported by the Portuguese from the XVIth century onwards. It has also been documented that in 1808, some Portuguese Rom (Kalons) entertained the Portuguese Royal Court on the occasion of its establishment in Rio de Janeiro and maintained a further degree of familiarity with them.

Life is very hard for nomads; the hygiene conditions in which they live often are highly inadequate; there are periods of heavy rain to contend with, they also have many difficulties in finding new places to set up a camp, their children are not vaccinated and may be malnourished, they are exposed to all kinds of diseases, there are no municipal, state, or federal laws in their favor, and, above all, they face strong prejudice from the surrounding society -maybe much more than other already settled Rom.

Like other Rom, nomadic Kalons travel mostly for reasons of economic survival. For that reason they participate in the various Brazilian festivals, especially those of a religious nature, and the summer tourist season when they head for the seaside resorts where the men practice small-scale craftwork and the women tell fortunes. The women can also be seen in the big cities of the country telling fortunes on the street.

Despite the specific and historic inclusion of nomadic and sedentary Roma [Ciganos] in late president Fernando Henrique Cardoso's 2002 *National Human Rights Programme*, there are as yet no legal guidelines for the treatment of nomadic Kalons or other nomadic groups. They continue to frequently be arrested for going around the city late at night, for fortune-telling or for being illegally camped.

Their immediate needs are for access to identity documents, schooling, birth certificates, the right to vote, and drivers' licenses.

#### *Sedentary Kalons:*

There are very few of these. Some live in Minas Gerais and others in São Paulo and in Salvador, but the largest group is to be found in the Catumbi quarter of Rio de Janeiro, where today some practice traditional professions while others have a University degree



and work in several independent professions; as lawyers, doctors, etc. Many, however are illiterate, especially among the women, who are however capable of improvising extraordinary old songs which they sing at parties. The men are excellent musicians, following a tradition they brought from Portugal similar to *fado*. They are also good performers of flamenco. Other sedentary Kalons deal in gold jewellery and precious stones, carpets, cars, and so on, and live in excellent economic conditions.

*Rom:*

They have been in Brazil since the turn of the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth century and many came during the second world war and after this; Italian Kalderash in the '60s and some German Lovari families after and before the war, these last fleeing the Nazi persecution.

Generally speaking, their social-economic conditions are good. This is particularly true for the Kalderash, who regard themselves as the élite group embodying Gypsy tradition. Their illiteracy rate is high in some families, because they take their children out of school as soon as they have learned basic reading, writing and some mathematics, the general reason being: so they won't be *poisoned by the Gadjé*. The truth is that they fear that at school their children will lose -or begin to feel ashamed of- their traditions, which non-Rom consider 'primitive'. Over the last few decades, however, many of them have gone on to university, adding lawyers, social workers, teachers, anthropologists and doctors to the community.

They may be either sedentary (Rrom foroske) or semi-nomadic (Rrom dromeske). The latter own beautiful houses, but most of them keep a tent on the grounds, where they live for most part of the time, entertain guests, and with which they even travel. The tent will have an oven, a refrigerator, television and radio.

**Machwaya:**

Originally from the city of Macva (Serbia), whence their name, they are really closed to the Kalderash and have no relatives in Europe. The two main countries where they can be found are Brazil and the USA. In this last country theirs is considered the most prestigious group. In Brazil, along with the Kalderash they are considered the most important.

The Machwaya are expert traders in new and old cars and other occupations. They are really wealthy and have among them many university professionals like lawyers, engineers and so on. Many of them, because of prejudices, hide their Romani origin; they intermarry with Kalderash and Xoraxane.

**Xoraxane:**

This group is like that from Chile and it is probable that at the time of their arrival in the Americas 100 years ago they were Muslims. They are very assimilated to the Kalderash in traditions and way of living, but they continue speaking their own Romani dialect. They also intermarry with Kalderash and Machwaya. Many of them are still nomadic, but others possess their own houses in many of the big cities of the country. Some Xoraxane families have even continued coming during then Yugoslavia's communist period; many of them arriving in the '60s and even in the '70s from that region.

*Boyash:*

The Boyash are Rom of Rumanian and Serbian origin who speak among them an old dialect of the Rumanian language, they work mainly as animal trainers and sell all kind of goods, other families own circuses and travel all over Brazil, (it seems to be that these Rom were who brought this tradition to the country), they are in contact with their relatives in other countries. Their living standards are lower than those of the Kalderash, Xoraxane and Machwaya, but higher than those of the Portuguese Kalons. There are still among them some families which continue their nomadic life; with an unofficial camping site in São Paulo they also intermarry with Xoraxane, Machwaya and Kalderash, but they are considered of lower status because they don't speak Romanes.

**Awareness:**

Gypsies are beginning to develop an awareness of themselves as a growing population group, and no longer accept the disintegration of their culture through the indifference of the authorities. They want to play a more active role in Brazilian society, they want the right to live with dignity and to see their culture respected by Gadjé. They want to go to school without being humiliated. They want to be able to get work without having to hide their identity and the Nomads want to exercise their right to travel freely through the country.

The inclusion of the group "Ciganos" in the *Programa Nacional de Direitos Humanos* in 2002 was the result of campaigning conducted by some Romani people (Claudio Iovanovitch and his União Romani do Brasil/Associação pela preservação da cultura Cigana de Curitiba)<sup>10</sup>

**Discrimination:**

In general, regional and local policies towards Gypsies in Brazil are characterized by force and coercion. This, frequently enforced by both civil and military police over the past twenty years at least, has resulted in gradual growth of subtly enforced sedentarism, and sometimes violent expulsions, particularly among the Kalons and Kalderash. Many

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<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Csergo, Personal Communication.

times the more wealthy Kalderash families buy a terrain where they can live as if they were in a free Romani encampment, but this doesn't avoid problems with the local police.

Brazil, as many countries in the region, is seeing a subtle resurgence of Neo-Nazism, which can add-to and worsen the collective subconscious image many Brazilian citizens have of the Rom. Such is the negative image they paint of our people: vagabondage, thievery, scams in connection with women's fortune-telling<sup>11</sup>, fraud, witchcraft, troubles and so on.

On the one hand, we the Rrom are the subject of a great fascination among Gadje due to our culture (because of the music, the dance, etc.), on the other hand, rejection and prejudices against us are apparent, mainly on the part of peasants from the interior of the country. There the nomads find big difficulties in setting up their tents, and the same happens many times in some cities.<sup>12</sup>

Another problem is that Romani children often haven't attended primary school, and only a small group have attended secondary school or University. Many people who went to university don't even want to be considered Rom any more and don't want people to know their background.

More often than not, the lack of true representatives or capable mediators who can mediate in the conflicts within or outside the group, the size and social situation of the country, illiteracy and lack of an organized and effective movement add to the above and allow the present situation to persist.

The Rom say: "If Brazil is the country of the future, we hope it'll be the same for us".

### **The founder of the city of Brasilia, a Rom:**

Kubitschek, Juscelino (1902 - 1976). President of Brazil 1956-61. His father was a person of Czech Romani origin who traveled the roads as a salesman. His mother was a gadji teacher. As a young man Juscelino studied to be a doctor and in 1955 the Democratic and Workers' Parties jointly nominated him presidential candidate, and he was elected a year later. His program had 33 points for economic development. He made Brazil into a major industrial power and built the new capital; Brasilia, one of the most modern of the time. He was a democrat and while he was president there were no political prisoners, in 1961 another president was elected. Kubitschek stood in the next elections but when the army seized power in 1965 he was among those barred from taking part in politics ever again. When he was the president he used to invite Rrom to the presidential palace to have lunch

<sup>11</sup> "Acampamento de ciganos provoca protestos" *AN Cidade*, Santa Catarina, 31/01/2001 <http://www.an.com.br/2001/jan/31/0cid.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Furuno, Meire; "Vizinhas reclamam de ciganos", *Jornal da Tarde*, São Paulo, 25/04/2001, Rudnik, Marli; "Ciganos invadem praça de teatro em Blumenau." *A Notícia*, Joinville, Santa Catarina 5/6/2001 <http://www.an.com.br/2001/jun/05/0ger.htm>

or dinner with him. He died in a car accident. However, most of the world is unaware of this, and the media simply ignore the fact or doubt its veracity.

## **URUGUAY**

Uruguay, with a local population of approximately 3.000.000, doesn't have a large Romani population. The local Rom, who are of Serbian and Greek origin make up some 2.000 or 5.000 individuals according to our sources. Most of them travel a lot, to Brazil and Argentina as well to other countries in the region where they also have relatives. In the city of Montevideo they inhabit a neighborhood called "Las Piedras". Their way of living is similar to that of other Rom of the region, and many Uruguayan Romani families nowadays live in Argentina or Brazil. The local population has many prejudices and stereotypes -fed by the collective subconscious or the media- regarding the Rom.

## **BOLIVIA**

Bolivia never had settled Rom living there, but many Rom families from everywhere used to cross the country in many opportunities in the past. We've lately heard of Peruvian or Venezuelan Romani families wishing to establish themselves in the city of La Paz.

## **PARAGUAY**

There are no settled Rom in Paraguay nowadays; when Stroessner's government forbade the Rom to enter the country, this was a hidden policy preventing those with Slavic last names and dark complexion from entering Paraguay. Gendarmes always found excuses to stop their entrance. Nevertheless, today many Brazilian and Argentinean Rom visit the country and do business there, the local population doesn't seem to show so many prejudices against Rom.

## **THE SITUATION IN CHILE**

### **Origin and filiation of the *Xoraxane Rom* in South-America**

Despite scholars saying that Rom came from India, this is mainly based upon linguistic studies on Romanes (the Romani language) in the last centuries, and as do many Kalderash and other Rom from the Americas, the Xoraxane Rom from Chile also say: "We are one of the twelve tribes of Israel, and from there the first Rom have come".

The Xoraxane Rom in South-America; Chile and Brazil have been arriving in these lands since the beginning of the XXth century and before, almost exclusively from the regions of Bosnia and Serbia. Their traditional fairytales relate this origin, and most of these end with the phrase: "This is the whole truth because it has happened in Serbia". One of them quotes:

“In Yugoslavia, at the beginning of the XXth century, a small group of Rom who had some money (over there the vast majority of the Rom are so poor that they have to beg, dance and play some instrument on the street for the Gadjé to earn some money to live), took a steamboat and came to America, running away from the war that was taking place in those lands, similar to that they are suffering now. When they arrived onto this continent most of them stayed in Brazil, Venezuela and Ecuador, and from there went to Chile and the rest of South-America. It was because of the war that Rom left Yugoslavia. Some Rom there even used to cut their forefingers in order to avoid going to the war. I’ve heard that from my father and grandfather. Because of war, prejudices, and poverty, the Rom Xoraxane came to America.”

(Juan Nicolich, personal communication).

Some authors, even Romani ones, and mainly in Brazil, erroneously suggest that Xoraxane Rom are a Kalderash subgroup of Turkish origin, with a similar way of life to that of the Machwaya, other authors and most of the Kalderash Rom even confuse both Groups.

The Xoraxane Rom have been Christians since their early arrival in the Americas, and are very assimilated with the Kalderash and Machwaya with whom they now share almost the same traditions, including the institution of the kris, and although they have preserved the Muslim ceremony of the kurbáno as in the Balkans, their traditional ceremonies are: (biáu), (bávine), (kristénje), (pomána), (pachíu) and (slávas) which are typical of the Kalderash Rom, while their language is that of the Xoraxane groups of Italy, Serbia, Rumania and Bulgaria. They speak a Vlach dialect of the Vlach I (old Vlach) type, palatized and similar to that of the Gurbet and Dzambazi from Serbia.

### **Women’s dress:**

The Romnyá (Romani women) of this group dress the same way as the Kalderash women in Rumania, Russia, Italy, France and the Americas: traditional long skirts and dikló (handkerchief, for those who are married).

### **Professions:**

Romani women practice fortune-telling and sell copper pots (copper additionally being one of Chile’s main exports) made by their husbands, who also repair copper pots, do general metalwork, sell and buy new and old cars. Many families continue to live a nomadic life.

Why did the Xoraxane Rom take on the traditions, way of living and the kris from the Kalderash and Machwáya in the Americas?

The question of the original reason for this groups changing its traditions can be perplexing: If they were Dasikane (Christian) Rom in origin, then why the kurbáno (the traditional Muslim feast of sacrificing a sheep asking for health)? It is hard to believe that they were not Muslims, especially when many old men hold some knowledge about this; and, although they use the word *gadjé* for the non-Rom, they also have the word “das” (Christian non-Rom in some parts of the Balkans), though used here to mean: *owner*, *boss*. Why then did they change their religion?

The reasons, I suppose, cannot be other than the old spirit of surviving and adaptation of the Rom. Although they were the first to arrive in certain parts of the Americas, they are a real minority compared to the Kalderash Rom, who arrived later in great numbers, bringing with them what some authors have called *Kalderashocentrism*<sup>13</sup>, and what the Kalderash call *Rromaníya* (the way of living, thinking, and the traditions of the Rom). This is the only thing that could explain this change by itself; the rejection suffered by them in confrontation not only with Kalderash groups but also with the prejudices of the Gadjé of European origin who dominated these lands, considering also that all the countries in the Americas are predominantly Christian (whether Catholicism, Protestantism, etc.).

## **Life of the Rom in Chile**

### **Romani Pride**

Even though the Rom have no territory, common religion, or national or international political representation; they do have a true sense of their own identity, based upon the values, way of living, sense of family, and customs which distinguish them as a group. And in the Americas they feel proud of being what they are; Rom, and want to be integrated within the society without losing their own identity.

### **Commercial capacity**

The obvious ability the Rom have for doing business, and surviving despite the marginalization in which they many times are constrained to live, force them exert their innate business capabilities; selling and buying everything, and in general obtaining the best results, instead of starving and begging.

Despite what the Gadjé think in their collective subconscious, the Rom earn their money through their jobs or businesses; whether what they do for a living may seem insignificant to the non-Rom. Even the ability to tell fortunes can bring some profit and can help to make a living.

Outsiders are often able to observe the the Rom's hardy perseverance in defending their customs and Romani laws. But what happens with the Chilean Rom who don't live under Romani law or follow many of the local Romani traditions? Already many don't live in tents or practice metalworking any more, and this was seen at the beginning as if these Rom were betraying the Romani way of life. Nowadays, however, many kinds of new business and professions have been born among the Chilean Rom: car dealing, jewelry, etc. The Rom little by little are finding their own place within the gadjo society which many times reject and undervalue them.

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<sup>13</sup> See Ian Hancock, "we are the Romani People", University of Hertfordshire Press, England 2002.

Showing the world wealthy Rom who neither beg on the streets nor wander throughout the country and whose life is closer to that of the Gadjé is something rare, but which is increasingly accepted day by day.

### **Traditions and Religion**

The Rom here are a people genuinely fond of their traditions, no matter how old fashioned they might appear to the eyes of the Gadjé. The men go out to work or to do business, selling new and old cars or metals of all kinds, while the women stay home taking care of the children, selling goods or telling their clients' fortunes. The bride must marry as a virgin and even nowadays it is not uncommon for parents to arrange their children's marriages. These customs additionally intermingle with the religion, because even though many of them are catholic and devoted to the virgin of Guadalupe, at least in Chile the Romani International Evangelical Movement is gaining ground, as also happens among Romani people in many countries of the world.

### **Discrimination and school**

Even in Chile Rom suffer discrimination and prejudice of others, which exists to varying degrees in all the countries of the Americas. School is a factor in changing the perceptions one group has of the other. This alone would make it important and necessary to provide every young Rom with access, not only to primary or secondary school, but University.

In Chile there exist the following Romani clans: Kávuchura, Koriánura, Baduníchura, Invasórrure, Chikarésti, Khanyária, but all of these call themselves Romá Xoraxané, and in Brazil they simply use this term. Both groups call the Kalderash Lease/Leasi and Kalderas (with s).

## **ROMANI PEOPLE IN COLOMBIA**

### **From where have the Colombian Rom come?**

The decisions of the majority are not always fair ones: The Rom had arrived in Colombia by the turn of the XIXth century, but when American societies were created, external examples were many times used as a model, so that many times the ideals of new American societies inherited trends and prejudices from European cultures. In this context, to be different wasn't tolerated at all.

Even though it wasn't forcefully forbidden here to speak the Romani language or to have our own cultural traits and to act according to them; our people, our activities and present social status, suppress the Romani capacity of development.

To subsist, Rom must sometimes go as far as abandoning their cultural patterns. For these reasons our people have historically assumed conducts of resistance from our traditional

nomadism to the resource of invisibility. This ethnic invisibility, though effective in the past, is today the cause of the critical situation in which the Rom in Colombia live. It doesn't mean that for common Colombians Romani people don't exist; on the contrary, in the memory of every person older than forty, the memory of encampments in the outskirts of the big cities, and the curiosity these mysterious people instilled in them is still present.

Many Rom insist that they are Colombians, of Colombian descent, when in reality they are Colombian Rom (a form of protection against the extreme nationalism of some parts of the country). Some people also point to the origin of the Rom as being depicted in the Holy Bible, the Rom here being one of the twelve tribes of Israel, the lost one (this is heard throughout the Americas and Europe), and because of this they will be favored by God.

There are not so many written sources to be consulted about the arrival of the Rom in Colombia. For this reason, Romani oral tradition is the original source from where one can extract the necessary information to reconstruct this historical moment, (this is also valid everywhere in the Americas).

In Colombia, most of the Rom belong to families with more than three or four generations of presence in the country, according to our sources, and due to the origin of the Rom in the majority of the countries in the Americas (mainly Vlax groups here, since Colombia doesn't have Spanish Kalé or other groups) we can fix the time of arrival by the turn of the XIXth century, approximately between 1880 and the 1920s. From then until now, -with the exception of the Second World War, when some families came- the country hasn't undergone significant extra or continental flows.

The recent conflicts in ex-Yugoslavia generated a displacement of people. Many of the Rom who escaped the conflicts came to the Americas, arriving in Colombia or Ecuador, some three or four families then from there moved to Argentina, but the vast majority of the Yugoslavian Rom who were looking for refuge traveled from Europe directly to the USA or Canada.

The *Bolochog* and the *Mihais*; two of the existing clans in Colombia, date their arrivals around the 1920s, the former from France and the latter from Russia, but both groups are considered Russian Rom by other Rom. The first to arrived here were the *Grekos*, who mostly came directly from Serbia around 1880. These until recently were nomads, and many of these groups moved to Ecuador.

Several *kumpanyas* (family groups which establish alliances to share a common community life) can be identified in Colombia, and which are located in almost all the country's cities: Bogota, D.C., many neighborhoods, in Girón (Santander), in Cúcuta, in Cali, in Medellín, Itagüí and Envigado among others.

Of these *kumpanyas*, the most important in terms of numbers are those of Bogotá, Girón and Cúcuta. Some years back, one of the most important *kumpanyas* was that of Itagüí,



but because of drug dealers and their associated violence, most of the families moved to other cities in search of a better life.

The incessant violence which fell upon Colombia in the last decades has lately been creating an important phenomenon of displacement of Romani families to the frontiers of the country. Particularly numerous is the group of Romani families who migrated to Venezuela. It is also important to mention the fact that many Romani families move to other places like Argentina, Brazil and USA, in that order. The lack of opportunities in the country due to insecurity, made the traditional Romani professions like metalworking, horse dealing and the sale of leather goods, all needful of constant travelling, the cause of many families' leaving the territory. We can safely speak of more than 200 families having moved to Venezuela, and some 60 or 70 more to Argentina. Many Rom in Colombia have suffered persecution by drug dealers, guerillas and paramilitaries, the latter permanently racketeering the Romani families

### **What's the meaning of being a Rom?:**

Romani people today, despite some undesired cultural transformations which threaten to finish off some aspects of our culture, features of our identity are kept alive, and among them we could mention the following:

- 1) The idea of a common origin and a shared history.
- 2) Social Organization based upon the related groups and the preservation of the traditional norms.
- 3) A strong internal cohesion within the group and a good interaction with outsiders.
- 4) A long nomadic tradition and the adaptation to new forms of itinerancy.
- 5) A language in common, Romanés.
- 6) A permanent valuing in the group of age and gender as organizing principle of social status.
- 7) Articulation of an internal welfare system based upon the existence of a patriarchal lineage.

### **Reflections on the education of Romani people in Colombia**

Romani People's shift away from formal education and institutions is mostly due to circumstances under which Romani people have had to live, and due mainly to

nomadism, the rejection and prejudices of others, and distrust towards a school system which is seen as an institution which wants to change the individuals from minorities by trying to destroy their cultural systems and values. This rejection even today causes 80 % of the Rom in Colombia not to have acquired a formal education out of fear of their own values being changed for those of the others to gain acceptance.

### **Traditional education**

The Romani child grows up in a very distinct environment in comparison with gadjo kids. The Romani kid is taught to survive and not to be prominent, her/his competition with the world is restricted to her/his own community, where the finish line can be reached by way of parameters very specific to their own culture. To have saved a certain amount of money in order to be able to marry, for instance. This can be achieved through the necessary knowledge of traditional economical activities like metalworking, coppersmithing and dealing with horses. On top of this, Rom value this kind of traditional form of education for being that which has kept our people spiritually free and alive for more than one thousand years, despite the forced itinerancy and the persecution suffered throughout the five continents.

The Romani child is kept under his/her mother's care during the first five years of life, almost exclusively, because fathers don't intervene so much in this period. In this time he or she develops freely, and learns the basic rules of life within the community, the mother tongue, respect for elders and love of freedom. This is also the moment when the child learns to distrust and fear the majority society, and this can be noticed in common sentences like: "the Gadjó is bad" "the Gadjé never are going to accept us". This is the consequence of a real situation but to a large extent a distant one, because even though there exists some kind of persecution and discrimination today, they are not the direct causes of the reproduction of these stereotypes, because Romani culture being an oral one, it is very difficult to break the chain of legends which behind these responses.

The Romani mentality has somehow succeeded at eluding these barriers of fear, and Romani children today access primary school. Depending on their sex, the child can reach a given degree of formal education. The boy reaches IVth or even Vth grade of basic primary education, and in exceptional cases one or two grades of secondary school. Girls who go further than the IVth primary school grade are generally a statistical exception. For instance, in the present generation in their thirties or older, it is really strange to know someone who has set foot in a school.

Romani kid start to go to school at seven, and the generalized opinion of the adults is that kids need only learn mathematics and to read and write, because of the importance of such for business. Beyond that, school is not considered necessary and there still lurks the fear that they will become Gadjé.

Adult Rom often cannot distinguish the reality of the present world and the necessity of competition; seeing the acculturation their kids suffer because of school. Childhood being

when one learns most behavioural rules, and being faced with two different cultures, Romani kids suffer too much confusion because schools in many countries don't accept differing culture and language.

The facts may speak more of the Romani people's capacity for adaptation than null access to school. However, current invasive and absorbent educational systems will end up harming many members of the Romani people, above all the young.

In Colombia as in other parts of the Americas the Romani population on average is young. Because of this, and due to the pressure of a growing acculturation many young people between 12 to 16 approximately find themselves in the middle between their own culture and that of the Gadjé, where in the past Romani boys stayed with their fathers and learnt traditional group occupations.

The latter is currently prevented by several circumstances:

a) Present economic activities don't allow itinerancy of the whole family because they are not as profitable as they were in the past due to political problems in the country, e.g.: trade of leather goods (shoes) and selling horses.

b) Due to low profits of the activities, the father cannot be accompanied by the older sons if necessary. To this we must add the problems the Rom are suffering in this country with the paramilitaries, guerillas and the constant threats and racketeering practiced by these people against the Rom.

Because of this, boys of this age group (12-16) remain home or hang around on the streets with the gadjo kids, lacking dialogue with their elders. These events are creating problems within their own families and community and don't allow them to be ready to face the future and to learn either the traditional or the gadjo ways.

For Romani girls, the situation is even worse because they don't even have the same opportunities the men currently do; very often their education is more limited due to fear they could become gadja (non- Romani women), marriage takes place at an early age, if they are asked for by their parents in marriage, since nowadays many boys prefer to marry non-Romani girls, allowing them to have much more contact with the majority society (this happens in many countries in the region). Women's traditional occupations selling goods once made by the men of the community, and fortune-telling, have decreased because of the fear of losing Romani culture which further restricted women's contact with the outside world. Besides, fortune-telling is forbidden by the Romani Pentecostal Church, which is really extended all over the world among all Romani groups.

The young Rom who in Colombia had have access to traditional Gadjo education have diverse opinions, they think that formal education is really necessary, but it has to pay much more attention to the realities of the different communities and should respect their

languages and traditions. Those who attended university also see the need to preserve Romani culture as the main goal.

More and more families have started to send their kids to school, but also want to fight for their rights, the respect of the others, access to a medical service and the right to education which respects the traditional values of the Romani People. Because of that it is necessary to implement an educational system -and this is valid for the whole region- where people may acquire the necessary tools to improve their life, and their own very best social and economic development while taking into account Romani culture and values which give the Rom their identity.

## **THE ROMANI PEOPLE IN ECUADOR**

At the end of the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s through the southern border with Peru, and the Northern frontier with Colombia, the first Rom started to arrive in Ecuador, travelling in small groups (*vitsas* or *kumpanias*)[See notes]. From these early groups some merely transited through Ecuador while others remained there. Those who inhabit the country are as follows: *Grekuya*, *Mihay*, *Bolochok* (all of these *Kalderash* in origin), *Xoraxane* and some *Boyash* (who speak these languages: Rumanian and *Rromanes*, because they've acquired the last one on the new continent).

The Romani People from Ecuador are concentrated in the provinces of Carchi, Imbabura, Cotopaxi, Pichincha, Tungurahua, Chimborazo, El Oro, Manabí, El Guayas and in the city of Quito. The number of Rom living there has been estimated at some 2.000 persons (ASOROM, personal communication).

### **Social situation of the Romani People**

The majority society obliges the Rom to maintain a state of invisibility due to the rejection of the non-Rom (Gadjé). The Romani people are never taken into account when new development projects for the major society are realized, e.g.: health care, education, economic development, housing. They don't recognize the Rom as part of any of the sectors of the population. Some schools don't accept Romani children because they don't speak Spanish and because the Rom have a different culture.

In the health sector, the Gadjé don't treat the Rom adequately. The attention Romani people receive is not equivalent to that of the non-Rom. Police authorities don't accept that the Rom are Ecuadorian at all, besides which they state that there are no Rom in Ecuador.

In the economic sector, and when the Rom go out in search of work, some people don't want to pay what we ask for the tasks performed by our people and want to pay what they want for those services. Regarding housing the Rom cannot set up their encampments in

many places where they would wish to do so, and where while it is not forbidden for others it certainly is for the Rom,. The same happens when someone wants to rent a house, because the Gadjé many times reject our people because they are afraid thinking that they are going to lose their houses or are going to be robbed by us.

### **Cultural Situation of the Rom**

The Rom have an ancient culture of thousand of years enriched with values and moral principles, rules that must be respected daily and which reinforce the natural coexistence within the group, valid for women, children, youths, adults and old people.

The children of the Romani people have to be cared for until they reach adolescence. Young people have to demonstrate their intellectual capacities, and obedience to our laws until they achieve membership of the adult group.

On their part, young women have to demonstrate what they've learnt from their parents, - taught from childhood- and that they are ready to follow the family's law with lots of pride. They must be virgin at the time of their marriage; from this virtue depends the honor of their family. They cannot marry a gadjo. Young people, boys or girls, must demonstrate with dignity that they are capable of their role as Rom.

On the other hand women have an important role at home, because on them depends the care of their children and husbands, as well as in large part the transmission of the language and traditional cultural patterns of the group to their offspring. Besides, if they respect Romani laws and wear the symbols of Romani culture with pride, the dikló (handkerchief which is worn by the married women) and the traditional dress which convert them into real Romani women, their reputation is enhanced within the group.

Romani men also have a big responsibility in their role before their people. They must demonstrate all the qualities of their kumpania, their economic capabilities, their intellect, the results of their work. The level of respect shown themselves, to others, and their own kumpania have to be correct, and above all they have to show respect for the Romani kris, the most important legal instance of the Romani people. They have to be Rom.

The role of the old people is one of the most important within the community. They are very much respected by both men and women; with their own lives they are living examples for all their people; their gray hair is respected by everybody, they are the wisdom, the knowledge, they are our life, they are the true Rom.

### **Legal representatives of the Rom**

Since 2001 in Ecuador, a Romani association legally exists. ASOROM was created under the tutelage of PROROM, the Colombian Romani Association, but the main complaint Rom have is that they are not accepted as part of multi-cultural, multi-ethnic Ecuador,

and state that the Ecuadorian Constitution only speaks about the native Americans and those of African ancestry.

## **ROMANI STORIES FROM CUBA**

Little known in Cuba is the passage of some Romani families which settled in Havana at the beginning of the 1900s and during the '20s.

These families had arrived as immigrants on ships, making up vitsas (clans) related by blood, and bringing with them the memory of the many countries they had gone through; a totally stable ethnic identity and a cultural heritage as in other countries in the continent with their own language, traditions and professions.

Tradition and language are some of the necessary links which have Romani people have maintained to assure their survival in this world.

Through the world the language and the traditions of the group were kept, and here as in all the countries of the Americas the myth of the creation of the Romani people appeared to reinforce those traditions and the particular characteristics of the group even in Cuba.

And the better known legend puts it thus (variants of this are well-known in all the countries of America and Europe):

### **How God created human beings**

“ Do you know how God created human beings?, I'm going to tell you: God first made the world with all the things that exist on it, the trees, the grass, the animals, well, with everything. But God felt alone, and then thought that he needed company and created the human beings. First He took some mud and kneaded it, and with it made the figure of a man in his own image, and put it into an oven that he had made to fire it, but he went away and forgot it, and when he came back the man was all burnt up. That's the ancestor of the black people from all over the world, but our Lord wasn't happy with his creation, because he also wanted to make other people, and then he made one more figure and put it into the oven, and so as to not forget it, he took it away at once. Of course, this time it was even very white, and this is the ancestor of the White People, the Gadjé. Once again, not so happy with his creation, he once more went through the same task, and put the figure into the oven, and calculated the time very well this time, and this was the more beautiful man of all of them, he was neither white nor black, but evenly brown, tanned, and this is the ancestor of all the Rom, and with him now he felt really happy for ever. This was my tale.”

This legend reflects the feeling of pride Romani people have of being what they are and in their ethnic origin which all the Romani communities have protected all over the world and which distinguishes them from the Gadjé. A lasting feeling which builds itself among the descendants of the families.

The nomadic group characteristics which the Rom possess have created a people with ethical, aesthetic, very strong and precise values, which cultural inheritance has been

worth safeguarding, and which identifies the Rom for what they are. This is also true for all the countries.

Beyond the place on earth where the Rom arrived, or the way of living of the country where they came to live, the Rom succeeded in keeping their authenticity and personality, adapting themselves in general to the social codes of the place where they were passing through, without leaving their moral values and the sum of all the beliefs which establish their ethnic condition behind them.

### **Numbers and attitudes**

The Romani people in Cuba don't reach the 200 persons, and maybe they are fewer than that, according to our sources. Many married non-Rom, because there weren't any Rom in Cuba apart from the two or three original extended families. There was a family whose members were all men who married Cuban women. In Romani families the descendents have to follow the father's side, and this family has preserved all the Romani observances and the language all the more so. In the '90s many of them have left Cuba in search of their American relatives in Venezuela, as well as in other parts of the American continent, with the sole aim of marrying their children to better preserve Romani culture, and as far as we know they have succeeded. When they used to live in Cuba, and according the new rules, they created a family cooperative to do metalwork which was absorbed by the state as soon as it was created.

The vast majority of the mixed families stayed in Cuba, though one of their members came to Argentina with his family, and they've preserved a mixed culture. Speaking Spanish, while still knowing many Romani terms regarding cultural behavior, these individuals consider themselves Cubans with Romani blood who somehow identify with the Rom but culturally much more with Cubans. Something similar, such acculturation, was suffered by the Jews of Cuba, who now have left Cuba or have the external assistance of the international Jewish Community and relearn the lost Jewish culture there.

### **Arrival and Romani identity in Cuba**

During the first decades of the XXth century several Romani families arrived in Cuba, coming from Central and Eastern-Europe and the Balkan region, reproducing their own familiar patterns brought from Europe in the social-family area, and maintaining themselves independent from the social-political system which ruled the country.

The family system as in Europe and in all the American countries still is based upon the extended family. Matrimony is endogamic with a strong status given to the ancestors; it is usual to give to new-born children the names of the ancestors, because the ancestors gave birth and origin to each familiar group and clan (vitsa), and the hierarchy of the elders who are the representatives of the law (kris) is strictly respected. This law which has been

jealously safeguarded and transmitted from generation to generation with the same rules in other countries of the continent and parts of Europe, respecting the family structures and ethical principles, is still kept nowadays among the second and even the third generation born in Cuba.

These Romani families which came from Europe, settled in the city of Havana, in the zone where a neighborhood named Lawton now belongs. In this sector of the city a working class population used to live; mostly unskilled workers, and some independent ones. There used to be open pieces of land, mostly poor wooden houses; and among the surroundings many people who lived in a marginalized way could even be found.

One of the families which arrived in the late 1920s, had the surname Cuik and had come from Russia, and at that time they had come back to Cuba for the third time accompanied by six of their apparently seventeen children. The first date of their arrival was 1912 from Russia, and the second, 1924.

In the neighborhood it is remembered that they had installed their military-like tents in an empty terrain and settled there until the late '40s.

These exotic immigrants, of such peculiar customs found in the community of Lawton a climate of acceptance and social recognition. According to their descendants:

“nobody used to disturbed them, for the Rom any country is good, where they could make some money and could live in peace that's O.K., because the Rom don't live with the opinions of the others”

from this thinking one can realize that it was like this as this clan found a physical place to become settled and make a living.

We might ask what most contributed to this acceptance by the non-Rom. We think that the kind of work the Rom developed was the cause that helped the Romani people in Cuba; metalworking was something Cuban society needed at that time, and it brought the necessary recognition within Cuban society.

One of their descendants, a woman currently living outside Cuba, in Venezuela, tells us that in the years after the revolution, and when she was already permanently integrated into the labor force of the new regime, she says she never felt discriminated:

“on the contrary, everybody came to consult me, as if one had wisdom: *how should I do this?, what do I have to do?*, it seems to be that we the Rom are a separate race”.

In the camping site they dedicated themselves to their traditional works: men did metalwork (they used to work with tin and copper) and woman to the practice of the fortune-telling.



### **Social status of women and men**

Women begin to be socially respected after their marriage, because it is considered that from that very moment that they really became grownups, and from that time women acquire a new social status because of the possibility of creating a new family. This gives them prestige in front of the social group and their peers.

Up to the first generation of Rom born in Cuba it was frequent to heard, on the occasion of family meetings, the phrase: “be careful of marimé” (one of the patterns which identify the Romani community, already explained above), and which is still preserved even today among the mixed families.

Another tradition which gives prestige to the married women and is even maintained within the mixed couples (Gadjo and Romni) is safekeeping of the galau, concept which means capital reserved in the form of cash, gold or jewellery (Rom also think gold has medical properties), which cannot be touched and has to be increased. Only the Romni (Romani woman) decides if this money can be spent in a business or transaction which could increase the galau.

Romani women, in Cuba and elsewhere, acquire much more prestige within the group when they get older and can even be consulted within the kris (the Romani court).

Romani women in Cuba, work study and can divorce without suffering any punishment within the group, they are really independent.

The mixed families also have kept the traditional celebration in honor of the dead: the “pomana”. This ritual is practiced in the Americas as well as in Europe, and is a meal which is offered to the community by the family in honor of the dead person - nine days after the death, at six weeks, six months, and for the anniversary of his/her death. On such occasions many Rom empty a cup of wine or water which is supposed to be consumed by the deceased person, who, though invisible, is still present. This custom can be observed in the houses where pictures of the dead people are visible. On the occasion of the anniversaries of the deceased, people put a glass of a drink of any kind in front of the picture of the dead person to please his or her soul. Alternatively, at family gatherings they're invited to partake first of anything the members of the family are going to drink. In some households many people still celebrate with a meal they prepare for the occasion in honor of the soul of the dead person for the date of the anniversary of the deceased. (This also happens among many Spanish Kalé). Because of that is also common among the contemporary mixed descendants of the Rom in Cuba, to find tales which refer to respect to the idea of spiritual reincarnation in a life after death, a feeling concerning a lost past, and often a pride in their own history and for being part of the Romani people.

## THE IMPACT OF THE ROMANI NGO'S IN ARGENTINA AND THE AMERICAS

### The current national political situation

Argentina in the sixties was considered a large middle class country with a good future, but political events that followed worsened life in the country over the years. These brought with them; impoverishment, insecurity, an increase in the crime rate and discrimination, mainly against the poor. The last 4 years of crisis have affected the lives of the majority of the country's inhabitants, during this crisis, the first legally formed Romani organization -Identidad Cultural Romani- was born. Opened in September 2000, this organization has mostly been seen as something strange by the Roma here. This is despite there having been another Romani Organization 12 years previously: *Narodo Romano* (Romani People), which, despite its informal role, realized many activities in its short life, and paved the way for this new-born entity.

### The Romani Organizations in the Americas

The first Romani organization in this part of the world was launched in the 1920s in the United States, where a kind of Romani cooperative called *E Tsoxa e Lolí* (the red skirt) was created, to protect the profession of the Rom who were doing metalwork in New York city. It wasn't until the 1980s however, that in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, a Romani violinist of Serbian origin called Mio Vasite, together with others -Rom and non-Rom- created the first Romani Cultural association called CEC (*Centro de Estudos Ciganos*) which Mio Vasite also presided. This was in accordance with the previously existing Romani organizations in Europe, though with more of a cultural character, and working within the Romani traditions and "kris" rather than independent of them. All these kinds of organizations were seen from the very beginning as strange to the Romani culture.

After the creation of that Organization in 1987 in Brazil, the idea was brought to Argentina in 1989 where the CEC presented Romani culture and music at the Centro Cultural San Martín, one of the most important venues in Argentina, to a vast and joyful non-Roma audience, amongst whom a few members of our community were present.

This impacted positively on the Argentinean Rom, who later informally set up a Romani Organization; *Narodo Rromano* which, though never legally registered, advised local TV while it produced three consecutive TV programs about our culture during that period. After that *Narodo Rromano's* activities ceased, and for the following 8 years no such activity took place until the creation of *Identidad Cultural Romani*. However, in the meantime other Romani Organizations such as *CEC Minas Gerais* and *CEC São Paulo* had appeared in Brazil, but none with much success.

During the year 2000, *Prorom*, a Colombian Romani organization, appeared in that country, modeled on Spanish Romani organizations (mainly the *Unión Romani*).

From this one, two more were born; one was *Asorom*, in Ecuador, and the other *Unión Romaní de Colombia*. All of these took shape under the authority of the Romani Kris and the Kumpanias (the vast majority of the Romani groups in the Americas belong to the Kalderash). The first two organizations played an important role as mediators, making it possible for many Romani NGOs to participate in the Conference Against Racism and Xenophobia in Quito, Ecuador, in March 2001. This contributed the first steps to creating *SKOKRA* (a federation of the Roma NGOs of the Americas).

At the same time an interesting event took place in Chile, when a group of Romani musicians had the opportunity to advise Chilean TV in their realization of a Romani soap opera, “Romané”, which had a great success in the whole continent, even in the U.S.A.. Nevertheless, Romani NGOs are generally not so well accepted by the Romani population in the Americas which doesn’t believe in them and rejects them.

Besides this, other problems affect them, such as the lack of a budget, which I shall refer to later, and being ignored by the local governments, but most of all they are under pressure of the “kris” (Romani internal body with controls the Romani kumpanias and is extraordinarily alive and strong in these lands), and of the Romani Evangelist church. This movement, born in France in 1961, has spread out through the entire American continent. In Argentina alone there are more than 15 such churches and in the United States three times as many. This has been the first and only outside institution to have been accepted; apart from some acceptance of school.

We identify the following as some of the main tasks currently facing Romani NGO's in the Americas:

#### **External Tasks:**

- 1) To promote the Romani culture, and its uniqueness.
- 2) To stop racism.
- 3) To support other minorities in danger or which suffer discrimination, such as the indigenous American people or others.
- 4) To follow the worldwide Romani movement and its international reclaims.

#### **Internal Tasks:**

- 1) To preserve our Romani culture, language, kumpanias, kris and values
- 2) To appraise the contribution of formal education to our culture.
- 3) To generate the promotion of our people, whilst keeping within our traditional values.
- 4) To resolve legal problems (legal support).

For example Identidad Cultural Romaní (“Romani Cultural Identity” from Argentina) is an open Organization and its main tasks are oriented in three directions:

- 1) The development of programs of direct intervention, trying to answer all the needs of the Romani population, and those of communities which would wish to collaborate in our project.
- 2) The offering of information services, advice and orientation coming from the diverse disciplines, managed not only by the professionals who work in the organization, but also by all the others that form it.
- 3) Acting directly upon the more structural causes which generate discrimination against minorities.

### **Objectives:**

- 1) To develop and integrate whatever might help to keep and promote the Cultural Identity of the Romani people, and of all the communities that would be interested in this project.
- 2) To support the accomplishment by all means of Argentina’s anti-discrimination law, to develop appreciation for cultural diversity, tolerance and education among the people, and to ask politicians and social leaders to take firm action to balance those situations which might otherwise generate xenophobic feelings or other worse evils.

### **Who take part in it?**

A group of individuals of all kinds of professions, amongst whom we can find Lawyers, Doctors, psychologists, Anthropologists, Musicians, Actors and people coming from the more diverse professions.

### **Our Activities:**

- 1) March 2001, Quito-Ecuador: we participated in the Forum of the Americas against Racism, Discrimination and Xenophobia. This conference was a preparatory one for the worldwide conference to be celebrated that same year in Durban-South-Africa, organized by the UN and diverse NGOs.
- 2) August-September 2001, Durban, South Africa: the above-mentioned conference.
- 3) We have published articles in diverse magazines and publications about the Romani Language and Culture.
- 4) We are currently continuing to work on projects in tandem with other organizations worldwide, to achieve the promotion and recognition of the Romani People, to recognize the positive values of this community and to fight against racism and stereotypes.
- 5) In March 2002, two members of our board of directors started a radio-program about Romani culture and music, which is broadcast once a week, every Friday at night in the city of Buenos Aires.

**Budget:**

What is important to point out is the fact that almost no Romani NGO working in South and North America receives any kind of support from external organizations. This is in contrast to Europe, where it is a source of support for the development of most Romani NGO activities. This is due to the fact that most of these third sector organizations ignore the very existence of Romani people on the continent. And aside from this, their help is directed only to American indigenous people or Afro-Americans considered to be in danger, and living in an extremely marginalized state. What is being missed here is the fact that many Romani groups in this continent suffer the same kind of marginalization. While this may not impact on them as much economically, it nevertheless affects them through discrimination, lack of education and so on, and through this the future erosion destruction of Romani culture.

**On the main problem in the Americas for future development of Roma****School:**

The current educational situation of Romani children is quite atypical in the continent even though as it was already mentioned in almost all the country primary education is an obligation. However from the very beginning, Rom tried to avoid this duty, because of the fact that the elders of the community considered that school could destroy the equilibrium of the group through the influence of an alien group (the Gadjé) in the Romany culture. For Rom only reading writing, and mathematics have been considered important.

*“The boys must stay at school while they learn how to read and write and mathematics, and not after that, besides if they don’t leave school they are going to become Gadjé” (General Romani statement regarding school).*

This happens in almost all the countries in the Americas from Tierra del Fuego to Alaska, and here also is where Romani NGOs have before them a titanic task, whilst avoiding creating a bad impact on the Romani community.

In the Americas, Romani culture, represented by 4.000.000 individuals in the whole continent, has kept closed and traditional in its confrontation with outsiders. Due mainly to the great fear of losing our own culture, things which come from the non-Rom are very often rejected, and this, as mentioned above, brings marginalization to the community, which is set to destroy our traditional life. Almost everything from outside is rejected; a good example being a wealthy, non-formally educated businessman who forces his own son not to go to school or to become a doctor, because this is against the Romani tradition and culture. This is the task which true Romani NGOs have to develop within the community: to reinforce the valuing of those institutions which come from the non-Romani world and which could contribute to the future development of our people.

### **The impact of Romani NGOs on the Romani community in some particular Areas**

Colombia is an area which has been affected by political instability for almost 40 years, the guerrillas destroyed the whole country. There exists a Romani Kalderash community (the only one) with almost 8.000 members. They have not escaped the entire process of impoverishment that most of Colombian society has suffered, including loss of trades, jobs or business contacts. Many Rom have not been able to continue developing their traditional occupations, such as selling horses (which was a profitable business there), metalworking or selling cars. Those who were able to, had left the country, but the others who remained did not want to change their professions for fear of losing their own culture. Finally, one of the two Romani organizations, together with some elders, was able to renew the traditional trades by introducing new kinds of business such as selling shoes door-to-door or in fairs, occupation which now is accepted as part of the Kalderash Romani tradition, and which has developed some self-confidence in its members once again.

### **Conclusion**

Romani NGOs, with the necessary external support, could further contribute to a better life for the Romani people and the preservation of their traditions in the Americas, as well as building towards the formation of a true worldwide Romani Nation which could help to better the existence of the whole of humanity. We think it is necessary to encourage the non-profit Romani NGOs to develop from the limited tools they have to achieve their goals, the goals of the Romani Nation, a place in this world, and neither cultural marginalization or the loss of our culture.

Jorge M. Fernandez Bernal

**Collaborators in the document:** Droujemira Tchileva, Bulgaria (AICRA), Nicholas Csergo, England (AICRA), revision of the document and collaboration in the chapter about Brazil, Prorom, Asorom, Chilean Romani Organization, SKOKRA.

### **Sources:**

*The existing bibliography about our people in the Americas is almost null, our sources were mostly our investigations for more than 20 years, the Community elders and members in all the countries of America and our own archives in the local Associations, our collaborators and the Pan-American Association (SKOKRA).*

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#### **Notes:**

**Vitsa:** family group sharing a common ancestor. **Kumpania:** an economical or territorial unit of Rom. This word also means "group".