

Who are the 'Gypsylogists'?

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In a series of recent publications devoted to various aspects of Romani/Gypsy studies – especially critical theory and social sciences – we encounter the term 'Gypsylogist'. It is not quite clear what this term means (it is not a technical designation for 'members of the Gypsy Lore Society'). It is, however, noticeable that the term is used with considerable emotional zeal by writers whose primary concern is to 'de-construct' the works of other scholars studying Roma/Gypsies and to expose their allegedly misguided thoughts and conclusions.

What does the term actually mean, and who does it refer to? I propose to take on the 'anti-Gypsylogists' in their own game. I shall critically analyse a selection of texts – due to time constraints, limiting myself to just a small but representative sample – that refer to and attack the so-called 'Gypsylogists'. I will show that the attackers engage in the construction of an imaginary adversary as a means of justifying their own scholarly interest in Roma/Gypsies. The term Gypsylogist (or: Gypsiologist) is used on a wholesale basis to refer to the Other - the other scholar who investigates Gypsies, but whose scholarship is rejected, because it does not lead to the same conclusions or engage in the same activism as that of the author him/herself. 'Gypsylogist' or 'Gypsiologist' is thus essentially a denunciatory term, rather than a descriptive or analytical one that refers to any particular point of view, methodology, affiliation, or era.

One of the first and most influential sources in coining a denunciatory term for predecessor scholars in the field is Judith Okely's book *The Traveller-Gypsies*.¹ There (1983: 7) she defines 'Gypsiologists' as those writers who "elaborated on the Gypsies' exotic potential". Commenting on the contemporary so-called Gypsiologists, Okely says:

¹ Okely, Judith. 1983. *The Traveller Gypsies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

“The Gypsiologists make the same mistakes as the nineteenth-century anthropologists .. Gypsy language and the ‘original culture’ have been located as things once intact in India, It is assumed that Gypsies existed in India many centuries back as a ‘pure’ group or separate society.” (p 13).

Okely suggests that by linking linguistic origins with an immigration of people from Asia, “The Gypsiologists have equated language with race”.

Inspired by Okely, Wim Willems revived criticism of an Indian origin.² Attributing it – quite simplistically – to Grellmann, he describes the idea as having had “until now the support of most gypsiologists – to use a collective term to cover authors who rely on this ethnographic perspective in carrying out their research on Gypsies” (p 294).

Thus, for Okely and for Willems, ‘Gypsiologists’ are those, past and present, who promote a theory of Indian origins, allegedly in order to exoticise Gypsies, leading potentially to an image of Gypsies as a “race”, and so to a potentially racist image of Gypsies.

Perhaps the most elaborate attempt to define an image of ‘Gypsylogists’ is contained in David Mayall’s recent book *Gypsy Identities*:³ He talks about

“the nineteenth-century Gypsy logists, who were particularly keen to show that their work and publications were an objective and scientific enterprise, and so would stand alongside any other serious investigation, and were not just the indulgent pastime of amateurs. These miscellaneous writers, past and present, are frequently seen, by others and also by themselves, as Gypsy ‘experts’. They are called upon to write encyclopedia entries and stand as expert witnesses in legal cases and on official governmental enquiries and commissions. Their works form the core of any study of the group, .. and for these reasons are extremely influential in shaping public opinion of the group. ... In

² Willems, Wim. 1997. In search of the true Gypsy. From enlightenment to final solution. London: Frank Cass.

³ Mayall, David. 2004. *Gypsy Identities 1500-2000*. From Egyptians and Moon-men to the Ethnic Romany. London: Routledge.

this way the labels Gypsiology and Tsiganology are limited to a quite specific body of writing and analysing, ranging from the nineteenth century lorists, to past and present members of the Gypsy Lore Society, and many contemporary researchers, writers, and activists (p 23-24)”

Much like Okely, Willems, and Lucassen, Mayall too attributes to the so-called “Gypsy Lorists” the (in his view, incorrect) belief that there an “overriding transnational Gypsy identity which allows for national differences” (pp 24-35). And, he is similarly critical of the role of language in constructing the historical argument:

“As well as the Romani language being used to establish Indian origins, it also becomes a major component of current Romani ethnic identity ... The argument is simple and follows the same path as the nineteenth-century philologists and Gypsy lorists: the roots of the language reveal the roots of the people who speak the language. ... The speculative nature of the linguistic evidence is revealed most sharply by the continued disagreements among Indianists and the constantly changing views about Gypsy origins.” (p 224-225)

Mayall in fact devotes an entire section of the book to define ‘Gypsy Lorists’ pp 162-179, as those who founded the GLS, took an interest in Gypsy culture, which became their hobby; developed an image of Gypsies as a ‘race’ or even ‘pure race’, plus romantic images of gypsies. He concludes the section by saying that: “the lorists have handed down as their main legacy a picture of the racial Gypsy which has been imprinted firmly in the popular consciousness” (p 179).

It is noteworthy that, much like Willems, Mayall too avoids any positive conclusions as to what a correct, alternative viewpoint might be. He concludes his book by saying that

“we are left with the question ‘Who are the gypsies?’. Essentially this study has been leading to the conclusion that they are and have been whoever people have wanted them to be ... It seems, then, that the question ‘Who are the Gypsies?’ will continue to be asked and contested for some time yet.” (p 276-278).

Thus, no answer is provided in the 300-page book, but much space is taken to denounce the so-called Gypsyorists.

This is representative of a recent trend to allegedly deconstruct what is referred to as 'Gypsyorism', as the construction of an image of Gypsies, without however committing oneself to any concrete empirical points nor to any alternative descriptive conclusions. This approach appears in several contributions to a recent book called *Travellers and their language*, edited by John M. Kirk and Dónall P. Ó Baoill,⁴

For instance, English Romani activist Len Smith rejects the term *poggadi jib* or 'broken talk', applied to Angloromani, saying that "it is arrogant and insulting for outsider academics to impose their definition upon it with that arbitrary name, coined by nineteenth-century Gypsyorists" (p. 192). Other contributions add a touch of Irish nationalism and anti-British sentiment, thus associating the study of Gypsies with imperialist thinking. Sinéad ní Shinéar opens her contribution by calling Shelta "a term and a concept constructed by Victorian Gypsyorists" (p. 21). Mary Burke refers to "academics and British Gypsyorists". Discussing the character 'Traveller Owen' in a 1999 novel *Tribe* by John F. McDonald, Burke reports that "Owen speaks Gaelic, Shelta and Romanes ... thereby gleefully dismantling the boundaries and categorical separations painfully erected between the 'secret languages' by the nineteenth-century Gypsyorists" (p. 99). It is not clear what the insight here is: Do we now know that Gaelic, Shelta and Romani are in fact one and the same? Mícheál Ó hAodha concludes his chapter called "Scott Macfie and the Gypsyorists" by saying:

"I have spoken to a few Romani activists who – resentful of the gypsyorists' central role in perpetuating certain erroneous stereotypes ...– admit they would rather the Gypsy Lore Society had never recorded the material it did ... Is it true that Gypsies and Travellers would be better off if the British branch [*sic*] of the Gypsy Lore Society had never existed?" (p. 112)

A different strand of 'Gypsyorist'-construction is represented by Thomas Acton (who is quoted by Hancock as having written a manuscript already in 1980 on Gypsyorism, which does not

⁴ Kirk, John M. and Ó Baoill, Dónall P. 2002. *Belfast Studies in Language, Culture and Politics* 4]. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast/ Cló Ollscoil na Banríona

appear to have been published).⁵ In his inaugural lecture of 1998 as Professor of Romani Studies (later published in Will Guy's 2001 collection), Acton defines the essence of what he calls 'Gypsyism' as

“earlier discourse of European states and scholars about the ‘true Gypsy’ which formed a variant of European ‘scientific racism’ .. and which has been called ‘Gypsyism’ after its flagship publication, the Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society. Romani nationalism saw itself as combating Gypsyist racism in much the same way as anti-colonial movements had combated European imperialism ..”.

This, then, is a separate strand from the one represented by Okely. While Okely and her followers see Gypsyism as responsible for the allegedly misguided emergence of a Romani ethnic-national movement, Acton and his followers see Romani nationalism as quite the opposite – namely as a rebellion against Gypsyism. Hancock, for instance, uses the term ‘Gypsyist’ to indicate the alleged denial of the right of Roma to construct their own images of themselves. In his article ‘Talking back’⁶, Hancock defines Gypsyists as those who feel secure that Gypsies will not comment on or challenge the content of their work, as well as those who dare challenge the content of arguments constructed by Gypsies themselves. For Hancock, the Gypsyist position is not, of course, that the Rom originate in India, which is how Okely defines the Gypsologists. Rather, Hancock labels as ‘Gypsyist’ those who, like Okely herself, claim that the Rom originate in castes of commercial nomads, rather than, as Hancock believes, in a caste of warriors. Thus he writes:

“For some reason, the possibility that our ancestors were not “the descendants of itinerant castes of artisans and entertainers” (Matras, 1999:1) but instead were individuals of some historical significance seems threatening to some gypsologists. ... The most recent paper in which this traditional position is upheld is by prominent gypsologist Yaron Matras, editor of Romani Studies (formerly The Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society) who, according to one reviewer, regards me and the Rajput hypothesis and its proponents “dangerous”

⁵ “Gypsyists remain the arcane priests of an oriental mystery quite removed from the thinking of educated Rom who are dismissed almost as a contradiction in terms” (Acton, 1980:3). ACTON, Thomas, 1980. “Gypsyism in the Far East: time for the end of an ideology?”, privately circulated unpublished ms.

⁶ <http://radoc.net:8088/RADOC-51-TALKINGBACK.htm>

citing (Acton, 2004:00) as his source. I will just add for the record that I do not recall ever calling Hancock 'dangerous', I simply think he is wrong.

Yet another twist or sub-strand of the anti-Gypsyologist argument is represented by some of the contributions to the recent volume co-edited by Susan Tebbutt and Nicholas Saul⁷ There, Ken Lee writes that "Orientalism and Gypsyology are discursive formations that constitute the subjects of which they write", a somewhat enigmatic formulation which I take to mean that both Orientalism and Gypsyology are taken as traditions that construct images. Ken Lee in fact equates history of what he calls 'Gypsyology' with the history of the GLS, speaks of 'hegemonic dominance of Gypsyology'.

In their editors' Introduction, Susan Tebbutt & Nicholas Saul, use the label 'Gypsyologists' to refer to those who "squeeze Romanies into straitjacket roles", while elsewhere in their Introduction they refer to "the scholarship, organization, passion, fieldwork and collection of the Gypsyologists, from John Sampson and Scott Macfie to Dora Yates and, more recently, Yaron Matras."

It is clear, then, that Gypsyologist is not a consistent signifier that designates any consistent object of reference. How do we make sense of the varying images with which the term is used? The common denominator is the use of the term to diminish confidence in the ideas of other scholars who disseminate views, images and analyses of Gypsies. For Okely, Willems, Lucassen, and Mayall, turning against Gypsyology is symbolic for denying assumptions on origin, language, culture and recently also nationhood and ethnicity that are now accepted in mainstream academic discourse. Ken Lee's anti-Gypsyology as anti-Orientalism, and Thomas Acton's anti-Gypsyology as anti-colonialism, are essentially arguments of self-promotion, allowing these authors to pretend that their superficial wholesale criticism is anchored in some theoretical framework, or, even beyond that, in a global, grassroots movement of nation-building. For Hancock, the goal is to capitalise on his authority as an academic of Romani origin to replace existing scholarship with new images that do not necessarily answer to criteria of academic scrutiny. In the case of the post-Okely generation of literary critics, supposedly, hostility toward an alleged Gypsyologist perspective is an identity marker of a new and self-legitimising scholarly

⁷ Saul, N. & Tebbutt, S. eds. 2005. *The role of the Romanies*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press..

interest in Gypsies. Finally, there is the copycat use of the term, by writers such as Tebbutt, who repeat the label merely as a token of self-exoneration from the potential criticism of being biased, or approaching their new subject-matter – the study of Gypsies – with preconceptions.

In this sense, the function of the word ‘Gypsyologist’ is not at all to designate any real entity, or to attribute any specific point of view to anybody. Rather, it is a simplistic kind of rhetorical device employed by writers in order to construct for themselves the credentials for entering into an academic field of research that is highly charged, both politically and emotionally.