

FAQs

Is using the terms “Gypsy/Gypsies” ok?

While people use this word to describe many different communities/things, the term as it relates to Roma/Romani people is not preferred by many Romani people. The term “Gypsy” is a misnomer – it is a shortened term of Egyptian and dates back to our arrival in Europe; Europeans might have assumed we were Egyptians. Since we are not Egyptian in origin, many people find that using this term is wrong because it perpetuates misinformation about our origins. Both linguistic and genetic evidence indicate an Indian origin for our people. Furthermore, the term has been used as a racial slur (“to gyp” means to steal) and is loaded with stereotypes, which many of us understandably want to distance ourselves from. The word that many of us prefer is Roma or Romani; a word taken from our own language that means “people”. While there may be differences of opinion *within* the culture about appropriate terminology, the more respectful term for outsiders to use is Roma or Romani.

Where are Romani people from?

Both linguistic and genetic evidence confirm our Indian origins. Our ancestors left India around 1000 A.D., possibly in several waves. This is based on research by Romani historian Dr. Adrian Marsh, and Prof. Hancock concurs with this hypothesis. The multiple waves explain the development of differing languages/dialects among Domari, Lom and Romani groups. We are a distinct ethnic group with our own language, culture, foods and beliefs, although traditions (including music and dance) greatly vary across groups based on where we live in and how long we have been settled there. We are currently the largest ethnic minority group in Europe, numbering 10-12 million; in the U.S there are an estimated 1-1.5 million Roma. We are real people; one cannot “choose” to be a Romani person; you either have Romani ancestry or you do not (i.e. it is not a “lifestyle” or choice).

Why do people associate Romani people with fortune telling/magic?

Stereotypes about curses and the supernatural have been used to stigmatize and racially profile Romani people for centuries. While it is true that some Romani people practice fortune telling, it is also true that many do not; it is not a practice that can be universally applied to all of us at all times. As a people, we are not associated with any particular religion. The 12-14 million Roma in the world today follow many different religions and some, none at all.

Are all Romani people the same; is there just one Romani culture?

Within our communities we are incredibly diverse. Similar to the concept of “tribes/clans/kin groups” that exists for Native Americans in the United States, Romani people have complex affiliations and ways to identify based on our overarching group, sub-groups within the main group, our location, the dialect of Romani that we speak, and our families’ traditional occupations. Within our communities we are very conscious of our internal identities and associations. The names of our sub-groups often reflect

this diversity. Although we are diverse, many of us hold core values across groups, such as loyalty to our families and passing on our cultural traditions and values to the next generation.

Are Roma nomadic? What occupations do Roma have?

The overwhelming majority of Roma are no longer nomadic, and many communities have been settled for hundreds of years. A few sub-groups, however, try to maintain semi-nomadic way of life that is related to their traditional occupations. Although most of the world's Rom are poor, Roma are diverse in their class situation. Historically, Roma were skilled (and often indispensable) craftspeople such as metalworkers, entertainers (such as musicians), traders, seasonal workers, etc. Today, in addition to semi-skilled and unskilled laborers, Roma are educated journalists, teachers, health workers, social workers, businesspeople in the rising middle class.

What kind of costume should I buy for Romani dance?

As mentioned above, there is no one Romani culture. Costuming will look very different if you are doing Flamenco (a Spanish Romani dance) as opposed to Turkish Romani dance. Also, within these genres there are various sub groups of dances and costumes that convey the context and feeling of performance. Your best resource is a qualified teacher to guide you in your selection of costume based on your performance context and dance. It should also be pointed out there is no such thing as a "skirt dance", although in some styles of Romani dance, dancers use their skirts to emphasize a movement or to show footwork; please don't assume that wearing a long flare skirt qualifies your costuming as "Romani".

Have Roma faced discrimination?

Initial curiosity about Roma by European peoples and rulers quickly gave way discrimination, a legacy that has continued until today. In the Romanian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, Roma were slaves from the 14-19th centuries. As bonded serfs owned by noblemen, monasteries, and the state, they were sold at auctions, bartered, and flogged. Romani slaves were an important labor and artisan source, providing skills in gold washing, bear-training, wood carving, blacksmithing, and music.

In virtually every West European territory, Roma were feared and mistrusted and expelled. Bounties were paid for their capture, dead or alive, and repressive measures included confiscation of property and children, forced labor, prison sentences, whipping, branding, and other forms of physical mutilation. Assimilation in the 18th century Austro-Hungarian Empire included forcibly removing children from their parents and outlawing nomadism, traditional occupations and Romani language, music, and dress. Similar assimilationist legislation was enacted in Spain after 1499.

In the Balkans, the policy of the Ottoman Empire towards Roma was, in general, more lenient than in Western Europe because Ottoman urban society was multi-cultural. Many Balkan Roma converted to Islam in the 16th to 18th centuries to pay lower taxes

The Muslim religion and Turkish culture and language were the marks of civilization, and conversion often meant merely a change in name.

With the Nazi rise to power, Roma faced an extermination campaign where 500,000 to 1.5 million were murdered. After the war, Roma received neither compensation nor recognition as victims, and only recently has the Roma Holocaust gained limited attention via memorials and commemorations. After World War II, the communist regimes in Eastern Europe defined Roma as a social problem. Targeted for integration into the planned economy, Roma were forced to sometimes give up their traditional occupations, and assigned to the lowest paid industrial and agricultural state jobs (e.g., street cleaners). Nomadic Roma were forcibly settled, settled Roma were sometimes forcibly moved, and sometimes aspects of their culture, such as music, were outlawed. Specific policies varied by country, for example, forced sterilization was common in Czechoslovakia. Cheap housing was nominally provided, but segregated neighborhoods were common. On the positive side, during socialism Romani school attendance grew (despite inferior and segregated schools), violence was rare, and Roma held steady employment and received the benefits of the paternalistic state.

After the fall of socialism in Eastern Europe, discrimination, scapegoating and violence against Roma dramatically increased. Western Europe has also recently witnessed a huge surge of xenophobia, anti-Romani racism, and physical as well as structural violence; many European political parties in power today are explicitly anti-Roma. Roma have mobilized against this historic racism via a worldwide human rights movement.