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Gypsies in Madrid

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology



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When Paloma Gay y Blasco began to conduct research among the Gitanos of Jarana, Spain, she wanted to examine the social memory of an illiterate minority of people in a dominant literate society. The Gitanos had the perfect social conditions, except they were completely uninterested in the past and became bored each time she brought the subject up. She then refocused her research, and states in the introduction to the text that her main theoretical question of her ethnography *Gypsies in Madrid: Sex, Gender and the Performance of Identity* is as follows: "Given the extreme centrifugal forces that govern Gitano society, and in the absence of a social memory and of links with a territory, how is it that the Gitanos manage to see themselves as a group and to reproduce their shared identity?"

Gay y Blasco never deliberately takes the time to describe the methods she used to research this ethnography, but the basics of how she conducted her research become evident through her descriptions and anecdotes. Interview and observation were both used, as she conducted fieldwork among the Jarana Gitanos for seven months (even this number was found only in the acknowledgements section of the text). Living with an older Gitano couple, she speaks of firsthand experiences with the customs and traditions of the Gitano people and the conclusions she draws from them. An interesting distinction is made between the types of information she was able to collect from her informants. The "life of the Gypsies," generally described in broad negative terms of struggle and oppression, did not necessarily coincide with the complex stories they shared about their own lives. Occasional references are made to specific conversations that took place for the purpose of gathering data, but again, this is the extent of the description of her methods.

Though her main question is how a shared identity is reproduced without a social memory or links to a territory, several minor themes are addressed. One of these, Payo-Gitano

relations (though never specifically addressed as such) is pervasive throughout. Gitano is the term Gay y Blasco uses to refer specifically to the Gypsies of Jarana, and Payo is the accepted expression among Gitanos to refer to their non-gypsy neighbors. Chapter 2, entitled “Those Awkward Spaniards” introduces the evident social and moral divide felt by both parties and also describes the modern history of the Jarana Gitanos. The early part of the 20th century was seen as a time when, while there was not necessarily complete harmony, there was not the marked disparity between the lives of Payos and Gitanos that exists today. Though they formerly dwelled in the countryside, industrial development in the 1950’s and 60’s incited a mass exodus to the cities, where the Gitanos set up “barrios de chabolas” (cardboard neighborhoods) and became the targets of a government wanting to demonstrate its strength. Then when democracy began in 1976, they found themselves unable to assimilate into the general population. Among other new laws and restrictions, vending and scavenging at rubbish dumps now required permits, criminalizing many Gitanos’ behavior and causing some to turn to drug dealing. Drugs have become an excuse for Payos to refuse to have Gitanos as their neighbors, which Gay y Blasco sees as simply a cover for the ‘ancestral’ hatred that some uneducated Payos feel towards the Gitanos. With their position at the bottom of the social scale established, the ethnographer poses new questions: How do they reproduce their singularity, sustain pride, resist assimilation and create relations among themselves?

Gitanos’ views of their Payo neighbors are more specifically addressed in Chapter 3: A Divided neighborhood. Gitanos see themselves as a people with a knowledge of right and wrong who are morally superior to Payos. Though they are a people of differences, they see these differences as a part of their identity. What unites them is who they are in the most general sense, rather than things like memory, links to a place, accumulation of material culture, and ties

between non-kin, which are all seen as “Payo things.” Genealogy is shallow, as they prefer to live in the “now” rather than the “before.” They are even reluctant to look back at their own lives, and do not speak the names of the dead because of the pain it brings. Instead the dead are referred to by kinship terms. Gypsiness is seen as a community of people who share the same beliefs concerning others, but community in the sense of commonness, not communion.

Affiliation to a patriline is essential, making the residents of Jarana internally fragmented while still collectively Gitanos. There is actually a strong preference for people to alienate themselves from neighboring but unrelated Gitanos, and marriages are preferred to be between family members. Social harmony and cohesiveness is not related to self-conception, and feuds between unrelated families are considered to strengthen their ties as Gypsies, as they demonstrate a shared morality.

Chapters 4 through 6 focus on sexual morality and how it is central to personal identity and status as well as the identity and status of the Gitano as a whole. Chapter 4: Desire, Control, and Dual Moral Standards describe the general views the Gitanos hold on sexuality. Views of men and women are gendered, that is they're fixed and linked to genitalia. Women are considered more evil and less knowledgeable than men and deserve less respect, but a heavy sexual burden is placed on them. It is responsibility of women to remain virgins until marriage in order to demonstrate the sexual decency of “the Gitano” as a whole, which helps to prove their superiority to Payos. Sex is considered difficult to resist and there is value in exerting self-control over their desires. After marriage, there is no shame in sexual activity. In fact, sex is talked about openly as something that should be enjoyable for both partners. The period between childhood and marriage when men and women are eligible to marry is called “mocedad” with men and women called “mozos” and “mozas,” respectively. While mozas are expected to remain

abstinent, mozos are encouraged to have sexual relations before marriage, but only with Payo women. This demonstration of female morality is another way that Gitanos show their superiority over the Payos.

Chapter 5: The Female Body and Gendered Moralities, describes the ritual of the wedding as another indicator of superiority to Payos. Evidence of the woman's virginity is taken with a white handkerchief, but the Gitanos don't look to blood caused from the hymen breaking. Blood is seen as a negative, and could mean that the woman has waited too long. They believe that an "honra," shaped similar to a grape, exists inside of all women. When intercourse is performed the honra bursts, producing a yellow fluid. For traditional weddings, a professional woman, as well as other married Gitanas, inspect the genitals of the bride to determine if she has been touched before. The woman then deflowers the bride with a handkerchief by breaking the honra and tying the handkerchief, causing a flower patterns to appear. This proof of morality, as it is seen, is proudly kept and displayed by the mother-in-law of the bride. Though the honra has a probable explanation as a gland that produces vaginal lubrication, it is not just an anatomical feature, but the center of practices and ideas about Gitano identity and social life. It's a symbol of moral standards. For this reason, if a bride believes her honra has been broken because of premarital sex, her and her husband must elope before the wedding. The process is relatively common and completed when the bride's parents forgive the couple. In the case of elopement, sexual purity before marriage is assumed, but by doing this they are still able to maintain their moral superiority over the Payos.

As previously mentioned, Gitanos have a gendered identity, meaning there are clear distinctions between roles of men and women. A hierarchical relation between husband and wives exists, and it is a man's role to tell his wife how she can and cannot act and what she can

and cannot do. Men deserve respect from women, and women are obliged to respect men. If a wife does not do what her husband asks, it is thought that she does not respect him. Women are in charge of domestic tasks, and it is unthinkable for a man to be involved with these activities. A woman must serve her husband dinner and wait until he is finished until she eats. This is the one area where Payas are envied by Gitanas. They are perceived to have more freedom and less moral restrictions. For example, whereas Gitanas must wear skirts to demonstrate their moral purity, Paya women can wear pants. While a gender hierarchy still exists with Evangelical converts, Evangelical Gitanas are generally better treated by their husbands. They are allowed to eat at the same time and she may not be beaten “as much.” Another salvation a woman may have from an abusive husband involves inciting the help of male kin, which is similar to the help a Yanomamo woman may illicit in a comparable situation.

Other parallels can be drawn between Yanomamo and Gitano practices. At the beginning of Part III, Gay y Blasco describes the role of Tío Juan as the head of a patrilineage. He shared many of the characteristics of a successful Yanomamo headman in that, while he could not exercise complete authority, he led by deserving respect by leading his life according to Gitano laws, which caused others to come to him for advice and requests. He was also an effective conflict mediator which allowed him to exert his influence over the life of all Gitanos in Jarana, not only those who were a part of his patrilineage. Conflicts and retaliation attacks between patrigroups are common, which is also evocative of Yanomamo practices, but Gitanos are not as social between groups and do not have allies and enemies to the extent that the Yanomamo are. When conflict arises, it is generally confined to whichever patrigroups the conflict concerns.

Chapter 7: Patrilinearity, Conflict and Masculinity, demonstrates the strong stress on patrilineal links that Jarana Gitanos hold. It is the father who is considered to have “made” the

child, using his seed, and for this reason it belongs to his *raza* (race). There is a certain amount of solidarity among *razas* or “patrigroups,” as Gay y Blasco refers to them, but there are not strict rules to their functions as a unit. Patrigroups are generally tied to spatial proximity and ties become evident during political events such as feuds, illnesses, weddings, and funerals. Feuds, or *ruinas*, have decreased in recent years, and while anthropologist San Román counted fourteen *ruinas* in a single year from her fieldwork in the early 1970’s, Gay y Blasco did not see any among the people of Jarana during the time she spent with them. *Ruinas* are essentially one *raza*’s retaliation against another following a serious injury or murder, a retaliation that is justified by “Gitano Law.” Most patrigroups avoid interaction with non-kin for fear of conflict, but it is one of the things that helps to establish the Gitanos as a moral community. It is also essential to the role that men play in the society: while women exhibit gypsiness in sexual behavior, men do it through confrontation.

Further expectations about men and conflict are presented in Chapter 8: Men in the Face of Conflict. Two kinds of men exist: *hombre de respeto* (man of respect) and *risión* (laughable man). The social ideal of a Gitano man is the *hombre de respeto*. Men should be courageous and willing to protect themselves, their families, and their dead. They must exhibit the knowledge that women are not supposed to have: *conocimiento*. As *la droga* (drugs) has become an increasingly widespread problem for the Jarana Gitanos, a drug addict is seen as the archetype of a *risión* and is someone who has a lack of self control and is without *conocimiento*. While a hierarchy exists based on gender and age, respect still must be acquired, and men must demonstrate their *conocimiento* or lose it.

As the ethnographer did not define her methods, she also does not present her theoretical perspective. While the methods are not specifically described, they are nonetheless evident and

adequate for the questions she addresses, which is more of a social question and does not require research beyond fieldwork, which involves daily contact with the group as well as some purposeful interviews. She presents a great number of anecdotes from her experiences and often attempts to generalize her conclusions, but this is effective in addressing the main question of the book of how, without a social memory or links to a territory, a shared identity is reproduced, especially when living so near to a dominant majority. The easy answer to this question is that the Gitanos differentiate themselves from the Payos in every aspect of their life, which generally comes back to a moral superiority. This theme can be found several times throughout every chapter while the ethnographer explains specific views, traditions, and customs of the Jarana Gitanos, but serves as a common thread throughout the book. This point made me consider how American culture, at least the stereotyped version, is perceived as morally inferior by other cultures. This can also be applied at a local level, as immigrants come in with new traditions and behaviors. Sometimes practices, when not understood, can be entirely misperceived. For example, Gay y Blasca describes how Gitanas wear pants in the winter because they are warmer than skirts, but to uphold moral standards expected of them, they still wear a skirt. Payo women sometimes see this as backwards, and think that somehow the Gitana women don't understand that it's either one or the other, when in reality the Gitanas are exhibiting their moral superiority. Do I inherently judge behaviors of others in this way, while completely missing the point? There is still the point, though, that the Gitanas are judging the Payo women for their lack of skirts, which simply reinforces my assumptions that everyone holds ethnocentric views that are difficult to overcome. This is evidenced by their idea so central to their identity that simply states that they are "better than the other" because they are morally right, according to their own standards, with no other qualifiers. For every society that is judging, there is another that is judging them.