

# Romani society and culture

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1552 [woodcut](#) of *A Gipsy Family*

The culture of the [Romani people](#) is rich and various because of peculiar properties of Romani history. In spite of big variety of Romani culture all the Romani peoples have similar values system and world perception.

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## [\[edit\]](#) Indian heritage

Linguistical and cultural researches shows that ancestors of Romani people lived in Northern part of [India](#). It seems that genetical researches confirm that. Romani ancestors belonged to a Dom caste. They used a language which had come from [Sanskrit](#) and was related to modern [Hindustani](#). Their traditional occupation was singing, dancing, music, smith's and jeweller's arts.

There is some heritage of Indian ancestors in modern Romani culture. Grammar and partly vocabulary are still related to Sanskrit. Crafts of the Dom caste are a part of traditional Romani crafts. There also idea of contamination exists though in our days it isn't related to social position but to genital organs and some types of crime.

## [\[edit\]](#) Moral values

### [\[edit\]](#) Being a part of Romani society

The most terrible punishment for a Rom is expulsion from Romani society. The expulsion is accompanied with contamination.

Being a part of the Romani society is possible if both a person and the society want the person to be its part.

### [\[edit\]](#) Family and life stages



A bride posing before her wedding.

The traditional Roma place a high value on the [extended family](#). [Virginity](#) is essential in unmarried women. Both men and women often marry young; there has been controversy in several countries over Roma practice of [child marriage](#). In 2003, one of the many self-styled Roma tribal "kings", [Ilie Tortica](#), banned his subjects from entering their children into marriage until they have come of legal age. This ban is seen by some as being in direct conflict with traditional Roma family practices. A rival Roma patriarch, Florin Cioaba, ran afoul of Romanian authorities in late 2003, when he married off his youngest daughter, Ana-Maria, 12 [\[1\]](#), well below the legally [marriageable age](#) in Europe.

Romani law establishes that the groom's family must pay the dowry to the bride's parents. Romani social behaviour is strictly regulated by purity laws ("marime" or "marhime"), still respected by most Roma (except Muslims) and among [Sinti](#) groups by the elder generations. This regulation affects many aspects of life and is applied to actions, people, and things.

Parts of the human body are considered impure: the genital organs, because they produce impure emissions, and the lower body. Fingernails and toenails must be filed with an emery board, as cutting them with a clipper is taboo. Clothes for the lower body, as well as the clothes of menstruating women are washed separately. Items used for eating are also washed in a different place. Childbirth is considered "impure" and must occur outside the dwelling place; the mother is considered "impure" for 40 days. Death is seen as "impure" and affects the whole family of the dead, who remain "impure" for a period. Many of these practices are also present in [Hindu](#) cultures. However, in contrast to the Hindu practice of burning the dead, Romani dead must be buried, not burned. It is believed the soul of the dead does not officially enter [Heaven](#) until after the burial.

[\[edit\]](#) **Profession**

[\[edit\]](#) **Faith**



The cult of [Saint Sarah](#) in the shrine of [Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer](#), Southern France is a devotion associated with Catholic Roma.

It has been suggested that while still in [India](#) the Roma people belonged to the [Hindu](#) religion. This theory is supported by the Romany word for "cross", *trushul*, which is the word which describes [Shiva's trident](#) ([Trishul](#)).

A stereotype that Roma people have [psychic](#) powers (e.g. [fortune-teller](#)) is still sometimes present, and some romantics attribute the invention of the [Tarot](#) cards to them.

Roma have usually adopted the dominant religion of the host country while often preserving their particular belief systems and indigenous religion and worship. Most Eastern European Roma are [Catholic](#), [Orthodox](#) or [Muslim](#). Those in Western Europe and the [United States](#) are mostly either Catholic or [Protestant](#). Most in [Latin America](#) kept their European religion, most of them being Orthodox<sup>[\[citation needed\]](#)</sup>. In [Turkey](#), [Egypt](#), and the southern [Balkans](#), they are overwhelmingly [Muslim](#).

Since [the Second World War](#), a growing number of Roma have embraced [Evangelical](#) movements. For the first time, Roma became ministers and created their own, autonomous churches and missionary organizations. In some countries, the majority of Roma now belong to the Romany churches. This unexpected change has greatly contributed to a better image of Roma in society. The work they perform is seen as more legitimate, and they have begun to obtain legal permits for commercial activities.

Evangelical Romane churches exist today in every country where Roma are settled. The movement is particularly strong in France and Spain; there are more than one thousand Romany churches (known as "Filadelfia" or simply *el culto*) in Spain, with almost one hundred in [Madrid](#) alone. In Germany, the most numerous group is that of Polish Roma, having their main church in [Mannheim](#). Other important and numerous Romany assemblies exist in [Los Angeles](#), [Houston](#), [Buenos Aires](#) and [Mexico](#). Some groups in Romania and Chile have joined the [Seventh-day Adventist Church](#).

In the Balkans, the Roma of Macedonia and Kosovo have been particularly active in Islamic mystical brotherhoods ([Sufism](#)). Muslim Roma immigrants to Western Europe and America have brought these traditions with them.

## [\[edit\]](#) **Philosophical terms that are important for Romani culture**

Roma pay much attention to philosophical questions usually in connection with 'romanipe'. There exists many Romany folk fairy-tales, songs and proverbs which are dedicated to philosophical questions. Here are some Romani philosophical terms.

### [\[edit\]](#) **Romanipe**

It's customary to translate this word as "Romani spirit" or "Romani culture", but the real meaning is wider. "Romanipe" is Romani spirit, Romani essence, Romani Code and willingness to follow the Romani Code, self-perception as a member of Romani society and willingness to be such a member, set of "Romani" strains etc all in whole. Sometimes an ethnic non-Rom who has Romanipe is considered to be Rom (an adopted non-Romani

child who has grown up in a Romani family). An ethnic Roma who has not Romanipe is not considered as Rom.

### [\[edit\]](#) Gadjee

A *Gadjo* man or *Gadji* woman is a person who has not Romanipe. Usually that is a person who is not ethnic Rom or 'Gypsy'. But also an ethnic Romani may be considered as a Gadjee if he/she has no Romanipe.

## [\[edit\]](#) Romani Code

*This short section requires [expansion](#).*

## [\[edit\]](#) Romani names

*This short section requires [expansion](#).*

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*Main article: [Romani dance](#)*

## [\[edit\]](#) Romani music



Romany musicians playing at a wedding in the Czech Republic in 2005

The [lautari](#) who perform at traditional Romanian weddings are virtually all Roma, although their music draws from a vast variety of ethnic traditions — for example Romanian, Turkish, Jewish, and Slavic — as well as Roma traditions. Probably the most internationally prominent contemporary performer in the lautari tradition are [Taraful Haiducilor](#). [Zdob si Zdub](#), one of the most prominent rock bands in [Moldova](#), although not Roma themselves draw heavily on Roma music, as do [Spitalul de Urgenta](#) in Romania.

The distinctive sound of Roma music has also strongly influenced [bolero](#), [jazz](#), [flamenco](#) and [Cante Jondo](#) in Europe. European-style [Gypsy jazz](#) is still widely practised among the original creators (the Roma People); one who acknowledged this artistic debt was [Django Reinhardt](#).

### **[[edit](#)] Roma in classical music**

[Roma music](#) is very important in Eastern European cultures such as Hungary, Russia and Romania, and the style and performance practices of Roma musicians have influenced European classical composers such as [Franz Liszt](#) and [Johannes Brahms](#).

Many famous classical musicians, such as the [Hungarian pianist Georges Cziffra](#), are Roma.

### **[[edit](#)] Other music**

Romanies who came to the Americas contributed to almost every musical style. [Salsa](#), [rumba](#), [mambo](#) and [guajira](#) from [Cuba](#), the [tondero](#), [zamacueca](#) and [marinera](#) from [Peru](#), [mariachi](#) music from [Mexico](#), "llanero" from the borders of Venezuela and Colombia,

and even American [country music](#) have all been influenced by their morose implementation of [string instruments](#), such as [violins](#) and [guitars](#).

[\[edit\]](#) **Theatre, circus and cinema**

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[\[edit\]](#) **Relations with other peoples**



An 1852 [Wallachian](#) poster advertising an auction of Roma slaves.

Because of their nomadic lifestyle and differences in language and culture, there has been a great deal of mutual distrust between these groups of Roma and their more settled neighbours. The popular image of Rom as [tramps](#) and [thieves](#) unfit for work contributed to their widespread persecution. This belief is often cited as the etymological source of the term *gyp*, meaning to "cheat", as in "I got gypped by a [con man](#)." The German name *Zigeuner* is often thought through [popular etymology](#) to derive either from *Ziehende Gauner*, which means 'travelling thieves', or from the Hungarian *Cigány* from their word "szegény" meaning "poor". The validity of these derivations, however, is disputed.

During the [Enlightenment](#), Spain briefly and unsuccessfully tried to assimilate the Roma into the mainstream population by forcing them to abandon their language and way of

life; even the word *gitano* was made illegal. Persecution of Roma reached a peak during [World War II](#) in the [Porajmos](#).

There are still tensions between the Roma and the majority population around them. Common complaints are that Roma [steal](#) and live off [social welfare](#), and residents often reject Roma encampments. In the [UK](#), [travellers](#) (referring to both [Irish Travellers](#) and Roma) became a 2005 [general election](#) issue, with the leader of the [Conservative Party](#) promising to review the [Human Rights Act 1998](#). This law, which absorbs the [European Convention on Human Rights](#) into UK primary legislation, is seen by some to permit the granting of retrospective [planning permission](#). Severe population pressures and the paucity of [greenfield](#) sites have led to *travellers* purchasing land, and setting up residential settlements almost overnight, thus subverting the planning restrictions imposed on other members of the community. Travellers argued in response that thousands of retrospective planning permissions are granted in Britain in cases involving non-Roma applicants each year and that statistics showed that 90% of planning applications by Roma and travellers were initially refused by local councils, compared with a national average of 20% for other applicants, disproving claims of preferential treatment favouring Gypsies. They also argued that the root of the problem was that many traditional stopping-places had been barricaded off and that legislation passed by the previous Conservative government had effectively criminalised their community, for example by removing local authorities' responsibility to provide sites, thus leaving the travellers with no option but to purchase unregistered new sites themselves.[\[2\]](#)

Law enforcement agencies in the United States hold regular [conferences](#) on the Roma and similar nomadic groups.

In Denmark there was much controversy when the city of Helsingør decided to put all Roma students in special classes in its public schools. The classes were later abandoned after it was determined that they were discriminatory, and the Roma were put back in regular classes. [Reference page in Danish](#)

[\[edit\]](#) **Roma in Eastern Europe**





Roma boy in bear costume, part of entertainer team for working Christmas crowds.  
Budapest, Hungary

In Eastern Europe, Roma often live in depressed [squatter](#) communities with very high [unemployment](#), while only some are fully integrated in the society. However, in some cases—notably the [Kalderash](#) clan in [Romania](#), who work as traditional [coppersmiths](#)—they have prospered. Although some Roma still embrace a nomadic lifestyle, most migration is actually forced, as most communities do not accept Romani settlements.

Many countries that were formerly part of the [Eastern bloc](#) and [former Yugoslavia](#) have substantial populations of Roma. The level of [integration](#) of Roma into society remains limited. In these countries, they usually remain on the margins of society, living in isolated, [ghetto](#)-like settlements (see [Chánov](#)). Only a small fraction of Roma children graduate from secondary schools, though numerous official efforts have been made, past and present, to compel their attendance. Roma frequently feel rejected by the state and the main population, creating another obstacle to their integration.

According to [The Guardian](#) (January 8, 2003):

"In the Czech Republic, 75% of Roma children are educated in schools for people with learning difficulties, and 70% are unemployed (compared with a national rate of 9%). In Hungary, 44% of Roma children are in special schools, while 74% of men and 83% of women are unemployed. In Slovakia, Roma children are 28 times more likely to be sent to a special school than non-Roma; Roma unemployment stands at 80%." [\[3\]](#)

In some countries, dependence on social security systems is part of the problem. For some Roma families, it may be preferable to live on social security compared to low-paid jobs. That creates many new problems: anger against Roma, conditions that produce crime, and extreme sensitivity to changes in social security. A good example of the latter

is [Slovakia](#), where reduction of social security (a family is paid allowance only for the first three children) led to civil disorder in several Roma villages.

In most countries within or applying to join the [European Union](#), Roma people can lead normal lives and may integrate into the larger society. Nevertheless, the Roma most visible to the settled community are those that for various reasons, including traditional avoidance of "pollution" by close contact with non-Roma (cultural standards of cleanliness among the Roma state that non-Roma are 'mahrimé', or spiritually unclean, and are therefore avoided for purity reasons as well as fear of 'persecution'), still live in shacks (usually built ad hoc, near railways) and beg on the streets, perpetuating the bad image of Roma overall. The local authorities may try to help such people by improving infrastructure in their settlements and subsidizing families further, but such aid is mostly viewed by the Roma as 'superficial' and 'insufficient'. Begging with pre-school children is sometimes practiced by the Roma, despite its illegality in many countries.

In 2004, [Lívía Járóka](#) and [Viktória Mohácsi](#) of Hungary became the two current Roma [Members of the European Parliament](#). The first Roma MEP was [Juan de Dios Ramirez-Heredia](#) of [Spain](#).

Seven former Communist Central European and Southeastern European states launched the [Decade of Roma Inclusion](#) initiative in 2005 to improve the socioeconomic conditions and status of the Roma minority.

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#### Languages

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