Sinti Estraixaria children at school, or, how to preserve 'the Sinti way of thinking'

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The discussion on schooling and education for Gypsy children has been running for a long time now. At present this discussion is taking several—sometimes quite opposite—directions. Some authors make a plea for schools which help to rediscover the lost cultural identity of the Gypsies, while others want liberation from school as Gypsy culture expresses itself outside the state apparatus of education. In many of these discussions the emic, or internal, vision of the Gypsy way of interpreting school and education is omitted. This article focuses on a concrete ethnographic example in which Italian Sinti give their own answers to the global dimension of school. The internal perspective is favoured here, and we can see Sinti children and their families interacting with and interpreting school according to their way of thinking. The article shows how Sinti, both children and adults, redefine and reinterpret their presence at school. It shows how school can be defined in relative terms, as a cultural value.

Keywords: Sinti, anthropology of education, childhood, body, school politics, cultural value, cultural learning, symbolic invisibility

Introduction[1]

In the current discussion about Gypsy children at school we can single out three main directions. First, the position of the German educationalist Mareile Krause, who considers open-school education for Gypsy children as a crucial step towards 'liberation'. Krause sees the present Gypsy culture as a product of long and violent discrimination and persecution which des-

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Here we are speaking of the specific cultural knowledge of the Sinti which is beyond the knowledge of the non-Gypsies.

In doing so, Sinti have elaborated their own culturally defined coping strategies. In order for us to understand how Sinti children manage to cope with these two levels, we must introduce an unusual feature of the body, or rather, some of its emissions. We are speaking of children farting (*ti dés ria*) at school and how Sinti interpret this. The human body as a concept of cultural symbolism has been described at length, emphasizing cultural systems which the body reflects. The body as a symbolic system has been taken over by feminist theory, which analyzes not only the cultural but also the gendered body. By now a lot has been written on the symbolic significance of menstrual blood and ejaculated or non-ejaculated semen but as far as I know, nothing has been written on excretion and similar physical acts as gestures of creating symbolic and cultural borders. Can something like a fart (*rial*) be seen as a cultural action?

Looking up *fart* in several German and Italian encyclopedias did not result in much. Only one encyclopedia speaks of the fart as 'a loud emission of gastric gas from the anus' (*Nuova Enciclopedia Universale* 1989: 157). As it does not go into further details, I would like to add some more information on the subtle qualities of this not always loud emission. The fart, in this context, will be introduced as the crucial expression of a culturally controlled situation by a child. It is invisible; most of the time it smells; sometimes it is loud but it can also be silent. For a Gadžo in Central Europe, the best fart—at least, when the farter is not alone—is invisible, silent, and odourless. On the other hand, for a Sinto a fart has different meanings. Sinti like to joke about funny circumstances in which human excretion takes place, and farting (*ti dés ria*) is one of their favourite subjects. For example, on the way a Sinto talks or moves, they may say: '. . . and the farts coming out from behind' (. . . *ti u ria pal vri*). Such a comment makes everybody laugh. Farts, though, are considered to be a big shame (*bari ladž*) when adult Sinti really fart in the presence of other Sinti; they cause great embarrassment. But for the Sinti a fart is not considered rude when the farter is among the Gadže, the farting is invisible, the fart is silent and stinks. Talking about children at school, we have to explore the sophisticated distinctions (distinctions much more elaborated than the ones we find in most encyclopaedias) that Sinti make when they talk about their children, school, and bodily functions.

Some reflections on anthropological concepts of education and the Sinti

We now turn to the Sinti Estraixaria of South Tyrol, Italy. They belong to a larger group of Sinti, the so-called *Sinti tedeschi* ('German Sinti'), who spent a great part of their past in German-speaking countries. Apart from the *Sinti tedeschi* there are the *Sinti italiani* ('Italian Sinti'), who left the German-speaking areas earlier (Piasere 1989).

The historical and nomadic movement of the Sinti Estraixaria—the name derives from *Estraixo*, which in Romanes means 'Austria'—can be traced back at least 120 years. We do not yet know since when they have been calling themselves Sinti Estraixaria. One hypothesis is that this name was introduced around 1918 when the Austrian–Hungarian Empire disintegrated. Despite the political changes of that time the Sinti continued to travel in the region, following their nomadic routes from Austria to Italy. Following the Second World War they changed their nomadic way of life, opting to travel in a more restricted area. (Here we will not discuss other reasons for changes in their life style.) It is important to know that the Sinti have historical ties with Austria and Italy.

There are several curious facts about the Sinti Estraixaria in Italy; for example, most of them do not speak German even though the region where they now live has been a bilingual area since at least 1919 and most of the non-Gypsies they deal with are German speaking; many of the grandparents of the adult Sinti in this area had Austrian citizenship until the 1960s; but they have only a few kinship relations with Sinti in Austria, while they have many relatives in the north of Italy.

The Gypsies in Central Europe have one experience in common: they have always been at the centre of political attention of the states in different periods. The Gypsies provoked the states to issue more specific laws to dominate and control them more efficiently. As was shown by Simoni (2000) in an article about legislation on begging in Italy in the past two hundred years, anti-Gypsy legislation was aimed at damaging the Gypsies without ever mentioning the word 'Gypsy' in laws. Similar policies concerning school laws have been pointed out by Okely (1994) and Liégeois (1988) for Europe in general and by Mayerhofer (1987), Hohmann (1988), Krause (1989), Fricke (1991, 1996), and Wippermann (1997) for Germany and Austria, in particular. In the German-speaking countries a lot of school laws were introduced to deal with specific ways of life—adopted, on the whole, by Gypsies—such

as nomadism. In the 1920s in Germany, a law requiring compulsory school attendance by all children was introduced, which said that children were not allowed to change school during term, which in effect meant no nomadism (Hohmann 1988: 75–6)

The modern states, particularly, and in our case, Germany and Austria (little is known about Italian political strategies concerning school), saw one of the possibilities of 'resolving the Gypsy problem' in specific, severe, and cruel education policies. In Württenberg, Prussia, and in Austria, children and even babies were taken away from their parents with the explanation that the state had to ensure good schooling for them (Fricke 1991, 1996; Mayerhofer 1987). As was shown by Acton (1985) and Stewart (1995), control over Gypsies has always focused on three different areas: work, settlement, and schooling.

Little is known about the experiences Sinti Estraixaria had with school politics in the past two centuries. We know that until 1919 in the county of Tyrol there were quite specific school laws for the children of farmers (Rath 1991), but we do not know whether these more relaxed laws also applied to the Sinti who travelled in this region. We can find examples, dating back up to four generations, of how the Italian state interfered in family problems by sending children to state homes and, once taken away, making it very difficult for their parents or relatives to get the children back.

One important fact is that Sinti, since their arrival in Europe, have had contact with literacy, but most of the adult Sinti I know are only semi-literate. Even taking into account Cook-Gumperz's (1986) theory of literacy as a socially constructed phenomenon, we have to ask here: Why do most Sinti, having lived in Europe for six hundred years, consider school not as a right, but only as a duty?[3]

Some indication as to how other minorities might experience school is provided by the Nigerian educational anthropologist, John Ogbu, who has elaborated a concept of culture which includes the historical experience of ethnic minorities. Ogbu worked out a typology of minorities. He distinguishes three main groups of minority: the deliberate or immigrant group, the non-deliberate or non-immigrant group, and the autonomous group (Ogbu 1987). We will discuss these three types in turn. The deliberate or immigrant minority includes groups which have taken a conscious decision to immi-

3. Ana Gomes (1998) formulated this question in her school ethnography on the Sinti Emiliani in Bologna, and started with this question a new and fundamental debate on anthropological theory of schooling in general.