

Sinti Estraxaria 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 re-interpret 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

Introduction¹

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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troyed the main cultural features and forced Gypsies to live 'in hiding' and 'in silence' (1989: 176). Open schools could allow children to rediscover their cultural identities. This approach deals with Gypsy culture as being in danger of losing its cultural values. The second approach derives from an anthropological perspective. It takes the same stance on the historical development, but also takes account of the hierarchical relation between state and minority. In this approach Gypsies have never been considered to have their own culture that has to be respected and integrated into general discourse. But Gypsies were not simply excluded. They were, as the British anthropologist Judith Okely (1994) shows, the object of systematic school politics which aimed to control the groups. Control over the groups could be established through the children; the justification of the state was simple: to give them a better education. The consequences of these policies were disastrous. But in contrast with Krause, Okely does not favour an open-school program for Gypsy children in which the culture can be rediscovered and Gypsies can liberate themselves. Okely considers the illiteracy of Gypsies 'far from being an inevitable cultural handicap', but rather as 'in many key areas a force for freedom.' 'Freedom' in this analysis means 'free from the education system', which implies freedom from the 'state apparatus' (1994: 78). Her conclusions demand more interest in and research on Gypsies, specifically into non-literate and non-territorial cultural knowledge, favouring the 'anti-school theories of Ivan Illich'. She argues that orthodox schooling is not a necessity if the Gypsies do not see it as such (1994: 78).

In the third approach, represented by the Brazilian educationalist Ana Gomes, the difficult relation between Gypsies and school is a constant. But this is nothing new, as the contacts between Gypsies and non-Gypsies have always been marked by non-communication. She characterizes the relation as one without any 'meeting points'. But—as Gomes says—'nonetheless we are speaking of a relation' (1998: 203). This is a fact which has been shown by anthropological research in the past 25 years. Gypsies are groups which can be seen only in relation with non-Gypsies. In Gomes's research, Sinti in Bologna cannot think about themselves 'without *gagi*' (1998: 203). But while Okely, who supports this perspective, speaks of Gypsies as *bricoleurs* (Okely 1983, 1994) and excludes school as a space where children and their parents might become 'bricoleurs', Gomes sees the school as one of the many spaces where Gypsies and non-Gypsies interact. She shows how school leaves some of its traces in the community, and how the community leaves some of its traces on school. In fact it is up to the anthropologist and the educational-

ist to identify and analyze these traces. For Gomes, the Sinti with whom she worked are not passively undergoing school but, as with all the other spaces, they interpret it. She concludes her work on a slightly optimistic note, seeing school as a possible meeting space for the two cultures, provided the majority are willing to discuss a 'school culture which is shared with all' (1998: 203).

I agree with Krause's and Okely's analysis of historical persecution and present discrimination as one of the most obvious features of Gypsy life in Europe. However, I do not see the 'silence' and the 'hidden' as signs of cultural loss as Krause does, but rather as very strong cultural features, to be discussed later. I agree with Okely in seeing non-literate culture as one which has to be understood in its own specific terms; but can we speak of the Gypsies as non-literate groups (see for this question Poueyto 2000)? Another question, which arises for the reality I know, is whether Gypsies want to avoid school at all at present. Surely they do not want to adopt school unquestioned; but can we say that they see non-literacy as an advantage? In the research that I present here, Sinti simply do not want to go to school like Gadže (non-Gypsies) do. But for the Sinti, as for non-Gypsies, school has become an omnipresent phenomenon, and maybe Sinti know this even better as they have to deal with these issues differently than the mainstream.

Another question which arises is: can school provide a concept which is shared with all, as Gomes favours it? A school culture that is based on a creative combination and elaboration of different cultures? Although we can find individuals who might share this vision of school, a change in the state's concept of school would amount to a cultural and political revolution.

The Italian Sinti with whom I lived and worked are realistic: they accept the presence of the Gadže and do not think about big changes or revolutions—therefore they send their children to school. In this article I want to show how Sinti children and their parents deal with school. My approach is an anthropological one. I look at how Sinti interpret school culturally and in doing so I am saying that, first, Sinti culture is not a threatened one, speaking in terms of cultural values, even though they continue to suffer discrimination and persecution. Secondly, Sinti—both parents and their children—have tried not to ignore school for about three generations now, but use it to learn how to read and write. In addition, Sinti children go to school also to learn how to become *romane*² and to gain more knowledge about the Gadže.

2. I would like to translate this word and concept with 'Sinti-like', which implies the capability to interpret the world in which Sinti live in a Sinti-like manner.

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 Württemberg, 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 *Estraxaria* 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.

grate. They hope for a better future in their new country, which they hope to achieve also through schooling. Refugees and labour immigrants are excluded from this group (1987: 269). In contrast, the non-deliberate or non-immigrant minority incorporates groups which have been colonized, conquered, or taken as slaves by the dominant society, such as the Indians of America, the blacks of America, the natives of Alaska, and the natives of Hawaii (see also Ogbu 1981, 1999). These two groups have different types of problems at school (1987: 258–9). The autonomous group, finally, is considered as not totally dominated by the majority. It is characterized by the number of its members, who are distinguished from the dominant group through race, ethnicity, religion, or language. This group, like the two other ones, suffers from discrimination, but as they are not ‘totally dominated’ (according to Ogbu) they have no particular problems at school (Ogbu 1987: 258).

Although these categories have helped to overcome prejudices and doubts concerning the intellectual capabilities of the different minority groups, Ogbu has been criticized by several educational anthropologists. Here I would like to mention only those criticisms important for our discussion of Sinti and schooling. The American educational anthropologist Douglas Foley criticizes Ogbu’s concept of culture, which to Foley is romanticizing tradition and putting authentic against non-authentic concepts (which also shows in his primary–secondary and substance–style distinctions). Foley thinks that Ogbu’s concept of culture is too deterministic in its approach (1991: 76); and the French educational sociologist Agnès Van Zanten (1997) considers Ogbu’s theory too deterministic. Van Zanten reflects on the ‘positive possibilities of an opposite identity’, which can include a ‘positive dimension of resistance and creativity/innovation’ (Van Zanten 1992; quoted in Gomes 1998: 68).

How can we apply these theories to the Sinti? A lot has been written by historians, sociologists, and psychologists on the subjects mentioned earlier, and most of this body of literature sees the Gypsies as an ideal field to address such issues as tradition/loss of traditional way of life, authentic/unauthentic features of culture, Gypsies as a culture/non-culture, Gypsy groups as resistance/refractoriness—and the debate continues. Nonetheless anthropologists such as Okely (1983), Williams (1984, 1993), Piasere (1985), and Stewart (1987) have shown that the debate on authentic v. non-authentic Gypsy culture is obsolete, as it is a culture which lives, survives, and creates itself among non-Gypsies. Gypsy culture is seen as a continuous creative process of including the non-Gypsies in their world view, using, transform-

ing, and re-interpreting their cultural and material features. It is a continual process of re-invention and recreation of the cosmos of which the non-Gypsies are a fundamental part, a part which occupies a place on a distinct symbolic order.

Ogbu does not consider the autonomous category worthy of further investigation. For us, however, it is the only one we would use, even if in a very limited way. It is the only category suitable for the Sinti as they have lived among the non-Gypsies in Europe for ever. But there are some fundamental obstacles. Sinti in South Tyrol do not see school as particularly helpful in overcoming discrimination, most of the Sinti have no particular ambitions vis-à-vis school and many Sinti do not see school as a provider of a better future.

In South Tyrol the main concerns of the non-Gypsies responsible for Gypsy children at school are absenteeism, different types of comprehension (traditional teaching does not work), the absence of participation in school projects and, as teachers and other school agents say, problems of discipline. I do not want to belittle these problems, but I will not discuss them in detail, either. It is hoped that this article will help us understand better how different symbolic weight is put on the same categories, and how from the Sinti point of view these same categories become empty ones.

Being a Sinti child

Plays and talks

Turning to Sinti children, we have to consider three different types of relationship they have with the other Sinti: the relationship with their siblings and cousins; the relationship with their parents; and the relationship with other adults (uncles, aunts, grandparents, cousins of their parents, etc.). These relationships have three things in common: they consider themselves Sinti,⁴ united in opposition to the Gadže; they are all related through marriage; and the dead persons they respect are the same.⁵ I will illustrate with some examples how these different types of relationship work for a child and what they express about Sinti culture.

4. *Sinti* describes groups of Gypsies which live mainly in Germany, Austria, France, and northern Italy. But for Sinto speakers Sinti means 'relatives', so they would say, *kala hi mur Sinti* 'these are my Sinti' (i.e., 'these are my relatives'), or *Kala hi či mur Sinti*, 'these are not my Sinti' (these are not my relatives).

5. For the concept of respect, see Williams (1993).

Some children of all ages are playing together; not necessarily all the children of the camp, but several children of different ages. We take the game where a little 5-year-old girl goes to *mangel* (begging and selling). The roles are divided between the Sinti staying at home, the *romni* (married woman/Sinta) who goes to the Gadže to obtain some money and food, and those who play the Gadže. The 'little *romni*' speaks in Italian in a yammering tone to the child playing a Gadži. *Buon giorno signora, hai qualcosa per me, i miei figli sono a casa, mio marito sta male, guarda qui, questo centrino, te lo do per pochi soldi.* ('Good afternoon, dear lady, have you got something for me, my children are at home, my husband is ill, here look at this wonderful handicrafts, I give them to you for little money.') The child playing the Gadži says, *No, no, non ti voglio qui, ho comprato qualcosa l'altra settimana.* ('No, no, I don't want you here, I bought something only last week.') The *romni*: *Oh, signora, non mandarmi via con niente, guarda qui mia figlia ha fame.* ('Oh, dear lady, don't send me away with nothing, look here, my little daughter is hungry.') The Gadži takes some stones from the ground and gives them to the *romni*, saying, *Prendi queste patate* ('Take these potatoes').

The little *romni* goes to the next Gadži, where she gets some apples and some clothes for the children and then to another one, collecting a lot of money. After her dealing she returns home happily giving all the things she obtained to her little husband/Sinto (*tino rom*), who, in the company of two other 'little men' (*tine mors*) sits by the river, smoking wood cigarettes, fishing, and looking after all his children. The children playing the male adults divide the things the little *romni* brought and start thinking about what they could do with all the money the little *romni* got. They say that they want to buy a big car, which will make all the other Sinti envious. In the meantime, the little *romni* makes coffee and prepares lunch, chatting with her *kirvi* ('godmother'). When the children are called by their real mothers for lunch the little ones do not want to interrupt, so one of the older ones now says in Romanes, *Dik koi vena u bedi, čivaha u čelo kova an u vordo, kana hunte džas minge.* ('Look there, I think the police is coming, we have to put all our things in the caravans, now we have to leave.') The little ones, excited by this danger, throw all their toys in their wheelbarrows and run home to their mothers.

Older and younger children play together a lot. In real life, Sinti, before they are married (especially the young women), must look after their younger siblings. In game-playing, the younger children make the decisions and take the initiative whereas the older children have a controlling function, in-

tervening only in critical situations. As I have shown, the children often play the role of adults, imitating the adults, their discussions, their gestures, and their behaviour (Tauber 2000a). The children incorporate real life into their games immediately. For example, only a year earlier the grandfather of one of the children had died. The Sinti, both adults and children, visit his tomb every day and the children now include these visits in their games, speaking with the dead grandfather, putting the first drop of coffee on the floor for him. The games of the children—the adults never participate or give instructions—reflect all aspects of Sinti life and values. They are a reflection of the Sinti cosmos from a children's perspective, and indeed, Sinti call these plays *romane kelapiá*, 'Sinti-like games'.

There is another feature which makes such a perfect children's reflection of Sinti life possible, namely, children participate in all matters of life (except sex). Children go with their mothers to *mangel* (begging and selling); they accompany their fathers to negotiate with the Gadže when buying new caravans or cars; they are present when their relatives have problems with the police. They are present in family conflicts, conflicts between different families, fights between their parents, parties until late at night; they are also present at mourning feasts and funerals. When Sinti are chatting, negotiating, fighting, dancing, drinking, mourning—children are always there.

This intergenerational phenomenon among different Gypsy groups—not distinguishing between space reserved for children and space reserved for adults—has also been observed by Okely (1983) among the Traveller Gypsies in Great Britain, by Piasere (1985, 1991) among the Slovenko Roma and the Xoraxané Roma in northern Italy, by Stewart (1987) among the Vlach Gypsies in Hungary, and by Williams (1993) among the Manus in France. Though none of these authors has done anthropological research on Gypsy childhood, they all mention the same phenomenon: the presence of children in almost every context of Gypsy life. Every group, though, has a unique and particular manner of conceptualizing itself as a block, obliterating almost every border between the generations, while at the same time establishing a clear distinction between themselves and the non-Gypsies.

In the relationship with their siblings and their parents, children are very protected and controlled. But in order to become strong and courageous Sinti, protection is not enough. The relationship of the children with adult relatives is less one of provocation and more of protection and children must learn to defend themselves. The following incident illustrates this. Iesael, 5 years old, had to endure sneering remarks of his father's cousin, Milo

(50 years old). Milo was leaning on the fence smoking a cigarette and Iesael was standing in front of him in his cowboy boots.

MILO: Dikium kau nevo auto tur dad kindis, kau hi či je lačo auto. ('I saw the new car your father bought, it is not a good car.')

IESAEL: Hi či čačo, hi je Mercedes, hi u ferdar auti. ('That is not true, it is a Mercedes, it is the best car.')

MILO: E no, kau hi či je lačo auto, Mercedes kerela či lače auti. ('Oh no, it is not a good car at all, Mercedes does not make good cars.')

IESAEL: Mercedes hi u ferdar auto van krol, mur dad kindis les. ('Mercedes is the best car there is, my father bought it.')

MILO: Miro auto hi ferdar her tiro. ('My car is much better than yours.')

[Iesael becomes thoughtful and a bit sad.]

MILO [insisting]: Džinehe ke miro auto hi ferdar her tiro? ('You know that my car is better than yours?')

IESAEL [now very angry]: Doho, kana de nox. ('Enough, stop it.')

The Sinti who listened to this conversation were pleased with Iesael's reaction. In this dialogue the father did not intervene, even though he was present. I have witnessed situations where the sneers and provocations were too heavy-handed and the children started to cry; when this happened their parents would intervene, entertaining their adult relatives with a joke, saying that those Sinti were 'shitty' (*ful* = 'shit', *fule* = plural, adjective of *shit*).

To be a child among the Sinti means to grow up in very controlled surroundings. Children until the age of ten to twelve are not allowed to hang around in town, their parents do not leave them with other relatives, they are not allowed to sleep in the caravans of their cousins or to spend a night outside the camp, etc. (something which even adult Sinti would never do without their families). For girls this protection/control continues until they marry; for boys it decreases with their adolescence. But even then parents will explain their overprotection by saying that if something would happen to their children, they had to kill the responsible adult (*hunte dap les ti mer*), even if it was a Sinto. In this tightly controlled and protected environment, tensions and provocations are seen as making the children strong and courageous, characteristics which are necessary if they want to live and survive as Sinti.⁶

6. A similar observation was made by Zita Réger, working on children's language learning. She shows how Rom mothers improvise long, colourful dialogues with their children (newborns), 'whose topic is not a directly experienced event, but the future life of the child, his

'Taking kisses and smells'

The children's social relationships are ambivalent in that they are protective and controlled while at the same time they allow autonomous behaviour. But there is one sphere of Sinti childhood which is beyond this ambivalence: their body. Children's bodies, in contrast with adult bodies, are seen as absolutely vulnerable to every kind of bad or hostile gesture. The child's body and its excretions are the subject of extensive talks (also between men). Its excrements are not seen as dirty or disgusting. In one such situation, while I was eating with my family, a Sinto was talking with other Sinti on the 'shit of my daughter' (*mur čakro ful*). I said to him—half joking, half seriously—that it was a quite disgusting subject (*hai grausi*) as we were eating. He was shocked by my reaction and said that his daughter's shit was not to be the subject of disgust and bad talking. He also threatened me half jokingly/half seriously that he would curse me (*prasau tut*), as he had to protect his daughter.

The children's bodies and their excretions are seen as particularly vulnerable in a symbolic way. Sinti would never leave their children's nappies in public places, as they would fear the Gadže's cursing on their children's excretions, which could harm them.⁷ Cursing is seen as a threat but also a protection of Sinti life.⁸ In this case cursing is seen as particularly dangerous if done by a Gadžo on their children's excretions.

But not only their children's shit (*čavengro ful*) is the subject of talks: in relation with their children, adults 'take my nose, my vagina, my penis, my bottom, my foot', etc. (*lau mange mur nag, mur mindž, mur kuar, mur xep, mur piro*, etc.). They take these parts of the body saying that 'they are really good' (*hai lačo* = masculine; :*i*=feminine; :*e* = plural). When children do

future tasks, activities, possible conflict of his adult life, smaller or greater events of his future life, and all this very often in a very minute, tale-like or dramatic presentation' (1988: 118).

7. On another occasion a father could not calm down, as he had left his daughter's nappy in a public rubbish bin. After two days of anxiety he decided to drive back (two hours by car) to retrieve the napkin. He feared the Gadže's curse on the napkin.

8. Cursing is not exactly the same as *ti prases*, which we can translate with 'using many bad words'. *Prasapen* (the subject) potentially includes bad talking about death ('eat your death': *xa tur mule*) which is a threat Sinti fear most and the cause of feuds where all the Sinti (Sinti understood in the sense of parents) get involved. If Sinti want to emphasize that they are telling the truth (*hi u čačapen*) they say, 'You can curse on me if I am not telling the truth' (*sixer prase man*). In the section entitled *The teacher's point of view* we will see how Sinti, protecting their children from the Gadže use cursing against them—an act which the Gadže see as threat, but which for the Sinti is protection of their children.

something that touches adults, adults say ‘to eat her cunt/his cock’ (*ti xas lakri mindž, ti xas leskro kuar*).⁹ Adults then ‘take kisses’ (*lau mange je pus*) or take smells (*lau mange mur čakri kant*). While saying that they ‘take’ some of their child’s body they make a gesture towards the body part they are talking of, touching it and bringing the hand with which they touched their child’s body to their mouth and kiss it. The astonishing thing is that they take not only parts of the body but also such airy things as the smell. Smell is seen as something which can be taken with the described gesture, held under the taker’s nose, and enjoyed with pleasure—even the smell of a fart. Children’s farts, as opposed to adults’ farts, are seen by their adult relatives and especially their parents as good or fine farts (*lače ria*).

Sinti children and school

The parents of the children who now go to school were the first Gypsies who went to school as a group in Italy under the so-called *Lacio Drom* program (1963–86). This was a project financed by the government, under which Sinti children were to be prepared for further schooling in the state schools (for a more detailed account, see Karpati 1989). None of the children who attended these classes continued school after the *Lacio Drom*. Most of the adults who participated cannot write and read properly today.

How did the new situation—since 1986 Sinti children are subject to compulsory education for at least eight years¹⁰—change the Sinti’s rhythm of life? The older children are at school, the little ones stay with their fathers while their mothers are out for *mangel*. Eagerly expected by their younger siblings, children return from school at mid-day (they do not go to the afternoon classes; asked about it they would say, ‘I must also stay at home for a bit’ (*Me hunte čáp nina je pisle khere*).

When these children returned from school they rarely talked about it. I sometimes asked them what they had been up to, and they would say, ‘Nothing’ (*gorči*). They rarely asked me to help them with their homework even though they knew that I had much school experience. Watching them play their games I rarely saw them playing going to school, while they did play going to *mangel*, buying big cars, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee, escaping from the police, talking between godfathers, fishing, football, going

9. See on the different meanings of eating (*ti xas*) Tauber 2000b.

10. Circolare Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione n.207 prot. 4846 del 16/07/86.

to the tombs of the dead—all this, but school was not part of their games.

Apart from the morning routine of getting up early—even on cold winter days—and the mid-day routine of picking up the children, there were almost no signs of school which were familiar to me, signs which I could easily associate with and decode. The Sinti in the camp where I lived did not allow their children to play truant too often, something to which I will return later. I soon learnt not to press the mothers when they declined further schooling for their children, after one mother answered, *Na, hoske, u čaven lena penge romnia ke džana ti mangel, hoske hunte kerelle skuoli* ('No, it makes no sense, the boys will marry girls, who go to *mangel*—why should they go to school?').¹¹ After a while I forgot that the children also had to go to school. I was reminded of it only in the morning when I saw, through the window of my caravan, sleepy children with heavy schoolbags, and at mid-day when happy children returned, awaited by their younger siblings who wanted to play with them. School was simply absent in the camp, in the games of the children, and in the talks between adults and children. How do the Sinti manage not to make a great deal of school even though their children go there every morning? And why do they not talk too much about school? Before answering these questions I want to go into my experiences with Sinti children in the classroom, with some teachers, and with the children who go to school for the first time.

*The classroom situation*¹²

When I entered the classroom for the first time, I did not know all the children of the Sinti in South Tyrol. I did not check the name lists because I wanted to see whether I was able to discover the Sinti children in the classroom on my own. In some of the classes very interesting things happened. Even though I had known the Sinti for a long time and had lived with them for years, I did not recognize the children that I did not already know. In one particular class I thought that there were only two Sinti children, while in fact there were four. In another class I thought the child I was supposed to observe was absent, but he was there. In yet another class I discovered,

11. Among the Sinti *Estraxaria* there is a very strict division of labour. In most families women go to *mangel*, while the men contribute to the family income only in moments of economic and/or social crisis (wife in prison, illness, etc.). Men do represent the Sinti way of life, which is made possible by the money women obtain through *mangel* (Tauber 1999a, 2000b).

12. The results I present here are based on data of an ethnographic research in classrooms which took place from September 2000 until June 2001.

only after a few days, and only by accident while checking the name list, that there were other Sinti children in the classroom whom I had not spotted after three days of participant observation.

Pupils are not allowed to speak anything but Italian at school. This applies particularly to Gypsy children, as one teacher admits. While the Roma children do not care about this prohibition and speak *Romané* loudly with their Roma classmates, the Sinti children do not do this. In the presence of the teacher they speak Italian, and only if they are certain that there is no teacher around do they speak in their own language.¹³

In many classrooms I observed that Sinti children preferred the periphery in the classroom. Many children I met in the classrooms were sitting at the end, tucked away in a corner. But apart from their visible marginality, their behaviour changed markedly from the Sinti context to the classroom context. The children were almost invisible and in many cases I would not recognize them as Sinti at all. At first sight there were no visible cultural features of the children's behaviour in the classroom, in the same way that it seemed as if there were no visible features of school at the camp. I will return to this strong feature of visibility/invisibility of Sinti children at school, as I think it is one of the most important aspects of this group of Sinti in northern Italy. But first let us see how the teachers see these children.

The teacher's point of view

When I went to school for my research, I did not tell the teachers and headmasters that I was familiar with the Sinti of the region, nor that I speak Romanes and that I have lived in a camp for a long time. At the first meeting the headmaster of one school gave me the list of the pupils. The list was divided into two columns: Italian and foreign pupils. In this list the Sinti were grouped with the foreign pupils, even though the headmaster and the teach-

13. The situation described here is more valid for those towns where the Sinti live in small camps, with only one extended family, while the situation changes dramatically in the capital of the province, where the camp has been constructed for all the Sinti families who do not live in flats and are registered there (150 to 180 persons). As a result, in one camp many extended families are forced to live together in spite of strong tensions between the families, which Sinti normally resolve through avoidance and nomadic strategies. This particular camp situation is reflected at school as well. Children are either very silent as in the little towns or very aggressive, an attitude which is less known in small towns. At schools in this town a high rate of absenteeism has been observed, children come to school only sporadically, from Easter on many children are not going to school any more. It seems that there is a connection between settlement situations and the behaviour of Sinti children at school.

er know that the Sinti are Italian citizens. In the head office of the Italian section of the primary school in this province, Sinti children of all the schools are registered under the title foreign and disabled children.¹⁴ Taking into account this categorization as foreigners on a bureaucratic level gives us an indication of how little school authorities are prepared to deal with the Sinti children at school.

The headmistress of one school mentioned some tensions with the Sinti families, telling me that some of the parents had threatened some teachers. Later on a teacher told me more about this threat. The father of a boy (6 years old) had come to speak with a teacher, telling her that his son was afraid of her because she screamed a lot in the classroom. The comment of the teacher who told me about this episode was, 'They [the Gypsies] come here to tell us that we should not scream. They are so impudent. They had better check their own behaviour.' This is one of many examples of what Gomes defined as 'non-communication within a relation' (1998: 203).

Talking with the teachers about their work in general and pupils in particular, many said that they had 'big problems' with the 'nomads' (in Italian schools Gypsies are called *nomadi*, 'nomads'), and especially with the Sinti.¹⁵ The teachers consider the Sinti closed and introverted. One teacher did not hesitate to say that she preferred a class without *zingari* (Italian for 'Gypsies'). Another teacher said that the Sinti were 'hard as nails', and added that all the other foreign pupils were easier to handle. She was negatively impressed and almost offended by the Sinti parents' mistrust of school.

The teachers told me that the children are not allowed by their parents to participate in school trips; that they do not participate in the afternoon lessons; that their parents come to school during the breaks—even if they are not allowed to—to see their children; that they rarely do their homework; that their school material such as pencils and books is often incomplete. In addition, teachers who do not show any particular aversion against Sinti children justify the policy of schools not to have too many Gypsy children in one school, as they are seen as problematic and difficult.

But in contrast with the Roma, many teachers said, the Sinti children were very silent. For the teachers the problem with Sinti children in small towns (again I want to underline the difference with the capital) were not problems

14. This is an ambivalence which is expressed in the circular of the *Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione 1986* itself (see n. 10). For further analysis of this circular see Ana Gomes (1998: 7).

15. I described one teacher who represented a real exception to this panorama in Tauber (2003).

of discipline in the classroom. But most of the teachers felt provoked by the fact that the Sinti remained very close and 'hard as nails'. One interesting observation which the teachers themselves made was that the cultural distance between Sinti children and non-Gypsies was deeper than the one between children of immigrants and Italians.

'Our children must know how the Gadže are'

One day, returning from my participant observation at school, I spoke with the Sinti about my school experience and asked them if they had any ideas on how the situation could be improved. They said that nothing could be done. I asked them if it would help if at school the children could speak about their own cultural knowledge, which is very different from the knowledge the other children have. They replied that this made no sense because a Gadžo would never understand the Sinti, so why should they talk about their own matters? When I mentioned that the children suffer at school, one father replied, *Me džinau nina ke jon laidena ma mengre čaven hunte džinelle her hi u Gadže* ('Yes I know that they suffer, but our children must know how the Gadže are'). And, to make the point clearer, another father said, *Jon hunte džalle či pal u Gadžengro šero, ma hunte džalle pal u Sintengro šero* ('They must not follow the Gadže way of thinking, they must keep the Sinti way of thinking', literally, 'They must not go by a Gadže mind but they must go by a Sinti mind').

The symbolic transformation of a fart

With medical certificates many Sinti families avoid sending their children to school from the age of 6.¹⁶ The parents think they are too small (*subut tikne*) for school. Sinti say that school is a shock for their children because they are not used to the frantic rhythm of school organization; they are used to having their parents around them, and they do not know the Gadže. Few Sinti, in contrast with the Xoraxane Romá who came as refugees to the area where I lived with the Sinti only ten years ago, send their children to kindergarten or nursery school. Before compulsory schooling, Sinti children stay with their parents; while their mothers are out for *mangel* they stay with their fathers. So for children, going to school means to be separated from their

16. In Italy compulsory education is from the ages of 6 to 14. With the latest school reform, compulsory school will be extended. All children have to go to school up to the age of 14, afterwards they can decide if they want to continue with school or if they want to do *formazione professionale* until the age of 18.

family for the first time and to be alone among the Gadže for the first time.

School is a cultural and social space defined and occupied by the non-Gypsies where Sinti, until a few years ago, did not actively take part in creating, recreating, and interpreting its inherent symbols. When confronted with national school politics, Sinti somehow managed to avoid regular schooling. Since at least 1986 Sinti children live in this institutionalized space of the non-Gypsies for some hours each day. In these morning hours the children are separated from their parents. It is a place where their parents are not allowed to take part. It is there that, for the first time in their life, Sinti children have to show that they are real Sinti (*čače Sinti*) who are able to follow 'the Sinti way of thinking' (*ti džal pal u Sintengro šero*), even in difficult situations. Sinti in prison have similar experiences, but they are adults and know how to behave like real Sinti, they know how to be *romane*.¹⁷

What happens with the children? Since their parents have only rudimentary school experience themselves, Sinti children go to school without their parents being able to give them concrete instructions for their behaviour. Nevertheless some children are very proud of going to school, especially if they have seen their older brothers and sisters go to school. Their parents buy them a new schoolbag of which they take great care and which they show to grandparents and uncles and aunts, explaining that now they are ready for school. In one such situation the grandmother's comment on the big bag was, *Se hi tut noia an i skoola lehe i tasa per ti džas ti mangel* ('If school is boring, just use this bag for *mangel*'). And school is not mentioned anymore until the day the child goes to school for the first time.¹⁸

Here we see Iesael again, the child we met earlier in the camp. Iesael is the youngest of five children and saw his sister and his brothers go to school. He is excited when the first day of school draws closer. Then, when he arrives in the classroom, his courage diminishes immediately: the teacher speaks only Italian, and Iesael is really scared, but he persists. The next day he is no longer convinced he wants to go to school, and he would like to stay at

17. See also n. 2. To be Romano means to respect and live according to the values of the Sinti: dress, behaviour, way of talking, eating, drinking, sharing, etc., to know the distinction between Gadže and Sinti, and to be able to implement this distinction in every kind of situation.

18. Ana Gomes describes one such first school day for the Sinti in an elementary school in Bologna. 'Sending one's child to school is a cause of tension for the mothers (some of them exited the classrooms and left their husbands behind, feeling unable to deal with the imposition inflicted upon their child). [...] After the children had been left alone, two of them cried in an almost convulsive way. The others explained that it was because they are afraid'. (1999: 167–8).

home. His parents, brothers, and sisters try to comfort him, saying that the Gadže there are not so bad (*kiake dibie*). Iesael plucks up his courage and goes to school the next day. But this day he does not resist and escapes during a break. The teacher only discovers his absence later and calls the parents, who, deeply worried, go in search of their child. They find him in the city centre, a town district Iesael does not know at all. From then on the father or the elder brother wait in front of the school, hidden from the school authorities, in case of another attempt to escape—many Sinti parents do this. This situation does not change in the next three months. Those responsible at school are not aware of the relatives who wait in front of the school, ready to protect their child. Only after three and a half months does Iesael leave school, happy and proud for the first time, telling his father on the way home that today he had done a special thing, namely, showing the Gadže who he is, *Kau dives dium bare ria pre i maestra ti mur kompani* ('Farting on the teacher and on his classmates').

Conclusion

Though in Ogbu's (1987) analysis of the autonomous group children have no particular problems at school, I would like to suggest that it depends on the kinds of problem we are dealing with. In my research I have seen many different Sinti children with many different problems, at least at an intellectual level. I met numerous children without any specific comprehension problems at all, and some of them do well at school. But here we are moving along a non-Gypsy level of argumentation. The measuring of success of ethnic minorities at school and the terminology of 'ethnic school failure' is ethnocentric. And indeed Sinti show us how the categories of success and ethnic school failure are empty as their children have to do another job at school, namely, the job of going on, following the Sinti way of thinking. This way of thinking expresses itself through silence and invisibility. Like the fart, smelling, perhaps, but in a group of persons the farter is not recognizable. 'Farting on the Gadže' (*ti dés ria pral u Gadžende*) is an expression that Sinti use when they talk about how they create confusion and discomfort in certain situations, how they take revenge and attack someone who has said or has done something against them. While at the camp, Iesael defended himself by shouting at an adult Sinto, in the context of the Gadže, after three months of being afraid and scared. Without activating any symbolic system, he becomes active in an undiscoverable way—farting.

In this situation the fart of a child is not a good thing which their parents might take and smell with pleasure. The fart here is a subtle expression of how the Sinti in specific contexts, where they have no possibility to avoid direct intervention of the Gadže in their affairs (in this case their children's education in a place to which adults have no access), reinforce the borders between themselves and the Gadže. The fart as an airy thing and a physical act contains not only a physical reaction towards something a child fears, but has to be seen as the action of a child that for the first time in his life is actively participating in creating the symbolic borders between the Gadže and the Sinti.

As the child is experiencing this creation for the first time on his own, we could guess that school provides a new space for rites of passage for Sinti children, and in fact we see parents who are afraid to let their children go and children for whom the first months of school are traumatic. But I do not think that the first entrance into school can be seen as a rite of passage, as Sinti do not meet the Gadže only in certain crucial moments of their lives. As we have seen earlier the Gadže are present in Sinti life, always and everywhere. So school just provides one possible situation which children and adults confront throughout their lives.

One dominant feature of the presence of Sinti children at school is their invisibility, or their being hidden and their silence—invisibility in the classroom organisation, in their behaviour (no problems of discipline, even if teachers see it differently), in not using their language in the presence of the teacher, in not being physically absent (this is valid for little towns with camps of one extended family). The Sinti could find no better answer to their experience amidst the Gadže than being present without showing themselves. This is not surprising anyway as it seems to be a main feature of Sinti culture. Sinti, although very different from the Gadže, have no visible rituals. There exists, as I have shown elsewhere in connection with their music, no highlight, no surface of a ritual which an outsider could decode or attack (Tauber 1999b).¹⁹ Similar features we have in this situation: children are silent, their reaction against school is not a visible one which school authorities could grasp and destroy, it is a non-ritualized action in which a child shows in a Sinti-like way (*Romanes*) how he, as a real Sinto, is able not to expose his true identity to the Gadže.

19. My analysis of silence and invisibility was strongly influenced by the work of Williams (1993).

It would be foolish to say that Sinti do not want to learn how to read and write. They know perfectly well that being illiterate creates problems for them, and that they need methods for decoding Gadže literacy. But school is not only a place where one learns how to read and write: school is a cultural place, an institution where a whole society is educated. School is the result of centuries of development and manifestations of a specific way of thought—a thought the non-Gypsies call ‘culture’, a thought the Sinti call *Gadžengro šero*: ‘the Gadže way of thinking’.

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