Gypsy fortune-telling in Houston: the study of a profession

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Abstract
This study deals with the Gypsy subculture in Harris County, Texas, and focuses upon the profession of fortune-telling. A review of the literature on the Gypsy in twentieth-century America is undertaken, and this information is related to contemporary Gypsy life in Harris County. Approximately forty-five sedentary Gypsy families reside in Harris County, the majority centered in Houston. These Gypsies retain their ethnic identity, speak Romany, maintain a tribal organization, arrange marriages with the customary bride-price and observe other basic traditions. Fortune-telling is the exclusive and sole profession of the female Gypsy and probably provides the principal source of income to the Gypsy community. Data about fortune-telling were obtained primarily from examination of Gypsy advertising, case histories from clients of the Gypsy, and consultation with six Gypsy practitioners. Gypsy fortune-tellers appeal to Negro, white, and Mexican-American clients by costly and extensive advertising that emphasizes culturally legitimized traditions of each group. For blacks the Gypsy is often identified as a spiritual advisor or may assume the role of a conjurer; for whites she serves as a counselor, palm reader, or handwriting analyst; and for Mexican-Americans she may pose as a Catholic Sister or as a curandera. The same practitioner may advertise simultaneously to all three groups. Case histories were obtained from former clients of Gypsies as well as ten subjects who responded by telephone to a Gypsy-type advertisement that was placed by the author in a local black newspaper. Most of the individuals were born in Southern states and had seen faith healers, Indian readers, as well as several local Gypsy spiritual advisors. Advice was sought for a variety of matters and several clients seemed in need of medical attention. The Gypsy fortuneteller was not recognized as a Gypsy per se but was viewed as an authentic agent of God. Clients often expressed dissatisfaction over the Gypsy’s high prices and ineffective treatment. The writer consulted six Gypsy fortune-tellers in the context of a fortune-telling session. A highly stereotyped style of fortunetelling is practiced, with prophecies about the distant future, the past, and the present made in that order and in terms of similar categories. Highly rational advertisements and adoption of current modes of divination may suggest some acculturation in the fortune-telling profession among Gypsies. Samples of advertising in other large cities are almost identical in form and content and Gypsies have continually modified their style of divination to fit popular demand. It is proposed that Gypsy fortune-telling remains a traditional profession and provides information that is relevant to the study of Gypsy culture.

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Fortune telling is the practice of predicting information about a person's life. The scope of fortune telling is in principle identical with the practice of divination. The difference is that divination is the term used for predictions considered part of a religious ritual, invoking deities or spirits, while the term fortune telling implies a less serious or formal setting, even one of popular culture, where belief in occult workings behind the prediction is less prominent than the concept of fortune-telling is the exclusive and sole profession of the female Gypsy and probably provides the principal source of income to the Gypsy community. Data about fortune-telling were obtained primarily from examination of Gypsy advertising, case histories from clients of the Gypsy, and consultation with six Gypsy practitioners. Gypsy fortune-tellers appeal to Negro, white, and Mexican- American clients by costly and extensive advertising that emphasizes culturally legitimized traditions of each group. For blacks the Gypsy is often identified as a spiritual advisor or may assume the role of a co