

# Welcome to COYOTE 0

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## BETWEEN EUROPE AND MY COMMUNITY

### The Patchwork of Roma Culture

#### Exploring a World of Diversity

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Before I started attending the courses and international meetings arranged at the European Youth Centres, the world I knew, that of the gypsies, was very limited.

In Spain, there has never been very much contact with Roma from other areas. Contact with Roma from former Yugoslavia, Romania, and so on was restricted to hearsay, and some Spanish Kale always said that they were not real Roma. There has, however, been limited contact with Sinti (French Roma, some of whom live in caravans: they are also known as Manouches). People in Spain have never truly been aware of the evil inflicted by the Nazi Holocaust on the Roma population, and there is no real political awareness of the idea of respect. The Romani language was banned for centuries and has thus been reduced to a vocabulary of about a hundred words, intermingled with Castilian, so that it can no longer, strictly speaking, be regarded as a separate dialect.

Despite their lack of reference points, the Kale have stuck together; they proudly defend their status as a separate people and have retained the key elements of their identity: a family, social and economic structure which has helped them to survive while preserving the traditions and customs that mark them out clearly from the majority, reinforce their attachment to a very particular feeling, way and concept of living, and make them the equals of their Roma brothers.

This isolation has meant that we have lost sight of the extraordinary diversity of the patchwork of Roma culture. It is surprising to see how the same spirit can give rise to so many different perfumes which only serve to enhance the delicacy and splendour of something very special, as a culture can be.

The first time I was able to immerse myself in that something very special was in 1996, when I attended my first meeting with Roma from other countries. At first, I was very keen to get to know these other Roma, who, although I was one of their kind, seemed so different. Once I had met with them, however, I felt somewhat disconcerted. I must admit that it was not easy to break through the barrier. Until then, it had been so easy for me to say what it meant to be a Rom! Now, I found myself challenging many of the statements and beliefs I had held to be absolute from an early stage in my childhood.

Little by little, as we slowly began to overcome our initial fears, we became aware of something amazing, something we could not explain but which was gradually taking us over. There was a kind of synchronisation,

a kind of harmony which made us feel as though we were becoming part of a vast world which we were beginning to appreciate beyond our little differences. The feeling of brotherhood, sharing, joy and laughter at certain situations, understanding the world and human relationships... something very deep was helping us to see, to discover more clearly and closely the imperceptible yet solid link that made us all equal as individuals within our particular group.

This discovery, this feeling of growing and learning about something you have been denied, was so great that I felt the impulse to learn more and to take part in other activities: I now have a more comprehensive knowledge and a fighting spirit which, in a sense, drives me to carry on working towards a goal which I believe in. Being now a youth leader myself, I have been fortunate enough to have been part of a team of trainers at a variety of training courses for young Roma. I only hope that the other young Roma with whom I am working will be able to enjoy and experience the same feeling that I experienced myself.