

# INTRODUCTION

## *Situating the Field*



One night, as I was walking the streets of el Rastro together with some Payo friends ('Payo' is the term Gitanos apply to non-Gitanos), in what seemed like a small, insignificant alley, we stopped in front of a worn-out concrete building with a roughly painted metal door. There was no sign to indicate that it was a church other than the subdued sound of intense singing and clapping. I asked a couple of men standing nearby if it would be ok for us to enter. They nodded their heads and as we passed them said: 'This is God's house. It is open to everyone.' Only one of the Payos in my company dared to join me in my quest. The 'sectarian Gitanos' frightened them, the others said. Inside, the lights were turned off, and we could only vaguely make out a crowd of 80 or so people, but as our eyes got used to the darkness, we could see the contours of the choir along with the rest of the congregation, who sang and clapped along to the heartfelt singing. We sat down alongside some middle-aged women. They greeted us with big smiles and the words '*Bienvenidos*' ('Welcome') and '*Dios te vendiga*' ('God bless you').

Although I was unaware of it at the time, this church (and its ritual – *el culto* 'the cult') was to become my ethnographic 'home' and 'point of departure' in the years to come. The rhythm, volume and intensity of *el culto* would fill my nights and days – my dream life as well as my social life.

With time, I came to understand the ritual of *el culto* as the core of the Rastro Gitanos' social – and of course religious – life, and the focal point for the social and cultural reproduction of the local Gitano population. In this sense, *el culto* is community creating and regenerating; it is a social meeting place, as well as a space for leisure, moral discourse and disciplining, and for sharing the sorrows and joys of life. *El culto* is also where the Rastro

Gitanos, collectively, address God and are addressed by God in the shape of *el Espíritu Santo* ('the Holy Spirit'). It is where the words of the Bible are brought to life, as socially relevant and present. Through *el culto*, the Rastro Gitanos receive and give themselves a place in history – as 'God's chosen people' – and thereby also a place in the present and future. *El culto* is where personal matters are made collective, general and existential, and where the collective is made personal; that is, where the values and worth of both Christianity and *el pueblo Gitano* ('the Gitano people') are personalized, internalized and embodied, but also contested and challenged.

In sermons, the pastor refers to the sphere of non-believers as *el mundo afuera* ('the world outside [of *el culto*]'), often pointing to the external door of the church when addressing this space of 'moral degradation and disgrace'. He construes this world of the outside as the space where Satan lurks; a place populated by 'condemned and lost souls'. We are told time and again that Satan comes in many colours and shapes, and that this space of externality is at times dangerous, with seductive demons and satanic temptations. *El mundo afuera* is thought to be mostly populated by Payos, and it thus coincides to an extent with the Rastro Gitanos' concept of *el mundo de los Payos* ('the world of the Payos') – majority society, the space where the Rastro Gitanos make their living. The Gitanos of el Rastro also contrast *el mundo de los Payos* with their own world, *el pueblo Gitano*, a social collective that at times includes and at other times excludes Gitanos living elsewhere in Madrid and Spain. Thus, for the Rastro Gitanos, *el culto* becomes a place of transition; a liminal space for both people and values, situated as they are between – or across – various 'worlds' or 'spheres' of value. Operating in *el mundo afuera* or *el mundo de los Payos*, the Rastro Gitanos – as traders and neighbours – act as individuals and family cooperatives. In *el culto*, however, persons and families are merged with others to form a larger Gitano body, a *communitas*. In this way, the Rastro Gitanos become reintegrated into the collective, and the collective is personified and embodied in each member. As *el culto* is held for two hours, six times a week, this process is virtually continuous and ever-present for the participants. 'Are you going to *el culto* tonight?' was the question I heard most frequently during my fieldwork – directed towards others as well as myself. As months went by, I understood that there was really only one answer to this question and that was 'Yes'. As more time passed, I realized that this 'Yes' could mean both 'Yes and 'No' depending on the who, why and what of the situation.

Epitomizing the ethnographic core of the book, *el culto* represents a combined empirical-theoretical disjuncture between a local expression and a global phenomenon, namely that of Charismatic Christianity, Evangelical Christianity or Pentecostalism. As a Pentecostal church, *el culto* is not Catholic. In Spain, this has somewhat of a strong oppositional sting

to it, especially when combined with Gitano ethnic belonging, as is mostly the case. The Catholic Church in Spain, standing historically very close to the Francoist political faction, has historically been very active in turning Gitanos away from what has been seen as a pagan and shameful lifestyle to a more righteous one. Time and again I was made aware of the obvious historic parallel between the sanctions and harassment experienced by the first evangelicals of el Rastro and the persecution of the apostles who founded the first churches. As such, the Gitanos' conversion from Catholicism to Pentecostalism can also be seen as something of a political project.

One main focus of the book is thus how this highly ritualized practice opens up new ways of experiencing, articulating and practising Gitano alterity, identity and otherness from the perspective of the Gitanos of el Rastro. Part of this focus includes an interest in the forces and potential consequences of transcendental modes of being, doing and thinking for the Rastro Gitanos and their cosmological and ontological ideas and notions. In sum, I take the present book to offer an experimental, phenomenological exploration of what it means to be Gitano/a from a Rastro Gitano/a perspective, emphasizing how they themselves *embody*, *experience* and *interpret* their specific ways of being, making and acting in and upon the world '*a la manera Gitana*' ('the Gitano way').

## ABOUT THE BOOK

This book presents an ethnographic study of the more classical kind, in the sense that it finds its locus and focus amongst a particular group of people. The place of reference is the outdoor market area of the city centre of Madrid (Spain), called *el Rastro*. The people of the study are a group of Gitanos (Spanish Gypsies)<sup>1</sup> that characterize themselves as middle to upper class or 'elites', self-employed traders ('*comerciantes*') and Pentecostal believers ('*creyentes*') – working, living and attending churches in el Rastro. I refer to these people as they do themselves, as the Gitanos of el Rastro, the Rastro Gitanos or only the Gitanos.<sup>2</sup>

The anthropological inquiries presented in this book are based mainly on material developed from long-term ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation conducted between 2012 and 2022 (for more details, see Brodersen 2021). In short, it was my persistent participation in the ritual of *el culto* that became my main gateway into the Gitano community. From there, I was invited into other spheres of Rastro Gitano life and was able to accompany people in a variety of daily affairs such as cooking, cleaning, meeting up with friends and family, buying groceries, having a coffee and selling goods at the market.

In short, this study is about what it means to live and act in and upon the world ‘*a la manera Gitana*’ (‘the Gitano way’) from the perspective of the Gitanos of el Rastro. Hence, I explore their creation and articulation of *el pueblo Gitano* (‘the Gitano people’) – this ‘society within society’ – as representative of an alternative way of being in the world that rests upon distinct and at times opposing cultural, moral and ideological values and notions, as compared to those of mainstream Spanish society. These distinct values align with the three key topics of this book, which include (1) the Gitanos’ ethos of ‘being one’s own master’, involving notions of self-employment, anti-proletarianism and anti-authoritarianism; (2) the all-encompassing religiosity that seems to saturate every aspect of Gitano lives; and (3) their ‘ontology of simultaneity’, descriptive of the ontological implications of the Gitanos’ relation to their Payo (non-Gitano) surroundings. *Simultaneity* thus becomes a key concept in understanding the Gitanos’ position in and relation to larger society, as well as for defining their multiple ways of making sense of the(ir) world, cosmologically and ontologically.

## BOOK ORGANIZATION

The book is divided into four main parts: The introductory Part I – Introduction to the Field (Chapters 1 and 2), Part II – Introduction to the ‘Making of Market’ (with Chapters 3 and 4), Part III – Introduction to the ‘Making of Mercy’ (with Chapters 5, 6 and 7) and the synergizing Part IV – Introduction to the ‘Making of Meaning’ (with Chapters 8 and 9). As the titles indicate, these parts present the Gitanos of el Rastro as creators of their own economic, spiritual and social existence. Parts II-IV come with an empirical and theoretical Introduction.

### Part I. Introduction to the Field

In Chapter 1, I present the general ethnographic context and situate the field of research empirically, methodologically<sup>3</sup> and in terms of strategy of analysis. In Chapter 2, I follow up by contextualizing the field and the Gitanos of el Rastro in terms of the complex cultural processes that have long shaped ‘us’/‘them’ relations in the field. In doing so, I refer to a variety of Gitano and non-Gitano discourses, mainly concerning ethnicity, which constitute internally and externally created identity constructions both historically and in the present.

## Part II. Introduction to the 'Making of Market'

Chapter 3 is the first of two chapters concerning the Gitanos' economic practices and alternative economic model as self-employed middleman<sup>4</sup> traders. In this chapter, I apply the literature on peripatetic peoples and socio-economic niches to analyse the Gitanos' creation of a socio-economic niche, both historically and in the present.

Chapter 4 builds on the empirical and theoretical foundations presented in Chapter 3 by analysing the economic practices of the Rastro Gitanos as 'existential entrepreneurship' based on a constant breaking and remaking of economic and social spheres and boundaries. Moreover, I address the interface between the Rastro Gitanos' economic activities and their religiosity and examine the ritual of *el culto* as the hub of value conversion and creation between *el mundo de los Payos* ('the world of the Payos') and *el pueblo Gitano* ('the Gitano people').

## Part III. Introduction to the 'Making of Mercy'

Chapter 5 is the first of three chapters concerning the Rastro Gitanos' religious engagement and their Pentecostal ritual practice of *el culto*. Theoretically, it provides an analysis of ritual 'in its own right', examining the self-generating, inner dynamics of *el culto*, as these create a liminal space for change and transformation in *el pueblo Gitano* – in the context of el Rastro. The chapter predominantly focuses on the dual and paradoxical nature of the Methodist legacy of Pentecostalism, with the combination of inner puritanism and ritual ecstasy and expressivity, and I treat this Eastern-inspired dual legacy metaphorically, with the tensional opposing concepts of Apollo and Dionysus. Finally, I illustrate the operation of these two opposing principles within *el culto*, as manifested in the creative principle or artistic mode of *el duende* and the spiritual force of *el Espíritu Santo* ('the Holy Spirit'), who I argue work on each other in a variety of creative ways.

Chapters 6 and 7 build on the findings of Chapter 5 by analysing the potential for transcendental states – as reached and experienced by the *creyentes* in *el culto* – to shape bodily, emotional, perceptive and interpretative apparatuses (Chapter 6). My argument is that this reshaping of the *creyentes* is constitutive of the ritual creation of a 'cultic habitus' and a 'spiritual gaze' (Chapter 7), whereby God is simultaneously embodied and felt as omnipresent and omnipotent, with far-reaching consequences also outside the church setting.

## Part IV. Introduction to the 'Making of Meaning'

In Chapters 8 and 9, I delve deeper into the Rastro Gitanos' cosmological and ontological conceptualizations of the world and explore how their particular ways of attributing and actualizing meaning relate to their ritually shaped 'cultic habitus' and 'spiritual gaze'. More specifically, in Chapter 8, I discuss their direct and flexible engagement with constructions of the meaning of objects and signs, persons, relations, situations and events. With my explorations, I conceptualize their worldviews as connected to something we might call a 'flexible cosmology' and an 'ontology of simultaneity' – and I unpack both concepts in the chapter.

As Chapter 8 deals mostly with processes of *objectification* – that is, the construction of conceptual and material objects – with Chapter 9, I am preoccupied with processes of *signification*. More concretely, I look at the Rastro Gitano practice of seeing particular happenings, situations and phenomena in the world as *signs* of God's existence, in the form of Godly messages and interventions. For the *creyentes*, the world seems intrinsically interconnected, and there is no such thing as 'coincidence' – only hidden meanings to be found and *signs* to be interpreted (or created as such). I finally analyse how this spiritually shaped perceptive and interpretative way of being in the world works to create community; in the context of el Rastro, *el pueblo Gitano* as a 'community of signs'.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I aggregate my findings and reflect on the political consequences of the Rastro Gitanos' creation of a 'society within society' – that is, their disarticulation from society. All through the book, the *dual* or *simultaneous* nature of the Rastro Gitanos' relation to mainstream society will, more implicitly than explicitly, work as a kind of key metaphor in my analyses: in Part I, in their position vis-à-vis mainstream society; in Part II, in their alternative economic practices and model as self-employed middleman traders; in Part III, through their ritual 'play' with simultaneously existing tensional oppositions; and in Part IV, by their flexible/essentialist ways of engaging with the construction of signs and objects (conceptual and material) grounded in an 'ontology of simultaneity'. In the Conclusion, I address the dual or simultaneous aspects of Rastro Gitano lives more explicitly.

## NOTES

1. Common terms used to describe the Gypsies are all contested. Without entering too far into the cultural, normative and ethical debates surrounding these terms, I will use the designation 'Gypsies' to refer to all people identified or identifying with any Gypsy group, 'Gitanos' to refer to the majority of Spanish Gypsies and 'Roma'

to refer to Gypsies/Gitanos in the framework of the EU's 'mainstreaming' policies (EURoma 2010; 2013).

2. It is estimated that there are 700,000–1,000,000 Gitanos living in Spain (Mirga 2016: 127). About 40 per cent of these reside in Andalucía, while approximately 10 per cent live in la Comunidad de Madrid (IEE 2018). Although some of the Madridian suburbs, like Vallecas, are home to a very large number of Gitanos, and though I do not have specific data for the number of Gitanos in el Rastro, el Rastro is definitely the area with the greatest number of Gitanos in the Madridian city centre. The Gitano population in Spain is considered the second largest of any Roma population in Europe, following that of only Romania. Because these numbers have remained stagnant for decades, they should only be taken as approximations (Mirga 2016).
3. To cite Seth Holmes (2013: 201), 'by design, this book has no methods section'. Hence, with 'methodologies', I do not imply a presentation of a separate methods section summarizing the ways in which I accessed research subjects and collected and analysed data. All through the book, I do, however, interweave methodological reflections with ethnographic material and anthropological conclusions – underscoring how position, perspective and context are always part of the production of knowledge.
4. Because you need a specific licence to buy from wholesalers, the Rastro Gitanos possessing such a licence are 'middlemen' in the sense that they arbitrate between (mostly Chinese) wholesalers and the general Madridian population.