

CIGANOS IN PORTUGAL

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CIGANOS IN PORTUGAL: THE BEGINNING

The *ciganos* arrived in Portugal five hundred years ago, in the 15th century. They brought with them a previously unknown language, exotic clothing and an outlandish culture which was not well received by the Portuguese. Due to their cultural identity, the *ciganos* ended up being marginalized, discriminated against, and persecuted. Several laws were implemented in an attempt to expel them and prevent them from making their home in Portugal. The justice system was harsh on them, punishing petty crimes with exile – or sentenced to deportation (in Portuguese, *degredo*) – and forced to live in the Portuguese colonies in Africa and in Brazil. If nowadays there are around 60 thousand *ciganos* in Portugal, there are over 600 thousand in Brazil. Although many groups still live in camps, over the last decades there has been an increase in the number of *ciganos*, especially in Brazil, who have settled down in fixed residences.

OBSERVATÓRIO DAS COMUNIDADES CIGANAS

The Observatory for *Cigano* Communities (OBCIG) is working on deconstructing the myths and stereotypes about *ciganos* that linger in Portuguese society. The Observatory is an informal unit of the Portuguese High Commission for Migrations. It was created in 2014 with the goal of enforcing the Portuguese government's "National Strategy for the Integration of Cigano Communities", whose contributors included experts, government officials and representatives of *cigano* communities. OBCIG collaborates with research centers, publishes studies and promotes debates about the predicament of the portuguese *ciganos*.



<https://www.vortexmag.net/portugal-500-anos-a-tentar-expulsar-os-ciganos-com-deportacoes-para-africa-e-brasil/>

The Jews and *Ciganos*: A Parallel

Both Jews and *ciganos* made a relative stir upon their arrival in the Portuguese territory. The *cigano* communities became segregated from mainstream Portuguese society right from the beginning of their presence in the 15th century. By the end of the same century Jews were being expelled and had already suffered previous gruesome persecutions. The expulsion of *ciganos* started in the 16th century. Just as some Jews were oftentimes discriminated against for their occupations, *ciganos* were thought to be part of the entertainment industry, represented by musicians, dancers and fortune tellers. This industry was thought to lack decorum and was therefore often frowned upon by Portuguese society.

The Merchant of Venice and the *Cigano* Experience

Whereas parallels between the historical marginalization of Jews and *ciganos* in Portugal may be drawn, Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* might also convey a discussion of the challenges faced by the latter minority today. Indeed, the themes of otherness and prejudice that arise in the play, with reference to the character of Shylock, provide an adequate basis from which one can problematize the persistent tendency to sideline and stereotype the *cigano* community in Portugal. The type of ignorance that informs the other characters' view of Shylock may be seen to mirror current widespread assumptions and misconceptions about the individual perceived as *cigano*: e.g. regarding his/her personality, occupations and religion. In this light, *The Merchant of Venice* may also invite self-reflection and help raise awareness as regards the lasting discrimination of *ciganos* in the country .

DID YOU KNOW?

- ❖ In Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1603) and *The Tempest* (1611) there are references to words in the English Romani language.
- ❖ Ben Jonson's masque *The Gypsies Metamorphosed* (1621) features a group of Romani people who sing, dance, tell fortunes and fully confirm stereotypical notions then current about gypsies.
- ❖ In William Wordsworth's poem *The Female Vagrant* (1798), gypsies were represented as a caring community who offered relief to the outcast and who managed to live in an ideal idleness that contrasted with the sufferings of the industrial worker.

Balada de um Batráquio (*Batrachian's Ballad*), Leonor Teles' 2016 award-winning short, explores prejudicial sentiment against the *cigano* community in Portugal. The film focuses on a common practice by shop owners who place ceramic frogs in their store windows in order to keep *ciganos* from entering, believing that they held back by superstitions related to the animal.

Despite not being pedagogical about *ciganos*, the images of their celebrations allow the viewer to perceive them as equals, as human beings. Opening with a fable, the film quickly escalates into activism: in the second part the director goes into several stores, steals the ceramic frogs and smashes them on the floor in front of the camera. In a symbolic way, her loud and explicit intervention urges us to act against this silent discrimination of the *cigano* community.

