



**CULTURAL  
GENOCIDE**

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The case of Irish Travellers

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## Introduction

Cultural genocide is a contemporary as much as a historical occurrence (Kingston, 2015) enacted through “a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups” (Lemkin, 1943 as cited in Powell, 2007, p. 534). This article examines the case of Irish Travellers, a nomadic ethnic minority group indigenous to Ireland. It charts the *attempted* systemic destruction of their long established collective cultural identity, particularly their nomadic way of life. Power asymmetries between Traveller and sedentary communities have

enabled non-Travellers to position Travellers as both culturally and intellectually inferior and to marginalise them. This marginalisation has worked to conceal the realities of ethnocentric and racist policies and practices, which require Travellers to surrender their cultural values and practices in favour of those of sedentary society. These policies and practices can cumulatively be considered acts of cultural genocide, which deliberately set out to destroy Traveller culture and significantly undermine Travellers' capacity to live in dignity and exercise their cultural rights.

### **Who are Irish Travellers?**

Irish Travellers (Mincéirs/Pavees in their own language of Gammon/Cant/Shelta) are an indigenous ethnic minority group comprising less than one per cent of the Irish population. They share a common language and history as well as a range of traditions, practices and cultural values associated with both orality and a nomadic way of life. These differences constitute and sustain their distinct Traveller identity. Accounts of their precise origins vary, but evidence suggests that Travellers have always been part of a distinct group that engaged in nomadism and seasonal migration. They contributed to the rural Irish economy in a range of ways, including through seasonal work, tinsmithing, stonemasonry, barrel-top wagon making, tool and instrument making, horse dealing, making and administering traditional remedies for both people and animals etc. Fanning (2002) describes them as "... a specific class with distinct economic activities and social relations...notably mobile family-based households linked through ties of kinship" (p. 49).

Travellers (along with the Roma Community) are the most discriminated against ethnic group in Ireland (Department

of Justice and Equality, 2017). Outcomes for Travellers in the areas of education, health and employment are significantly lower than that of the dominant group. Tellingly, the average life expectancy for Travellers is 11-15 years lower than that of the settled community and the suicide rate for Travellers is almost seven times that of the settled community's (AITHS, 2010).

While Travellers are a racially white group, the pattern of entrenched racism towards them in Irish society suggests that they are not considered culturally white by a majority sedentary population whose philosophical presuppositions superiorise settled identity. In this hegemonic system of unequal power relations, Travellers' distinct identity and way of life are abnormalised and rendered culturally inferior (Bhopal, 2018). Constituted and reinscribed through pathologising popular discourses and official policies reflective of anti-Traveller mind-sets, this cultural racism serves to justify their oppression and subaltern positionality. This social positioning is woven so effectively into the fabric of Irish society that the marginalisation of Travellers is perceived as a norm of the status quo. This has worked to shroud the realities of the slow, insidious, and cumulative process of Traveller cultural genocide. Davidson (2012) describes cultural genocide as the "purposeful destructive targeting of out-group cultures so as to destroy or weaken them in the process of conquest or domination" (p. 1). This destruction can be of tangible (e.g. buildings, monuments) and/or intangible (e.g. oral traditions, social and cultural practices, knowledge, skills, rituals, performing arts) cultural components (UNESCO, n.d.). As Travellers are a landless and nomadic people, there was an absence of tangible cultural components to destroy and no real territorial or obvious economic incentive to motivate cultural destruction. The historical function was therefore domination and the type of cultural destruction

predominately intangible. As will be discussed below, from the 1960s onwards, the State began to pursue social policies underpinned by ideologies of sedentarism and anti-nomadism. Eroding and undermining Travellers' nomadic way of life became a moral and policy imperative.

## **Travellers' historical oppression**

The negative othering of Travellers has a long history, but the 1950s and 1960s saw the emergence of a more virulent anti-Traveller discourse (Fanning, 2015). As the advent of mechanisation rendered their rural economy superfluous, leaving them without the means to make a living through their traditional crafts, they began to re-locate to the fringes of urban settings in search of employment opportunities. Their presence caused much disquiet among parts of the settled population and led to the emergence of a discourse, which positioned Travellers as a dangerous and deviant underclass (Fanning, 2015). The universalised and accepted truth was that they were a degenerate and menacing outgroup who needed to be brought under control.

## **The beginnings of systemic cultural destruction**

A government report investigating what it termed the “problems inherent in their [the Traveller] way of life” was published in 1963 (Commission on Itinerancy Report, 1963, p. 11). The report was concerned with how Traveller “absorption into the general community” could be “promoted” and suggested that “absorption” would “reduce to a minimum the disadvantages to themselves [Travellers] and to the [settled] community resulting from their itinerant habits” (p. 11). “Itinerant habits” were

presented by the report as a problem both for Travellers and settled society. Assimilation (“absorption”), a destructive tool of cultural genocide, was proposed as settled society’s systematic and systemic solution. The language used in the report reflects a paternalistic, ethnocentric and racist view of Travellers. It denigrates their identity, culture and traditions. Nomadism as a state of mind and, in particular, a way of life is inferiorised and invalidated.

The report became the State’s first systemic attempt to sedentarise Travellers and to force them to assimilate. It was also the first systemic and systematic attempt to undermine and erode the integrity of Traveller culture and their capacity to live their lives according to their long established cultural framework. Both Davidson (2012) and Tinker (1993) contend that cultural genocide can be intentional (cultural destruction as the intended outcome) or unintentional (cultural destruction resulting from entrenched ethnocentric norms and related actions and oppressive structures that do not explicitly and consciously focus on cultural destruction). Based on the blatant nature of the language used in the report, it is hard to conceive of it as being anything other than a deliberate and intentional attempt to promote acts that constitute culture genocide.

The report’s recommendations shaped social policy towards Travellers for the next twenty years (ITM, 2017). Indeed, it was 32 years before a State policy document (*Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community, 1995*) acknowledged that Traveller culture was different **but not inferior** to settled culture. Some argue that despite changes in official policy, the assimilationist mind-set which the 1963 report engendered continues to shape official and public mind-sets about Travellers today (ITM, 2017), demonstrating both its durability and resilience.

Despite conceivable good intentions (e.g., assimilation in order to alleviate Traveller poverty and marginalisation), State policies, underpinned by racist and ethnocentric assumptions about the cultural and intellectual inferiority of Travellers, actively sought to weaken or eradicate the intangible dimensions of Traveller culture. Raphael Lemkin, the Polish jurist and legal activist who coined the term “genocide” argued that the destruction of “the essential foundations” of a group’s culture was enacted through “a coordinated plan of different actions” (as cited in Powell, 2007, p. 534). Given the prevalence of anti-nomadic policies across a range of State institutions, it is hard to argue that it was not a coordinated plan aimed at cultural destruction. As will be argued below, what is even more egregious is that even today, contemporary policies and practices seek to consciously erode Traveller culture and destroy their nomadic way of life, albeit in more subtle ways than has historically been the case.

While assimilationist discourses have been replaced by the language of integration and interculturalism, overt but indirect policies of assimilation persist. For example, the Trespass Act (2002) makes the establishment of unofficial roadway encampments (known as unofficial halting sites) illegal, thereby essentially criminalising nomadism, one of the most fundamental dimensions of Traveller identity (Kavanagh & Dupont, 2021). This certainly constitutes the undermining of “the integrity of the culture and system of values” as per Davidson’s conceptualisation of cultural genocide. Secondly, to continue with the example of nomadism, the State is arguably aware of the adverse effects of making nomadism illegal (both Traveller organisations and academics have highlighted this repeatedly, including linking this prohibition to high rates of suicide). Despite this, the State has continued to pursue these policies. These acts suggest an intentionality of cultural destruction.

The above logic is equally applicable to the fields of education (e.g. culturally inappropriate education, subtractive bilingualism, lack of recognition of Traveller knowledge systems, no current National Traveller Education Strategy), housing (e.g. culturally inappropriate accommodation, substandard conditions on existing official and unofficial halting sites), health (e.g. unpublished National Traveller Health Action Plan) and leisure/cultural activities (e.g. no specific provision for harness racing [known as sulky racing], no efforts to support the long Traveller tradition of pony and horse ownership – e.g. through the provision of accommodation which takes account of the needs of these animals). These various structures undermine and erode the cultural structures which bind Travellers together as a community (Tinker, 1993). They destroy a communal and historically inherited system of meaning and significance. Collectively these can be considered acts of cultural genocide.

## **Potential for change**

In 2017, following a long campaign by individual Travellers and Traveller groups, the then Taoiseach (Prime Minister) made a formal Statement to the Dáil (Parliament), formally recognising, on behalf of the State, that Travellers are a distinctive ethnic group with a unique heritage, culture and identity. For this recognition to be meaningful, all State policies that affect Travellers, must be reviewed in consultation with Traveller organisations in order to enable Travellers to live in dignity and have their cultural and wider human rights respected.

## **Conclusion**

The economic processes that eradicated the need for Travellers' previously highly valued traditional skills dramatically intensified an asymmetrical clash between the Traveller way of life and the hegemonic structure of the Irish State. Nevertheless, Irish Traveller culture has remained remarkably resilient despite a long legacy of systemic assimilationist policies which have sought to disrupt, undermine and destroy Traveller cultural distinctiveness. These acts, constituting cultural genocide, have caused immeasurable intergenerational harm, suffering and trauma.

The survival of Traveller culture is testament to both the strength of this long-established culture and the political activism of individual Travellers and Traveller organisations. Travellers have a long history of agitating for their cultural rights and contesting systemic and structural racisms (Kavanagh & Dupont, 2021; Kitching, 2015). Indeed, the language of cultural genocide is often used by Travellers when highlighting incidents of structural racism and gross violations of their cultural rights.

Despite sustained and repeated attempts to eradicate nomadism – a feature of overt and subtle Irish policy for over sixty years – it lives on, albeit practised by a much smaller number of Traveller families. As Donahue, McVeigh and Ward (2006, p. 6) argue, “Traveller nomadism remains a defining feature of many Irish Traveller lives. It takes new forms certainly; it endures terrible pressure certainly; but it doesn't ‘die out’”. The tenacious grip of Traveller culture in the face of such obstacles cannot be taken for granted. A sea change in State policy is necessary to preserve this rich and unique culture.



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