

Chapter I

MERCURY'S SANDALS: THE JEWS AND OTHER NOMADS

Let Ares doze, that other war
Is instantly declared once more
'Twixt those who follow
Precocious Hermes all the way
And those who without qualms obey
Pompous Apollo.

—W. H. Auden, “Under Which Lyre”

There was nothing particularly unusual about the social and economic position of the Jews in medieval and early modern Europe. Many agrarian and pastoral societies contained groups of permanent strangers who performed tasks that the natives were unable or unwilling to perform. Death, trade, magic, wilderness, money, disease, and internal violence were often handled by people who claimed—or were assigned to—different gods, tongues, and origins. Such specialized foreigners could be procured sporadically as individual slaves, scribes, merchants, or mercenaries, or they could be permanently available as demographically complete endogenous descent groups. They might have been allowed or forced to specialize in certain jobs because they were ethnic strangers, or they might have become ethnic strangers because they specialized in certain jobs—either way, they combined renewable ethnicity with a dangerous occupation. In India, such self-reproducing but not self-sufficient communities formed a complex symbolic and economic hierarchy; elsewhere, they led a precarious and sometimes ghostly existence as outcasts without a religiously sanctioned caste system.

In medieval Korea, the Koli such'ok and Hwach'ok-chaein peoples were employed as basket weavers, shoemakers, hunters, butchers, sorcerers, torturers, border guards, buffoons, dancers, and pup-

peteers. In Ashikaga and Tokugawa Japan, the Eta specialized in animal slaughter, public executions, and mortuary services, and the Hinin monopolized begging, prostitution, juggling, dog training, and snake charming. In early twentieth-century Africa, the Yibir practiced magic, surgery, and leatherwork among the Somalis; the Fuga of southern Ethiopia were ritual experts and entertainers as well as wood-carvers and potters; and throughout the Sahel, Sahara, and Sudan, traveling blacksmiths often doubled as cattle dealers, grave diggers, circumcisers, peddlers, jewelers, musicians, and conflict mediators. In Europe, various “Gypsy” and “Traveler” groups specialized in tinsmithing, knife sharpening, chimney sweeping, horse dealing, fortune-telling, jewelry making, itinerant trading, entertainment, and scavenging (including begging, stealing, and the collection of scrap metal and used clothing for resale).

Most itinerant occupations were accompanied by exchange, and some “stranger” minorities became professional merchants. The Sheikh Mohammadi of eastern Afghanistan followed seasonal migration routes to trade manufactured goods for agricultural produce; the Humli-Khyampa of far western Nepal bartered Tibetan salt for Nepalese rice; the Yao from the Lake Malawi area opened up an important segment of the Indian Ocean trade network; and the Kooroko of Wasulu (in present-day Mali) went from being pariah blacksmiths to Wasulu-wide barterers to urban merchants to large-scale commercial kola nut distributors.¹

Outcast-to-capitalist careers were not uncommon elsewhere in Africa and in much of Eurasia. Jewish, Armenian, and Nestorian (Assyrian) entrepreneurs parlayed their transgressor expertise into successful commercial activities even as the majority of their service-oriented kinsmen continued to ply traditional low-status trades as peddlers, cobblers, barbers, butchers, porters, blacksmiths, and moneylenders. Most of the world’s long-distance trade was dominated by politically and militarily sponsored diasporas—Hellene, Phoenician, Muslim, Venetian, Genoese, Portuguese, Dutch, and British, among others—but there was always room for unprotected and presumably neutral strangers. Just as an itinerant Sheikh Mohammadi peddler could sell a bracelet to a secluded Pashtun woman or mediate between two warriors without jeopard-

izing their honor, the Jewish entrepreneur could cross the Christian-Muslim divide, serve as an army contractor, or engage in tabooed but much-needed “usury.” In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Armenian merchants presided over a dense commercial network that connected the competing Ottoman, Safavid, Mughal, Russian, and Dutch empires by making use of professionally trained agents, standardized contracts, and detailed manuals on international weights, measures, tariffs, and prices. In the eighteenth century, the clashing interests of the Russian and Ottoman empires were ably represented by Baltic German and Phanariot Greek diplomats.²

Internally, too, strangeness could be an asset. By not intermarrying, fraternizing, or fighting with their hosts, outcast communities were the symbolic equivalents of eunuchs, monks, and celibate or hereditary priests insofar as they remained outside the traditional web of kinship obligations, blood friendships, and family feuds. The strictly endogamous Inadan gunsmiths and jewelers of the Sahara could officiate at Tuareg weddings, sacrifices, child-naming ceremonies, and victory celebrations because they were not subject to the Tuareg avoidance rules, marriage politics, and dignity requirements. Similarly, the Nawar peddlers allowed the Rwala Bedouin households to exchange delicate information with their neighbors; the Armenian “Amira” provided the Ottoman court with trustworthy tax farmers, mint superintendents, and gunpowder manufacturers; and Jewish leaseholders and innkeepers made it possible for Polish landowners to squeeze profits from their serfs without abandoning the rhetoric of patriarchal reciprocity.³

The rise of European colonialism created more and better-specialized strangers as mercantile capitalism encroached on previously unmonetized regional exchange systems and peasant economies. In India, the Parsis of Bombay and Gujarat became the principal commercial intermediaries between the Europeans, the Indian hinterland, and the Far East. Descendants of eighth-century Zoroastrian refugees from Muslim-dominated Iran, they formed a closed, endogamous, self-administered community that remained outside the Hindu caste system and allowed for relatively greater mobility. Having started out as peddlers, weavers, carpenters, and liquor purvey-

ors, with the arrival of the Europeans in the sixteenth century they moved into brokering, moneylending, shipbuilding, and international commerce. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Parsis had become Bombay's leading bankers, industrialists, and professionals, as well as India's most proficient English-speakers and most determined practitioners of Western social rituals.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, more than two million Chinese followed European capital to Southeast Asia (where they found numerous earlier colonies), the Indian Ocean, Africa, and the Americas. Some of them went as indentured laborers, but the majority (including many erstwhile "coolies") moved into the service sector, eventually dominating Southeast Asian trade and industry. In East Africa, the "middleman" niche between the European elite and the indigenous nomads and agriculturalists was occupied by the Indians, who were brought in after 1895 to build (or die building) the Uganda Railway but ended up monopolizing retail trade, clerical jobs, and many urban professions. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, and Goan Catholics from a variety of castes, they all became *baniyas* (traders). Similar choices were made by Lebanese and Syrian Christians (and some Muslims) who went to West Africa, the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean. The majority started out as peddlers (the "coral men" of the African "bush" or *mescates* of the Brazilian interior), then opened permanent shops, and eventually branched out into industry, banking, real estate, transportation, politics, and entertainment. Wherever the Lebanese went, they had a good chance of facing some competition from Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Indians, or Chinese, among others.⁴

All these groups were nonprimary producers specializing in the delivery of goods and services to the surrounding agricultural or pastoral populations. Their principal resource base was human, not natural, and their expertise was in "foreign" affairs. They were the descendants—or predecessors—of Hermes (Mercury), the god of all those who did not herd animals, till the soil, or live by the sword;

the patron of rule breakers, border crossers, and go-betweens; the protector of people who lived by their wit, craft, and art.

Most traditional pantheons had trickster gods analogous to Hermes, and most societies had members (guilds or tribes) who looked to them for sanction and assistance. Their realm was enormous but internally coherent, for it lay entirely on the margins. Hermes' name derives from the Greek word for "stone heap," and his early cult was primarily associated with boundary markers. Hermes' protégés communicated with spirits and strangers as magicians, morticians, merchants, messengers, sacrificers, healers, seers, minstrels, craftsmen, interpreters, and guides—all closely related activities, as sorcerers were heralds, heralds were sorcerers, and artisans were artful artificers, as were traders, who were also sorcerers and heralds. They were admired but also feared and despised by their food-producing and food-plundering (aristocratic) hosts both on and off Mount Olympus. Whatever they brought from abroad could be marvelous, but it was always dangerous: Hermes had the monopoly on round-trips to Hades; Prometheus, another artful patron of artisans, brought the most marvelous and dangerous gift of all; Hephaestus, the divine blacksmith, created Pandora, the first woman and source of all the trouble and temptation in the world; and the two Roman gods of the boundary (besides Mercury) were Janus, the two-faced sponsor of beginnings whose name meant "doorway," and Silvanus, the supervisor of the savage (*silvaticus*) world beyond the threshold.⁵

One could choose to emphasize heroism, dexterity, deviousness, or foreignness, but what all of Hermes' followers had in common was their mercuriality, or impermanence. In the case of nations, it meant that they were all transients and wanderers—from fully nomadic Gypsy groups, to mostly commercial communities divided into fixed brokers and traveling agents, to permanently settled populations who thought of themselves as exiles. Whether they knew no homeland, like the Irish Travelers or the Sheikh Mohammadi, had lost it, like the Armenians and the Jews, or had no political ties to it, like the Overseas Indians or Lebanese, they were perpetual resident aliens and vocational foreigners (the Javanese word for "trader," *wong dagang*, also means "foreigner" and "wanderer," or

“tramp”). Their origin myths and symbolic destinations were always different from those of their clients—and so were their dwellings, which were either mobile or temporary. A Jewish house in Ukraine did not resemble the peasant hut next door, not because it was Jewish in architecture (there was no such thing) but because it was never painted, mended, or decorated. It did not belong to the landscape; it was a dry husk that contained the real treasure—the children of Israel and their memory. All nomads defined themselves in genealogical terms; most “service nomads” persisted in doing so in the midst of dominant agrarian societies that sacralized space. They were people wedded to time, not land; people seen as both homeless and historic, rootless and “ancient.”⁶

Whatever the sources of difference, it was the fact of difference that mattered the most. Because only strangers could do certain dangerous, marvelous, and distasteful things, the survival of people specializing in such things depended on their success at being strangers. According to Brian L. Foster, for example, in the early 1970s the Mon people of Thailand were divided into rice farmers and river traders. The farmers referred to themselves as Thai, spoke little Mon, and claimed to speak even less; the traders called themselves Mon, spoke mostly Mon, and claimed to speak even more. The farmers were frequently unsure whether they were of Mon ancestry; the traders were quite sure that their farmer clients were not (or they would not have been their clients). Everyone involved agreed that it was impossible to engage in commerce without being crooked; being crooked meant acting in ways that farmers considered unbecoming a fellow villager. “In fact, a trader who was subject to the traditional social obligations and constraints would find it very difficult to run a viable business. . . . It would be difficult for him to refuse credit, and it would not be possible to collect debts. If he followed the ideology strictly, he would not even try to make a profit.”⁷

To cite an earlier injunction to the same effect, “Thou shalt not lend upon usury to thy brother; usury of money, usury of victuals, usury of any thing that is lent upon usury: Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury; but unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon usury: that the Lord thy God may bless thee in all that thou

settest thine hand to in the land whither thou goest to possess it” (Deut. 23:19–20). This meant—among other things—that if thou set thine hand to credit operations, thou had to play the trespasser (or submit to domestication through various “clientelization” and “blood brotherhood” techniques).

In the eyes of the rural majority, all craftsmen were crafty, and all merchants, mercenary (both—as was Mercury himself—derived from *merx*, “goods”). And of course Hermes was a thief. Accordingly, European traders and artisans were usually segregated in special urban communities; in some Andean villages in today’s Ecuador, store owners are often Protestants; and one Chinese shopkeeper observed by L. A. Peter Gosling in a Malay village “appeared to be considerably acculturated to Malay culture, and was scrupulously sensitive to Malays in every way, including the normal wearing of sarong, quiet and polite Malay speech, and a humble and affable manner. However, at harvest time when he would go to the field to collect crops on which he had advanced credit, he would put on his Chinese costume of shorts and under-shirt, and speak in a much more abrupt fashion, acting, as one Malay farmer put it, ‘just like a Chinese.’ ”⁸

Noblesse oblige, and so most mercurial strangers make a point—and perhaps a virtue—of not doing as the Romans do. The Chinese unsettle the Malays by being *kasar* (crude); the Inadan make a mockery of the Tuareg notions of dignified behavior (*takarakayt*); the Japanese Burakumin claim to be unable to control their emotions; and Jewish shopkeepers in Europe rarely failed to impress the Gentiles with their unseemly urgency and volubility (“the wife, the daughter, the servant, the dog, all howl in your ears,” as Sombart quotes approvingly). Gypsies, in particular, seem to offend against business rationality by offending the sensibilities of their customers. They can “pass” when they find it expedient to do so, but much more often they choose to play up their foreignness by preferring bold speech, bold manners, and bold colors—sometimes as part of elaborate public displays of defiant impropriety.⁹

What makes such spectacles especially offensive to host populations is that so many of the offenders are women. In traditional societies, foreigners are dangerous, disgusting, or ridiculous be-

cause they break the rules, and no rules are more important in the breach than the ones regulating sexual life and the sexual division of labor. Foreign women, in particular, are either promiscuous or downtrodden, and often “beautiful” (by virtue of being promiscuous or downtrodden and because foreign women are both cause and prize of much warrior activity). But of course some foreigners are more foreign than others, and the internal ones are very foreign indeed because they are full-time, professional, and ideologically committed rule breakers. Traders among sharers, nomads among peasants, or tribes among nations, they frequently appear as mirror images of their hosts—sometimes quite brazenly and deliberately so, as many of them are professional jesters, fortune-tellers, and carnival performers. This means, as far as the hosts are concerned, that their women and men have a tendency to change places—a perception that is partly a variation on the “perversity of strangers” theme but mostly a function of occupational differences. Traders and nomads assign more visible and economically important roles to women than do peasants or warriors, and some trading nomads depend primarily on women’s labor (while remaining patriarchal in political organization). The Kanjar of Pakistan, who specialize in toy making, singing, dancing, begging, and prostitution, derive most of their annual income from female work, as do many European Gypsy groups that emphasize begging and fortune-telling. In both of these cases, and in some merchant communities such as the Eastern European Jewish market traders, women are vital links to the outside world (as performers, stall attendants, or negotiators) and are often considered sexually provocative or socially aggressive—a perception they occasionally reinforce by deliberate displays.¹⁰

The same purpose is served by demonstrative male nonbelligerence, which is both a necessary condition for the pursuit of stranger occupations and an important indication of continued strangeness (a refusal to fight, like a refusal to accept hospitality, is an effective way of setting oneself apart from the usual conventions of cross-cultural interaction). The Burakumin, Inadan, and Gypsies may be seen as “passionate” or “spontaneous” in the way children and pranksters are; what matters is that they are not expected to have

warrior honor. To be competitive as functional eunuchs, monks, confessors, or jesters, they cannot be seen as complete men. And so they were not. According to Vasilii Rozanov, one of Russia's most articulate fin de siècle anti-Semites, all Jewish qualities stemmed from "their femininity—their devotion, cleaving, their almost erotic attachment, to the particular person each one of them is dealing with, as well as to the tribe, atmosphere, landscape, and everyday life that they are surrounded by (as witness both the prophets' reproaches and the obvious facts)."¹¹ Hermes was as physically weak as he was clever (with cleverness serving as compensation for weakness); Hephaestus was lame, ugly, and comically inept at everything except prodigious handicraft; the clairvoyant metalworkers of Germanic myths were hunchbacked dwarves with oversized heads; and all of them—along with the tradesmen they patronized—were associated with dissolute, dangerous, and adulterous sexuality. The three images—bloodless neutrality, female eroticism, and Don Juan rakishness—were combined in various proportions and applied in different degrees, but what they all shared was the glaring absence of dignified manliness.

It is not only images, however, that make strangers—it is also actions; and of all human actions, two are universally seen as defining humanity and community: eating and procreating. Strangers (enemies) are people with whom one does not eat or intermarry; radical strangers (savages) are people who eat filth and fornicate like wild animals. The most common way to convert a foreigner into a friend is to partake of his food and "blood"; the surest way to remain a foreigner is to refuse to do so.¹²

All service nomads are endogamous, and many of them observe dietary restrictions that make fraternizing with their neighbors/clients impossible (and thus service occupations conceivable). Only Phinehas's act of atonement could save the children of Israel from the Lord's wrath when "the people began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab," and one man in particular brought

“a Midianitish woman in the sight of Moses.” For he (Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest) “took a javelin in his hand, and he went after the man of Israel into the tent, and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her belly. So the plague was stayed from the children of Israel” (Num. 25:1–18). Elsewhere, men had a reasonable chance of escaping punishment, but in most traditional Jewish and Gypsy communities, a woman’s marriage to an outsider signified irredeemable defilement and resulted in excommunication and symbolic death. There was nothing unusual about Phinehas’s act at a time when all gods were jealous; there was something peculiar about a continued commitment to endogamy amid the divinely sanctioned whoredom of religious universalism.

Food taboos are less lethal but more evident as everyday boundary markers. No Jew could accept non-Jewish hospitality or retain his ritual purity in an alien environment; the craftsmen and minstrels living among the Margi of the western Sudan were readily recognizable by the distinctive drinking baskets they carried around to avoid pollution; and the English Travelers, who obtained most of their food from the dominant society, lived in constant fear of contagion (preferring canned, packaged, or bottled food not visibly contaminated by non-Travelers, and eating with their hands to avoid using cafeteria silverware). The Jains, who along with the Parsis became colonial India’s most successful entrepreneurs, were, like the Parsis, formally outside the Hindu caste system, but what made them truly “peculiar people” was their strict adherence to *ahimsa*, the doctrine of nonviolence toward all living things. This meant, besides strict vegetarianism, a ban on all food that might be contaminated by small insects or worms, such as potatoes and radishes, and a prohibition on eating after sunset, when the danger of causing injury was especially great. It also meant that most kinds of manual labor, especially agriculture, were potentially polluting. Whatever came first—the change in professional specialization or the ascetic challenge to Hinduism—the fact remains that the Jains, who started out as members of the Kshatriya warrior caste, became mostly Baniyas specializing in moneylending, jewelry making,

shopkeeping, and eventually banking and industry. What emigration accomplished in East Africa, the pursuit of ritual purity did back home in India.¹³

The opposition between purity and pollution lies at the heart of all moral order, be it in the form of traditional distinctions (between body parts, parts of the world, natural realms, supernatural forces, species of humanity) or of various quests for salvation, religious or secular. In any case, “dirt” and “foreignness” tend to be synonymous—and dangerous—with regard to both objects and people. Universalist egalitarian religions attempted to banish foreignness by reinterpreting it (even proclaiming, in one case, that it is “not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man” [Matt. 15:11]). They were not totally successful (the world was still full of old-fashioned, filth-eating foreigners, including many converted ones), but they did make filth and foreignness appear less formidable and ultimately conquerable—except in the case of those whose fate and faith seemed inseparable from foreignness and thus unreformable and irredeemable. Most of the time, the Jews, Gypsies, and other service nomads seemed to share this view; largely unpersuaded by universalist rhetoric, they retained the traditional division of the world into two separate entities, one associated with purity (maintained through ritual observance), the other with pollution. Whereas in the Christian and Muslim realms, words representing foreigners, savages, strangers, the heathen, and the infidel competed with each other, did not fully overlap, and could no longer be subsumed under one heading, the Jewish and Gypsy concepts of “Goy” and “Gajo” (among other terms and spellings) allowed one to conceive of all non-Jews or non-Gypsies as one alien tribe, with individual Goyim or Gajos as members. Even the Christians and Muslims who specialized in service nomadism tended to belong to endogamous, nonproselytizing, “national” churches, such as the Gregorian (the Armenian word for non-Armenians, *odar*, is probably a cognate of the English “other”), Nestorian, Maronite, Melchite, Coptic, Ibadi, and Ismaili.

They were all chosen people, in other words, all “tribal” and “traditional” insofar as they worshiped themselves openly and separated

themselves as a matter of principle. There were others like them, but few were as consistent. Most agrarian nobilities, for example, routinely (and sometimes convincingly) traced their descent from nomadic warriors, stressed their foreignness as a matter of honor, practiced endogamy, and performed complex distancing rituals. Priests, too, removed themselves from important modes of social exchange by forming self-reproducing castes or refraining from reproduction altogether. Both groups, however, usually shared a name, a place, or a god (and perhaps an occasional meal or a wife) with others, whose labor they appropriated by virtue of controlling access to land or salvation. Besides, many of them subscribed to universalist creeds that set limits to particularism and imposed commitments that might prompt crusades, deportations, and concerted missionary endeavors aiming at the abolition of difference.

The “Mercurians” had no such commitments, and the most uncompromising among them, such as the Gypsies and the Jews, retained radical dualism and strict pollution taboos through many centuries of preaching and persecution. The black silk cord that pious Jews wore around their waists to separate the upper and lower body might be reincarnated as the “fence” (*eyruv*) that converted an entire shtetl into one home for the purpose of Sabbath purity, and, at the outer limits, as the invisible but ritually all-important barrier that demarcated the Jew-Gentile border. Gypsy defenses against impurity were similar, if much more rigid and numerous, because in the absence of a scriptural tradition, they had to bear the full burden of ethnic differentiation. Just being Gypsy involved a desperate struggle against *marime* (contagion)—a task all the more daunting because Gypsies had no choice but to live among the Gajo, who were the principal source and embodiment of that contagion. (Perhaps ironically, they also had no choice but to have Gajos live among them—as slaves or servants employed to do the unclean work.) When religious injunctions appeared to weaken, the “hygienic” ones took their place—or so it might seem when observant Gypsies bleached their dwellings or used paper towels to turn on taps or open bathroom doors. The Jews, considered dirty in a variety of contexts, could also arouse the suspicion or admiration of their neighbors because of their preoccupation with bodily clean-

liness. And even on the Indian subcontinent, where all ethnosocial groups surrounded themselves with elaborate pollution taboos, the Parsis were remarkable for the strictness of their constraints on menstruating women and the intensity of their concern for personal hygiene.¹⁴

Next to purity and pollution, and closely related to them as a sign of difference, is language. “Barbarian” originally meant a “babbler” or “stutterer,” and the Slavic word for “foreigner” (later “German”) is *nemec*, “the mute one.” Most “Mercurian” peoples are barbarians and “Germans” wherever they go, sometimes by dint of considerable effort. If they do not speak a language that is foreign to the surrounding majority (as a result of recent immigration or long-term language maintenance), they create one. Some European Gypsies, for example, speak Romani, an inflected, morphologically productive Indic language probably related to the Dom languages of the Middle East and possibly derived from the idiom of an Indian caste of metalworkers, peddlers, and entertainers. (Romani is, however, unusual in that it cannot be traced to any particular regional variety and seems to have experienced an extraordinary degree of morphosyntactic borrowing—some say “fusion”—leading a minority of scholars to deny its coherence and independence.)¹⁵ Many others speak peculiar “Para-Romani” languages that combine a Romani lexicon with the grammar (phonology, morphology, and syntax) of coterritorial majority languages. There are Romani versions of English, Spanish, Basque, Portuguese, Finnish, Swedish, and Norwegian, among others, all of them unintelligible to host communities and variously described as former Romani dialects transformed by means of “massive grammatical replacement”; creole languages derived from pidgins (simplified contact languages) used by original Roma immigrants to communicate with local outlaws; “mixed dialects” created by speakers who had lost full-fledged inflected Romani but still had access to it (older kinsmen, new immigrants) as an “alienation” resource; “mixed languages” (local grammar, immigrant vocabulary) born of the in-

tertwinning of two parent languages, as in the case of frontier languages spoken by the offspring of immigrant fathers and native mothers; and finally ethnolects or cryptolects consciously created by the native speakers of standard languages with the help of widely available Romani and non-Romani items.¹⁶

Whatever their origin, the “Para-Romani” languages are specific to service nomads, learned in adolescence (although some may have been spoken natively at some point), and retained as markers of group identity and secret codes. According to Asta Olesen’s Sheikh Mohammadi informants, their children speak Persian until they are six or seven, when they are taught Adurgari, “which is spoken ‘when strangers should not understand what we talk about.’ ” The same seems to be true of the “secret languages” of the Fuga and Waata service nomads of southern Ethiopia.¹⁷

When a language foreign to the host society is not available and loan elements are deemed insufficient, various forms of linguistic camouflage are used to ensure unintelligibility: reversal (of whole words or syllables), vowel changes, consonant substitution, prefixation, suffixation, paraphrasing, punning, and so on. The Inadan make themselves incomprehensible by adding the prefix *om-* and suffix *-ak* to certain Tamacheq (Tamajec, Tamashek) nouns; the Halabi (the blacksmiths, healers, and entertainers of the Nile valley) transform Arabic words by adding the suffixes *-eishi* or *-elheid*; the Romani English (Angloromani) words for “about,” “bull,” and “tobacco smoke” are *aboutas*, *bullas*, and *fogas*; and the Shelta words for the Irish *do* (“two”) and *dorus* (“door”) are *od* and *rodus*, and for the English “solder” and “supper,” *grawder* and *grupper*.¹⁸ Shelta was spoken by Irish Travelers (reportedly as a native tongue in some cases) and consists of an Irish Gaelic lexicon, much of it disguised, embedded in an English grammatical framework. Its main function is nontransparency to outsiders, and according to the typically prejudiced (in every sense) account of the collector John Sampson, who met two “tinkers” in a Liverpool tavern in 1890, it served its purpose very well. “These men were not encumbered by any prejudices in favor of personal decency or cleanliness, and the language used by them was, in every sense, corrupt. Etymologically it might be described as a Babylonish, model-lodging-

house jargon, compounded of Shelta, ‘flying Cant,’ rhyming slang, and Romani. This they spoke with astonishing fluency, and apparent profit to themselves.”¹⁹

Various postexilic Jewish languages have been disparaged in similar ways and spoken by community members with equal fluency and even greater profit (in the sense of meeting a full range of communicative and cognitive needs as well as reinforcing the ethnic boundary). The Jews lost their original home languages relatively early, but nowhere—for as long as they remained specialized service nomads—did they adopt unaltered host languages as a means of internal communication. Wherever they went, they created, or brought with them, their own unique vernaculars, so that there were Jewish versions (sometimes more than one) of Arabic, Persian, Greek, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Italian, among many others. Or perhaps they were not just “versions,” as some scholars, who prefer “Judezmo” over “Judeo-Spanish” and “Yahudic” over “Judeo-Arabic,” have suggested (echoing the “Angloromani” versus “Romani English” debate). Yiddish, for example, is usually classified as a Germanic language or a dialect of German; either way, it is unique in that it contains an extremely large body of non-Germanic grammatical elements; cannot be traced back to any particular dialect (Solomon Birnbaum called it “a synthesis of diverse dialectal material”); and was spoken exclusively by an occupationally specialized and religiously distinct community wherever its members resided.²⁰ There is no evidence that the early Jewish immigrants to the Rhineland ever shared a dialect with their Christian neighbors; in fact, there is evidence to suggest that the (apparently) Romance languages that they spoke at the time of arrival were themselves uniquely Jewish.²¹

Some scholars have suggested that Yiddish may be a Romance or Slavic language that experienced a massive lexicon replacement (“relexification”), or that it is a particular type of creole born out of a “pidginized” German followed by “expansion in internal use, accompanied by admixture.”²² The two canonical histories of Yiddish reject the Germanic genesis without attempting to fit the language into any conventional nomenclature (other than “Jewish languages”): Birnbaum calls it a “synthesis” of Semitic, Aramaic,

Romance, Germanic, and Slavic “elements,” whereas Max Weinreich describes it as a “fusion language” molded out of four “determinants”—Hebrew, Loez (Judeo-French and Judeo-Italian), German, and Slavic. More recently, Joshua A. Fishman has argued that Yiddish is a “multicomponential” language of the “postexilic Jewish” variety that is commonly seen as deficient by its speakers and other detractors but was never a pidgin because it never passed through a stabilized reduction stage or served as a means of intergroup communication.²³ Generally, most creolists mention Yiddish as an exception or not at all; most Yiddish specialists consider it a mixed language without proposing a broader framework to fit it into; a recent advocate of a general “mixed language” category does not consider it mixed enough; and most general linguists assign Yiddish to the Germanic genetic group without discussing its peculiar genesis.²⁴

What seems clear is that when service nomads possessed no vernaculars foreign to their hosts, they created new ones in ways that resembled neither genetic change (transmission from generation to generation) nor pidginization (simplification and role restriction). These languages are—like their speakers—mercurial and Promethean. They do not fit into existing “families,” however defined. Their *raison d'être* is the maintenance of difference, the conscious preservation of the self and thus of strangeness. They are special secret languages in the service of Mercury's precarious artistry. For example, the argot of German Jewish cattle traders (like that of the rabbis) contained a much higher proportion of Hebrew words than the speech of their kinsmen whose communication needs were less esoteric. With considerable insight as well as irony, they called it *Loshen-Koudesh*, or “sacred language” / “cow language,” and used it, as a kind of Yiddish in miniature, across large territories. (Beyond the Jewish world, Yiddish was, along with Romani, a major source of European underworld vocabularies.)²⁵ But mostly it was religion, which is to say “culture,” which is to say service nomadism writ large, that made Mercurian languages special. As Max Weinreich put it, “‘Ours differs from theirs’ reaches much further than mere disgust words or distinction words.” Or rather, it was not just the filthy and the sublime that uncleaned “Gentile” words could not

be allowed to express; it was charity, family, childbirth, death, and indeed most of life. One Sabbath benediction begins with “He who distinguishes between the sacred and the profane” and ends with “He who distinguishes between the sacred and the sacred.” Within the Jewish—and Gypsy—world, “all nooks of life are sacred, some more, some less,” and so secret words multiplied and metamorphosed, until the language itself became secret, like the people it served and celebrated.²⁶

In addition to more or less secret vernaculars, some service nomads possess formally sacred languages and alphabets that preserve their scriptural connection to their gods, past, home, and salvation (Hebrew and Aramaic for the Jews, Avestan and Pahlavi for the Parsis, Grabar for the Armenians, Syriac for the Nestorians). Indeed, all literate service nomads (including the Overseas Chinese and Eastern European Germans, for example) can be said to possess such languages, for all modern “national” languages are sacred to the extent that they preserve their speakers’ connection to their (new) gods, past, home, and salvation. All Mercurians are multilingual, in other words (Hermes was the god of eloquence). As professional internal strangers equally dependent on cultural difference and economic interdependence, they speak at least one internal language (sacred, secret, or both) and at least one external one. They are all trained linguists, negotiators, translators, and mystifiers, and the literate groups among them tend to be much more literate than their hosts—because literacy, like language generally, is a key to both the maintenance of their separate identity and the fulfillment of their commercial (conjoining) function.

Once again, however, difference is primary. The continued fulfillment of their conjoining function (like all acts of mediating, negotiating, and translating) hinges on the perpetuation of difference, and difference makes for strange bedfellows: wherever Mercurians live, their relations with their clients are those of mutual hostility, suspicion, and contempt. Even in India, where the entire society consists of endogamous, economically specialized,

pollution-fearing strangers, the Parsis tend to feel, and may be made to feel, stranger and cleaner than most.²⁷ Elsewhere, there was little doubt about a mutual antipathy based ultimately on the fear of pollution. “They” always eat filth, smell funny, live in squalor, breed like rabbits, and otherwise mix the pure and the impure so as to contaminate themselves beyond redemption (and thus become the object of intense sexual curiosity). All contact with them, especially through food (hospitality) and blood (marriage), is dangerous, and therefore forbidden—and therefore desirable. And therefore forbidden. Such fears are rarely symmetrical: border crossers are always interlopers and outcasts and thus more contagious, more difficult to contain and domesticate. In complex societies with well-established universalist religions the nature of the relationship may change: the border crossers retain their preoccupation with everyday pollution and intermarriage (*shiksa* means “filthy”), and the host majorities profess to fear certain religious practices and political conspiracies. Still, much of the anti-Mercurian rhetoric has to do with contagion/infestation and, in cases of particular resonance, specifically with food and blood: casting spells to destroy the harvest, using the blood of infants to prepare ritual meals, and jeopardizing Christian Spain’s *limpieza de sangre* (“blood purity”)—in addition to basic untidiness.

The asymmetry goes much further, of course. The host societies have numbers, weapons, and warrior values, and sometimes the state, on their side. Economically, too, they are generally self-sufficient—not as comfortably as Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain may have believed, but incomparably more so than the service nomads, who are fully dependent on their customers for survival. Finally, beyond the basic fear of pollution, the actual views that the two parties hold of each other are very different. In fact, they tend to be complementary, mutually reinforcing opposites making up the totality of the universe: insider-outsider, settled-nomadic, body-mind, masculine-feminine, steady-mercurial. Over time, the relative value of particular elements may change, but the oppositions themselves tend to remain the same (Hermes possessed most of the qualities that the Gypsies, Jews, and Overseas Chinese would be both loathed and admired for).²⁸

Most important, many of these views were true. Not in the sense of the reality of certain acts or the applicability of generalizations to particular individuals, but insofar as they described the cultural values and economic behaviors of one community in terms of another. Indeed, very often the two communities agreed on the general terms, if not the specific formulations. The view that service nomads kept aloof, “did not belong,” had other loyalties, insisted on their difference, and resisted assimilation was shared by all (and was an accusation only in those relatively few societies where assimilation was occasionally seen as a good thing). Strangeness was their profession; aloofness was their way of remaining strange; and their primary loyalty was to each other and their common fate.

Even the reasons for their strangeness were not, in essence, controversial. European anti-Semitism is often explained in connection with the Jewish origins of Christianity and the subsequent casting of unconverted Jews in the role of deicides (as the mob’s cry, “his blood be on us, and on our children,” was reinterpreted in “ethnic” terms). This is true in more ways than one (the arrival of the Christian millennium is, in fact, tied to the end of Jewish wanderings), but it is also true that before the rise of commercial capitalism, when Hermes became the supreme deity and certain kinds of service nomadism became fashionable or even compulsory, Mercurian life was universally seen—by the service nomads themselves, as well as by their hosts—as divine punishment for an original transgression.

One “griot” group living among the Malinke was “condemned to eternal wandering” because their ancestor, Sourakhata, had attempted to kill the Prophet Muhammad. The Inadan were cursed for selling a strand of the Prophet Muhammad’s hair to some passing Arab caravan traders. The Waata (in East Africa) had to depend on the Boran for food because their ancestor had been late to the first postcreation meeting, at which the Sky-God was distributing livestock. The Sheikh Mohammadi say that their ancestor’s sons behaved badly, “so he cursed them all and said, ‘May you never be together!’ So they scattered and went on scattering in many places.” And Siaun, the ancestor of the Ghorbat in Afghanistan, “sat atop a hill weaving a sieve and then he grew hungry. A piece of bread appeared, first within reach, but then, since God was angry with

our ancestor, the bread rolled down the hill and up the next and Siaun had to run after it for many miles before he could finally catch it. This is why we, his descendants, still have to walk so far and wide to find our *ruzi* (food).” Of the many legends accounting for the Gypsy predicament, one claims that Adam and Eve were so fruitful that they decided to hide some of their children from God, who became angry and condemned the ones he could not see to eternal homelessness. Other explanations include punishment for incest or refusal of hospitality, but the most common one blames the Gypsies for forging the nails used to crucify Jesus. A positive version has them refuse to forge the fourth nail and, as a reward, receive freedom to roam and a dispensation to steal, but it seems to be of more recent vintage (like the explanation of the Jewish exile as a result of Gentile oppression). Before the rise of secularism and industrialism, everyone in agrarian societies seems to have agreed that service nomadism meant homelessness, and that homelessness was a curse. Perhaps the most famous punishments in the European tradition were meted out to Prometheus, the mischievous master craftsman who stole Zeus’s fire; Sisyphus, “the craftiest of men,” who cheated Death, and of course Odysseus/Ulysses, that most Jewish of Greeks, whose jealous crew let loose the hostile winds that would keep them away from home.²⁹

Another common host stereotype of the Mercurians is that they are devious, acquisitive, greedy, crafty, pushy, and crude. This, too, is a statement of fact, in the sense that, for peasants, pastoralists, princes, and priests, any trader, moneylender, or artisan is in perpetual and deliberate violation of most norms of decency and decorum (especially if he happens to be a babbling infidel without a home or reputable ancestors). “For the Rwala [Bedouin], wealth, in terms of camels, goods, and gold, could not be conserved; it had to be converted into reputation (or honor). For the peripatetics [service nomads], most of whom were emissaries from the towns, and all of whom were regarded as such, rightly or wrongly, by the Rwala, wealth is measured by possessions, be these objects or cash. Among the Rwala, to be rich in possessions implied a lack of generosity, which led to a diminution of honor, and in turn, a decrease in influence. Among townsmen—and by extension, peripatetics—pos-

sessions implied power and influence.”³⁰ All economic division of labor involves value differentiation; next to the division based on sex, perhaps the deepest is the one separating food producers and predators from service providers. Apollonians and Dionysians are usually the same people: now sober and serene, now drunk and frenzied. The followers of Hermes are neither; they have been seen as artful and shrewd ever since Hermes, on the day of his birth, invented the lyre, made himself some “unspeakable, unthinkable, marvelous” sandals, and stole Apollo’s cattle.

Hermes had nothing except his wit; Apollo, his big brother and condescending antipode, possessed most things in the universe because he was the god of both livestock and agriculture. As the patron of food production, Apollo owned much of the land, directed the flow of time, protected sailors and warriors, and inspired true poets. He was both manly and eternally young, athletic and artistic, prophetic and dignified—the most universal of all gods and the most commonly worshiped. The difference between Apollo and Dionysus—made much of by Nietzsche—is relatively minor because wine was but one of the countless fruits of the earth and sea that Apollo presided over. (Dionysians are Apollonians at a festival—peasants after the harvest.) The difference between Apollonians and Mercurians is the all-important difference between those who grow food and those who create concepts and artifacts. The Mercurians are always sober but never dignified.

Whenever the Apollonians turn cosmopolitan, they find the Mercurians to be uncommonly recalcitrant and routinely accuse them of tribalism, nepotism, clannishness, and other sins that used to be virtues (and still are, in a variety of contexts). Such accusations have a lot to do with the old mirror-image principle: if cosmopolitanism is a good thing, strangers do not have it (unless they belong to a noble savage variety preserved as a reproach to the rest of us). But they have even more to do with reality: in complex agrarian societies (no other preindustrial kind has much interest in cosmopolitanism), and certainly in modern ones, service nomads tend to possess a greater degree of kin solidarity and internal cohesion than their settled neighbors. This is true of most nomads, but especially the mercurial kind, who have few other resources

and no other enforcement mechanisms. In the words of Pierre van den Berghe, “Groups with a strong network of extended family ties and with a strong patriarchal authority structure to keep extended families together in the family business have a strong competitive advantage in middleman occupations over groups lacking these characteristics.”³¹

Whether “corporate kinship” is the cause or consequence of service nomadism, it does appear that most service nomads possess such a system.³² Various Rom “nations” are composed of restricted cognatic descent groups (*vitsa*), which are further subdivided into highly cohesive extended families that often pool their income under the jurisdiction of the eldest member; in addition, migration units (*tabor*) and territorial associations (*kumpania*) apportion areas to be exploited and organize economic and social life under the leadership of one family head.³³

The Indians in East Africa escaped some of the occupational restrictions and status-building requirements of the subcontinent (“we are all *baniyas*, even those who do not have *dukas* [shops]”) but retained endogamy, pollution taboos, and the extended family as an economic unit.³⁴ In West Africa, all Lebanese businesses were family affairs. This “meant that outsiders (without really understanding them) could count on the continuity of the business. A son would honor the debts of his father and would expect the repayment of credits extended by his father. The coherence of the family was the social factor which was the backbone of the economic success of the Lebanese traders: the authority of a man over his wife and children meant that the business was run as resolutely [and as cheaply!] as by a single person and yet was as strong as a group.” Disaster insurance, expansion opportunities, different forms of credit, and social regulation were provided by larger kinship networks and occasionally by the whole Lebanese community.³⁵ Similarly, the Overseas Chinese gained access to capital, welfare, and employment by becoming members of ascriptive, endogamous, centralized, and mostly coresidential organizations based on surname (clan), home village, district, and dialect. These organizations formed rotating credit associations, trade guilds, benevolent societies, and chambers of commerce that organized economic life, col-

lected and disseminated information, settled disputes, provided political protection, and financed schools, hospitals, and various social activities. The criminal versions of such entities (“gangster tongs”) represented smaller clans or functioned as fictitious families complete with elaborate rites of passage and welfare support.³⁶ (In fact, all durable “mafias” are either offshoots of service nomadic communities or their successful imitations.)

Clannishness is loyalty to a limited and well-defined circle of kin (real or fictitious). Such loyalty creates the internal trust and external impregnability that allow service nomads to survive and, under certain conditions, succeed spectacularly in an alien environment. “Credit is extended and capital pooled with the expectation that commitments will be met; delegation of authority takes place without fear that agents will pursue their own interests at the expense of the principal’s.”³⁷ At the same time, clearly marked aliens are kept securely outside the community: “Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury.” Clannishness is loyalty as seen by a stranger.

Economic success, and indeed the very nature of the Mercurians’ economic pursuits, are associated with another common and essentially accurate perception of their culture: “They think they are better than everybody, they are so clever.” And of course they do, and they are. It is better to be chosen than not chosen, whatever the price one has to pay. “Blessed art thou, O Lord, King of the Universe, who hast not made me a Gentile,” says the Jewish prayer. “It is good that I am a descendant of Jacob, and not of Esau,” wrote the great Yiddish writer, Sholem Aleichem.³⁸ “It is the feeling you might have if you went to an elite school, and then you attended a polytechnic,” explained a Parsi informant burdened by an apparently inescapable sense of superiority toward other Indians. “You feel proud of your elite school, but you’re embarrassed if other people know. You’re embarrassed because you think they think you feel superior to them, and you do and know it’s wrong.”³⁹

It has not been wrong for very long. Mercurians owe their survival to their sense of superiority, and when it comes to generalizations based on mutual perceptions, that superiority is seen to reside in the intellect. Jacob was too smart for the hairy Esau, and Hermes outwitted Apollo and amused Zeus when he was a day old (one

wonders what he would have done to the drunk Dionysus). Both stories—and many more like them—are told by the tricksters' descendants. The Kanjar despise their gullible hosts; the Irish Travelers believe that what distinguishes them from their clients is agility of mind (“cleverness”); much of Rom folklore is about outsmarting slow, dull-witted non-Gypsies; and on the best of days, a shtetl Jew might concede, in the words of Maurice Samuel, “that at bottom Ivan was not a bad fellow; stupid, perhaps, and earthy, given to drink and occasional wife-beating, but essentially good-natured . . . , as long as the higher-ups did not begin to manipulate him.”⁴⁰

In their own eyes, as well as those of others, the Mercurians possess a quality that the Greeks called *metis*, or “cunning intelligence” (with an emphasis on either “cunning” or “intelligence,” depending on who does the labeling). Supervised by Hermes and fully embodied on this earth by Odysseus/Ulysses, it is the most potent weapon of the weak, the most ambiguous of virtues, the nemesis of both brute force and mature wisdom. As Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant put it in their study of Homer,

There are many activities in which man must learn to manipulate hostile forces too powerful to be controlled directly but which can be exploited despite themselves, without ever being confronted head on, to implement the plan in mind by some unexpected, devious means; they include, for example, the stratagems used by the warrior the success of whose attack hinges on surprise, trickery or ambush, the art of the pilot steering his ship against winds and tides, the verbal ploys of the sophist making the adversary's powerful argument recoil against him, the skill of the banker and the merchant who, like conjurers, make a great deal of money out of nothing, the knowing forethought of the politician whose flair enables him to assess the uncertain course of events in advance, and the sleights of hand and trade secrets which give craftsmen their control over material which is always more or less intractable to their designs. It is over all such activities that *metis* presides.⁴¹

The Mercurians' views of the Apollonians are ultimately as rational as the Apollonians' views of the Mercurians. It wasn't Mother Earth or Apollo's herds that nourished, beguiled, and

shaped the service nomads; it was people. Traders, healers, minstrels, or artisans, they always performed for the consumer, who was always right, in his own way. And so they had to pay attention. “The Kanjar know a great deal about the human resources they exploit; whereas members of sedentary communities know almost nothing about Kanjar society and culture—their experience is limited to passive audience roles in contrived performance settings.”⁴² Singers know people’s tastes, fortune-tellers their hopes (and thus their fate), merchants their needs, doctors their bodies, and thieves their habits, dwellings, and hiding places. “When begging, Irish Traveller women wear a shawl or ‘rug’ (plaid blanket), both symbols of Ireland’s past poverty; take a baby or young child with them, even if they must borrow one from another family; and ask for tiny amounts such as a ‘sup’ of milk or a ‘bit’ of butter, playing on their client’s sympathy and making any refusal seem miserly.”⁴³

As professional cultivators of people, Mercurians use words, concepts, money, emotions, and other intangibles as tools of their trade (whatever the particular trade may be). They assign value to a much larger portion of the universe than do peasants or pastoralists, and they see value in many more pursuits. Their world is larger and more varied—because they cross conceptual and communal borders as a matter of course, because they speak more tongues, and because they have those “unspeakable, unthinkable, marvelous” sandals that allow them to be in several places at once. Gypsies are always just passing through, and so, in more ways than one, are the Jews. In “ghetto times,” according to Jacob Katz, “no community, even the largest, could be said to have been self-contained and self-sufficient. Business transactions brought members of different communities into touch through correspondence or personal contact. It was a typical feature of Jewish economic activity that it could rely on business connections with Jewish communities in even far-flung cities and countries. . . . Jews who made a living by sitting in their shops waiting for clients were the minority rather than the prevalent type.”⁴⁴ Bankers, peddlers, yeshiva students, and famous rabbis traveled far and wide, well beyond the edges of peasant imagination.

They did not travel just by land or water. Some service nomads were literate, and thus doubly nomads. By a natural extension of his expertise in eloquence and wit, Mercury became a patron of writers (*Mercuriales viri*, “Mercury’s men,” as Horace called them), so that Mercurians who happened to be literate became the preeminent manipulators of texts. In traditional societies, writing was the monopoly of priests or bureaucrats; among literate Mercurians, every male was a priest. The Jews, Parsis, Armenians, Eastern European Germans, Overseas Indians, and Overseas Chinese were not only more literate (on average) than their clients; they were acutely aware of being more literate—and thus more knowledgeable and more sophisticated. What the Rom, Nawar, and Inadan are to oral culture, the scriptural Mercurians are to the culture of the written word. Businessmen, diplomats, doctors, and psychotherapists are literate peddlers, heralds, healers, and fortune-tellers. Sometimes they are also blood relatives.

Either way, they would all take a justifiably dim view of Ivan. If one values mobility, mental agility, negotiation, wealth, and curiosity, one has little reason to respect either prince or peasant. And if one feels strongly enough that manual labor is sacred, physical violence is honorable, trade is tricky, and strangers should be either fed or fought (or perhaps that there should be no strangers at all), one is unlikely to admire service nomads. And so, for much of human history, they have lived next to each other in mutual scorn and suspicion—not because of ignorant superstition but because they have had the chance to get to know each other.

For much of human history, it seemed quite obvious who had the upper hand. The Mercurians may have known more about the Apollonians than the Apollonians knew about the Mercurians (or about themselves), but that knowledge was a weapon of weakness and dependence. Hermes needed his wit because Apollo and Zeus were so big and strong. He would tease and dissimulate when the opportunity presented itself, but mostly he used his sandals and his lyre to run errands, amuse, and officiate.

Then things began to change: Zeus was beheaded, repeatedly, or made a fool of; Apollo lost his cool; and Hermes bluffed his way to the top—not in the sense of the Inadan lording it over the Tuareg, but to the extent that the Tuareg were now forced to be more like the Inadan. Modernity was about everyone becoming a service nomad: mobile, clever, articulate, occupationally flexible, and good at being a stranger. In fact, the task was even more daunting because both the Tuareg and the Inadan were under pressure to become like the Armenians and the Jews, whose economic and cultural border-crossing was greatly aided by their habit of writing things down (in their own way).

Some predominantly oral Mercurians (such as the Ibo of Nigeria) would embrace the transition; others (such as the Gypsies) would continue to service the ever shrinking world of folk culture and small pariah entrepreneurship. Some Apollonian groups would prove willing and able to convert to Mercurianism; others would balk, fail, or rebel. No one would remain immune, however, and no one was better at being a scriptural Mercurian—and therefore “modern”—than scriptural Mercurians, old and new.⁴⁵ The over-representation of the Armenians and Jews in entrepreneurial and professional jobs in Europe and the Middle East (discrimination notwithstanding) was matched or exceeded by the Chinese in Southeast Asia, the Parsis in India, the Indians in Africa, and the Lebanese in Latin America and the Caribbean, among others. Having established themselves as commercial intermediaries with the arrival of the Portuguese, the Parsis became British India’s premier financiers, industrialists, and urban professionals—including the most famous and most successful of them all, Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata. The principal nineteenth-century Indian politician (“the Grand Old Man of India” Dadabhai Naoroji) was also a Parsi, as was the ideologue of violent nationalism Bhaikhaiji Rustom Cama; all three Indian members of the British Parliament; the first Indian baronet; the first prime minister of the Bombay Presidency; the “Uncrowned King of Bombay”; the “Potato King of Bombay”; the pioneer of coffee production in the East; the first Indian to fly from Europe to India; the most prominent Indian Freemasons; most Western musicians (including, eventually, Zubin Mehta); and every

single member of the first all-India cricket team. In 1931, 79 percent of all Parsis (and 73 percent of the females) were literate, as compared to 51 percent of Indian Christians and 19 percent of Hindus and Muslims.⁴⁶ Similar lists could be compiled for all scriptural Mercurians (although in some areas they thought it wise to stay out of public politics).

A small minority wherever they find themselves, the Arabic-speaking immigrants from the Levant (Syrians, Palestinians, and Lebanese, known in Latin America as “turcos”) established a virtual monopoly of the Amazon trade during the rubber boom around the turn of the twentieth century and eventually came to dominate the economic life of Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras, among other places. Between 1919 and 1936, Arab entrepreneurs controlled 67 percent of the Honduran import and export sector, and by the late 1960s, they employed 36 percent and 45 percent of the manufacturing labor force in the country’s industrial centers of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. Over the past two decades, at least seven of the New World’s heads of state have been of Lebanese origin: Julio Cesar Turbay Ayala of Colombia, Abdala Bucaram and Jamil Mahuad of Ecuador, Carlos Roberto Flores Facusse of Honduras, Carlos Menem of Argentina, Said Musa of Belize, and Edward Seaga of Jamaica. In the United States, descendants of Lebanese Christian immigrants are strongly over-represented in the political, economic, and cultural elite; one of them, Ralph Nader, was a contender for the presidency in the 2000 election. In postindependence Sierra Leone, in West Africa, the Lebanese (less than 1 percent of the population) acquired full control of the most productive sectors of the economy, including the gold and diamond trade, finance, retail, transportation, and real estate. Under President Siaka Stephens, in particular, five Lebanese oligarchs (to borrow a term from post-Soviet Russia) were the country’s de facto government.⁴⁷

Various Indian diasporas have outlived the British Empire (which did so much to propel them), and moved farther afield, specializing in traditional Mercurian (“Jewish”) occupations such as trading, finance, garments, jewelry, real estate, entertainment, and medicine. Despite continued discrimination, Goans, Jains, Is-

mailis, and Gujaratis, among others, have continued to dominate the economic and professional life of large parts of East Africa (accounting for between 70 and 80 percent of all manufacturing firms in postindependence Kenya, for example). The Jains, the most “puritanical” and probably the wealthiest of all Indian diaspora communities, are second only to the Jews in the international diamond trade; in the late 1980s, having established themselves in such diamond centers as New York, Antwerp, and Tel Aviv, they accounted for about one-third of all purchases of rough diamonds in the world. In the United States, Indians (mostly Gujaratis) own about 40 percent of all small motels, including about one-fourth of the franchises of the Days Inn chain, and a substantial number of low-cost hotels in large urban centers. In 1989, the combined global real estate investment of Overseas Indians was estimated to be worth about \$100 billion. At the same time (in the 1980s), the number of Indian students studying in the United States quadrupled to more than 26,000. By 1990, there were about 5,000 Indian engineers and several hundred Indian millionaires in California’s Silicon Valley. Altogether, there were about 20,000 Indian engineers and 28,000 physicians in the United States, including 10 percent of all anesthesiologists. But probably the biggest jewel in the Indian diaspora’s crown is the old imperial “mother country.” London serves as the headquarters of a large number of Indian commercial clans, and in Great Britain as a whole, Indian and Pakistani males have a 60 percent higher rate of self-employment than “white” Britons and make up a disproportionate share of managerial and professional personnel. In the 1970s, the rate of economic upward mobility among Indians and Pakistanis was three times that of the rest of the British population.⁴⁸

By far the largest and most widely dispersed of all Mercurian communities in today’s world are the Overseas Chinese. Most of them live in Southeast Asia, where they have encountered relatively little market competition as they have moved from peddling, moneylending, and small artisanship to banking, garment making, and agricultural processing, to virtually total economic dominance (often concealed behind a variety of local frontmen). At the end of the twentieth century, ethnic Chinese (less than 2 percent of the population) controlled about 60 percent of the private economy of

the Philippines, including, according to Amy Chua, “the country’s four major airlines and almost all of the country’s banks, hotels, shopping malls, and major conglomerates.” They dominated “the shipping, textiles, construction, real estate, pharmaceutical, manufacturing, and personal computer industries as well as the country’s wholesale distribution networks . . . and six out of the ten English-language newspapers in Manila, including the one with the largest circulation.” The situation looked similar in Indonesia (over 70 percent of the private economy, 80 percent of the companies listed on the Jakarta Stock Exchange, and all of the country’s billionaires and largest corporations), Malaysia (about 70 percent of market capitalization), and Thailand (all but three of the country’s seventy most powerful business groups, the exceptions being the Military Bank, the Crown Property Bureau, and a Thai-Indian corporation). In post-Communist Burma and almost-post-Communist Vietnam, the ethnic Chinese were quickly returning to economic prominence; in Rangoon and Mandalay, they owned most shops, hotels, and real estate, and in Ho Chi Minh City, they controlled roughly 50 percent of the city’s market activity and dominated light industry, import-export, shopping malls, and private banking. Postcolonial Southeast Asia had become part of an international Overseas Chinese economy, headquartered in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and California.⁴⁹

There is no consensus on why some recently uprooted Apollonians seem able and willing to transform themselves into Mercurians. Why do Chinese and Japanese farmers tend to become entrepreneurs when they arrive on new shores? Why did most Indians in Africa, whatever their background, become *baniyas*? And why did Lebanese villagers consistently ignore the appeals of the Brazilian government (which needed independent farmers to develop the South, farm laborers to replace the slaves, and factory workers to help with industrialization) in order to take up a nomadic and dangerous life as peddlers in the jungle?

Some writers have responded by trying to find a “Protestant ethic” in Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Judaism, Confucianism, or the Tokugawa religion.⁵⁰ The difficulty with this endeavor is that there seem to be more service nomads than there are plausible Protestants. One could search for peculiarly Mercurian traits in the na-

tionalized Christianity of the Armenian Gregorians and Lebanese Maronites (the majority of the original Arab immigrants to the Americas), but one could hardly argue that Orthodox Christianity provided the Ottoman Greeks with much entrepreneurial ammunition, or that Roman Catholicism is responsible for the strong representation of Italian Americans in such typically Mercurian pursuits as entertainment, organized crime, and retail trade in urban ghettos. Max Weber, too, may have discouraged some of his followers by insisting on a rigid distinction between rule-based capitalism and tribal entrepreneurship, as well as by suggesting that some “Calvinist” elements in Judaism were relatively late adaptations to the conditions of exile, not sources of commercial inspiration.

Another approach is to refer to the effects of regional trade practices on local attitudes toward economic gain and broad familiarity, and possibly sympathy, with the Mercurian ethos. According to Thomas Sowell, for example, “the economically strategic location of the Middle East, for centuries a crossroads of trade between Europe and Asia, fostered the development of many trading ports and many trading peoples, of whom the Jews, the Armenians, and the Lebanese have been particularly prominent.” The same, Sowell argues, is true of the Overseas Chinese, “who originated in similarly demanding regions of southern China, where trade was part of their survival skills in a geographically unpromising region for industry, but which had trading ports.” The same may very well be true of some Indian or East Asian Mercurians—but clearly not of others. The Korean and Japanese diasporas, for example, have tended to be much keener on middleman roles and much better at performing them than most migrants from such trading entrepôts as the Baltic or the Mediterranean.⁵¹

Perhaps the most popular explanation for successful Mercurianism is “corporate kinship,” which is said to promote internal trust and obedience while limiting the number of potential beneficiaries. Nepotism may be good for capitalism, in other words—as long as the duties and entitlements of one’s nephews are understood clearly and followed religiously.⁵² Indeed, virtually all Armenian, Korean, Lebanese, diaspora Indian, and American Italian businesses are family enterprises. Even the largest Overseas Chinese commercial

and manufacturing empires, with offices in London, New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, are similar to the Rothschild banking house in that the regional branches are usually run by the sons, brothers, nephews, or sons-in-law of the founder. The one true Mercurian faith, according to this theory, is fervent familism (which may, in a strange land, be extended to larger lineages and ultimately the whole—chosen—people). If the core of Confucianism is “the apotheosis of the family,” then the behavior of large numbers of Italian immigrants to the Americas may be attributed to what Francis Fukuyama calls “Italian Confucianism.”⁵³

The problem with the strictly sociobiological explanation of entrepreneurial nepotism (such as the one advanced by Pierre van den Berghe) is that some of the most successful Mercurian enterprises—the German and Japanese ones, as well as the Sicilian Mafia—have not been kin groups. Instead, they have used family models and metaphors to create durable and cohesive quasi-families—from, in the Japanese case, master-disciple swordsmanship groups to *zaibatsu* (“money clique”) business partnerships. The upshot, it would seem, is that the best new candidates for Mercurian roles are those groups that most closely resemble the old Mercurian tribes. The principal trait that all aspirants must possess is the combination of internal cohesion and external strangeness: the greater the cohesion, the greater the strangeness, and the greater the strangeness, the greater the cohesion, whichever comes first. The best guarantee of both is an uncompromising and ideologized familism (tribalism), which may be either biological or adoptive and which can be reinforced—or indeed replaced—by a strong sense of divine election and cultural superiority. The millenarian religious sects that do not insist on celibacy are invariably endogamous—and thus potential tribes; the endogamous tribes that take their fate and their strangeness seriously are also religious sects.⁵⁴

Whatever the sources of its most recent versions, service nomadism—old or new, scriptural or oral—has always been a dangerous proposition. Unarmed internal strangers, the Mercurians are as

vulnerable as they are foreign, especially because residential segregation (in forest encampments, merchant quarters, or ethnic compounds) is a necessary condition for their continued existence as service nomads among traditional food producers. In stateless societies, they are protected by their supernatural powers and exclusive specialization; elsewhere, they are safeguarded—or not—by tax-collecting elites that profit from their expertise.

The history of most service nomads is a story of sporadic grassroots pogroms and permanent state ambivalence, as various regimes oscillated between more or less rationalized extortion and periodic confiscations, conversions, expulsions, and executions. The European Gypsies were usually seen as parasitic as well as dangerous (entertainment was the only “Bohemian” activity subject to profitable regulation), and thus hounded relentlessly, if rarely with great conviction. The scriptural Mercurians were often considered indispensable as well as dangerous, and thus allowed to remain both resident (including the granting of state protection and economic monopolies) and alien (including the toleration of physical separation, religious self-rule, and administrative autonomy).

The key to continued usefulness was economic success; visible economic success led to heavier taxation, popular violence, and renewed complaints from native competitors. Either way, considerations of long-term usefulness could become secondary to an urgent need for financial revenue or political scapegoats; occasionally, they might be abandoned entirely in favor of religious universalism or bureaucratic transparency. In the Spanish Philippines, for example, 12,000 Chinese were deported in 1596, approximately 23,000 massacred in 1603, another 23,000 in 1639, and then about 20,000 in 1662; in 1755 all non-Christian Chinese were expelled (and many converted); in 1764, 6,000 were killed; and in 1823, the levying of special taxes resulted in mass flight and imprisonment.⁵⁵

The rise of nationalism and communism seemed to pave the way to a final solution. If all nations were entitled to their own states and all states were to embody nations, all internal strangers were potential traitors. They might, or might not, be allowed to assimilate, but they had ever fewer legitimate arguments for continued difference and specialization. In a nation-state, citizenship and na-

tionality (“culture”) became inseparable; nonnationals were aliens and thus not true citizens. And if, on the other hand, proletarians of all countries were supposed to inherit the earth, and if only industrial workers (and possibly their peasant allies) could be true proletarians, then service nomads were to be disinherited as “bourgeois lackeys” or just plain bourgeois. Some Mercurians became communist (in opposition to ethnic nationalism), and some became Mercurian nationalists (in opposition to both), but both nationalism and communism were fundamentally Apollonian, so that many Mercurians who were not murdered became Apollonians of Mercurian descent or citizens of the newly “revived” Israel and Armenia (which tended to be more Apollonian—and much more martial—than Apollo himself).

In the summer of 1903, soon after the anti-Jewish riots in Kishinev, the government of Haiti barred foreigners from retail trade and stood by during the repeated anti-Levantine pogroms that followed. For two years, local newspapers (including *L'Antisyrien*, created expressly for the purpose) inveighed against “Levantine monsters” and “descendants of Judas,” occasionally calling for “l'extirpation des Syriens.” Only pressure from foreign powers (whose representatives were themselves ambivalent about the Levantines) prevented the expulsion orders of March 1905 from taking full effect. About 900 refugees left the country.⁵⁶ On the other side of the Atlantic, the Lebanese population of Freetown, Sierra Leone, spent eight weeks in 1919 under protective custody in the town hall and two other buildings as their property was being looted and destroyed. In the aftermath, the British Colonial Office considered wholesale deportation “in the interests of peace” but opted for continued protection. About twenty years later, the cultural commissar of an incoming prime minister of Thailand delivered a much publicized speech in which he referred to Hitler’s anti-Semitic policies and declared that “it was high time Siam considered dealing with their own Jews,” meaning ethnic Chinese (of whom he himself was one). As King Vajiravudh had written in a pamphlet entitled *The Jews of the East*, “in matters of money the Chinese are entirely devoid of morals and mercy. They will cheat you with a smile of satisfaction at their own perspicacity.”⁵⁷

The nearly universal condemnation of the attempted “extirpation” of the Armenians and Assyrians in Turkey and the Jews and Gypsies in Europe did little to diminish this new anti-Mercurian zeal. In the newly independent African states, “Africanization” meant, among other things, discrimination against Indian and Lebanese entrepreneurs and civil servants. In Kenya, they were squeezed out as “Asians”; in Tanzania, as “capitalists”; and in both places, as “bloodsuckers” and “leeches.” In 1972, President Idi Amin of Uganda expelled about 70,000 Indians without their assets, telling them as they went that they had “no interest in this country beyond the aim of making as much profit as possible, and at all costs.” In 1982, a coup attempt in Nairobi was followed by a massive Indian pogrom, in which about five hundred shops were looted and at least twenty women were raped.⁵⁸

In postcolonial Southeast Asia, ethnic Chinese became the targets of similar nation-building efforts. In Thailand, they were excluded from twenty-seven occupations (1942), in Cambodia from eighteen (1957), and in the Philippines, relentless anti-“alien” legislation affected their ability to own or inherit certain assets and pursue most professions—while making their “alien” status much harder to escape. In 1959–60, President Sukarno’s ban on alien retail trade in Indonesia’s rural areas resulted in the hasty departure of about 130,000 Chinese, and in 1965–67, General Suharto’s campaign against the Communists was accompanied by massive anti-Chinese violence including large-scale massacres, expulsions, extortion, and legal discrimination. Like several other modern Mercurian communities, the Chinese of Southeast Asia were strongly overrepresented among Communists, as well as capitalists, and were often seen by some indigenous groups as the embodiment of all forms of cosmopolitan modernity. In 1969, anti-Chinese riots in Kuala Lumpur left nearly a thousand people dead; in 1975, Pol Pot’s entry into Phnom Penh led to the death of an estimated two hundred thousand Chinese (half the ethnic Chinese population, or about twice as high a death toll as among urban Khmers); and in 1978–79, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese Chinese fled Vietnam for China as “boat people.” The end of the century brought the end of Indonesia’s president Suharto, who had closed down

Chinese schools and banned the use of Chinese characters (except by one government-controlled newspaper), while relying on the financial support of Chinese-owned conglomerates. The popular demonstrations that brought down the regime culminated in huge anti-Chinese riots. According to one eyewitness account, “‘Serbu . . . serbu . . . serbu’ [attack], the massa [crowds] shouted. Thus, hundreds of people spontaneously moved to the shops. Windows and blockades were destroyed, and the looting began. The massa suddenly became crazy. After the goods were in their hands, the buildings and the occupants were set on fire. Girls were raped.” After two days of violence, about five thousand homes were burned down, more than 150 women gang-raped, and more than two thousand people killed.⁵⁹

There is no word for “anti-Sinicism” in the English language, or indeed in any other language except Chinese (and even in Chinese, the term, *paibua*, is limited in use and not universally accepted). The most common way to describe the role—and the fate—of Indonesia’s Chinese is to call them “the Jews of Asia.” And probably the most appropriate English (French, Dutch, German, Spanish, Italian) name for what happened in Jakarta in May 1998 is “pogrom,” the Russian word for “slaughter,” “looting,” “urban riot,” “violent assault against a particular group,” which has been applied primarily to anti-Jewish violence. There was nothing unusual about the social and economic position of the Jews in medieval and early modern Europe, but there is something remarkable about the way they have come to stand for service nomadism wherever it may be found. All Mercurians represented urban arts amid rural labors, and most scriptural Mercurians emerged as the primary beneficiaries and scapegoats of the city’s costly triumph, but only the Jews—the scriptural Mercurians of Europe—came to represent Mercurianism and modernity everywhere. The Age of Universal Mercurianism became Jewish because it began in Europe.