For more than a century, every 24 and 25 May, in the
month of lilacs and lilies, a whole people has been
gathering at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer for a singular
cult: the Gypsy pilgrimage.

The Gypsies come from all over Europe to trample
on the original sea and honour Sara the Black, their
patron saint. Virgin of the sun, she is said to be the
handmaiden of Mary Salome and Mary Jacobean,
who with Mary Magdalene took to the sea after
the crucifixion of Christ and the death of Mary,
to drift to the coasts of Provence. The Camargue
village with its Romanesque church, a stage on the
pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, sees thou-
sands of travellers pass through during this spring
weekend. An obligatory stopover for the community,
the caravans, families and animals settle in with the
wind in order to pay their respect to the saint. The
men have brown complexions, wear black felt hats,
open shirts with gold chains, rings and bracelets on
their hands. The women wear colourful dresses and
gold coin necklaces. Children run barefoot through
the streets, begging for alms like princes asking for
tribute. The week before, one vigil follows another,
people come to light their candles, they pray until
their voices break, they baptise the children, and
above all they dress the saint before her journey
through the city to the shore.

Roma from Central and Eastern Europe, Italian
tzingaris, gypsies from Alsace, Lorraine and the
Rhineland, gypsies from Spain, but also horse guards
and Arlesian women in traditional costumes, all these
people come together at the time of the procession
to the sea. This ceremony is directly linked to the
Camargue rites of the 17th century, when believers
went through the woods, vineyards and onto the
beach to prostrate themselves on their knees in the
sea. A purifying procession perpetuated through the
Rogations and Carnival celebrations.

But this crowd of believers is joined by tourists
and onlookers, and the high media profile of the
event brings with it its share of inconvenience.
Photographers and videographers from France and
abroad come to immortalise the religious scenes, a
real photo safari where exoticism is within everyone’s
reach. This mysterious people, with ancient tradi-
tions, attracts the lens. The sunburnt faces, the deep
black hair and the clear eyes give the photographers
dreams of iconic shots. Gypsies are a cabalistic
people for gadjos and gadjis, a nomadic bastion in
the face of the world’s disenchantment. Since reli-
gions and magic seem to be receding in the face of
the pragmatism of science, this tribe still carries the
history of ancient myths.

There are thousands of reports on this pilgrimage,
and the iconography, often identical, means that
we only retain the author’s prism of this event, the
main information becoming secondary. In the end,
clichés about gypsies are perpetuated due to the
lack of depth of the work done, and the following
report by Yan Morvan is no exception. But placed in
the context of the archive, the photos take on a new
meaning, they become temporal markers. The inte-
rest is no longer in discovering a Catholic rite but in
bearing witness to a vanished period: clothes, hair-
cuts, accessories, banal details that take on impor-
tance as time passes. Therein lies the strength of the
photographer, being able to understand that certain
works will only be of interest ten, twenty, or even
thirty years after they were taken. It is important to
approach this series in this way, the brief chapter
of a life, that of the author on the gypsy pilgrimage.