

Gypsy “flavor” within a social structure

Abstract

In Turkey Romani people have preserved their basic cultural values throughout ages, in fact ever since the Byzantium times. Their origins can be traced back to India, from where they somehow dispersed practically everywhere around the globe. Certain tribes kept living as nomadic people until fairly recent times; while others got settled collectively in districts of certain provinces and counties. In *Istanbul* sedentarized Romanies essentially pertain to some old neighborhoods near the ancient citywall. The bigger society used to attribute some undeserved negative traits to those jovial, carefree communities; while some of their true virtues (like music-talent or skilled handicrafts) could never be contested, enjoying universal appreciation. In this particular study; Romany people are handled from a sociologicay viewpoint in as much detail as possible or appropriate for the scope of an academic article. The major sources hereby consulted comprise an expert work in French by the prominent social scientist *François de Vaux de Foletier*, as well as a few volumes of the masterpiece of a social-historian, late Reşat Ekrem Koçu, namely *İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* (The Encyclopedia of İstanbul). (The publishment of the precious serial came to an end with the untimely-death of the chief-editor). Auxiliary complementary literature is also included. The author of this article did insert a sequence of his own life experiences/*Erlebnis*, as well. The outdated-and-despised word “Gypsy” is mostly omitted in the text, except solely in obligatory quotations. Instead, it is replaced by euphumistic words, above all “Romany”.

Keywords: Romany/Gypsy/Bohemian/Gitan/Coptic, İstanbul, *Sulukule*-district, nomads, settlements, music, ethnicity

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Introduction

Commonly confused concepts: race versus ethnicity

A race from a biological point of view; consists of a population pool of the species *Homo Sapiens* as distinguished from other clusters by the frequency (occurrence) of one or more genes. The three main classifications are described in this respect as Mongoloid, Negroid and Caucasian, which correspond to the yellow, black and white races, respectively. To this day; no evidence has emerged that the these gene patterns determining races have an innate relationship with mental abilities.¹

Nowadays, Anthropology has already given up on “scratching” over or stressing or, “foaming” matters of human races, as it did so in previous times. Even though races are different in some respects, there is no inferiority/superiority relationship regarding their comparisons.

As for the matter of ethnicity; such a group or community may be defined as those who, whether imagined or real, consider themselves to be descended from common ancestors or are seen as such by others and are similar in this respect.¹

While the biological elements take on diminished roles in ethnicity; it is the culture (which is nourished by strong historical roots as well as new life experiences/*Erlebnis*) which is in possession of “the upper hand”.

According to an archaic Turkish proverb; *while expressing his superior qualities, the Romany-lad asserts how skillful he is in pilfering/stealing objects from their owners*. In this very quotation, the counter-culture concept of sociology seems to be expressed in a most concise and powerful manner. This situation does not involve a genetic “code” by any means; rather, it constitutes a sheer cultural trait.

To begin with; the Romany people we are talking about here are not a race in Türkiye (Turkey), but an ethnicity. Social-Historian *Reşat Ekrem Koçu* reserved an important place for these people in his

work (*Istanbul Encyclopedia*), which only consists of nine volumes (He passed away before completing this very precious work). In his days⁽¹⁾ the word “Gypsy” (in Turkish *çingene*) was in common usage anyhow and the scholar did not refrain from employing the actual word, either.

The master author (1965: 3986, Vol 7) affirms that this tribe also mentioned as *Kıbtî (Coptic)*, spread to the world from India. They form a significant population pool in Turkey; some of whom are nomadic; while some others are long settled in certain localities. He states the districts of *Lonca* in *Ayvansaray* and especially */surtout Sulukule* (extending along the ancient city walls), as the main places of settlement for the case of İstanbul. (“*Sulukule*” means literally *watery-tower*).

Common Stances/Attitudes towards the Community & their brief History

An important subject of Economics Sociology deals with *enclaves*. These represent portions of some cities whose inhabitants are culturally or ethnically distinct and who also make a business or trade of their own sort. Chinatowns in London or New York are the most typical examples. There is no formation in this strict sense in Turkey. The example that suits the definition best is the situation of the *Sulukule* district long before the urban transformation (gentrification “operation”) that lasted until 2009, with intermittent processes spanning years.² (Two more important sociological concepts, namely *human capital* and *cultural capital* are also involved with this study; but they shall be considered in a later section under the sub-title *An Innate Aptitude for Music*, which proved to be a more appropriate location to elaborate the subject in question).

¹After all, words and phrases are also living entities. The evolution from *Negro* to *Black* to *Afro-American* is a good demonstrative example. Sometime this evolution happens too fast. Eas revealed in the novel *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck; *Okie* initially simply meant *someone from Oklahoma*. Soon it acquired connotations suggesting ideas like *bad, filthy immigrants!*

(When I was a kid, there was a *Sulukule*-record in the record collection at our house. The lyrics included phrases like "Sulukule girls/ They can't hold back their coyness/ Oh *Sulukule*/ My dear *Sulukule*/ Let's have fun in the district".)

Belly dancing, folk songs, *raki* (stark, anise-added *Schnaps*) and appetizers for the enjoyment of regulars/attenders used to bring income to the local people there. A middle-aged woman speaking in a documentary previously shot on an official TV channel explains that some good-natured drunk clients used to provide generous tips in the neighborhood, indeed.

According to the limited written sources about *Sulukule*, Romany people came to this region from India in 1054. It is considered the first settlement of the community in the world history. *Sulukule* has stood out as a dance and entertainment center since its first settlement. Apart from this, the best mule-drivers and basket-weavers of Istanbul came from *Sulukule*. The people living here also assumed the responsibility of controlling *Edirnekapi* gate-entrance and exit ways into the Istanbul Land Walls.³

Koçu,⁴ this time under the pen-name *Hüsnü Kınaylı*, relates that until the first years of the republic, the nomadic Coptic subjects were left to their own devices by the state. Even during the *Reformation* (*Tanzimat*) and later Constitutional Monarchy periods of late-Ottoman times, they were not recorded in the state's population register. They were not given identity cards in the form of "head papers"; thus, their birth and death dates and their exact numbers remained unknown. They were not drafted/conscripted for the military service, either. The registration of *Oba* (nomad-tents/clans) Gypsies started in 1341 Hijri/Islamic date (1923 AD) and even became a subject of the humor newspapers of the period, such as the bear-cartoon ⁽²⁾ given below in the [Appendix-section](#).⁵

²During one bus trip, we had to spend time in a crowded coffeehouse. At the next table, a middle-aged bear-keeper was talking loudly with his friend, referring to memories. Eavesdropping just aside, I intently followed the conversation rich in findings on Folklore and Social Anthropology. Later, when our bus got all fixed, I wrote a poem titled "*Hamdi* the Bear-Keeper" based entirely on what was already told. In terms of *ethology/animal behavior*, it is interesting to note that even a given animal, in a sense, is a kind of "individual", that is, it is in possession of a unique "personality". Scottish veterinarian *James Herriot* (1916-1915) expressed this issue in his novel-like memoirs (On one side, there is a doggy "who" licked his arm gratefully after the treatment, whereas on the other side there is a doggy "who" bit that same arm three houses away, during a similar treatment! Now the mentioned poem:

HAMDİ THE BEAR-KEEPER / I love the conversation / of our bear-keeper-*Hamdi*! / The very first bear of his, / Bigboy smeared with henna / used to serve as luck-bringer / next to the main role of / providing the bread / for the household, indeed. / How auspicious a creature he was! / A year of going on tour / in western Anatolia / proved to be adequate / for purchasing a house! / thanks to the gain he attained / with his dancing-animal / Once the good-old-creature / did kick off (of pneumonia), / The second one he bought then / proved to be unlucky! / Owner-Hamdi got submerged / in poverty and sickness / until he tramped the beastly / with a third one from the / Acquainted colleague, who / insisted on receiving / quite a lot of "dough" / that is to say, extra sums / for agreeing with the deal. / Hamdi gave in readily / just to get rid of the / horrible second bear of his / As for the third bear to emerge / Well, it turned out to be a / sheer crazy animal! / During one hot show / *Hamdi*'s index-finger was / literally snapped off / among the keen canine-teeth / of the uncontrollable / mad-and-savage mammal there! / Following the catastrophe / *Hamdi* quit his old task / Now he makes his living by / sharpening knives and scissors and axes / Nevertheless he dislikes / the title of "grinder" / He insists on being called / among cronies and others / with the former glorious / title of his: Bear-keeper! (S. Çaya, Dardanelles, November 1994).

Feelings of comradeship, on the part of the researcher

When I was a child, my father left home after a big argument with my mother. My mother, who was completing her thirtieth calendar-age at the time; started his career as an elementary-school teacher (institutrice). Her first appointment was a village-school in the Marmara Region. After a few years, they transferred her to a nearby small town. We have regained a socially higher environment. Finally came my mother's turn to deserve a teaching position in her very home-city but in a location extremely far away from her parental home. {The "price/atonement" of deserving "better" appointments was paid in terms of years in service ("accumulated" seniority), i.e. endurance and patience}. Lady-mother taught at the far-away school for a couple of years, until a brand-new elementary school was built up at a region relatively nearby and moreover enabling one to access fast and directly, as far as traffic went. But there was a "catch" in the "game": The new establishment was just in the bosom of the Romany neighborhood. The teachers appointed there would educate almost entirely the children of the "ghetto". Mother then resorted to the practice of exchanging workplaces, via mutual consent, a procedure then valid in the National Education system, within a given settlement. She simply ignored this Romany aspect of the deal, just for the sake of getting close to the paternal home. She passionately requested an exchange with another colleague, who obviously was equally anxious to leave the ghetto behind, the sooner the better. Mother continued teaching children at this last school of hers, until her retirement.

By a happy coincidence; upon the death of mother, during the "liquidation" process of her belongings (she had obtained a house of her own, shortly after retirement); it proved to be Romany people who willingly took the donated items of all sorts from the house of the dead-teacher. This development stirred up extra feelings of appreciation for Romany community, in my soul. After all; a person who makes a charity is only pleased to witness the acceptance of what he/she offers to others (and is accordingly offended if encountered by refusal). I was happy to witness the valorization of many commodities instead of their being wasted away!

Before the construction of the mentioned new school, the children of the ghetto were also receiving elementary education in a certain other school, where they used to constitute a somewhat "substantial" percentage of the student-body. During a season when my father attended a military development course for officers; the rest of the family naturally got "shipped" onto the maternal-parental-side temporarily, to be taken care of. Therefore, I too had to attend that "certain other school" for a whole term, along with Romany classmates (.). (There was no trace of "Romany children" in the more central schools of the county. (One of them was —of course in the "unofficial" or informal sense— a "higher society" school, which was even named after Emrullah Efendi, a well-known Ottoman minister of education in late-Ottoman era).

My mother got especially fond of a certain boy, *Küçük Ali* (Ali the small one), whose adventures she related at home, pleasingly. Paradoxically, that quick-witted (schlagfertig) child was the one who spared and secured his teacher's bag during breaks and appropriated this habitude as an institutionalized self-imposed duty. (The boy was thereby taking measures against possible "theft attempts by Gypsies" in the very same wording of the child—Gypsies like himself, that is to say!) My mother had a very positive attitude towards these people in general (students as well as parents), whose very existence was the reason, in her eyes, why she could get assigned to a nearby workplace.

Nevertheless; she was not completely free from the subconscious prejudices that had had accumulated in her subconscious over long years. When she dreamed about any “*gurbitka*” whomever—which means Gypsy in the Macedonian language—upon the following wakefulness, her morale was sunk real deep. For her, such a *dream/rêve/Traum* could only mean a bad omen of some sort, somehow suggesting that something bad might imminently happen. (My grandmother and my mother used to interpret dreams of theirs in this Balkanic language, which was a much more fluent medium of communication for the elderly lady, originally from Vodina-Tselaniki as a Lausanne-Treaty-exchange-immigrant). [Remnants of Christian Greeks and Moslem Turks were exchanged between the two countries in 1923, following the War of Independence of Turks, at the aftermath of World War I. At the time, modern Turkey had just emerged from among the rubbles of the already-collapsed former Ottoman State].

In one of my conversations, my mother told me about an incident she witnessed when she was a young girl. One of the neighboring ladies had her copper kitchenware tinned by a traveling female tinsmith and then cheated her about the payment. The tinsmith woman cursed the neighbor:

“O, Turkish woman! [naturally she employed the expression to mean “white-Turkish”]. I really hope to hell that you shan’t give an easy birth to the baby you are carrying in your womb!” She uttered such severe cursing phrases! Later on, that particular neighbor woman actually came up with a stillbirth. Mother concluded the memory by adding the comment: “the lesson to take: A curse from their lips really haunts one; definitely gets one!”

A few months later, while reading in a newspaper about a wrestler serial (which was very popular during my childhood); I reinforced that memory in my mind again. Once upon a time, a young Coptic sportsman appeared in *Kırkpınar* (Holy-40-Springs, the 6-century-old “arena” of traditional oil-wrestling) festivities. He made it all the way to the finals by defeating his opponents, one by one. He had the last wrestling match with the famous *Kel Aliço* (*Aliço* the bald), the lion of the field for many consecutive years. At one point, when the *Gitan* wrestler/ *lutteur/ ringer* caused the veteran opponent to lose his balance (a form of disguised defeat for the stumbler and accordingly victory on the part of the causer-actor); the referee and the notables among spectators got really irritated. *Aliço*, however; did display an astonishing reaction, against those favoring him!

— O, you dignitaries/*aghas*! How else can a wrestler ever disrupt the balance of his opponent? Are you guys going to make me usurp a Gypsy’s lawful right? {That’s all that stuck to my memory, in this particular episode of the serial (published in *Tercüman Gazetesi*)}. I guess a satisfactory conclusion to settle the matter was eventually figured out, anyhow).

(Let me talk a little about memories involving my father, too.) When the word *Romany* was not yet firmly established in the language; father used to call them *darkly-complected citizens*, as a euphemism of his own invention. While teaching English classes at a secondary school as a retired army-major and a substitute-teacher, he favored and lovingly teased a particular student of his, a serious-looking “*darkly-complected citizen*”. Father bestowed him with the nickname *Lumumba*. (The news of the assassination of *Patrice Lumumba*, the first president of the newly independent *Congo*, was more or less fresh in collective memory, at that time). When the semester was over, father took over the defense of the boy at the teachers’ board, emphasized his sympathetic appearance and initiated the correction of his a few failing-grades by the decision of the board, thereby exempting the boy from the painstaking burden of sitting prospective conditional examinations.

Popular Occupations of the Community

—Hey you, Gypsy! Snap snap!

Many lice are to be observed on your back.

A spoon of buttermilk

Shall suffice to render you quite content—

A nursery rhyme or puerile/childish tongue-twister

According to *Koçu*,⁴ *citadin*-Gypsies were making a living by playing musical instrument, singing aloud songs, dancing on the stage acrobatically⁽³⁾, shoe-shining, pottery etc. They also (if only rarely) worked as hammam-massagers (*tellâk-task*), (while their females did the corresponding *natir*-work in female-hot-baths). Especially males who somehow (and this is a real exception) receive schooling and get clerical jobs, or official tasks in civil service do conceal their Gypsy-identity⁽⁴⁾ and after another generation, they completely break off their former roots. Nomads, on the other hand, engage in blacksmithing, reaping harvest, bear-dancing and horse-breeding [horse raising plus trading (buying and selling horses)]. Their women and girls perform fortune-telling, dancing/playing and song- chanting at recreation areas; selling lavender, hibiscus, chicory flowers.

We were undergraduate students at *Boğaziçi University*. A lively student who casually glanced at the homework of a friend who was preparing an ethnography-type project (to be submitted to instructor *Tahir Alangu*) in the dormitory building read aloud this successfully translated passage from an old English source with a laughter: “Blacksmithing is a profession that has been almost identified with Gypsies for a long time. A resentful Gypsy would even be reproached by his interlocutor, with words like “Oh Gypsy, did I ever swallow your iron pieces?”

According to *Koçu*, although the nomadic Gypsy tribes used to steal things whenever the opportunity presented itself, they did not make it a regular business; rather, they took things that were not protected by their owners. So, they can’t be deemed “professionals”. It was also said that they were child-thieves. It has been stated that they captured little girls and boys in Istanbul and sold them to childless people in the countryside and made a lot of profit in this manner.

[We can elaborate on this point]: On October 9, 1961, a little girl named *Aylâ Özakar* went to buy biscuits at a grocery store 100 meters away from her house in *Bahçelievler*, Istanbul, as she often did so. That day, she got lost on that very short road she always walked through. What followed the event was a nightmare-life for

³*Güllü İbo / Abraham of Roses*, during the reign of Hunter *Mehmet* alias *Sultan Mehmed the Fourth* —the ruling padishah at the time of the second siege of Vienna by the Janissary corps— is the most famous of these. *Kolbaşı* (“branch-head”, the equivalent of today’s art-manager) named *Baba Nazlı* (*Launish Father*), literally made the entire city bubble up with joy, thanks to this young lad he had trained so magnificently! [Author *Ergun Hiçyılmaz* has dealt with this subject well]. The tradition involved boys’ dancing on the stage in female attire, females being banned from all stage performances according to a related interpretation of the Islamic law by the state administrations of the times. This *zenne* or *köçek* tradition was valid in parts of Afghanistan and India, too.

⁴The concern or obligation or anxiety regarding concealing one’s ethnic or cultural origin from the presently surrounding social environment as much as possible, did not pertain to this group alone, in previous years. This was also the case for many citizens of immigrant origins. I remember a written statement by academician *Elçin Macar*, affirming that the *Lausanne-Treaty-exchangees* behaved accordingly, too, as if they were hiding their leprosy. Similarly, a sentence by writer *Cüneyt Ülsever* about how the exchangee-grandfather of his, in the city of *Samsun* got fed up with many detrimental allusions from the surroundings, in this line of negative attitudes, is also in my mind.

the *Özakar* family, which also became the subject of a Yeşilçam (local) movie. The family searched tirelessly for Ayla for 40 years. A reward was promised to those who would locate the lost child. Ayla can could never be found. After 40 years, her elderly father decided to end his fruitless and painful search for his daughter and has a symbolic grave built for Ayla. The *Aylâ* incident, which coincided with the days of great political turmoil [following the May 27 coup of toppling the legal government and further chaotic implementations of the junta, including unfair-and-merciless capital penalties for a few statesmen], also replaced the unspeakable themes in the field of politics by creating a topic convenient (and safe) to talk about. Considering the conjuncture, the interest shown in the Ayla case should be understood accordingly.⁶

There are no graves⁽⁵⁾ of the people of Oba (nomad-tents). Those who die on the road or at the campsite are buried in a pit; there is no marking stone put and they eventually vanish. *Ahmet Vefik Pasha*; In his dictionary called *Lehçe-i Osmani* [*Ottoman Dialects*], records that especially the nomadic ones spoke an unwritten language called Romani. Again, since ancient times; the executioners who actually carried out the death sentences, have always⁷ come from the tribesmen; but those who took up this as a profession were unable to live in their camps; they had to settle in the city.⁴

An Innate Aptitude for Music

Late *Adnan Şenses* (1935-2013), one of Türkiye’s most important singers, was “an officer’s son” and he affirmed in an on-screen conversation that he had volunteered to linger in the district of *Sulukule* for a while, as a kind of “internship” in music, in his youth. There, there exists no technical concepts such as musical notes, solfeggio-knowledge, signs for sharp, flat tones etc. Rather, all tunes and fluctuations of the melodies are embedded within the head! The art is performed practically, magnificently.

Koçu wrote the following lines on this subject: In 1939, in the days preceding the Second World War, one evening with *Mesud Cemil* [*Mesut Cemil Tel*, son of *Tamburî Cemil Bey*], one of the great figures of our music, we went to *Boris’* tavern in *Balıkpazarı* (famous fish market). A slender boy (*şopar*), at most at the age of 15 and with the skin-color of burnt bricks, arrived. The little vagabond proved to be a virtuoso with his violin in his hand, wandering from tavern to tavern! He retreated to the most secluded corner of the place. He started his concert with a wonderful introduction section. The boy was unaware that he is playing the violin in front of a master, so he was indifferent. Mesut Cemil suddenly became attentive.

1) “*Ekrem*,” he said, “This kid is magnificent!” There is only one mistake that I couldn’t understand why.

He asked for the violin of the brunette boy. He looked at his tuning: Perfect! He wanted the bow. The boy was embarrassed; he didn’t want to give it, at first. Then he extended his bow, as well, crestfallen.

⁵As *Yashar Kemal* explains in his novel *The Legend of the Thousand Bulls* (1971), about nomads along the *Taurus* mountains, this situation of not having a grave is also a reality for some other nomads.

Such a striking scene also occurs in John Steinbeck’s famous novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. The farmer-family, who made an internal migration from barren-*Oklahoma* (the dust bowl!) to fertile-*California*, buries the deceased elder of the family right there where he happens to die. As a matter of fact; as family-member explains, since the *state cares more for the dead than the living*, they place a bottle on the corpse’s lap and insert a written note inside, stating the reason for his death.

2) “Just what is this?” asked the music-master. There wasn’t even a single horse-hair left on the bow. The boy was playing the violin with a sheer stick! Those beautiful and slightly twisted melodies were emanating from such an absurd object, in other words.

One can indeed encounter many great musical talents among Istanbul Gitan-boys, and most of them are wasted away due to lack of appreciation. We take the following lines from *Hürriyet Newspaper*: In 1962, *Üfler* (literally *blower/souffleur*) Brothers from *Sulukule*, 13-year-old violinist *Yaşar* and 11-year-old concussion-player *Hüseyin* met an American artist-promoter named Mr. Johnson in front of the Blue Mosque. The organizer, who got to like *Üfler*-Brothers very much, decided to take them to Hollywood and made a related agreement with their father. Their shabby clothing was renewed; *Yaşar* was given a new violin worth of a hundred liras, and *Hüseyin* received a drum bought for him for twenty-five liras. Now the two kids are awaiting the airplane tickets and the invitation-letter from Mr. Johnson.

Human capital, one of the abstract concepts of capital emphasized by contemporary French sociologist *Pierre Bourdieu*, roughly means work experience, and for a young person, such an intangible form of capital may come more handy, more important and more promising than tangible inheritance in kind or in cash. In this example, we witness a typical functionality of this very concept of Sociology. Those young people in the United States might have made a lot of profit not only for themselves but also for their patron/benefactor.⁸

Cultural capital, which is essentially another type of intangible capital (defining tastes, pleasures, talents, etc. originating from the family-herd), is also partially involved, at this point. In the textbooks, it is acknowledged that this value has no direct benefit in practice (we cannot activate the car that broke down in the desert by reading a tirade from Hamlet), but the centers that hold the “carrots” (the power and therefore the chance of distributing prizes) may regard an individual they admire as worthy of granting a certain privilege, whereby the concept all of a sudden materializes into practical appearance (this is a development in the line of a humane-and-merciful logic in the line of “You shouldn’t be wasted away despite these superior qualities of yours! So, here’s an opportunity that indeed would suit you!”).⁸

Some years ago when High Schools Specialized in Fine Arts were being promoted all over Turkey; the ministry started recruiting suitable teachers from among classical lycées via oral exams held before qualified juries. My own brother, an artistic painting teacher elsewhere, also applied for the selections. The event coincided with my period of military service. To boost the young man’s morale, I took a half-day leave from my commandant in order to escort him to the exams. While my brother was perspiring in front of the tough jury; thanks to my fancy uniform, I attracted attention from other candidates awaiting for their turns. I just joined the conversations going on in the canteen. A talkative young music-teacher; expressed his achievements at the high school where he currently worked, politely and appropriately. A female candidate’s accompanying-husband turned to him in a cold and raw manner and commented:

—“Don’t you have some Gypsy origins, by any chance?” So, the fellow “committed” the mistake of saying that blunt adjective in the most *banal* way ever possible! By doing this rude move, he spoiled the entire sweet ambiance and gained the shared disapproval of the group, right on the spot. All of a sudden, the young music-teacher’s darkly complected skin suddenly resumed another dimension in his public image. Another awareness. After a few seconds of recovery and swallowing in total silence, this music teacher spoke up articulately:

—“If you ever ask this question to me one more time, in this same manner and with this same word-choice, then I shall remove this wooden here and smash it onto your bleeding face!” This statement achieved its common approval with beaming mouths all around.

Debates over associating them with crimes or so-called execution-tasks

It is known that during the rising era of *Ottomans*, the “perfect” palace-executioners/*Henkers* were deaf-mute Namibian eunuchs. In addition, the Palace Gardeners also performed this abominable job as a twin-duty when necessary. It is understood that in the processes of decadence and corruption following on in later times, in almost every subsequent fields of life, even this very profession changed shape by breaking away from the previous institutionalized-and-rigid traditions.⁹

According to *Koçu* (1959: 609, Vol 2), It is estimated that the origin of the terrifying *Kara Ali* (*Ali* the Black), who served as the chief executioner for 25 years in the mid-17th century, was a *Coptic*. The clothes and underwear of execution victims, as well as the other belongings and money that came out of their bosoms, belts, accessories etc. were rightfully transferred to the executioners. This olive-skinned Gypsy-wrestler used to wear the underwear of the dead viziers he had robbed; he used to use their brocaded handkerchiefs, stone-decorated pocket-watches, amber cigarette-holders. However, at the execution of Sultan Ibrahim, he got frightened at first and did not want to strangle a ruler.

In the First Courtyard of *Topkapı Palace*, there stands the executioner’s fountain and a monumental stone next to it.⁴ There was an executioners’ cemetery behind the *Karyağdı* (literally “it did snow”) slope in the district of *Eyüp*, which, according to *Koçu*,⁴ is extremely worthy of attention as one of the noblest examples of the sense of social morality. Even though it was their official duty to take lives, the Ottoman society did not accept the dead-executioner into their cemeteries. Instead, they sent them to a separate cemetery. [On the other hand, the same author, the chief editor of the encyclopedia; simultaneously considers the complete loss of the *Cellüd* (Arabic plural of *cellad*) Cemetery after 1950, when the district of *Taşlıtarla* (literally “the stony field”) was being formed, as a deficiency in terms of the history of the very society].

The world-famous poet of the Turkish language, *Nâzım Hikmet Ran* also confirms this attribution to Romany ethnicity in some of his own verses: “Be sure my darling /if ever a poor Gypsy’s / hairy, black, spider-like hand / shall place a noose / around his throat / those who search for / a glimmer of fear within his blue eyes / will look at *Nâzım* in vain [he’ll display no fear].”

Yugoslavian writer *Ivo Andrić*¹⁰ chose the executioner-character from among the Gitan subjects of the Ottoman administration in his historical novel titled *the Bridge over the River Drina*. Under Ottoman hegemony, Grand Vizier *Sokollu Mehmet Pasha* wanted to accord a bridge to the city of *Višegrad*, his childhood territories before his conscription into the corps of young Janissaries. In today’s sense, the “contractor” to lead the mission, *Abid Agha* is cruel and prone to corruption. Even though he received the necessary amount of funds from the Grand Vizier, he kept his expenses to a minimum and embezzled a large amount of wealth. Apart from key personnel such as the important Italian stone-master, he somehow tried to employ the local people in the format of *drudgeriy* (*corvée*) via employment of brute force of the state.

As a reaction to this disliked dignitary, sabotage acts against the construction works occurred. A villager named *Radisav* was detected and captured. The punishment of *impalement* (!) [a more horrible *modus operandi* than hanging or decapitating] was carried out by a master executioner from the Romany-tribe. {Soon after, the Christian section of the population sanctified that victimized-man⁽⁶⁾}.

During my childhood, some district municipalities in the Marmara region used to wage war against ravens, on the grounds of their being harmful birds for fields and fruit gardens. (Today, some of their species are even under lawful protection against the danger of extinction). During a summer season when municipalities offered a certain monetary reward for raven-heads, many neighborhood children would go around hunting them with slingshots. I had just turned twelve. My friend İrfan, a barber’s apprentice, broke a forked branch from a mulberry tree, used old bicycle inner tubes and a piece of leather to make his own slingshot. He collected a lot of pocket money from the toll booth of the town municipality. One Saturday afternoon, many town children gathered along the stream to take a dip in the water and cool off. (I can’t say swimming because there was practically no one in the “terrestrial” settlement who knew how to swim properly; unfortunately, there drowning cases were encountered in summer times, accordingly).

One Saturday evening when İrfan was kept in the barbershop as overtime, I went to the stream with my peers. There was a boy from Istanbul who was a few years older than me. From what I inferred, he was spending his school holiday with his grandparents, just like me. With a proud attitude he remarked:

—“You can catch germs from this muddy dirty water!” protesting the “swimmers”. Then he opened a huge paper-bag made of newspapers, displaying his newly collected booty: About a dozen dead ravens! The *Istanbulite* “aristocrat” looked around, caught sight of a Romany boy of my age and gave his supreme order:

—“Why don’t you chop off their heads, for me? You surely know about an executioner’s task!” The child; now pleased to receive the attention of the “nobleman”, readily accepted the challenge, grabbing the paper bag and walking some distance with it. Just then a comrade of his from the same ethnicity went along with a *battle-cry* (*Schlachtruf*):

—“Here comes the second executioner to join you!”. Then his example was followed with a third volunteer:

—“Here comes the third executioner to join you.”⁸

The tendency of the *Gitans/Zigeuneurs* to commit some simple crimes must be a reactionary behavior, in a sense induced by the mainstream society, which excludes them and regards them with suspicion, to begin with This is another case of a “self-fulfilling prophecy” in sociology. The fact that the Romany-executioner found a propensity for this function may probably be explained through a Freudian interpretation: He thereby performs the task of venting his

⁶*Sokollu Pasha* later exiled that particular official to a far-flung Anatolian corner —merciful-Pasha could have got him killed, if he had wished to do so— and transferred the project to *Ârif Agha*, an honest personality. He kept the architect, *Tosun Ağa*, in place. As labor gained wages, the public got to embrace the project; The stone bridge, with all its majesty and especially its useful terrace, dominated the very center of social life for centuries to come. [*Pashas* could legally acquire wealth in the *Ottoman Empire*. They could establish charity foundations from their personal wealth. In case death, the wealth would be confiscated by the treasury, leaving modest incomes to inheritors. Confiscation (*müsadere*) of wealth upon death did not apply to rich merchants, however. The expert on such topics is Dr. *Ali Yayıoğlu* in the teaching staff of Stanford University].

anger in a representative (symbolic) manner on a "sample individual" of the mainstream society. As fate would have it, if ever one of them was sentenced to an official punishment, and thereby "harming that single sample now became permissible" there comes up an opportunity for symbolic-revenge! *Displacement*, which is one of the psychological defense mechanisms that relieves the individual, may also be involved in the "equation". (Even if it is not a target worthy of anger, it is nevertheless a safe object to hurt by discharging accumulated subconscious feelings of resentment).

German-American sociological theorist *Herbert Gans* deals with the function of the poor people in society. He expresses that even in a rich society, the root of poverty is deliberately maintained because it is only possible to find a basis for materially dirty (chimney sweeping, etc.) and dangerous jobs (window cleaners in skyscrapers, etc.), that is, the main boulevard middle class does not want poverty to be eradicated. In many societies, ethnic minority status and poverty go hand in hand. In numerical data, the poor percentages of whites are more weighted than the poor percentages of Hispanics and Blacks in America. *Gans's* theory may apply to the *Gitan/Zigeuneur* community in this direction in the specific example of former Türkiye (during the era of capital punishment).

Gitan Novel Characters in Turkish Literature

—"My black mulberry, my Gypsy!

My pomegranate, my darling, my unique beloved-one!"—

from late poet Bedri Rahmi Eyuboğlu

(as addressed to a woman whom interested him)

According to *Koçu* (p. 3988, Vol 7), the one who describes the Gypsy best is [symbolic poet] Ahmed Hâşim: *Gypsy is a beautiful breed of humans that remains closest to nature. You would think that these country-dwellers with bronze faces and beautiful [Chinese porcelain-like] teeth are some green trees that have metamorphosed into human form. Gypsy is the spring itself among the seasons.* The first prose-writer to partially mention Gypsy life in late-Ottoman literature was Ahmet Mithat Efendi [1844-1912], in a long story called "Gypsy". The hero of the story is a beautiful young girl named Zibâ, who lives in Alibeyköy. Events develop when he meets Şemsi Hikmet Bey. Another masterpiece novel, called *Gypsies*, was written by Osman Cemal Kaygılı [1890-1945]. The slender, beautiful girl with vellum eyes is the protagonist. Selâhattin Enis Atabeyoğlu [1892-1942], one of our realist novelists, also discusses Gypsy females in his work titled *Bataklık Çiçeği* (The Swamp Flower).

The Turkish movie *Gurgriye* (hubble-bubble), which was released in 1981 should not be omitted in this mentioning, either.

Elif Şafak, in a historical novel of hers describes a trainer of an elephant named *Çota*, a gift from India, during the reign of *Suleiman the Magnificent* and its continuation, and also presents sections from Chief-architect Sinan the Great ⁷, builder of numerous mosques and other monuments. Trainer-*Cihan* also works as a construction foreman as a twin job alongside the Chief Architect. In the novel, a secondary but important character named Balaban emerges too. Now, this Balaban is a *Çeribaşı* (common law leader or ringleader) of a

⁷*Sinan the Great* really came from the Janissary fortification quarry (the very counterpart of today's army engineering corps), and his transition to aesthetic architecture took place during his middle-ages. In a couplet he wrote himself, he affirms: "I became a Janissary and put up with the sufferings / I participated in many battles as a simple infantryman!"

Gypsy community in the Ottoman Capital-City, then called *Dersaadet*. This resourceful, constructive and courageous personality, who has encountered Cihan and helped him out in difficult circumstances many times on various occasions, also owns a female elephant and decides to use *Cihan's* elephant as a "breeding-bull"/ "*taureau reproducteur*", in order to obtain a baby elephant.

After so many adventures, in his old days, trainer-Cihan finally leaves Istanbul by ship, again with the help of Balaban. In spite of his advanced age, he is still vigorous. Then, when he was one hundred and five years old, he boards a ship from Portugal and reaches India. The year is 1632. Our author *Şafak* now portrays her fictitious character Cihan as one of the architects of the Mausoleum *Taj Mahal*, which *Shah Cihan* (his namesake-ruler) had built for his beloved wife *Mumtaz Mahal* in the city of *Agra* (Özbursalı 12 April 2020, passim).

The situation in European countries

B. Cartland, in a historical novel of hers, touches upon the special language and some customs used among the traveling Romany groups (the itinerant Gypsies) in Britain. Anthropological information is available: Their belief about accepting a tip from a friend being shameful, their understanding of matriarchal leadership (an old female chief of staff is at the head of the caravan), and that dying in the open air is a virtue for this freedom-loving tribe. Even though such knowledge takes place in the background of the novel (hidden transcript); they provide distinct information patterns for the enthusiasts.⁸

It is possible to watch the situation, or rather the drama, of the *Coptic people* in France recently (1975) from the frames of a film jointly made by an unconventional director (*José Giovanni*) with Italian artists. The leading role was played by the unforgettable handsome man of French cinema, *Alain Delon*. In the movie, we witness a man who expresses his anger towards mainstream society through robberies. He uses knives skillfully. His fate will intersect with a white French jewelry-robber. In the images about the tribe, it is observed that their nomads got motorized long before the compatriots in Türkiye. In the last scenes, the bourgeois-bandit aids and abets the Romany chief who is on the run from the law - he also hid in his old camp for a while. He even lends her a *robe de chambre* for the night. He also hands over a book; so that he doesn't get bored in the room. *Çeribaşı* turns the pages and asks:

—"Aren't there any pictures in this stuff?" he asks. (While watching the movie in an Istanbul movie-theater years ago, the audience could not help laughing at that particular scene). There, the contrast between the cultural capital accumulation of urban and rural people was clearly contrasted.

Selected Supplements from Related French Literature

While on the one hand throughout history there were captive *Gitans / Bohemians* in Eastern Europe; on the other hand, in the North and South Americas, for example in Brazil, there were slave-dealer *Gitans*, as well. Although the Portuguese king banned this profession in 1760, the decree proved to be ineffective. By 1830, some of these slave-traders had accumulated significant fortunes by selling the blacks they had carried from Africa (Vaux de Foletier 1970: 176).

Between 1830 and 1850, *Bohemians* in Britain were seen eating snail and hedgehog stew. It was reported that they ate hedgehogs in the Rhineland region of Germany in the early years of the 19th century. Evidently, porcupine meat has been a food of choice for the nomadic *Gitans*.¹¹

British person Richard Twiss, who traveled through Spain in 1772 & 1773; vouched for the honesty of the Gitanos. He noted that he frequently stayed in the inns they ran and that not even the smallest of his belongings were stolen, even though he did not take any special precautions.¹¹

In *Poland* in 1513, there were almost no people other than Gitanos among those who were manufacturing and repaired agricultural equipment, in rural regions. At the beginning of the 19th century, they were successfully launching these products for sale even in cities, and their women were also making a living by telling fortune-telling to city-dwellers.¹¹

Among the talismanic powers attributed to Bohemians, the ability to stop fires is also mentioned. In 1715, while an octogenarian ringleader was being taken to the gallows in Königsberg, news of a fire came. They immediately took him to the scene of the fire [they expected help from him]. In front of hundreds of witnesses, the old man addressed to the flames and caused them to expire within minutes. As a reward, the Prussian⁸ administration granted him amnesty.¹¹

For Bohemians, whether men or women, tobacco use is literally a lust! Not only do they smoke tobacco, they also chew it. Sometimes they swallow it with its leaves and stems. Short or long wooden mouthpieces are especially in demand (recorded with reference to Grellmann 1810 by Vaux de Foletier.¹¹ [There is either an exaggeration in the narrative, or the mechanism of habituation and tolerance to nicotine is also included in this equation, nicotine being toxic].

In the 19th century, Gustave Flaubert [the unforgettable author of *Madame Bovary*] took great pleasure in the company of the Bohemians. In a letter to George Sandi the novelist stated that he was always a loyal friend of minorities and that he became enraged when he saw them being treated badly. He added an analysis that hostile attitudes towards Bohemians were especially true for the bourgeois social layer.¹¹ As a matter of fact, as can be seen from Paul Scarron's edited notes, Bohemians were on good terms with the nobility. They loved to toast to the health of the princes and lords during festivities, as a reciprocity to the aristocracy, who treated their small domestic animal herds hospitably! (p. 223).¹²⁻²²

Conclusion

It was in 2017. As a group of sociologists, we took the *métro tunnel historique d'Istanbul* (despite its short range, the oldest subway of the world) in a hurry to attend a conference at the Algeria Meeting Hall in Taksim district of Istanbul. A group of Romany musicians was performing their capabilities on the streetside. Some passers-by were throwing coins into the opened cello-case as reward. Colleague *Alev Hanım* searched in her *port-monnaie* for a banknote, rather than a simple coin. She placed the paper-money gently within the cello-case. We exchanged glances. It was as if my face said "what a generosity this is!" Sensing the very meaning, she explained:

⁸Some grandsons of those Prussians in later generations to come, would be quite intolerant or even bitterly hostile to some grandsons of this very Bohemian: In his well-documented realistic historical novel *Glenn Mead* (2001) provides the following true information from the mouth of one character: The inmates of *Ravensbrück* concentration camp (constructed in 1939 solely for females) included *Sinti and Roma* (Gypsy tribes of Germany) along with political criminals, Jews, prostitutes, female prisoners of war, Allied spies and members of the resistance movements.

Still in another work of his, the same author (2012) makes another novel-character utter the following sentence: "Not only Jews were put into camps, but also intellectuals, homosexuals, tramps, gypsies and certain cult members".

—"Those are oppressed people". I immediately emulated my female fellow-sociologist. I felt a respite when putting my bank on the case.

.....

French scholar *Cartier* (1968: 289, 300), who wrote down the impressions he gained as a result of a long trip; makes a reference to the problematic black-white conflict in the *United States*. (Since the *Civil War*, the north has been known to be affectionate towards blacks, while the south has been known to be intolerant. The traditional homeland of the slave-holding aristocratic plantation owners, and therefore the traditional black majority, is a trait of the southern states). The Southerners he talked to gave him the following message: Yankees up north love blacks as an abstraction. As such, they still do exclude them from hotels, restaurants, family gatherings. They actually keep up Blacks' lower socio-economic level. Their lips alone talk about equality. In this way, they thus display hypocrisy. As for us; in a sense, we love black people as a reality. We simply consider it a principle for the general public order that the colors remain separated.

I was to remember the-above-given passage from a Sociological Treaty in French at the border city of *Adrinople (Edirne)* upon returning from abroad, some years ago. The association was only too keen! While I was having my shoes shined at the entrance of the historical Grand Bazaar, I was even mumbling the rhyming refrain of a local song: *I bought some rice at the market/ Edirne's shoeshiner is the most talented!* Then, all of a sudden, I got generous with the happiness of being reunited with my homeland and offered the entire contents of the cigarillo (thin rolled cigars) box in my pocket to my Gitan shoe-shiner and other fellow-shiners. Once the contents got used up, there appeared still another shoe-shiner! This one peered at the emptied box miserably and threw a dark glance at its possessor, yours truly, spoiling my jovial mood on the spot! As if it were my fault that he was unlucky.

During my childhood years, I once entered a ready-made shoe store with my maternal grandfather. While the previously arrived lady-customers were also trying on shoes; we overheard the shop owner chatting with a Gitan friend of his. The man's daughter graduated from a high school with honors and was sent abroad for further study "in the narrator's own words". After stating this with pride, the father went on:

1) "After all, we are Muslims, good believers, too. How come some people despise us? There may emerge important people from among our ranks, too!" The shop owner replied, as if to confirm him, but in my opinion, committing a horribly blunt misstep/*faux pas*, while trying to come up with a tactful sentence:

2) "Indeed, there is a proverb: Emeralds may emerge within stool (*shit*), while stool (*shit*) may emerge among emeralds!"

I observed the Gitan-customer through my child-eyes secretly. His did not show any dissatisfaction, openly. Of course, he was not pleased, either. He put up with the "confirmation", not daring to make a fuss. A mere neutral silence on his part.

As predecessors (*Vorgänger*) of today's Turks, the Ottomans were in a sense "color-blind" when it came to ethnical issues of all sorts. Just as the protestant Anglo-Saxon core of the United States attracted many immigrants for economic and/or democratic-liberal reasons; the Ottoman veteran tradition also expanded and developed with the ideal of spreading the religion of Islam. The Ottoman mind did not even experience a preoccupation, let alone obsession, on racial-ethnic issues. Ottoman civilization, a cosmopolitan empire; did not

distinguish Arab from black; and called blacks Arabs, and called real Arabs “Akarap” (White-Arabs), as stated by *Yağmur Atsız* in a former column-article.

No importance was given to nationality in the Ottomans. A Muslim is considered a Turk in a sense. Greeks and Slavs; once they become Muslims; were able to reach posts of commanders, viziers and other high positions (Stüwe 1974: 131).

The fluctuations of this former stance is apparently still valid, today. Despite the population becoming more homogeneous through land-losses in the long run; it is quite natural that the Ottoman mentality prevails as a legacy, in this respect. Moreover; during the ongoing transition from nomadism to settlement in republican-Turkey, the integration with and the incorporation into the “main boulevard” society continued rapidly over the years, on the part of Romany communities, even if the settlements took place mainly in the form of ghettoization.

Today, Romany citizens live a much more comfortable life in Turkey than elsewhere. They are relatively far from prejudices, compared to many other geographies. They are a color-additive and a value, a further enjoyable delicacy within the mosaic (perhaps marbling-metaphor is more appropriate). In general, as leaps are made in education and socio-economic levels; remnants of lingering discriminating positions, which has already been eliminated in official legislation, will continue to get minimized in mentalities, as well.

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