THE "ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION" OF DOM PEOPLE IN DIYARBAKIR*

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Abstract

Ethnic identification of Dom people in Diyarbakir, a southeastern city of Turkey is quite different from Romani people in the western sides of Turkey. They identify themselves with Domness in contrast with most Romani people generally being reluctant to identify themselves as Romanis and standing close to identification with Turkishness. Moreover, they speak Domari as their mother tongue, opposed to relatively rare usage of Romani in Turkey. My paper explores their ethnic identification in relation to their social exclusion. Thus their ethnic identification does not only reveal their ethnic belonging but also the degree of their exclusion in relation with their sociopolitical environment.

Keywords: Gypsy, Dom, Ethnicity, Diyarbakır, Turkey, Social Exclusion.

DİYARBAKIR'DAKİ DOM HALKININ ETNİK KİMLİK TANIMLAMALARI

Öz

Türkiye'nin güneydoğu şehri olan Diyarbakır'daki Dom halkının etnik kimlik tanımlaması, ülkenin batı kısmındaki Roman halkından oldukça farklılıklar göstermektedir. Roman kimliğiyle özdeşim kurmaktan çekinen ve kendilerini Türk kimliğiyle özdeşleştiren pek çok Roman'dan farklı olarak Domlar, Domluk üzerinden özdeşim kurmaktadırlar. Bununla beraber, Roman dilinin Türkiye'de nadir kullanılmasına karşın Domlar Domca dilini anadilleri olarak konuşmaktadırlar. Bu makale, Dom'ların toplumsal dışlanmalarına bağlı olarak kurdukları etnik kimlik tanımlamalarını incelemektedir. Bu şekilde kurulan etnik tanımlamaları sadece etnik bağlarının değil sosyo-politik çevreleriyle bağlantılı olarak toplumsal dışlanmalarının boyutunu da ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Çingene, Dom, Etnisite, Diyarbakır, Türkiye, Toplumsal dışlanma

Introduction

This paper draws upon research conducted as part of the European Roma Rights Centre, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, Istanbul and EDROM (Edirne Romanlar [Turkish Roma] Culture and Social Association) program "Promoting Romani Rights in Turkey", funded by European Commission. The research missions were carried out in December 2006 and April 2007. During these research missions, I interviewed some 15 or so families over approximately 80 hours in the Hançepek and Yeniköy neighborhoods of Diyarbakır where Dom people settled. My reflections are also a result of discussions with and consideration of the work of my other research colleagues[1].

I will briefly elaborate on group identification of Dom people in Diyarbakır in relation to the mechanisms of their social exclusion, as I observed them through preliminary research. Although I have used the term "ethnicity" as an exploratory concept in some contexts, it is still debatable and can be approached in several ways[2], as "ethnic identity" is not defined and/or *performed* in the same ways by different groups, or in differing circumstances. In the context of Turkey, this term is complex and contested, as most minority groups do not identify themselves "ethnically" but rather culturally, linguistically and occupationally, as is frequently seen in the case of Dom people. It is also very difficult to present this issue in such a limited time, so I will concentrate on social exclusion and its impact upon Dom identification. Of course, further research is also needed for a comprehensive analysis of Dom identity in Turkey, in relation to several other dynamics such as socio-economic and cultural conditions, as well as inter-communal power relations. Theoretically, my article draws upon the works of Stuart Hall (1996)[3] and Judith Butler (1990)[4] for the emphasis on changing and fluid identifications. The works about the situation of Gypsies in Turkey written by other scholars also contribute to this study (i.e. Mustafa Aksu 1997, Nazım Alpman 2003, Adrian Marsh and Elin Strand 2005, 2006)[5].

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1   Gunnar Grut, Idaver Memedov, Özhan Önder, Bertil Videt and Adrian Marsh
2   I.e. primordialists and instrumentalists
3   Stuart Hall, "Introduction Who Needs Identity", *Cultural Identity*, S. Hall & Paul du Gay (eds.), Sage Publications, London, 1996, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi.
4   Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990.
5   Mustafa Aksu, *Türkiye'de Çingene Olmak (Being a Gypsy in Turkey)*, Ozan Yayıncılık, Istanbul, 2003; Nazım Alpman, *Baska Dünyanın İnsanları Çingeneler (Gypsies Another World's People)*,Ozan Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 1997; Adrian Marsh and Elin Strand, "Reaching the Romanlar", *International Romani Studies Network (IRSN) Report,* British Council/Consulate General of Sweden in Istanbul, Istanbul, 2005; Adrian Marsh and Elin Strand (eds), *Gypsies and the Problem of Identities; Contextual, Constructed & Contested*, Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul Transactions 17, I.B. Tauris, Istanbul & London, 2006.

Social exclusion can be defined as a multi-dimensional phenomenon that encompasses deprivation due to the dynamics of changing social relations in social, economic, political and cultural arenas, as Ali Madanipour, Göran Cars and Judith Allen (2002)[6] discuss the term. Whereas economic deprivation appears as the most emphatic outcome of social exclusion, its interplay with other power relations such as ethnicity and gender is considerable. In this context, differing vulnerable social groups may also exclude one another, as social exclusion relies upon hierarchies in society that lead to inequalities between different members of the society.

In spite of relatively different backgrounds and conditions, most Gypsies in Turkey face social exclusion that manifests itself in several ways and to varying degrees, such as their high rate of unemployment, poverty, poor housing conditions, restricted access to education, stereotyping and negative perceptions regarding their life styles and culture. Deduced from the Ottoman population census in 1831[7], the most widely circulated number for the population of Gypsies living in Turkey is 500,000, some researchers[8] estimate that there are around 2.5 million Gypsies living in Turkey while others suggest a much higher number.[9] This huge gap between these estimations and the official number is principally connected to the social exclusion of Gypsy people and their tendency to 'hide' their identity. Although there are socio-economic differences between individuals in particular communities, and as to their degree of social integration with non-Gypsy society, together with local differences and different groupings and identifications, one can basically talk about three main groups of Gypsy people that live in Turkey: the Rom who are concentrated in western regions, the Lom in the north, and the Dom in the south-east and east.

I. Dom People in Diyarbakır

Dom people in Turkey mostly live in eastern and southeastern regions where there are also large Kurdish populations, while there are some seasonally nomadic ones in the northeastern region[10], in total an estimated population of perhaps 100,000. However, this figure may change if more people begin to self-identify in a similar way as has happened with Rom people. In the Diyarbakır region, an important centre with a total population of over one million people,

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6   Ali Madanipour, Göran Cars and Judith Allen "Introduction", *Social Exclusion in European Cities: Processes, Experiences and Responses* (Regional Development and Public Policy Series), Routledge, London, 2002, pp.7-24.

7   Marsh, "Ethnicity and Identity," refers to Karpat, *Ottoman Population*. Adrian Marsh, "Ethnicity and Identity: The Origin of The Gypsies." In *We Are Here! Discriminatory Exclusion and Struggle for Rights of Roma in Turkey*. Edited by Ebru Uzpeder, Savelina Danova/ Roussinova, Sevgi Özçelik, and Sinan Gokcen, Mart Publishing, Istanbul, 2008.

8   Due to my intreview with Ana Oprisan (20.10.2005) and Neşe Erdilek (05.01.2006), Marsh & Strand (2005).

9   Due to my interviews in Gypsy neighborhoods in Bursa, Balıkesir and Trakya.

10   *I.e.* Ağrı, Iğdır, Doğubeyazıt and Kars.

some 14,000 Dom are estimated to live. The newly founded Diyarbakır Dom Association (May 2007) has not yet completed its registration of members that might allow for a more exact number to be given. In the old city where the Hançepek neighborhood is established, around 2,000 Dom people live, while some 1,500 live in the nearby Yeniköy and Bağlar neighborhoods.

Occupationally, Dom people are primarily musicians with a significant number peddling and carrying out dentistry especially among the nomadic groups, although this latter is declining due to increasing health regulation by the state. Seasonal agricultural laboring, porting, and hunting and trading small birds among the nomads are also common occupations. Confessionally they regard themselves as Sunni Muslim; while tending to follow their own spiritual leaders or *sheikhs,* who are often Naqsibendi (a popular Sufi order). Some groups of Dom in the northeast have also asserted that they were *Yezidis*[11] in the past.

Dom people have extensive kinship networks, with many of them sharing surnames related to travelling[12]. Polygamy is frequent, and Dom families tend to be large. Marriage practices follow traditional patterns and bride-price payments of between 7,000 and 10,000 new Turkish liras[13] are common. Wedding ceremonies traditionally lasted for three days but this is changing with economic conditions. They celebrate *Kına Gecesi* (Henna Night), the fetching of the bride from her family home, the presentation of the groom together with music and dancing that is closely related to Kurdish forms, and these days with few musicians (often using the *rababah*, the single or double stringed instrument common amongst the Dom in Egypt and elsewhere)[14]. On the second day the presentation of the bride and the groom together takes place with further music and dance, and on the final day gifts are given from the community. They no longer carry out the traditional ceremony among women called *paça*.

Although there are different stories regarding their origins from Syria or Pakistan, the Dom in Diyarbakır place an important emphasis upon *locality* and their *longevity* as a community in the city. They also maintain a tradition regarding a very old book detailing the history and genealogy of the community, written in another language that they could not read, and told us that they lent it to a German researcher who disappeared with it about seven years ago. Thus, we could not have access to the book, though many of our interviewees agreed upon its one-time existence.

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11   A religious sect mostly found in northern Iraq, Syria and the Caucasus, thought to number about 500,000 worldwide, whose doctrine is an amalgam of pagan, Sabean, Shamanistic, Manichean, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian and Islamic elements.

12   *I.e.* Gezgin, Gezer

13   Between around 3000 and 4000 euros.

14   See Kevin Holmes, "The Rababah" *KURI*, Vol 2 No 1 Fall/Winter, 2004 http://www. domresearchcenter.com/journal/21/index.html (accessed 01 August 2013)

Linguistically the picture is complex. Many of the Dom use *Domari* (they call it *Domani* or *Domca*) with varying degrees of fluency. In Diyarbakır, many families use Domari and transmit it to their children, due to its significance for communal ties and belongings, in contrast to the Jerusalem example documented by Yaron Matras[15] where Domari is only used by the older generation in the community. However *Kurmançi*, which is a form of Kurdish widely used in the region, is spoken more in daily life while Domari is used for special conditions. I was informed that some nomad groups use only Domari, but my research suggests that this is an aspect of gender relations, as only women are using just Domari. Apart from this, Dom are frequently multi-lingual to a greater or lesser degree, speaking *Domari*, *Kurmanci*, *Turkish*, *Farsi*, *Arabic*, *Russian*, and *Azeri*.

II. Social Exclusion

In Diyarbakır, Dom are highly socially excluded and economically marginalized. Most of them have lost their traditional occupations such as travelling from village to village to perform music at weddings and circumcision ceremonies, and peddling small goods, due to the conflicts in the south-east that have forced Dom and many other people to migrate to Diyarbakır or further westward to Istanbul and Europe. There has also been a sharp decline in the employment of Dom musicians due to changing cultural patterns. This means there are more synthesizers being played at weddings. They experience an abnormally high degree of unemployment since much larger groups in the city have concentrated on the same economic niches, and Dom people are deprived of access to certain networks (for example in the construction industry, where Kurdish kinship networks and prejudice combine to exclude the Dom). One of the areas they are still predominant on the other hand, is seasonal agricultural work, though this is not enough to cover their yearly expenses.

Until recently, Dom felt excluded from the *belediye* (municipality) without any opportunities of employment or support. However, as a result of the ERRC/HYD/EDROM research program, the city authorities have recognized these problems and begun to support the Dom through the newly founded Association and cultural activities (such as the Diyarbakır festival of this year, where the Dom musicians opened the proceedings). Nevertheless, the municipal police (*zabıta*) still collect Dom beggars, take them to the outskirts of the city, confiscate any money in their possession and leave them to make the long walk home. It has also been reported to us that in the past there have been incidents of arbitrary arrest, detention and mistreatment of Dom by the

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15   Yaron Matras, "Two Domari Legends about the Origin of the Doms" *Romani Studies, the continuing Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, 2000, Series 5, Vol. 10, No.1, pp.49-75. Available at http://romani.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/downloads/2/Matras_legends.pdf (accessed 01 August 2013)

city police. Dom people clearly see themselves as citizens of Turkish Republic, but as citizens they feel that they are treated unequally due to social exclusion, suffering from prejudice and maltreatment at the hands of the authorities.

Furthermore, their poverty plays a large part in their exclusion and access to certain services.

Access to hospitals and health services is difficult because of their poverty, although some have the possibility of access to the so-called "green card" scheme (that allows poor people access to free health services), some face severe obstacles in the green card scheme. This is due to the fact that some Dom people are not registered in Diyarbakır but elsewhere, while there are some who are not registered at all. This forces them to use each other's cards, or resort to the local health care provided by the municipality that provides services regardless of status or documentation.

In accessing to education for the Dom, poverty again appears to be the main obstacle. Some asserted that they could not send their children to further education after primary school due to their poverty, and even when there was support for families through the national schemes, the prejudices of some teaching staff meant that only a few Dom children were granted this[16]. Thus, access to primary education is problematic, and very few Dom are graduates of high school or university, with illiteracy very high among women and the older generation. However, there is one Dom university entrant in Diyarbakır who will be supported by Roma Education Fund this year, and it is hoped that this will improve in the coming years.

In daily life, Dom also encounter prejudicial attitudes and behavior ranging from discrimination and pejorative descriptions such as being called *Çingene* or *Mıtrip,* to inter-communal violence and sometimes even physical abuse and murder[17]. Besides, their physical appearance such as their skin color which is considered darker, their way of walking, dressing and talking can be used by the non-Doms in discriminating them. Socially they are excluded from public spaces such as most tea-houses and restaurants, and they also face threat of eviction from non-Dom residents in their neighborhoods. Moreover, intermarriages with non-Dom partners are very rare and problematic, but this is likely to change with the younger generation's proximity to each other, according to one of our informants. Hiding their identity as Kurdish people who are the majority population in the region is also a strategy to avoid exclusion and to enhance job opportunities, similar to cases of Dom in Egypt and Jordan[18].

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16   One of our informants has seven children at school, but only two of them had been granted support, and their father felt he had been dismissed as a "musician" when he had asked why this was.

17   Thomas Acton & Adrian Marsh "The Development of Roma/Gypsy/Traveller Identity during the candidacy for EU membership of the Turkish Republic" *Paper delivered to the Annual Conference of the Gypsy Lore Society at the University of Manchester, 7th September 2007.*

18   The estimated population of the Kurds in Diyarbakır constitutes 90 % of the population

Conclusion

In comparison to Gypsies' general conditions and identifications in Turkey, Dom's ethnic identification in Diyarbakır reveal several differences along with their most general commonality as social exclusion. Their differences should be also considered through their commonality as the degrees and ways of their social exclusion reinforce the different identifications.

Becoming visible also with these examples, identification is not a simple process and fluid identifications must be considered. These contextual transformations of identities and instrumentalist approaches observed in Doms' identifications in Diyarbakır echo Stuart Hall emphasizing the process of "becoming" an ethnic group in the context of discursive practice[19] and "historically, politically and culturally"[20]constructed characteristic of ethnic identity.

To summarize, it can be said that the Dom people in Diyarbakır primarily identify in cultural, linguistic and occupational terms, and as I have briefly presented, their social exclusion mainly has impact on their performing this identity. They avoid notions of ethnic identification, moreover they do not presently see themselves as part of a wider Gypsy diaspora, but this may be in the process of change, as the newly founded Dom Association builds connections with Rom and Lom people in the rest of Turkey. Through its work, the new Association hopes to improve the economic, educational, social and cultural situation for the Dom in Diyarbakır, and it is actually beginning to address some of the issues of inequality and social exclusion. Of course, this can only be achieved in partnership with other institutions such as the city municipality and through changing perceptions of the society at large.

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more than 1.5 million (2010 population census and Mutlu referred in Güvenç 2011, p 26). Muna Güvenç (2011). "Constructing Narratives of Kurdish Nationalism in the Urban Space of Diyarbakır, Turkey." Traditional Dwellings and Settlements.Vol 23 No 1. Kevin Holmes (2002). "The Dom of Egypt: A DRC Update, May 2002". in *Kuri: Journal of the Dom Research Centre,* Vol 1 No 6, pp 25-40. Available at http://www.domresearchcenter.com/journal/16/index.html (accessed 01 August 2013); Allen Williams (2003), "The Current Situation of the Dom in Jordan: A DRC Update" in *Kuri: Journal of the Dom Research Centre* Vol. 1 No. 8 Spring/Summer. Available at http://www.domresearchcenter.com/journal/18/index.html (accessed 01 August 2013)

19   Foucault quoted in Hall, Stuart. "Introduction Who Needs Identity" in Cultural Identity. S. Hall& Paul du Gay (eds), Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: 1996 (1), p 2

20   Stuart Hall (1992) "The New Ethnicities" *Race, Culture and Difference* J. Donald& A. Rattansi (eds), Sage Publications, London, 2000, pp.256-6(included in Hutchinson& Smith, p 161)

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