

Eastern Europe

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The Islamic community of Romania is concentrated in the Dobrudja, a southeastern province of Romania lying between the Danube River and the Black Sea. The community comprises an ethnic mosaic of Turks, Tartars, Albanians and Gypsies.¹ Muslim Gypsies identify themselves as 'Horahane Roma' – Horahane meaning Turkish in the Rromani language. The Muslim community accepts the Horahane Roma as belonging to the Islamic religion, but otherwise does not affiliate with them. The great majority of the Romanian population rejects Horahane Roma because of their adherence to a religion different from the 'national' Orthodox Christianity. For the other Gypsies, they are simply known as 'Turks'.

► **The women and children of the bulibasha's family in Babadag**

The official number of the Roma, or Gypsy, population of Romania is still based upon the 1992 census: 409,723 persons, or 1.8% of the entire population. However, unofficial estimates by Rromani associations amount to approximately 2.5 million people. A very small part of this Gypsy population (10,000-15,000) is estimated to be Muslim, and is distributed over a dozen towns and villages.²

Because very few written records have survived little is known of the history of the Muslim Gypsies in Dobrudja. It is thought that they arrived in the area in the early 16th century as a *sanjak* (division) of a specific category of Gypsies serving in the Ottoman army. This hypothesis is sustained by the Special Law for the Gypsies of Rumelia, promulgated by Sultan Suleiman the Great in 1530, and by the Law for the supervision of the *sanjak* of Gypsies of 1541. Others may be descendants of Gypsies that came from the other territories to the Ottoman dominions that embraced Islam. Muslim Gypsies in Dobrudja have no written culture, but they have a rich oral tradition, which includes fairytales, legends, riddles, charms, and songs. Unfortunately this tradition has been recorded only sporadically thus far and it has not been analysed at all. The study of these cultural expressions would certainly lead to a greater understanding of their history.

Ancestral beliefs and Islam

The Muslim Gypsies in Romania are Sunnites of the Hanafitic rite. Identifying Islam with the Ottoman civilization, some of them proclaim: 'We are Muslims, so we believe in the God of the Turks.' The other Muslim inhabitants of Dobrudja often stress that the Gypsies do not have much knowledge of religion. They name them *Allahsiz insanlar*, Godless people, because they do not live a manifest religious life. They go to the mosque only on the occasions of great Islamic festivals, such as the Id al-Fitr and the Id al-Adha. Pejorative allusions are sometimes made by other

The Muslim Gypsies in Romania



PHOTO: ANA OPRISAN

Muslims of Dobrudja to the old dualist religion (*Devla-God/Benga-Satan*) of the Gypsies.

Generally Gypsies are capable of adapting, at least superficially, to all sorts of circumstances while maintaining their identity. This phenomenon may also be noticed at the level of religion. In spite of their declared affiliation to Islam, many of their ancestral religious representations, beliefs and practices are still present, such as belief in demons, totemism and divination. Of interest is that the two Islamic categories *halal* (allowed) and *haram* (prohibited) have been superposed on two categories of the ancestral culture of Gypsies, namely *ujo* (pure) and *melalo* (impure). This taboo system is regulated by rituals, such as the use of charms, and not by resorting to Islamic teachings.

Another illustrative example of the syncretism that characterizes their worldview is the annual Hirdelezi festival, an occasion on which the dead are commemorated. This festival takes place on the 6th of May and is celebrated by all the Muslims in Dobrudja. Fire plays a central role for the Gypsies on this special day. Fires are lit in front of their houses and the members of the family jump over them in order to purify themselves from sins and liberate themselves from bad spirits. This ritual is similar to the Newroz festival celebrated by Kurds, Iranians and others. The Hirdelezi festival is sometimes called 'Turkish Easter', because the Gypsies also light candles in their houses.

Linguistic aspects

Name-giving among the Muslim Gypsies reflects the pragmatic and eclectic approach of this small community living in a – sometimes – hostile environment. Often their names are a combination of a Turkish (Islamic) name and a Romanian (sometimes even Christian) name. For example, the name of the *bulibasha* (community head) in the town of Babadag is Recep Lupu, Lupu being a name from the Romanian bestiary, meaning wolf. The women in the community have at least two names. For example, one of the outstanding women in the community of Babadag is called Maria Rubie. Depending on circumstances, some of them declare themselves Romanians and Christians, making use of the Romanian name only, while at the other occasions they proclaim themselves Turks and Muslims, making use of the Turkish name.

Muslim Gypsies in Dobrudja present a typical case of languages in contact. A number of languages – Horahane (a Rromani dialect), Turkish, and Romanian, as well as varieties of these are widely used in everyday interactions. The choice of using a particular language is governed by social factors. For instance, the Horahane dialect is spoken inside the community, especially by women and children. The type of Turkish used is linked to a whole spectrum of varieties ranging from the Ottoman Turkish, used for the invocation of God, to the

everyday Turkish variety spoken in the area. A kind of pidgin Turkish is also used. Classical Arabic is used for the Islamic prayer ritual, the *namaz*, and some religious expressions derived from Arabic – but with a very specific pronunciation – are part of their spoken language. Romanian, the official language, is normally spoken by the majority of Gypsies.

A direct result of this situation is the appearance of the phenomenon of code-switching, which is defined as the alternate use of two or more languages in the same sentence or in the same discourse.

Changing lifestyles

Muslim Gypsies, once nomads, used to travel as artisans and seasonal labourers by tilt wagons from village to village offering their services, such as tinning kitchen dishes, in exchange for agricultural products or for money. However, modern industries led to a crisis of the traditional craft practised by the Muslim Gypsies. Taking also into consideration the forced sedentarization policies of the communist authorities, their entire way of life was changed. Without the traditional skills they once had, nowadays the Muslim Gypsies are seeking employment opportunities outside of their community. Attracted by the economic activities of the large cities, a considerable number of them migrated, usually settling in the city outskirts as petty traders, domestic servants and day labourers. Their cities of preference are Constantza and Bucharest in Romania and Istanbul in Turkey. Those remaining in villages are also involved in petty trade and domestic service. One can often find them travelling with their merchandise from one village to the other in the area, by car or sometimes still by traditional tilt wagon.

The Muslim Gypsies can be said to still have close-knit communities. The tradition of 'Hanamic' is a way to construct strong relationships between families: More powerful than blood kinship, the parents vow, before their children are born, that their offspring will intermarry when they have reached the proper age. As of yet, mixed marriages are very rare. This may nonetheless change: It seems that the Muslim Gypsies could lose their distinct identity through assimilation. However, through the strengthening of relations with the Muslim Gypsies in other parts of southeastern Europe, especially in Bulgaria and Turkey, a revival of their ethnic identity indeed belongs to the future possibilities.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Cinema, Media and the Middle East: 'The Maghreb'

Urgent Change:

The forthcoming conference on 'Cinema, Media and the Middle East' has to be postponed due to unforeseen organizational circumstances. It will be held from 24 to 25 October 2001 at the Department of Film Studies on the campus of the University of Mainz, Germany.

The interdisciplinary research network on 'Cinema, Media and the Middle East' is organizing its third international conference in Mainz from 24 to 25 October 2001. The conference will take place on the campus of the University of Mainz, which is located only 30 km from Frankfurt airport.

Papers, in German and English, will be given on various aspects of cinema and mass media representations of the Maghreb. Studies will cover film production, cinematic depiction of the everyday and the underlying political and economic structures of these

media images. In addition to the latter, studies will also focus on gender, social class, culture and other issues raised by various disciplines. The conference aims to bring together scholars from different research areas and media professionals. The conference will be hosted by Prof. Anton Escher (Geography, CERAW (Centre for Research on the Arab World)) and Prof. Thomas Koebner (Film Studies).

In order to register for the conference, please contact the co-organizer, Dipl.-Geogr. Stefan Zimmermann: Centre for Research on the Arab World (CERAW) Institute of Geography, University of Mainz 55099 Mainz, Germany Tel: +49-6131-3924494 Fax: +49-6131-3924763 E-mail: S.Zimmermann@geo.uni-mainz.de

Notes

1. See also Grigore, George (1999), 'Muslims in Romania', *ISIM Newsletter*, 3.
2. The towns of Babadag, Harsova, Constantza, and Medgidia, and the villages of Cobadin, Negru-Voda, Dobromir, Baneasa, Lespezi, Valeni, Castelu, Mihail and Kogalniceanu.

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