

The Analysis of Erosion: Occupational and Social Change and Continuity amongst the basket-weavers of Izmir and musicians of Diyarbakir in Turkey.

Presented at the Gypsy Lore Society's Annual General Meeting and Conference 2008, Georgetown University, Washington DC, 28th to 30th August

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Abstract

Changing social and economic conditions in Turkey have eroded the occupational identities of basket-makers in Izmir and musicians from Diyarbakir adversely, leaving them exposed to increasing emiseration and marginalisation and undermining both the 'traditional' economic base of these communities and their sense of selfhood. The impact of these changes is assessed by the authors, drawing upon recent research each has conducted particularly in Izmir and Diyarbakir, through understanding the complex economic and social interrelations and identifying the mechanisms of change and continuity.

The authors also attempt to draw upon the debates surrounding notions of identity and ethnicity in Turkey, to illuminate their arguments.

Keywords: *Gypsies*¹, *Romanlar*, *Domlar*, *Lomlar*, Globalisation, Localisation, Occupational Change

Economy, occupation and society in Turkey: the Romanlar, Domlar, Lomlar

The increasing pace of technological development has had a profound impact upon traditional modes of production in Turkey, as new market demands and the impetus of Integration with European capital and labour forms, reduce traditional craft-based

¹ The term *Gypsies* in this article is used in the historical context from Ottoman and Turkish Republican records from the Turkish *Çingeneler* and *Kıpti*. It is a contested term and where it is clear, the self-appellations for individual communities are used (*i.e.*, *Romanlar*, *Domlar*, *Lomlar*, *Gezginler*, *Abdallar*, *etc.*)

occupations to the position of occupying specific economic niches in the tourist trade or the 'heritage' industry. The former occupations of numbers of groups, such as the 'Kalayci', 'Çalgar', 'Sepetçi', 'Superge' and 'Mitrip' and others have been increasingly affected by the economic transformation of Turkish society, as both local and global trends reshape the labour market.

Whilst the restructuring of the Turkish economy has opened new opportunities in the service sectors, the information communication technology sector, and provided substantial new markets for the export of Turkish produced textiles and agricultural goods, shifting patterns of consumer behaviour have seen an increasing movement away from the need for older services from small entrepreneurs in the urban environments. These traditionally supported groups on the fringes of the economy, the decline of the *Superge* mattress cleaners that toured neighbourhoods each spring, relied upon the use of cotton and horse-hair mattresses that have been replaced by internally sprung divans of the kind familiar in the rest of Europe, for example. Basket-weavers, *Sepetçiler*, that also toured urban areas throughout the spring and summer have seen the loss of their markets to the cheaper, mass-produced plastic containers that now flood the market from China and elsewhere. Inexpensive knives are available (also from China, Pakistan, India) to replace the worn implements used in Turkish kitchens, marketed by European companies such as IKEA or throughout the small shops and bazaars of Turkey. The traditional producers in the north-east Black Sea region, such as those in Sürmene, have observed the loss of their markets, as they are unable to compete with the enormous numbers produced in the complex global economy. These would formerly have been sharpened each season by the itinerant knife-grinders from the *Çalgar* groups that carried their whetstones through the streets, catering to households and kebab-houses alike. The small pedlars that carry their bundles throughout Turkey, *Bohça*, traditionally sold small goods such as ribbons, needles, pins, lace, buttons and items that were accumulated for the *gelin esyası* or *çeyiz*, the wedding trousseau of young women. They still ply their trade in the rural regions of Turkey, most especially in the villages of the eastern lands; however, they are almost unknown in the conurbations of Turkey's increasingly urban population, with the alteration in tastes in marriage goods to become more consumer oriented and less dependent upon older, hand-made linens, napery and embroidered artefacts for the home.

Globalisation and Turkish economic resistance

In this context, the pressures of economic globalisation have been experienced as a consequence of both the decades long relationship with the US economy, itself a result of the position of Turkey as an ally and key actor in United States policies in the region and the more recent impact of increasing 'harmonisation' with the European markets, economic convergence, the legal and governmental institutions and structures and economic and social policies. In short, the consequence of the process of emerging from the state-driven economy of the single-party, early Republican era to the economically liberalised, multi-party European candidate that Turkey now is. In macro-economic terms, these shifts have undoubtedly benefitted the access of Turkish producers to widening markets, and the increasing foreign direct investment has risen substantially with growing perceptions of stability that now define the Turkish economy, where before rampant

inflation and constant devaluation of the currency were seen as the norm. Politically the notion of the Turkish state as primarily one subject to the periodic irruption of the military is also changing; democratisation is widely seen by Turkey's European partners to be almost irreversible and is rapidly becoming entrenched in what was formerly regarded as a semi-authoritarian regime, despite the occasional political crisis such as engages us at present².

Turkey and Turkish society have produced its own highly specific and local variations of the debates over social and economic 'progress' that has energised western European societies since the industrial revolutions of the late 18th and 19th centuries. Within the discourses surrounding these debates and the concomitant notions of inexorable improvement due to the rise of capitalism and the growth of liberal economy, the governments and citizens of the Republic have constructed their responses, both positive and negative, to the pressures of globalisation and candidacy for the European Union, whilst continuing the normal intercourse of political life, of economic debates and the discussion surrounding social and cultural issues. They have, in a way that is perhaps more marked than elsewhere in Europe, produced localised manifestations of global phenomena, incorporating local resistance to external pressures to produce what might be described as a 'nationalised' discourse *vis-à-vis* European and American hegemony.

In micro-economic terms, the changes have profoundly affected the occupational structure of the Turkish economy. Perhaps nowhere more so than in the traditional occupations of the so-called *Gypsy* groups that have relied upon the slight opportunities in sedentary society to exploit particular niches or markets deemed not profitable enough to be subject to the organisation of labour and production. As itinerant traders and commercial, or 'service' nomads, the *Gypsies* have both acted as agents to their own communities, in similar ways to other 'middle-men' groups such as immigrant communities in the USA, and supplied small goods and services to the wider community, which have hitherto been unregarded by wider commercial interests. This often effectively creates a closed economic community that is seen as intrinsically identified with them, such as the flower-sellers of Istanbul and Izmir or *Çiçekçiler*, or the carriage-drivers of the Marmara islands, the *Arabacılar*. A number of economic and cultural factors are increasingly undermining these occupations, without any obvious opportunities for the communities involved to reassign and reskill themselves occupationally, realigning their economic position, leaving them vulnerable to poverty, social exclusion and marginalisation.

Basket-weavers and musicians: occupational and social change and continuity

In the light of this preceding framework, the position of the basket-weavers or *Sepetçiler*, previously an integral part of the economy in the Ottoman period and organised (as much else in the Ottoman economy) within the guild system, can be seen as an example of a "traditional" occupation. In the pre-plastic carrier bag era, baskets were essential to the everyday life of mediaeval and early modern Europe, and especially to the military. Goods

² This paragraph is highly reflective of the period, 2002 to 2012 in Turkey and the conditions described as "almost irreversible" above, have proven anything but.

were either transported in sacks or baskets and their producers were extremely important to the economy of the Ottoman Empire. At first sight, the change from organised craft production of these goods to the looser competitive structures of the late Ottoman Empire might be construed as a consequence of the process of reform. This begins in the reign of Selim III in 1789, then after his deposition and murder by the janissaries and conservative *ulema* in 1807, proceeds with the accession of Mahmud II in 1808 and continues in earnest with the *Tanzimat* period from the 1830's onwards. Reform was arguably driven by the combination of European economic and diplomatic intervention, and the internal processes of development from a modernising bureaucratic elite within the Ottoman governing factions, the so-called 'men-of-the-pen'. However, the urban guild system may have only ever represented part of the production of baskets that took place, and much of the remaining production was probably always in the hands of travelling groups of *Sepetçiler*, located in the Mediterranean region, close to the raw materials necessary for their craft (bamboo, rushes). The historical wealth and importance of the basket-weavers in Istanbul is attested by the fact that they could 'sponsor' the renovation of the *Sepetçiler Kasrı* (Pavilion of the Basket-Weavers) for the Sultan Ibrahim I in the mid-17th century, himself a basket-maker by profession and patron of the guild (and alleged to have had a *Gypsy* mother in the *harem*).

The *Sepetçiler* of Tepecik *mahalle*, Izmir

The historical *Romanlar* communities of Izmir, noted by such Ottoman travellers as Evliya Çelebi in the 17th century would seem to have been largely absorbed in the later migrations of Romani people from the areas around Seres, Drama and Selanik during the *mubadile* or population transfers of the 1920's and 1930's. Certainly the modern community of Tepecik claim direct descent from those Romani people that came to Turkey as part of this process of forced migration, and view the Republic as 'a place of greater safety' for themselves as refugees. Some of the *Romanlar* in Izmir are Christian and Orthodox, possibly relating to the evacuation of numbers of Greek-speaking and Christian *Mandopolini* from the Greek state, as the authorities would appear to have used the *mubadile* as an opportunity to rid themselves of numbers of Roma who did not fall within the criteria of Muslims exchanged for Orthodox Christians after the Lausanne Treaty (1923). The origins of the current small Christian *Romanlar* community in Izmir are however, difficult to ascertain, as the majority Muslim *Romanlar* are deeply reluctant to encourage contact between researchers and this group (data from the ERRC/hCa/EDROM research project, May 2007). The present-day *Romanlar* in Tepecik are largely orthodox *Sunni*, even *Naqşbendi* in their confessional adherence and the presence of the *tarikats* amongst the *Romanlar* has been noted on a number of research visits. Such revitalisation of the Muslim identity of the *Romanlar* is also a feature elsewhere in Turkey amongst the *Romanlar*, as in Keşan for example, and represents a move towards a re-conception of identity in the light of current political and social mores, comparable to Romani religiosity and the charismatic Christian movements in Europe.

The modern communities of basket-weavers depend upon family labour, as they have always done, in this labour-intensive craft. The securing of the basic resources (water,

reeds, bamboo, withies and other pliable materials) requires the families engaged in the production process to cooperate in their acquisition and storage. The materials are gathered in wet lands, river banks and deltas and the families must find places to stop and camp that are suitable, living as semi-nomads for portions of the year. For the remainder of the year, basket-weavers rent houses in the urban areas. The interviews conducted for this paper were made in one such neighbourhood, Tepecik in Izmir on the Mediterranean coast of southwestern Turkey. The interviews were conducted with a few points in mind: the historical context of the basket-weavers and their community was taken from the oral histories that they related during the course of the interviews; these rely upon the transmission of memories from one generation to the next; the present situation of the basket-weavers, as a community, was drawn from their subjective experiences of day-to-day living and the problems they encountered, and finally, the future of the community and the viability of their craft was a key question put to the interviewees.

The field data gathered during the course of the research indicates clearly erosion of the market that has traditionally been open to the basket-weavers, through the importation of cheaper goods produced elsewhere (China or India for example). This and the mass production of inexpensive plastic goods, has created major problems for the sustainability of the community in Izmir. The options for moving into new sectors for the basket-makers is very limited indeed, although there have been attempts (not wholly successful) to develop a new skills base in the former basket-weaving community in Mersin, with a bamboo furniture making project, sponsored by the municipality and the local chamber of commerce. This project did not generate a sustainable alternative for a number of reasons, most notably the lack of sufficient training in the procurement of basic resources and equipment. The knowledge of distribution for the finished goods was also not embedded in the project, nor any basic business management training offered, in the setting up of a new venture for production of rattan furniture.

In this sense, the development of alternatives was marked by the willingness of local businesses to employ the Mersin Romanlar as 'cheap labour' for the duration of the EU funded project, but not to establish what could have been a viable, but competitive production structure. Such examples exist elsewhere; the training offered to *Romanlar* workers in local fabric and textile production in Kesan, in the European province of Turkey, gave underpaid employment to the *Romanlar* for a period of three months. It awarded a certificate once this period had been completed, issued by the local adult education institute (*Halk Eđitim Merkezi*), but did not result in any long-term employment being offered and in some cases, the training allowance was not paid at all (data from the ERRC/hCa/EDROM "Promoting Roma Rights in Turkey" research project, July 2007). Clearly the opportunities for the Tepecik *Romanlar* in Izmir are similarly restricted by wider concerns and the unwillingness of local businesses to introduce potential competitors into the market, by supporting training and development of *Romanlar* businesses.

In the wake of these problems, many of the former basket-weavers are forced into unemployment or marginal occupations such as the collection and recycling of garbage, extracting paper, cardboard, plastic bottles and containers and tin cans, in an effort to

sustain themselves and their families. The demise of the market for hand-produced baskets and containers also means that the future of the community is very much at risk, as there are no possibilities for the coming generations to take up the trade, very much as previous *Romanlar* communities, such as the bear-leaders (*Ayıcılar*), have experienced.

Whilst education is clearly understood by all those who were interviewed to be of primary importance in creating new opportunities for younger *Romanlar*, the constraints for families sending their children to schools are very heavy, with the need for the family to generate income requiring that children are an essential part of the labour force. The costs associated with schooling itself can also prove to be a major burden for families whose income is less than 150 Turkish *lira* a month (c.2008), the average in the neighbourhood (as elsewhere in Turkey amongst the *Romanlar*). The quality of education is clearly an issue, as parents interviewed were disparaging about the dedication of teachers at the local schools, saying that they (teachers in their neighbourhood schools) were late to begin work, that they discriminated in the classrooms by placing the *Romanlar* children at the back and that they generally expressed the opinion that educating the “Gypsies [*Çingeneler*] was a waste of time”, as they were by definition uneducable (ERRC/hCa/EDROM research, April 2007). Only one Romani person had achieved a college education in Izmir, graduating from the sociology programme of the local university with a bachelor’s degree. He had subsequently been very active in the local associations and worked in the family business, supporting the Romani community financially. He was not however, from the basket-weaving community originally.

The economic situation of the Izmir *Romanlar* is precarious indeed, and especially amongst the basket-weavers of Tepecik neighbourhood. Both global and local economic trends and circumstances severely constrain their position, socially and economically. Culturally, the low expectations and narrow perceptions of the *Romanlar*, by the majority society, combined with prejudices that consign *Gypsies* to very negative stereotypes of criminality, irreligiosity, incapability and ‘Other-ness’, mean that the possibilities for economic change and social improvement are almost minimal. Further erosion of the market with increasing integration of the Turkish and European economies bodes ill for the *Romanlar*. European capital seeks to exploit new markets in Turkey for cheap consumer goods and Turkish labour to produce European goods such as fabrics and textiles, agricultural products and minerals, but competition from other producers in some of these markets (such as Chinese textiles) increasingly drives production costs downward and narrows the market still further. The traditional niche markets that *Romanlar* basket-weavers have relied upon in modern times in Turkey, a product in part of the tightly controlled and state driven Turkish economy of the early Republican period, have been eroded and the opportunities for establishing alternatives are almost nil.

The *Domlar* musicians of Diyarbakir

The *Domlar* (*Domari*) of the southeast and east of Turkey have relied upon a small number of economic niches in which they predominated for centuries but are no longer available to them. The erosion of these markets have, at their base, been partly a result of political circumstances arising from the conflicts of the region in the 1980's and 1990's and

changing cultural factors associated with these. The relationship between the *Dom* musicians and their patrons has been eroded over the past three decades to a very significant degree, leaving them extremely marginalised and almost entirely beyond the formal economic structure of the country. Even amongst the wider communities of *Gypsies* in Turkey, the *Domlar* are the most impoverished and isolated, under-educated and unemployed. Poor housing, desperate health problems and a profound lack of any opportunities have produced a bleak situation for the *Dom*.

Historically, the *Dom* are the oldest *Gypsy* community to be found in Turkey, dating at least from the early 11th century CE³ and possibly even earlier if references to the *al-Zutt* in Arabic and Byzantine sources can be ascribed to these people in the 9th century. The Mesopotamian mini-state, established by the rebel *al-Zutt* involved in the *Zanj* revolt of the period 869 to 883 CE, may also provide an indication of the origins of the *Dom* in these lands, though the arguments surrounding the origins of the *Dom* are still formative⁴. The earliest reliable records of the *Dom* in south eastern Turkey are from much later, the letters of missionaries in this region in the late 19th century, published in the 'Notes and Comments' of the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* in the 1880's and 1890's. These describe the '*Doom*' in substantial numbers throughout this area, mentioning their occupations as primarily musicians (noted as '*mitrip*', the Arabic word for musician that is still in use today in some communities), and small pedlars. Earlier descriptions have yet to be found in any sources, though there are indications that Paspatis understood that other groups of *Gypsies*, speaking languages that significantly differed from the *Romanlar* of European Turkey, existed in the east of the country⁵. Modern sources on the Ottoman *Dom* are restricted to those in the Arab lands, such as those studies of Robert A. Stewart Macalister and Father Anastas the Carmelite, from the last years of the Empire.

The modern communities of *Domlar* in Diyarbakır reside in three main *mahalles* or neighbourhoods: Bağlar, Yeniköy and Hancepek. The last of these is the oldest, located in the *Sur için* ('within the walls') ward, close to the ancient Byzantine walls. There are other scattered households across the city and in nearby towns and villages, such as Silwan, Kiziltepe and further towards the historic cities of Nusaybin and Mardin itself. Other large communities are located in Bitlis, Van, Doğubayezit, Ağrı, Kars and across the Armenian border in Yerevan. Smaller travelling communities are common in the summer months throughout the region and central Anatolia, even to Istanbul and its environs. Their numbers are difficult to ascertain, but in all probability there are at least some 500,000 of them living in Turkey at present. They experience profound discrimination and violence from surrounding communities, even to murder of *Dom* women and children (data from interviews conducted by the University of Greenwich's ESRC research project, RES-000-22-1652, "Charting the Variety of Aspirations of Romani/Gypsy groups in Turkey" 2006-07).

³ CE meaning Common Era

⁴ In the forthcoming "*No Promised Land*" *History, Historiography and the Origins of the Gypsies*, Marsh makes a case for their origins amongst the '*mawla*' client soldiers of the Abbasid Kahlif'a in this period.

⁵ Alexander Paspatis's "Memoir on the Language of the Gypsies as now used in the Turkish Empire" 1860-63

The *Dom* in Diyarbakır's Hancepek neighbourhood maintain a strong tradition of *Domari* speaking, as part of the maintenance of their own identity. Music is also a central part of this, even when as in many cases now, musicianship is no longer practised professionally and other occupations have come to replace this, such as seasonal agricultural work or paper collection and recycling. The old traditions of musicianship were centred around the performance at weddings, circumcision festivals, community events such as *Newroz* (the New Year celebrations amongst the Kurds and *Alevi*s of the region) and *Hdrilez*, known as 'Kakava' in western Turkey and 'Erdelezi' throughout the Balkans. This syncretic festival is almost certainly *Alevi* in origins and its historical dispersal throughout the quondam Ottoman lands, due to the spread of *Sufi* Islam by dervishes of *Alevi*, *Bektaş* and *Kalendari*, or the 'ragged brotherhood' (to which many *Gypsies* belonged in Ottoman times), adherence. Exactly when it became identifiably part of the culture of Ottoman *Gypsies* is not clear, but certainly by the 17th century there are references to its celebration in the *Gypsy* quarters in Istanbul, Edirne and Kırklarelli where large communities lived (and still do).

The occupational patterns of the period pre-1980 were based in itinerant music and peddling of small goods around the villages and smaller towns in the south eastern region (though there were and still are occasionally, performances given by *Dom* musicians from Doğubayezit in Istanbul and western Turkey, according to interviews conducted with the ERRC/hCa/EDROM research project in September 2007). However, the large-scale destruction of villages and small hamlets in the region, by the Turkish military forces throughout the 1980's and 1990's, resulted in refugees flooding into the major urban conurbations of Diyarbakır, Bitlis, Van and other cities and the consequent decline in opportunities to practice these traditional occupations.

Markets also become eroded in the field of music with changing economic conditions for the traditional patrons of performances, as the Kurds and Turks of these villages no longer had the means to organise large weddings or circumcision celebrations and reduced both the number of musicians to the basic one *zurna* and one *davul* to escort the bride from her house to the house of the groom's family. The shifting political atmosphere also had a profound impact, as the radicalisation of the Kurdish community resulted in changing tastes for music played at these and other events, where once the *Domlar* had been dominant. *Saz* or *bağlamar* the former being an *argot* term for the same instrument, and the large, shallow tambour with metal rings close to the skin – *arbana* (from the Arabic), have taken the place of the *Dom* instruments of *davul* and *zurna*. The *Dom* of Nüseybin, near Mardin, have adapted their musical skills to incorporate these instruments, but these are the exception. The songs played at occasions are more 'traditionally' Kurdish and draw upon the repertoire of singers like Ahmet Kaya and Aynur, rather than older *Gypsy* music of the *Dom*. The *Dom* are less inclined to play this music, as they are reluctant to be identified with the aspirations frequently expressed. *Dom* weddings still maintain their traditional pattern of three-day celebration with musicians invited to play of high reputation from other cities and regions. A *Dom* wedding in Diyarbakır in April 2007 was attended by a *rababa* player from Syria, who played the two-stringed so-called 'spike fiddle' through a wireless connection to an aging sound-system that occasionally turned his performance into a Hendrix-like roar of feedback and sustain; he was well-respected amongst the *Dom* musicians of Hancepek. The importance of these events and the relationships between

musicians that still exist even across borders (the *Dom* of Kars and Doğubayezit had strong connections with the *Dom* musicians of Yerevan in Armenia), are indicated by this episode. Such extended networks are common throughout the *Romanlar* and *Domlar* communities in Turkey; in the case of Sulukule for example, there are still exchanges of tapes and recordings with the *Dom* in Cairo and some of the *Romanlar* are descended from marriages with this group (interviews in 2006 and 2008 with members of the Sulukule Association).

Many of the former *Dom* musicians are now forced into seasonal agricultural work, such as harvesting hazel nuts in the Black Sea region or begging – some 20% according to the local *Dom* interviewed. The agricultural labouring earns families (not individuals) some 150 *lira* a month at best and is of course, only an option if transport can be arranged collectively (costing some 2,000 *lira* for the hire of a minibus for the season), or existing vehicles repaired and used (usually heavily over-crowded and frequently subject to break-down). Other possibilities such as micro-credit projects that have engaged with the Kurdish community, particularly women, are viewed by the *Dom* with distrust, as a form of financial indebtedness that they are unwilling to become involved in. Gender relations also mean that the prospect of *Dom* women earning whilst the men are unemployed, are dismissed as unacceptable. The small number of EU initiatives, such as a silver-making project in the *Sur için* district have not been addressed to the young *Dom* community as yet. For most of the non-*Dom* inhabitants of the city, the issues of poverty, discrimination and marginalisation have been experienced as a primarily Kurdish phenomenon, and the *Dom* remain ‘invisible’ still to all others.

Globalisation and localisation in the erosion of *Sepetçi* and *Mitrip* economies

The interplay of factors that impact upon the two communities discussed here, demonstrate that in relation to the wider economic trends, the future of the *Romanlar*, *Domlar*, *Lomlar*, *Abdallar*, *Gezginler* and other *Gypsy* communities in Turkey looks bleak indeed, if the continuing erosion of traditional occupations continues. Local factors have also profoundly undermined the situation in the case of the *Domlar* of eastern Turkey and there is little indication that these are to be alleviated in any way, as eastern Anatolia remains outside the formal economic structure of the region (though there is a government initiative to address the development of eastern Anatolia in the offing, but its not likely that it will impact much upon the *Domlar*). The increasing globalisation of the Turkish economy in the western regions of the country and the significant under-development of the east will both continue to erode *Gypsy* occupations and offer little new opportunities for improvement generally.

Istanbul, July 2008