

# ALEVIS AND ALEVISM \* TRANSFORMED IDENTITIES

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HEGE IRENE MARKUSSEN



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# Gypsies and Alevis: the impossibility of Abdallar identity?

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Adrian Marsh & Elin Strand

## INTRODUCTION

*In this article, the emphasis is upon examining the notion of Alevi and Romani identities, operational concurrently within the same environment, in an ethnic equivalent of linguistic 'code-switching'. The question of whether this is possible in the context of Romani (Romanlar) groups and Alevis came to our attention during the Romani Studies Conference 2003 in Istanbul, entitled "Contextual, Contested and Constructed: Gypsies and the problem of identities". Much debate, at times heated, took place between scholars and researchers who argued that such a phenomenon is not possible, as Alevis are a closed group, hermetic and resistant to admittance except by birth. Others refuted this and claimed that not only were there Alevi Romanlar groups present in parts of Turkey in the present, but that this was a historical situation dating from Ottoman, or possibly pre-Ottoman Anatolia. Representatives from the Laz and Kurdish communities also argued that multiple identities were to be found in their own groups, and that in the case of the latter, large numbers of Kurdish Domlar existed in Eastern Anatolia for example. It is axiomatic that, in the context of discussing Romani identities, a similar "exclusivist" discourse has often been prevalent. Prompted by the Istanbul debates, the authors here describe historical context of the formation of the Romani peoples and suggest the circumstances for the relationship existing between the two groups. The question of religious beliefs and practices amongst various Romani groups has occupied the attentions of many missionaries, anthropologists and 'Gypsy-lorists' from the late eighteenth-century, but little has been written about those who profess Islam, orthodox or heterodox. In this case the challenge is both to present a comprehensible analysis of Romani ethnogenesis to scholars of Alevism and Alevi identity, and to argue why it is that groups of Romanies in Turkey (and possibly elsewhere) could claim to be Alevis. The normative functions of the arguments surrounding the question will be examined in the context of the notions of identities.*

*We refer to groups living in the environs of Istanbul, Gaziantep and Izmir. We have drawn from the research, as yet unpublished, by Ana Oprisan and Suat Kolukirik, conducted jointly amongst the Teber-Abdals of Izmir during 2002–2003, and the work of photo-journalist Stefan Bladh amongst Abdals in Istanbul during the same period. Oprisan and Kolukirik's ultimate conclusions were diametrically opposed, and we argue that these differences were epistemological in nature, embedded in the discourse of ethnography and social anthropology. The resolution to these differences lies in the ability to contextualise the problem of identity within the history of the Romani people. Bladh has been able to make no clear conclusions regarding the identity of the Istanbul-Gaziantep Abdal group, though Oprisan has concluded that these, like the Izmir groups are Romani. We present the evidence for this below.*

*THE terminology adopted is that current in the discourse of Romani Studies, c.2005. Thus the term Romani will be employed to denote the groups of peoples in the world who share linguistic and cultural traits and notions of a common Indian 'ethnogenesis', i.e. Rom, Dom and Lom communities. In the particular context of Turkey the term Çingene, widely (and inappropriately) translated, as 'Gypsy' will not be used as it carries many of the pejorative associations that are reflected in popular Turkish culture. The term 'Gypsy' has been consciously reclaimed by British Romani and non-Romani activists since the 1960's, in a similar fashion to other emancipation movements. Outside the UK and US, despite being frequently used in academic and political discourse, Romani communities have not universally accepted it. The authors argue that historically, the record of self-appellations is poor, and that on very few occasions is it possible to identify whether the groups referred to in the sources were Romani speakers, or spoke one of the other related languages (for example Domari or Lomavren). This being the case, the terms 'Gypsy' and 'Gypsies' will be used carefully. We acknowledge this problem of nomenclature by always capitalising and italicising them.*

*THE term 'Romani' will be used to describe the language of those peoples sharing an ethnonym derived from 'Rom', itself derived from 'Rûm' or Roman (i.e., Byzantine); 'Romanlar' is the plural of the individual term 'Roman' the self-appellation of many Romanies in Turkey. 'Romani' will also be deployed as a term to describe the wider community of 'Roms'; 'Dom' refers to the Gypsy peoples of the Middle East (often labelled as Ghagar, Nawar and Halebi amongst others who speak 'Domari') and 'Lom' to those of Armenia and Central Asia (Luri, Poscha in addition to other groups who speak Lomavren). There are many terms to describe the differing groups of Turkish Romanlar, mostly derived from occupational designations under the Ottomans. In the interests of clarity, we shall refer to them individually only when necessary, after giving a brief description.*

*THE similarities with the two groups will be highlighted in terms of their processes of social group and identity formation, their genesis and histories, some beliefs and practices and the discourse surrounding both Alevi and Romani identities, in particular as the 'Other'.*

*WE conclude that the historical processes of Romani ethnogenesis have produced a variety of related identities from a range of composite groups, amongst them Romanies who are Alevis. This is a largely undocumented phenomena, an unaccepted notion by some researchers in our experience, that demands further investigation by both Romani Studies and Alevi scholars in partnership, to produce more informative and illuminating evidence for any lasting conclusions.*

## Origins

The presence of Alevi Gypsies in the modern Turkish Republic is a phenomenon that is questioned upon occasion, by those who insist upon positivist notions of identity as primordial, innate and immutable. In their eyes, Alevi identity, unlike the *Romanlar* identity that is similar in many respects, is one that cannot be anything other than one based upon blood; one is born into the Alevi group and there is no other form of "admittance" (Melikoff, 1998:6). In this understanding, the very notion that an identity could encompass both Alevi and *Romani* elements is anathema. This is not necessarily the opinion of Alevi scholars generally, but is perhaps more familiar amongst the Alevi "grass roots" activists and academics. Similar notions are not uncommon amongst particular elements of the Roma (or *Rroma*) political movement, who insist upon criteria for membership that they argue demonstrates a greater degree of *Roma-ness* than those they would differentiate themselves from. The key commonality here is that of the

hermetically sealed *ethnie*, traversing the centuries as sealed "...eternal entities, which are closed, by their nature to any kind of evolution." (Bozarslan, 2002: 4). For Roma nationalists, the link to India is paramount, and much scholarly, and less than scholarly, effort and argument has been mobilised and formulated to demonstrate this irrefutable relationship between the past and present, creating a "consensual discourse" amongst scholars, activists and in what has been described by Alevi scholars as a kind of "feedback loop" (Bozarslan, 2002: 3), amongst the Romani people themselves.

In common with *diaspora* peoples like the Jews and Armenians, the focus is often connected to a 'promised land', in this case 'Romanestan'. Imaginatively, *Romanestan* has been located in north-western Multan, Rajasthan and the surrounding region, although there have been attempts to construct alternatives in modern history, most notably in Stalin's Soviet Union (Kalinin, 2001). The notion of *Romanestan* has been mobilised by the Indian government at points, especially during the Ghandi regime of the 1970's, as part of the wider geopolitical concerns in the region. It has been suggested that there was a process of *reverse* colonisation, whereby groups of Indian peoples established themselves in Europe long before Europeans colonised India, an attractive proposition in the anti-colonialist discourse. The support of the Indian government was critical at that time (including the sponsorship of the 1<sup>st</sup> International Romani Union World Romani Congress in London, 8<sup>th</sup> April 1971), in the growth of what can be characterised as Romani *ethno-nationalism*.

In a similar development, the emergence of Balkan *Egyptians* during the 1990's of groups in Macedonia and Kosovo claiming a neither-Roma, nor *Ashkali* identity (Duijzings, 1997) was bolstered by the *de facto* acceptance of their status by EULEX (the European Union Mission in Kosovo) and subsequent legal recognition in Kosovo policy and strategy. Both examples illustrate differing aspects of the politics of institutional-sponsored ethno-nationalism, the claims by individual nation-states or supra-national entities over extra-territorial ethnic *elements*, to be defined as part of the *nation* or in some fashion. Though the Indian government's championing of the Romani peoples has, to a greater extent become dormant from its heyday in the 1970's it remains as a potent, if latent symbol.

Those scholars of Romani Studies who would share something of the *primordialist* approach are to be found insisting upon an entirely Indian ethno-genesis for the Roma, whom it is argued migrated from the sub-continent between 500 and 1000CE, or thereabouts. The shift in Romani historiography from notions of *monogenesis* to the 'late origin' theorists has meant a major restructuring of the "story" or trajectory of Romani history and a much closer inspection of the historical and linguistic "evidence", to deduce probable and possible developments (Acton, 2003). The three major *Gypsy* groups are, contrary to much accepted scholarship, likely to have left at differing times, with the earlier migrations from the *Sindh* or north-western India a result of the Muslim Arab incursions and invasions in the late 7<sup>th</sup> and early 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. These groups maintain a linguistic structure (derived from Old Indo-Aryan), which allows scholars to date their departure to this time (Hancock, 2003). Their modern descendants can be found throughout the Middle East and Eastern Anatolia mostly speaking *Domari* (within their communities), and they are known by a variety of epithets including, *Ghagar*, *Nawar*,

*Halebi* in Egypt, Israel and Syria. The predominant self-appellation amongst these communities is *Dom*.

The other two major groups are likely to have been captives from the successive *razzias* of the *Ghaznâvid* Sultan, Mahmûd b. Sebûktigin (or Mahmûd-i Zabulî, 971-1030CE). His vast territories, centred upon *Ghaznâ*, stretched from north-central India to Khorasan in an empire not seen since the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate at its apogee. Hundreds of thousands of Indian prisoners, many of them crafts people, musicians, entertainers and the remnants of the armies defeated by Ghaznâvid forces on almost every occasion, were deported to the capital over the years 997–1027 CE. The aim of the raids was two-fold; to capture booty, plunder and prisoners to maintain the multi-ethnic, professional standing army and central bureaucracy of the state, and to reduce the religious enemies of Islam. These were the Hindus, described in detail by the scholar al-Bîrûnî (940–1048?CE), in his *magnum opus*, “Description of India” (1030CE), and the *Shî’î* rulers of *Sindh* (Sachau, 1910; Bosworth, 1991:65-66). Mahmûd’s successful reduction of the Sindhi principalities brought many *Shî’î* and Hindu Indians into the Ghaznâvid forces, in the usual incorporation of conquered ethnic elements into the armies of Islam (Crone, 2003:286). This process had been in place since the *Sufyânid* period, when regiments of Berbers (*Waddâhiyya*), Iranians (*Bukhâriyya*) and Sindhi Indians (*Oîqâniyya*) appeared as *mawâlî* (client) troops (Crone, 2003:285). This organisational model was not dissimilar to the one that pertained in the early mediaeval armies of Bedouin *amîr* Hasan al-Makzûn al-Sinjârî, whose defence of *Nusayriyya* (Syrian Alawites) took place in 1220 and 1223CE (EI<sup>2</sup>:146a). From these Nusayriyya contingents the tribes of *Matâwira*, *Mahâlîba*, *Darâwisa*, *Numaylâtiyya* and *Banû ‘Alî* emerged in the region (Halm, 1995:146a). The nature of the relationship between *Alawites* and *Alevis* is one where both claim autochthonous origins in separate ethno-cultural matrixes (Arab and Bedouin on the one hand, Turkish and Kurdish on the other), and we do not intend to suggest a direct relationship here (see Aringberg-Laanaatza, 1998 for the similarities and differences between Alawites and Alevis). It is the process of “tribal” formation in the Islamic military context that is highlighted by our example.

In the multi-ethnic Ghaznâvid bureaucracy and army, the *mawâlî* troops learnt to speak a *koiné*, a military “command” language, comprised of predominantly New Indo-Aryan Indic and Persian, some Turkish and Arabic. The rationale of such is obvious; in formation movement and battle, the need for all parts of the army to understand commands quickly and respond was essential. From this *lingua franca* would emerge two forms, a western and eastern or what would eventually crystallise as *Romani* and *Urdu*, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The separated trajectory was a result of the defeat of the Ghaznâvid Sultan Mas’ûd at Dandanqan, by the Seljuks in 1040CE. Mas’ûd returned to India and was allowed to keep the territory east of Ghaznâ (but was deposed almost immediately), however, the western portion of the empire was lost forever. This is the date when the initial wave of *Turkoman* nomads found Khorasan and eastern Anatolia open to them, the beginnings of the radical shift in ethnicity that would alter the previous two thousand year predominance of the Greeks, Armenians and the Kurds, amongst others. Ahead of the *Turkomans* went the remnants of the defeated, predominantly Indian Ghaznâvid *mawâlî*

who avoided capture, some of the ancestors of the *Romanies*. Their sojourn in the Armenian lands was ended by the Seljūk victory at Ani in 1064CE, and the incorporation of the remaining Bagratid Kingdom of Kars by the Byzantines in its aftermath. The Byzantine debacle at Manzikert (1071CE) pushed the *proto-Romanies* further west, into Asia Minor and imperial territory. By this time, we may assume that the Indian genetic “core” was complemented by an admixture of Persians, Khwarizmians, Armenians, Greeks, Arabs and others, both from the Ghaznâvid period and from contact on their migration after the Dandânqan defeat. Most importantly for our discussion here, Hancock notes ‘two salient aspects of the contemporary Romani condition’ when he states that

“...the population has been a composite one from the very beginning, and... that while their earliest components originated in India, Romanies are essentially a population which acquired its identity in the [Byzantine] West.” (2002:5)

The “path” of their migration over a period c.1040CE – c.1100CE, took them from Ghaznâ to Dandânqan in the armies of Mas’ûd, from here along the traditional “silk roads” of the southern Caspian (*Bahr al-Khazar*) through Ismâ’îl territory and into Adharbayjan and the lands of Armîniya. Once the Seljuks had reduced the nominally independent principalities of the remaining Bagratid princes (the Byzantines having succeeded in annexing Ani and the greater part of the Bagratid domains after 1045 CE), the *proto-Romanies* moved further westward, possibly and partly perhaps as a result of forced migration on the part of the Byzantines, who also “recompensed” the Bagratid prince of Ani, Gagik II and many Armenians with lands in Cappadocia. The earliest reliable reference to *Gypsies* as *Aiguptoi* or *Aiguptissa* (feminine form) and *Atsinganoi* comes from Byzantine clerical sources, such as Theodore of Balsomon in the later 11<sup>th</sup> century CE in Constantinople (Soulis, 1961: 143). The ethnonym *Rom* would appear to derive from the notion of being “from Rûm”, i.e., Byzantium, and is recorded in Modon in the 1380’s by pilgrims travelling to the Holy Lands, in the form *Romiti* (Manzi, 1818).

We have no indication as to what happened to those Indic troops captured at Dandânqan by the Seljûks, their incorporation into the armies as mawâlî or otherwise. In the eventual collapse of Seljūk authority on the borderlands of Anatolia, they too may have found themselves moving into quondam imperial territories with others. What we wish to suggest here is that the path of migration for the ancestors of Romani populations in Anatolia began in, amongst other places the *Shî’î* Muslim principalities of north-western India, moved through the regions most clearly associated with the origins of Turkish *Sufism* and Alevism (Trans Oxiana and Khorâsân), the territories of Kurdish Alevism and established contacts with groups of Alevi Turkomans in a relationship that was still in existence in the early 1920’s (Halliday, 1922). Religiously heterodox, even in the context of early Islam, the appeal to these groups (as to many) of the wandering dervishes’ message of tolerant inclusion and *sufism* would have made particular sense of their lives. The influences of *sufi* mysticism amongst Romani groups has never been described by ethnographers or anthropologists, much less researched by historians. The few allusions to anything resembling a connection come from ethno-musicology, where aspects of *Gypsy* dance are related to Central Asian *shamanism* (Seeman, 1999). Delivered in the

form of the mystical syncretism of Hacı Bektash Veli and Mevlana Celaladdin Rûmi, together with the dervishes, this corpus of 'lore' was at the heart of Anatolian Islam and the differing threads it acquired, including Alevism and syncretic beliefs drawn from Christianity, Zoroastrianism and elsewhere. The importance of "fortune-telling" as an occupation much identified with the later, *Atsinganoi* and *Aiguptoi*, is easy to understand in the range of services offered by these commercial nomads to the sedentary, fearful populations they encountered.

The *mentalité* of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century Anatolian populations must have been deeply affected by the insecurity of their daily lives. Subject to predation and raiding by bands of *Turkoman* and *Ghuzz*, and the increasing collapse of any central Byzantine authority, left the population vulnerable to subjection by any rising warlord or bandit chieftain. The concern with death and disorder, visible in the images of Mehmed Siyah Kalem and the poetry of Yûnus Emre, encapsulate the milieu in which early Romani populations plied their trades, in common with the dervishes offering solace, sellers of relics and artefacts associated with both Muslim and Christian saints and prophets, and Orthodox monks and *sufis* seeking spiritual security in the chaos and disorder of early mediaeval Anatolia. Wanderers and refugees from the calamities of warfare and persecution, ruination through excessive taxation, the ravages of disease and the predation of bandits and warlords, abounded on the roads and pathways of the region during this period, many of whom may have made the choice to join stronger groups offering protection, economic opportunity and companionship.

Here then, is not only the "origin of the *Gypsies*", that historical moment when the group evolves distinctly from the variety that typified its make-up previously. 'Forged' between the hammer of the Seljûks and Turkomans and the anvil of the Byzantines, they were annealed and melded in the social and spiritual cauldron of early mediaeval Anatolia. Here is the milieu in which Alevi *Gypsies* are all too likely to have emerged.

### Social Formation

The complex process of the formation of different Romani peoples is a topic that is, in its entirety, beyond the scope of this piece; however, it is important to note that both *ethnogenesis* and social construction have been at work in the development of *Romani* identity. It is also the underlying position of the authors that *Romanies*, as Hancock describes them, are populations that acquired their identities in the late Byzantine and, we would further argue, early Ottoman periods (Hancock, 2003). The social organisation of *Gypsy* groups under the guild system of the Byzantines, which was fully developed by the Ottomans who inherited it, through the ascription of occupational tax categories to particular groups, is the basis for *ethnic* and 'tribal' Romani identities. This process however, is not one that was exclusive to *Gypsies*, but also applied to others, particularly those groups defined in ethno-religious terms (Makdisi, 2002:3). The process of social formation is the main point here; as has been suggested elsewhere with regard to nomadic or 'tribal' units, the existence of sophisticated state machinery demands the development of structures and strategies that could deal with this amongst the former (Wells, c.1999: 56). These may originally be imposed, as in the case of the Indian mawâlî

regiments of the Ghaznâvid army. In the context of early *Gypsy* groups in the Byzantine Empire, the need for the organisation of the individual, commercially nomadic units into 'clan' or 'tribal' groups of cohesive, tax-paying and accountable communities was driven by the state. The response of these groups was to conform to the model presented in order to achieve maximum flexibility in economic and social relations. Fundamentally, loose associations of travelling peoples of various origins, bound by the need for security and developing particular economic specialisations accepted the definitions of 'tribes' and the pre-existent identity of *Egyptian* in order to continue exploiting the available niches in the market.

We may suggest here that the particular experience of the Ottoman fiscal system has had a profound impact upon the historical *Gypsies* in Turkey. The common divisions into *Sepetçi*, *Balamoron*, *Kipti*, *Mirti*, *Kocer* and *Arabci* are clearly the result of categorisation for tax purposes often linked to occupation (i.e., *arabci* as carriage-drivers, *mirti* as employees of the Ottoman state, *balamoron* as wax-chandlers, etc.), or notions of origin (*Kipti* as *Egyptians* originally from the Middle East, i.e., Coptic *Dom*; *Çingene* as peripatetic, from the east, i.e., China). This complex nomenclature is reflective of the late Byzantine and early Ottoman taxation systems that spawned it. It also reflects the differing descriptions of *Romanlar*, *Domlar* and *Lomlar* (those who speak Romani, Domari and Lomavren) in various contexts. Historically, any groups that displayed some or all of the perceived characteristics of *Gypsies* found themselves labelled as such. This conflation led 19<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman enumerators to register numbers of *Tahtacı* and *Abdallar* as *Gypsies* in 1831 population records for Teke *sancak* (Karpas, 1985). The descendants of *Alawites* banished from Anatolia to Cyprus in 1712 and *Tahtacı* conscripted into the modernised Ottoman forces in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, defined themselves as *Kipti* (Hatay, 2003). Our own research suggests this was in order to avoid serving with Sunni recruits (Marsh & Strand, 2003). This would suggest that Ottoman identification had some basis in self-ascription amongst these communities, and existing association or relationships between them.

### Identity

One of the clearest similarities in the historical experience of both Alevis and *Gypsies* is that of marginalisation and discrimination. The consistent identification of the Byzantine and Ottoman *Egyptian* populations as the 'Other', associated in the former with magical practices and sorcery, and in the latter with heterodoxy and poor adherence to the tenets of Sunni Islam, has marked the experience of the Romanies in the region. In the modern context, Irish Travellers (*Minceirí*) and New [Age] Travellers in Britain, the *Yenische* of Germany, the *Resande* of Scandinavia, and the *Zabaleen* of Egypt, are all examples of this. They may be said to share characteristics of commercial peripatetics, generational mobility, an alternative religious identity to the wider population, occupational marginalisation and what might be termed as a "counter-culture"; i.e., the perceived disregard for the normative behaviour of the surrounding community. These labels are of course, contested by the groups themselves, and the perceptions that establish such definitions are a source of disputes between the *Gypsies* and non-*Gypsies* (*gadjé* in Romani), in the wider social and political context. In modern Turkey, the *Abdallar* we refer



to here are, we argue examples of this perception.

The crucial factor of mobility is welded to that of historical *Gypsy* in the discourse of identity, where the normative opposition is *Gypsy/non-Gypsy* and mobile/settled. In fusing these elements into an identity underpinned by what is almost universally referred to as 'a history of persecution', the normative function becomes clearer. The historical *Gypsies* are descendants of mobile people, excluded by non-nomadic people in the process of formation and caught within a binary opposition that inter-weaves the fear and fascination of 'nomads' by those who have settled, the *xenophobia* of homogeneous groups for the 'alien', the terror of the civilised while inventing the barbarians (Hall, 1989) and, like the Sunni/Alevi opposition, the horror of the orthodox for the heretic. As suggested earlier, by extension, all commercially nomadic groups can effectively be perceived as *Gypsies* by non-Gypsies. The construction of Romani 'consciousness' has had to negotiate this "imaginary *Gypsy*" (Willems, 1998), before embarking upon a process of 'self-fashioning' (Greenblatt, 1980), in opposition to it. The re-construction (or 'construction') of *Romani* identity has meant an incorporation of others as a survival strategy, a mechanism to ensure maximum flexibility in social negotiations. In a similar fashion to the Alevi desire to maintain outward 'boundaries' around the community, the *Romanies* have often resorted to presenting an identity that emphasises their *non-Romani-ness*. In effect, they have frequently chosen to 'pass' as others to avoid persecution, prejudice and not infrequently, destruction.

The *Teber-Abdal* group are a peripatetic, or semi-nomadic group moving through a regular pattern of migration to the south of Turkey every summer and back to Izmir-Bornova during the winter months (Kolukirik, 2003). They describe their journey to Izmir as a narrative passing through Khorasan-Erzurum-Eskisehir-Alasehir (Kolukirik, 2003). The Istanbul *Abdallar* describe themselves as originating in Gaziantep, in southern Anatolia (Bladh, 2003). The former live in what might be described as insecure housing, or 'shanty town' dwellings on the periphery of the community, with a current population of about two hundred and fifty, or three hundred persons. The latter reside under a series of motorway flyovers on the outskirts of Istanbul, close to other *Romanlar* communities and would appear to be one extended kinship group. The *Teber-Abdals* have been "resident" in the Mevlana quarter or *mahalle* for almost three years since arriving in early 2000, whilst the Istanbul *Abdals* have been returning to their site or 'stopping place' for a similar period. Occupationally, this group engages in selling perfumes and low-priced colognes, flowers, building and labouring, scrap-collecting, shoe cleaning and itinerant begging. The more traditional occupations associated with music and performing are not part of these groups' activities. As Alevi Muslims, the *Tebers* are also engaged in selling religious literature, a factor that suggests levels of literacy higher than that usually found in *Romanlar* communities in Turkey. Crucially for those living in the environs of the Mevlana *mahalle*, these groups are labelled as *Gypsy* by their neighbours, as are the Istanbul group by the authorities. The former however, define themselves as *Teber-Abdal*, a primary definition that is clearly at odds with the ascription of the wider community, and the question of language is contested (Kolukirik, 2003; Oprisan, 2003). Kolukirik presents a table of terms, comparing the responses to various items, where only the group from

Tarlabashi close by, who acknowledge themselves as *Gypsies*, offer identifiable Romani words. Oprisan argues that these groups do, in fact know some Romani and represent the frequent phenomenon of *Romani* groups losing their language, similar to the *Ghurbeti* and *Mandi* in Cyprus, who largely speak Turkish and Greek respectively these days. The Istanbul *Abdals* also refute the notion that they are *Romani*, but speak *Romance* (Turkish Romani language), they say for business purposes (Bladh, 2003). We would suggest that in the case of both groups, an ascription reliant purely upon a single criterion (i.e., language), is flawed, and that both these groups are Alevi and *Romani*.

### Religiosity

It was axiomatic amongst *Gypsy*lorists and older scholarship in Romani Studies, that “religion sits lightly upon the *Gypsy*”, a statement that implies an indifference to religion in general. It is often argued that where the phenomena of ‘crypto-religion’ (Malcolm, 2001:91) or *syncretism* existed in the Ottoman past and subsequently survives in the successor states of the Balkans and in Anatolia, historical *Gypsies* represented something fundamentally different. This detachment is a means of reinforcing the notions of separation from the normative social behaviour of the surrounding communities and emphasising the counter-cultural element of *Gypsy* communities. For *Romanies*, the *marimé* pollution codes are a means of separating them from the surrounding *mochadi* or “unclean” *gadjé*, in many ways analogous to the cleanliness taboos existing amongst Judaic, or other Indian groups. These cleanliness taboos, sometimes interpreted as expression of *Romani* religiosity, are not in opposition to or in place of affiliation to organised religions. More accurately, they are in accordance with other religious traditions. Notions of pure and impure food, ways of preparing meals, rules regarding matrimony and regulating the degree of proximity to the community exist in many religions. The traditional Islamic division between *haramlık* (private) and *selamlık* (public) is similar to the way *Romani* people distinguish between clean (private) and unclean (public). An untested, yet interesting hypothesis, is the possible link between the Islamic concept of intimacy and privacy, incorporating an idea of secrecy (*mahremiyet*), with the *Romani* concept of *marimé*. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to explore this further, this may suggest a closer connection between the two cultures than hitherto has been suggested. What is clear is that these *Romani* ‘purity codes’ are not only compatible with but reinforce existing religious practices and rituals. Pentecostal *Romanies* in Europe, for instance, would argue that they are not only “...better *Gypsies* for being Christians, but better Christians because they are *Gypsies*” (Acton, 1979: 291; Gay y Blasco, 1999:10; Strand, 2001).

The example of the *Abdallar* groups who insist upon their religious identity and deny any existence of aspects of a *Gypsy* identity, despite familiarity with Romani and an awareness of these pollution taboos, suggests that there is another possibility for the expression of these practices (Kolukirik, 2003). In the context of the close correlation between religious and ethnic identity in the late Ottoman and early Republic period, changing one’s religion can be seen as coterminous with adopting or adapting to a new *ethnic* identity. In the search for what might be termed a *macro-identity* i.e., one that reflects and allows the *Romanlar* to be admitted to the wider society, there is a need to

explain the existence of certain rituals within the community. This can be through the development of a heterodox Muslim identity that allows the members of the group to be accepted as part of a larger, or 'meta-group', whilst still maintaining essential practices to define cultural boundary markers. In this way, the two groups allow for the possible interpretations that currently apply, i.e., that a group which maintains certain practices and linguistic elements drawn from Romani yet denies that they are in any way *Gypsy*, confirms the argument that only an *Alevi* identity is possible (Kolukirik, 2003).

The Istanbul *Abdals* from Gaziantep would refute that they in any way are *Gypsies* (p.c. Bladh, March 2004), but the extent to which they are familiar with *Romance* (Romani language in Turkish), is explained in pragmatic terms, stressing their use of it as a means of facilitating business. Our contention is the fact that *Romance* is a *creole* of Turkish with Romani words and Turkish syntax and grammar (in a similar way to English *Rromani-chib* and Swedish *Rommani*). If we investigate the *Abdals'* explanations for their language acquisition, it is clear that Turkish would be the more convenient *lingua franca*. Furthermore, *Romance* is not a language that is taught; one learns it within the group, acquiring full use through socialization at a later stage, almost as a *rite de passage*. In contradistinction to many *Romanlar* in Istanbul, who assert a complex of identities as Turkish/Sunni Muslim/*Roman*, in that order, the *Abdallar* stress their religious identity. However, the wedding rituals amongst the *Abdallar* groups bear strong resemblance with Romani weddings elsewhere (Bladh, 2003; Kolukirik, 2003). We suggest that the reason for attempting to 'pass' is an 'avoidance' strategy, allowing maximum flexibility in negotiating with the wider community, common to most *Romani* groups. Conversely, there are situations where groups are able to claim both an *Alevi* identity and a *Romani* one. The case of Teketo in Bulgaria, discussed below, is an example. The contested point between these positions is what establishes the boundary, both for the groups and community around them. The emphasis on language as the defining factor in these boundaries, at the expense of the context in which they are drawn, is one that will result in simple binary opposition that fails to take into account this complexity.

Margarita Karamikova's research on the hitherto very rare subject of *Alevi* – *Romani* relations, is based on her fieldwork at the *Tekke* of Osman Boba in the Bulgarian village Teketo. The study pinpoints the complexities surrounding ethnographic and epistemological problems. Karamikova's arguments are also interesting, as they clearly reflect - or reveal - a series of hierarchical value judgements. In this instance, it is that of the superiority of an *Alevi* identity over a *Romani* identity. The *Gypsies* in this study are from the nearby *mahalle* of Stolipinovo, in the Izgrev neighbourhood of Plovdiv. Some of these regular pilgrims to this *Alevi* shrine prefer to initially identify themselves as ethnic Turks, later "admitting" to being *Gypsies*. In Stolipinovo, other individuals self-identify as *Romi* (Karamikova, 2003). Religiously, the pilgrims adhere to *Alevism*, but despite the author's own evidence that supports the existence of multiple ethno-religious identities (i.e., ethnic Turk/*Romi*/*Alevi* in Bulgaria), her conclusion is one that echoes the stereotypical depiction of *Romani* people as non-authentic religious practitioners. The *Alevi Gypsies* are stripped of any genuine religiosity and are described as a "demographic threat" to the *Alevi* pilgrims and hosts, at the holy place (Karamikova, 2003). Not only are

their ways of worshipping being portrayed as violating the “...rules of worship at the holy place”, but the *Gypsies* are also deprived of any spiritual or historical awareness:

“...The communication of sacrifice has been destroyed through ignoring the local cultural practice and practitioners [...] The new group, alien to the Alevi in both ethnic and confessional terms, is interested neither in Bektashism [sic] nor the history of, nor the rules of worship at the holy place...” (Karamikova, 2003)

In explaining the background for the increasing number of *Romanies* that visit the holy place, i.e., the right to profess to various religious beliefs after 1989, Karamikova notes that “the *Gypsies* seemed to outnumber the Turks (Alevi and Sunni)”, and that the Romani visitors constituted “a massive invasion”, in an unconscious reflection of the language of European exclusion of the “*Gypsy hordes*” (*Daily Express*, late January and early February 2004). It seems clear to the authors that Karamikova firstly disassociates *Gypsies* from the Turks and secondly, establishes the “fact” that *Gypsy Alevism*, in her own words, is a “travesty” of the “true” Alevi tradition (*ibid.*). The conclusion is one that, again, would support the either-or debate and the true & false dichotomy. Yet, there is in the field of Romani Studies, a corpus of comparative material showing the possibility of intertwined ethno-religious identities. Not only was it a novelty even for experienced scholars at the Istanbul International Romani Studies Conference 2003 to learn about the existence of Kurdish *Domlar*, *Quereçi* (*Qerec*, *Poshe*), but the paper on Jewish *Romani* and *Domari* people in Israel, was of particular interest (Novoselsky, 2003). The fact that a group of the latter have converted to Pentecostalism, may complicate and challenge ethnographic desires to categorise even further. Marushiakova and Popov (1999), amongst the leading Romani Studies scholars, and certainly the most eminent experts of Romani Studies in Bulgaria, would also disagree with Karamikova's arguments. Explaining the wide spread dismissal of *Gypsy* religiosity, they argue that such a perception is based on an ethnocentric understanding that fails to view religious syncretism, other than as a deviation from a normative religious model (in this case, the “local cultural practice”).

The Alevi scholar David Shankland, has pointed out the unfruitfulness of claiming any “true” form of Alevism (Shankland, 1998). In this instance, *Alevi-ness* and *Gypsy-ness* share similar components stemming from the ways in which they have had to accommodate to the dominant majority society; how their religiosity continually is being questioned by the adherents of normative organised religion, the shared history of persecution, the extent to which admittance to the group is exclusive rather than inclusive, a certain level of secrecy and suspicion of non-members (as a result of the former), and the syncretic religious practices (as a result of the factors mentioned). Shankland illustrates the syncretism in a village by describing how villagers employ both orthodox Muslim and *Alevi* rituals for the same funeral, explaining that “...this overlapping of different ritual cycles and different layers of belief within *Alevi* life are profound” (1998). The same kind of overlapping holds true for *Gypsies*; it is quite common for Bulgarian *Romanies* to use the services of both the *imam* and the priest, for example. (Marushiakova and Popov, 1999).

The adherence to a non-orthodox religious branch is a distinctive feature for *Alevi*s and

for a large number of Romani Pentecostals in the world<sup>1</sup>. The social processes at work within the *Gypsy Pentecostal Movement* (GPM) show some similar patterns as that of the *Alevi* movement; the overlap between the political and religious spheres, the emphasis on the oral rather than written tradition, heart and soul above dogma, and expressions of resistance to cultural assimilation. Above all, they are considered as indigenous movements. The differences between these religious movements are indeed greater than the similarities, not least, as the GPM is an evangelising Church. The point we wish to make here is the exclusionary effects of the connection between orthodox religion and nation-state (Sunni Islam and Turkey, Roman Catholicism and Italy in this case) on these minorities. Attempts have been made by representatives of the dominant religions to reduce the theological distance between the majority group and minority group, by drawing attention to central religious *personae* that unite them; Hasan Mahdi Shirazi argues “...the words *Alawi* and *Shiah* [sic] are interchangeable” (Eliade, 1987). Pope Giovanni Paolo II has, in an encyclical, highlighted the trans-nationality of the *Romani* people and called upon Mary, “Queen of the *Gypsies*” to protect them (Woytyla, cited in Acton, 1991). *Alevi* and *Gypsy* peoples have to this extent received official recognition of their spiritual status here, by evoking Imam Ali and the Mother of Christ.

### Conclusion

In this way the construction of these identities is to be seen as part of a continuous historical process at work upon these communities. The shift during the late Ottoman period from confessional communities to ethnic or national groups, was part of the development of the *millet* system, both in response to increasing pressure from the governments of countries which claimed rights of protection over sections of the Empire’s non-Muslim populations, and the adoption of demographic practices allowing the Ottoman government to establish the diversity and extent of its peoples. Categorisation of groups was a process that remains unclear; certainly modern ethnography would dispute the designations applied to some groups (as suggested above). Latterly, *Gypsy* incorporation into wider demographic categories pushed them into close proximity with other, marginalised and often nomadic sections of the Ottoman population. Thus, the censuses of the nineteenth century did include *Tahtacılar* and *Abdallar* together with Anatolian *Romanlar* (Karpas, 1985), for reasons suggested above. Religious exclusion and social marginalisation combined with commercial nomadism, or occupational specificity to produce the Ottoman–Turkish *Gypsy* identity. The inheritance of a creole derived from New Indo-Aryan, Greek, Persian and incorporated into Turkish, also provided a component to this, although one less stable in the long term. The

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<sup>1</sup> The number of Romani Catholics that have converted to Pentecostalism is huge, a fact that has not escaped the Vatican. The traditional close connection between Catholicism and the nation-state has had an exclusionary effect on people like the *Gypsies*. As a response to these inroads, the Pope John Paul II officially highlighted the situation of the *Gypsies* in his papal encyclical of 1991, in which he described the Roma as a ‘minority ethnic group which knows no territorial limits ...a minority paradigmatic in its transnational dimensions ...diverse in race, language and religion’ (Woytyla, 1991 cited in Acton, 1999: 156).

historical presence in Anatolia of heterodox Muslim *Gypsies* may have been, we argue, very long-standing indeed, as may the association of the ancestors of these with heterodox Islam. The association between *Alevi*s and *Gypsies* is one that has a complex and hitherto, little-documented past. The modern presence of *Alevism* in *Gypsy* groups is part of the complex picture of religiosity amongst *Romani* and other *Gypsy* groups in the Balkans, Turkey and the Middle East. In the continuum of *Romani* identities (as with others), the emphasis placed upon *one* aspect of identity over others, is contingent upon the socio-cultural matrix it takes place within. The assertion of this aspect does not preclude the existence, and assertion of others in a different context.

Elin Strand MA is an independent researcher at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul (2002-2003), and has lectured in Romani Studies at Malmö Högskola

email: [elistra@britishlibrary.net](mailto:elistra@britishlibrary.net)

Adrian Marsh is a PhD and lecturer in Romani Studies at the University of Greenwich, London and Malmö Högskola

Email: romanistudies at mac dot com