

Swapping Identities in Sulukele

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This paper will focus on an aspect of an ongoing research in Sulukule, Istanbul, to try to understand how and why many Roma living in this neighbourhood disclaim their ethnic identity, emphasizing instead, their religious identity.

Sulukule is the oldest and most continuous Roma settlement in this part of the world according to historians; a neighbourhood along the historical Byzantine city walls where a group of Roma lived over the centuries, a significant proportion of whom had made a profession of playing, singing and dancing to the middle classes in Istanbul.

Though largely peripheral to the life of the city within whose borders they lived and worked, and largely ignored if not discriminated against by the city dwellers, occasionally they “attracted the attention” of the local politicians, the military and/or the municipalities.

Here I will focus on the dynamics of identity formation processes among Sulukule Roma, and the exchanging of Roma-“Gypsy” for “Moslem” identity while simultaneously deliberating on why religious belonging, fairly new though it may be, overrides ethnicity.

Swapping Identities: Roma or Moslem?

That there might be groups in the world rejecting their ethnic belonging and identity seems anathema at this time in the early twenty-first century when everyone is either digging in or clinging to the last bits of their imagined collective roots. Yet right in the middle of the cosmopolitan metropolis of Istanbul, are a group of Roma living along the historical Byzantine walls of the city, in Edirnekapı, commonly known as Sulukule, who reject being “Roma”, (read “Gypsy”) to prove, through a cumbersome intellectual exercise that they are Moslem, (while drawing Chinese Walls between the two). They claim that they are not “Gypsies”, and have never been so. Interestingly living in a country where everyone is supposed, by hook or by crook, to be a “Turk”, they seem to be oblivious to the concept of “Turkishness”, concentrating instead on their deeply held belonging in the widespread Sunni Moslem sect of Islam in Turkey.

It is this particular aspect of swapping one belonging and identity in favour of another that this paper aims to focus on. I try to understand the Sulukule-Roma puzzle within the context of conceptions of structural violence intertwining it with notions of identity. However, as the French sociologist Etienne Balibar says, concerning his reflections on citizenship (Balibar 2004: viii):

many of the peculiarities of my argument are dependent on the circumstances, dates, places... This results from my conviction, now firmly rooted, that political matters cannot be examined from a deductive point of view (be it moral, legal, philosophical, sociological or some combination of these) but can only be theorized under the constraints imposed by the situation and the changes in the situation that one observes or tries to anticipate. This is not to say that the discourse remains purely descriptive or empirical, but that- precisely in order to be ‘theoretical’ in the way that the political matter requires- it has to incorporate as much as possible a reflection on its immediate conditions, which determine the understanding and use of concepts.

Hence my discussion here, will attempt less to generalize my findings to Roma all over the world, though the general approach to Roma-“Gypsy identity”, as the empirical work shows, also apply to groups in Central and Eastern Europe, concentrating instead on the confined and circumscribed cultural geography that is Sulukule, and to some extent Istanbul.

History

Sulukule, as the district is commonly known in Istanbul, or Hatice Sultan and Neslişah neighbourhoods as many residents now prefer to call it, is a very ancient district along the historical Byzantine walls of the city at Edirnekapı. Once in the periphery, now it has come to the centre of the city, which is partly the cause for its current shaky existence; the avaricious city is getting ready to swallow it up and turn over to wealthier and more established middle to upper class occupants.

Not having regular employment during the Ottoman Empire, and marginal to the life of the city later in the Republic in any case, Sulukuleans made a living by playing, singing and dancing for the middle and upper classes or being employed otherwise in the services related to the entertainment sector in the neighbourhood.

They were not accepted among the established groups in society except as “Gypsy musicians and performers”, even when they became rich (unless they were able to disguise their ethnic background). To achieve breaking through the invisible middle class walls, they adapted different strategies in the recent past, sometimes in combination, to fit their specific status:

Make money, preferably, get rich.

Move away from the neighbourhood and cut ties with other Roma, give up connections to the extended relatives which they normally so value.

- Do not speak the mother tongue ever again
- Do not teach the mother tongue or ancestral history to offspring
- Do not make mention of “Gypsy background” to anybody.
- If it is ever asked or mentioned, deny it

Is the Sulukule Roma out of sync with the rest of the world? If so why? If not, then, what would explain for their current refusal to identify with a historical community that have been living here longer than any Istanbulite, which in some cases of identity-belonging is a crucial factor in acceptance and determination? At the least, it appears as if the Sulukule Roma are anachronic, since in the early twenty-first century everyone seems to be looking for their historical roots, over the current ones, whatever those may be, and hold on fast to them once they think they have found such serendipitous cues.

Methods

Three academicians from different disciplines and universities,¹ we joined hands to conduct an “ethnographic study of sorts” in Sulukule in December of 2005, upon news of its impending demolition by the municipality following the dictates of a new law (No. 5366) on “city renewal” passed by the national parliament in Turkey on June 16, 2005. Each of us chose a different aspect of the neighbourhood to investigate and set to do fieldwork. The methods used in this study consist of those common in most fieldwork; mainly, in-depth interviews and informal focus group discussions, in addition to participant observation.

In the beginning, unsure of our presence in the area, we went there, walked, talked and stayed in our group of three. Eventually however, gaining some confidence in ourselves, and in the significance and persuasive power of our research, we strayed alone to conduct in-depth interviews with the residents. In addition, we had long discussions in groups, of anywhere from two to twenty in teahouses (with men) and on the side streets in front of the houses they owned or rented (with women).²

Structural Violence

In “Violence and Its Causes” the Norwegian sociologist and founder of peace research Johan Galtung (1981) defines the idea of violence as anything avoidable that impedes human self-realization. He makes a distinction between direct and structural violence. Direct violence is the use of physical force in response to the actions of other human beings. Structural violence, on the other hand, is the result of social structures which affect people indirectly. Galtung’s distinction between personal and structural violence is based upon the actor: is there, or is there not an effectively acting subject (person) who produces violence?

Working in Peru, MacGregor and Marcial, explain that that the theories of Walter Benjamin and Max Weber on violence, in lawful and illegal domination of people were part

1 We started this research in October of 2005 as three academicians, including Assoc. Prof. Süheyla Kirca-Schroeder from Bahçeşehir University and Dr. Sevgi Uçan-Çubukçu from the Political Science Department of the İstanbul University, in addition to the writer. We have already, individually, submitted five papers to international conferences and workshops, and the research, as well as the writing of joint and/or individual papers based on it, still goes on.

2 Many times we had to conduct these interviews immediately outside of the homes, sitting on the doorsteps. Sulukuleans were not very forthcoming in opening their doors to strangers; especially due to the fact that they had been (and are being) pestered by the municipality and harassed by the police frequently. In the beginnings they saw and identified us with official agents who had not been kind to them in the past.

of Galtung's intellectual environment (1994:43). To make more explicit the borders between the two forms of violence, they add "in structural violence the aggressor is faceless" thus reinforcing Galtung's conception (1994:49-50). However, they say, "We at the Peruvian Peace Research Association consider structural violence a working hypothesis whose validity can only be probed empirically" (p. 44). Structural violence is contained in the very structures of society itself; it flows inside social structures and stems out of them into interpersonal relationships. (p. 49). Institutional violence is that type of structural violence which is found formally or truly embedded in the institutions and is accepted or tolerated, with the complicity of the people.

According to Galtung, structural violence is a process with ups and downs while cultural violence (such as can be found among the Yanomamo of Brazil and Venezuela³) is invariant. "Structural violence does not consist just of poverty and injustice. These are major factors, but alongside them is a whole set of institutions and social rules that may be crucial to an explanation of structural violence" (1999:57 & 47).

Daniel J. Christie, on the other hand, points out the significance of structural violence from an individual's point of view (2006):

In contrast to direct violence, structural violence occurs when economic and political structures systematically deprive need satisfaction for certain segments of society. When economic deprivation occurs, the need for well-being is not satisfied, resulting in deficits in human growth and development. Politically, structural violence engenders the systematic deprivation of the need for self-determination.

Fred Dubee brings in the notion of dominant logic to the formulation of structural violence thus: "structural violence is often unintended; a consequence of political structures and cultural norms, part of the dominant logic."⁴

Anthropologist and medical doctor Paul Farmer, working in Haiti in 1983, on the other hand, is more specific in his analysis and the point of view of structural violence that I adopt in this paper is closer to his rather than the others. Working with actual data, and real people, instead of on theoretical models, he is more succinct and transparent: He claims he saw suffering in Haiti, like no other place before, suffering not due to war, but stemming from the socio-political situation that the Haitians found themselves in. As he explains (Farmer 2002 1996 , 424): "In only three countries in the world, was suffering judged to be more extreme than that endured in Haiti, each of these three countries (was) at that time, in the midst of an internationally recognized civil war".

Farmer also referred to what he saw there as *structural violence*. According to him structural violence results from the way that political and economic forces structure risk for various forms of suffering within a population. It can be in the form of infectious diseases, epidemics, but may also include consequences of poverty, such as hunger, under nourishment, difficulties a minority group has in dealing with a majority hegemonic group and its repressive apparatuses which may result in rape, torture, police harassment and, I add, deterritorialization. The workings of structural violence create specific spaces in society in which the poorest and least empowered members are subjected to highly intensified risks of all kinds, increasing the potential for social suffering.

In a later article Farmer et al (2004), explain the current spread of tuberculosis and AIDS in Haiti and elsewhere in the postcolonial world as follows:

The emergence and persistence of these epidemics in Haiti, where they are the leading

3 The example is mine and not Galtung's.

4 Fred Dubee's paper was originally presented at the World Productivity Congress in Shenyang, China in October 2006. found on the internet with just this bit of information.

causes of young-adult death, is rooted in the enduring effects of European expansion in the New World and in the slavery and racism with which it was associated. A syncretic and properly biosocial anthropology of these and other plagues moves us beyond noting, for example, their strong association with poverty and social inequalities to an understanding of how such inequalities are embodied as differential risk for infection and, among those already infected, for adverse outcomes including death.

There is an inherent class component of structural violence that neither Farmer, nor the others emphasize sufficiently though Farmer does relate suffering to economic and political structures in Haitian society.

Also, none of the authors quoted above, talk about state production and reproduction of structural violence. However, as is well known, repressive instruments such as the police force, or the gendarmerie are parts of the state mechanism, controlled by governments and/or the military.⁵ Working for the UN, Galtung, for instance, was, I think, being “diplomatic” in not identifying the sources of violence. Also in the West, sociologists and anthropologists have traditionally tended to keep quiet about issues related to state and governmental violence, what Paul Gilroy calls *securocracy*.⁶ Currently however, some have begun to speak about state violence and a sociologist, R.J. Rummel (1986) even invented a term to speak of violence in so-called democracies, “democide”; to refer to the mass murders perpetrated by governments.

So let me emphasize that structural violence is not “faceless”, rather it generally bears the imprint of whatever government is in power and who ever controls structures of the state. It strikes the lower and underclasses, the lumpen proletariat, much more so than the middle and upper ones. The upper classes are protected by “bumper mechanisms” such as the capacity to be able to send their children to the best educational institutions, to pay for the best doctors and health services in the country, go abroad for treatment, even bribe the police/bureaucrats or escape the country if need be. As far as hurt from the police force and violence of the government is concerned, it has been well documented by human rights activists and journalists all over the world that such duress, in general, hits the lower and under classes and the disempowered minority groups in society much more so than the others. Marxists might see this as part of “class struggle”. In any case, as Schultz and Lavenda point out, it is important to emphasize the “structural” aspect of the violence since Western observers are more trained to see the individual as the cause for h/er/is own suffering, with the result of, ironically, ‘blaming the victim’” (2005: 134).

Structural Violence in Sulukule

Almost every aspect of social and individual living one looks into in Sulukule; one can find small bits as well as gross pieces of evidence relating to structural violence. Located in the midst of historical monuments, mosques, churches and Byzantine city walls, there is no question that the insecure, marginal subsistence of the Roma here goes back to “time immemorial”. From the narratives of the residents, and sparse pieces of evidence on Sulukule, in relevant books, one can discern many cues of a sustained precarious, fragile and peripheral existence over the centuries, at least from the Ottoman times to the present.

In between the 16th through the 19th centuries, when the Ottoman Empire was in peace, for one, the Roma were located immediately outside the city walls, not inside, but could live on the gardens they planted right in front of their flimsy dwellings. During war times,

5 In authoritarian democracies of the South, for instance, the will of the military generally supersedes that of governments.

6 In his address to the plenary titled “Multicultural Citizens” in INTER, *A European Cultural Studies Conference in Sweden* which took place on June the 10th 2007.

however, they would be moved inside the walls to help in the war efforts of the military. The *Entertainment Houses*⁷ stood right inside the walls, and war or peace, individuals continued working there.

In recent history, the Roma here were faced with the vicious cycle of exclusion and poverty, more than once. At least thrice, since the 1950s, in 1958, 1966, and then again in 1982, groups of houses were demolished by the elected municipality, and many Roma had to leave the neighbourhood. On the first of these occasions, in 1958, two big highways, Vatan and Millet avenues, were built in place of their homes and *Entertainment Houses (EH)*, hence Sulukule was moved slightly northeast, from Topkapı, towards Edirnekapı. They were barely compensated for this. On the second occasion, in 1966, a part of the neighbourhood including a big EH by Sulukule standards,⁸ twenty-five small and one large house was again demolished by then Republican Party mayor, Haşim İşcan. Then in 1982, after the third military coup in the country, there was a third demolition. Furthermore, in the early '90s, the EH were closed down by a decree of the Motherland Party metropolitan municipality, those who had houses along the Sulukule avenue, were relocated by force to a district far away from where they are now, and takes anywhere from one-and-a-half to two hours to go by the city bus (Sarıgöl and Taşoluk), unless they were wealthy enough to buy property elsewhere in the city.

Currently, now for the fourth time, they are faced with another threat of forced eviction and a fourth calamity; coming again from the municipality under a new law (no. 5366) simply called "Urban Renewal" requiring "zones of degeneration in the city to be renewed". Using this law as its basis, the local Justice and Development Municipality in Fatih now has decided to demolish the remaining Roma houses and the EH in Sulukule.

We have met residents from Sarıgöl and Taşoluk districts who now attend meetings for the solidarity of Sulukuleans against demolition and eviction, and have learned from them that they now are also faced with a second eviction, from where they were relocated by the municipality some years ago, which would further relocate them forcefully close to a coal mining area, about several kilometres away from where they live now. The reason: many former Sulukuleans now settled there, are extremely poor, have no jobs and to make up for the "income gap" have resorted to petty robbery, drug selling, and the sex trade which has irritated the up and coming classes in the neighbourhood.

In addition, Sulukule Roma have been subject to frequent police raids and strict municipality controls, particularly when the EH were in operation. They were generally stigmatized and scapegoated, beaten by the police on the streets as well as in custody. Nowadays they are so fearful of both, that they dare not speak to them at all, and virtually escape into their houses when word gets around that either is coming which, of course, does not stop the police confronting them face-to-face by breaking into their homes. The police feel they can break into any house by force in Sulukule without the necessary permissions and take in, whoever they consider to be the "usual suspects" to the police headquarters.

Nor can the poverty stricken Sulukuleans find employment in the larger city, if their attire or name, or place of residence, associates them with Romanness and/or Sulukule. In a country where official IDs cards are a must, whatever the occasion, showing ones religion, place of birth, and names of father and mother, the only chance they've got, is to stay in the

7 The Roma of Sulukule are famous for their EH, "private eat, drink, listen and watch" places along the famous Kaleboyu caddesi across from the city walls where middle and upper class İstanbulites came for the music and dance performances. These were tiny one- or room houses connected with intricate labyrinths to the owners' homes to facilitate service and going back and forth in the backstage for the musicians and dancers, and singers. These Sulukule performers, the same ones as in the EH, were also often invited to homes of İstanbulites for a certain amount of money.

8 According to Ziyaeddin bey, owner of the house and president of "Sulukule Revival and Tourism Association", founded in 1969 and closed down in 1971.

neighbourhood when searching for work or to create circumstances for their own employment such as, as mobile sellers of fruits vegetables, and other odds and ends. A few may have enough capital maybe to open a tiny grocery store, or a small manufacturing workshop, on a side street or alley in the neighbourhood. This is another reason why the EH were of such importance to them: they created employment not only for performers, but also for less qualified who could find jobs created by the service sector surrounding entertainment.

Identity: Enigma or Rational Choice?

Identity search and globalization did not dawn upon the Roma in Sulukule until the late '90s. In Eastern and Central Europe, on the other hand, sometime after the fall of the Soviet Union, when confronted with downward vertical mobility, did the search for roots, rise to the surface. However, some academicians suspect this as being a ploy of the now capitalist economies and governments supporting them, claiming that it was the governments who initiated and substituted the "ethnicity card" as opposed to the economic security and "class card" of the former era. Martin Kovats warns (Kovats, 30 July 2003: 2):

The emergence of Roma politics is duly interpreted in accordance with the traditional, 19th century concept of national 'awakening'... Such self-righteous complacency disguises the uncomfortable realities of the unravelling of the 'communist' Social Contract by which the full employment and social security of the post-war decades have been exchanged for 'freedom, democracy, and the rule of law'. The sanctification of political and economic competition has produced a dramatic increase in inequality with those disadvantaged by a lack of capital and marketable skills sinking furthest and fastest

In any case, Roma in Sulukule had to come to terms with their identity, only after the municipality decided to demolish the neighbourhood and aimed to destroy their *gemeinschaft*, or communal being. Until then, it was only "us", those in Sulukule, as opposed to the municipal administrators and the police, because they were and are currently, by and large, a closed community with little socio-cultural exchange with outside of their own neighbourhoods, except for the performers, particularly the musicians.

Since there is no written history of the Roma here, much of what anyone in the community knows comes from word-of-mouth, oral history passed down from one generation to another, hearsay evidence, and since the past three-four decades or so, what they see and hear about themselves from the audio and visual media,⁹ with the creation of an objective self-awareness of sorts. Add to this the fact that Roma do not like to identify themselves as Roma (read Gypsy), but prefer to override this with an Islamic identity, the children are almost never directly told of their family and ancestral history. This appears to have been intentional with the purpose of preventing the children from immediate and future stigmatization, discrimination and prejudice.¹⁰ Nor were the children taught their own language with the consequence that today, anybody who knows anything about the Rom language is extremely hard to find. When adults of 25-70 years gather together, they only remember and can share remnants of frequently used words, as we witnessed in several teahouse discussions including a British Roma, himself a Roma historian.¹¹ Of the 3 thousand and 500 Roma who live here, we have been told that there maybe one or two old people who know anything about Rom, their mother tongue. Though we requested to meet these

9 For example a film made on a novel written by Metin Kaçan, *Heavy Novel* (Ağır Roman) or a tv series created on one of the commercial channels The Sulukuleans do not read much unfortunately. One reason for that being the lack of educated Roma in this area and secondly, the fact that books are expensive. But then they do not even read newspapers, save for the very colorful ones dedicated to football and magazine.

10 Though they did in any case.

11 Adrian Marsh, British Roma historian of Roman ancestry and author of books and articles on the Roma.

individuals, they never appeared, which leads me to doubt whether there were in fact any Roma here who remembered and spoke their mother tongue. However, a few individuals have also told us that at home their parents sometimes spoke in Rom to each other, when they did not wish the children to hear.

Structural Violence and Identity

Grigore says that in Romania, until slavery was abolished in 1856, the Roma were slaves and had been so for more than 500 years (2003: 2):

They were objects of exchange and sometimes sold by weight.” Gradually, “Roma began to lose their cultural identity and internalize their inferior status in society as if it were inalienable. Ashamed of themselves, perceiving their ethnic identity as damnation, they were stigmatized and excluded from the society of their former masters. Roma thus became a scapegoat for all the frustrations and failures of Romanian society.

A widespread word used in referring to the Roma in Eastern and Central Europe, “*tsigan*”, explains Grigore, meant “slave” in the 18th century Romanian language, “*Masters offered Roma girls as pleasure toys to their guests, and had the right of life and death over the slave...*”

In the Ottoman Empire though the Roma were not slaves, they were the lowest of the low “subjects” to be moved inside and outside of the city walls to suit the will of the emperor and times of war and peace.

Hence, as many researchers point, it is not surprising that the people, the public at large in many countries in Europe call Roma, refuse to identify themselves as such. Thus Jean-Pierre Liégeois says “*From the Gypsy point of view there is no such group as the Gypsies*” (1994).

On the other hand, according to Martin Kovats (30 July 2003: 4)

‘Roma’ is simply the political replacement for the generic identity ‘Gypsy’ covers a huge number of highly diverse communities with different political needs, aspirations, capabilities and interests, living in a wide variety of economic, political, social and cultural environments

Csepeli and Simon summarize this as follows “Minorities deprived of the means of a positive self-identification tend to get rid of their membership when they are counterattacked by the majority” (2004: 135)

A Roma poet and civil right activist from Hungary puts it more bluntly

...the one who is labelled all the time as ‘thief’, ‘lazy’, ‘dirty’, ‘work dodger’, ‘unreliable’ and ‘swindler’ sooner or later will start hiding: identity, mother-tongue, cultural habits, and will deny belonging to his/her community.¹²

Anca Covrig (2004) from Poland has written a paper based on her doctoral research focussed on this very issue. Covrig’s research shows that “The Roma refuse to declare themselves as Roma not only to officers of the state trying to collect statistics, but also to researchers” (Covrig 2004: 91).

Her study shows that official estimates of the Roma population are much higher than the actual official numbers in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. In these countries, also they identify themselves with the larger community of the nation-state as being- “Czech”, “Hungarian,” “Romanian”, “Slovakian” or “Slovenian” rather than Roma.

12 Cited in Csepeli and Simon, 2004, p. 135.

Some of this, researchers in Central and Eastern Europe point out, is due to the policy of assimilation during the Soviet era. The Roma then were made to settle down by force, but through the universal education system got a good basic education which prepared them for their later jobs and employment. Hence their identification with the majority superseded their “Romanipen”¹³.

Csepeli and Simon point out that in the socialist era

The Roma had to pay for their educational and subsequent social success with the loss of their identity and were forced to leave their communities... The goal of ‘complete assimilation of the Roma population was discussed openly as a Communist Party asset throughout the region.

Social scientists of this particular chronotope were obliged to give scientific arguments for the thesis that Roma had no objective grounds to claim minority rights. “*In this period, the tendency among Roma to identify themselves as non-Roma increased....*” (2004: 131-132).

Based on current research, Csepeli and Simon argue that in Central and Eastern Europe (2004: 133):

the Roma are the most rejected of all minority groups...and that during the transition to a market economy, hostility against Roma became even stronger... the response to statements such as ‘The Roma are genetically inclined to commit crimes’, ‘You can’t trust or rely on gypsies and ‘The Gypsies are lazy and irresponsible’ have been conspicuously rising.

Another reason for the denial, according to Covrig, is that many of them do not have identity papers (like the Sulukule Roma), but also, according to Covrig “*The Roma are resistant to being part of statistics*” (Covrig, 2004:91). Covrig lists a number of reasons from past experience (of the consequences of documentation by the Nazis) to a variety of perennial factors such as fear of discrimination, segregation, violence, of limitations on freedom, of the data being used by the states to control their migratory movements, of other misuse and simple mistrust of the state. “*Being ashamed*” is another reason given by Covrig for the concealing of identity.

However, it is not exactly possible to compare the situation of Roma in Sulukule (and Turkey in general) with that of those in Central and in East Europe since in the latter two cases the socio-economic status of Roma was effected by a sharp downward mobility following the fall of the Soviet Union and the socialist regimes, whereas in Sulukule, the trend can better be described as more or less as a curvilinear trajectory with small waves, at least over the past century of recent history. Also in Sulukule, Roma are, and have been, generally speaking, sedentary.

Covrig says that Roma will “*only declare themselves as Roma in unofficial contexts*” (2004: 94). We have found however, that even in informal friendly discussions, many rejected being “Gypsy” and tried to convince us of their “One hundred percent guaranteed Moslem belonging”. Only now, after the wider spread introduction of the term “Roma” will their organic leaders (such as Mr. S. Pündük) there, say proudly “yes we are and have been Roma for centuries”. Hence, Roma, rather than the stigmatized and stereotyped “Gypsy” has now made them come to grips with their history and identity. It seems that inadvertently the recent presence of NGOs from Europe and Turkey, architects, sociologists and lawyers presence there, use of the new term by them, assurances in discussions that their negative perception by the public at large, is not their fault, but that of the state, and the media has recently convinced them to come to terms with their Roma identity. Earlier, only some of the musicians in the

13 Roma way of life. Roma identity

community were using the term “Roma” to describe themselves, which I attribute to the fact that many of them had travelled in Europe and elsewhere, had met others like themselves and gotten familiar with the term Roma, eventually developing a liking for it.

I think it is safe to conjure and say that the seeds of ethnogenesis among the Roma in Sulukule started with the travelling musicians and to some extent other travelling merchants, and was reified by the coming of a variety of NGOs here for the first time in solidarity, and our presence and discussions in the community. It appears that for the first time there were individuals who took them seriously listened to them sincerely and took heed of the problems they described.¹⁴

Analysis

At the time Roma in Sulukule started claiming they were Moslem, the Islamicly oriented Justice and Development Party had recently come to power in the government, about 2002; but perhaps more importantly for this political party and the Roma here, they had also made a huge success in winning the local elections in many municipalities all over the country, including the metropolitan municipality of Istanbul and the local Fatih municipality to which Sulukule is administratively attached. Most men in Sulukule say, they canvassed for the JDP, helped the JDP come to power in the municipality by going from one house to another and telling the families in the neighbourhood who to vote for.

Furthermore, the Islamicly oriented JDP made generous local investments and donations, conducting workshops for children (boys) while opening a Quranic school to teach the sacred text to teenage boys and girls. Also a rich Islamic capitalist built a large sports facility across from the city walls even including, a semi Olympic swimming pool in the 1990s, in the land that had been left over from the 1966 demolition. However, such facilities could only be made use of by those who could show their Islamic affiliation and/or that their teenage boys were attending the Quranic school. Girls were not allowed to use the facility at all. Hence the JDP was very much in power in Sulukule with its obvious consequences and those associated with it had higher status and respect in the community than the rest of older Islamic, social democratic and right-wing parties. Ironically those former Entertainment House owners, who, one would expect to be the least interested in Islam, were the ones most eager and forthcoming in sending, particularly their bright teenagers to the Quranic workshops, most eager to prove their Islamic upbringing and orientation generally.

The real underclass of Roma, who were part of the Entertainment House crowd, on the other hand, representing the “service sector” such as waiters, cleaners, cooks, and the lesser dancers had no such claims, though joining the former in their denial of being “Gypsy”. They were perfectly happy in their casual colourful daily dresses, instead of the long coats Moslem women here wore, many did not bother cover their hair, and danced and sung as requested. They lived in the now emptied EH, renting one or two rooms depending on family size; and families could be quite large (3-4 children on the average). They rented the *Entertainment Houses* from the owners at a very low price but were even unable to pay that on a monthly basis since they had no regular income. The men were usually mobile sellers of fruits and vegetables going all over the city, or tended animals (mainly horses) for the rich, and the women would, on days when the weather permitted, wait or walk around for a pick-up on the main avenue of Sulukule, Kaleboyu avenue, to earn some money.

Being Moslem then, was “being in”, “being part of the crowd”, being free of scapegoating and stigmatization, and other sorts of “negative freedoms”. It offered empowerment, respect

14 The process of ethnogenesis among the Roma was noted earlier by others. See CEDIME-SE, 2000 which points out the “new Roma identity ... from ‘slave’ status to one equal to that of a citizen ... with the right of identifying as belonging to the Roma community” (par. No. 66)

and protection, being free of accusations of minor crimes of drug trafficking and prostitution and even helped them in opening up work places so they could earn money. It also was a haven to escape police abuse and harassment by the municipality. In fact, it is the individuals with the potential to move up the class ladder, such as the owners of former Entertainment Houses who were stronger in the claim to be Moslem. Hence there seems to be no puzzle or irony involved in the choice of Roma Sulukule as Moslem, drawing sharp boundaries and articulating clear differences between being Roma and being Moslem and stressing the incommensurability of being both simultaneously.

They give a variety of evidence to prove their point. They say they have been Moslem for centuries, explaining how they conduct their daily prayers immaculately, go to the mosque (men) regularly, if not daily, cover their hair (women), give the alms required by Islam, send their children to the Koranic school after regular school hours, become “hadji” by going to Mecca, and would even “kill for their honour”¹⁵ if necessary. Even their charter¹⁶ (origin myth) has been formulated to fit this “rational” design: many say they came to this particular place along the city walls with the armies of the Ottoman Sultan, Mehmed the Conqueror, invading the Byzantine city of Constantinople in the 15th century and have been here since.¹⁷ Hence the swapping of Roma identity in favour of being Moslem provided them with status and privilege in a Weberian sense, as well as endowing them with more economic possibilities and a way to remove themselves gracefully from the structural violence, lack of education, health services and lack of prestige that prevails for those Roma in Sulukule.

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15 Meaning if the “morals” of “their” women ever became “questionable” or “in doubt”.

16 To use a Malinowskian concept

17 According to Marushiakova and Popov, however, the Roma have been here even before that. They date the presence of Roma” in the Balkans to the time of Byzantine Empire, and more precisely to the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries (2001:13).

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