



## The Dom in the Middle East: an ethnic group of wandering

Eleni Panagiota Stoupa \*

***“Gypsies”, as a distinctive ethnic group present an integral part of the unknown Middle East history. Known as “Dom” in the MENA territory, this societal group embodies the culture of wandering, the oral tradition, as well as commune socio-cultural features, all of which are reflected, incorporated, and transferred through their language and cultural practices. Their history has been inherited from one generation to the other through folks, tales, narratives, and songs. Their communal lifestyle maintains their ancient tradition, while it safeguards the purity of their community. Nevertheless, their isolation from the social structures, the political polarization along with the long-term conflicts of this territory, have complicated their presence in the Middle East.***

\*Researcher of the Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies of the University of Peloponnese

## The Origins

Throughout the centuries the land of Middle East has been marked as the leeward and the home for many ethnic groups that carry an unknown and hidden historical path without official documents and records. As one of these distinctive minority communities, Gypsies underlie an integral part of Middle East historical consciousness. Described in pastoral and metropolitan communities, as well as identified by high levels of mobility, Gypsies represent a peripatetic nomad community scattered all over the world. The wandering lifestyle, the value of travelling and the culture of migration in different parts of the earth, have created a variety of denominations. In European region this societal group of craftsmen is well known as Roma, while in countries of Northern Anatolia they are described as Lom.<sup>1</sup> In the region of North Africa and the Middle East, Gypsies are designated as Ghrajar -an ethnonym in the broader ethnic framework- as well as Dom, a regional designation.

The history and the cultural aspects of the Dom people are restricted to a very limited variety of sources and research work, reflecting a hazy and muddy holistic picture of this ethnic group. According to the research community, different migration waves in different historical periods reflect the dissimilarities between the Rom, the Lom, and the Dom in their cultural and linguistic habits. The modulation of Gypsy's tribes – as they are described above - are derived from the differences detected at the days of their departure, the routes they followed, the land of their migration, as well as the diversity of their social background. Following the widely accepted assumptions and historical narratives, the first migration wave was held during the 9th Century after the Gadznavid Islamification attacks on Punjabc. Through their wandering route from India, the people moved to the areas -that are now known as Iraq, Cyprus, Palestine- were named Dom.<sup>2</sup> The Dom delineation is inextricably linked with the Indian caste name, which is still widely used to designate a range of peripatetic communities.<sup>3</sup> While the term “Dom” is used as a regional designation, the names of the Middle East Gypsies can be related with their tribal origins such as “Zoti”, their professions such as “Haddad” meaning the man working with metal, or the geographical area of their migration such as Halabi from Syria's Aleppo, as well as other names such as Kawli, Karaji, Qarbat, Lumi, Luri, Jati, Zangari, Zangi. Nevertheless, in the Arab world the designation Nawar is the most common, used in a contemptuous manner.<sup>4</sup> While their total number is hard to be assessed considering their abstention from the statistical surveys -as a disenfranchised community often without citizenship- it is estimated that about 5 million Dom are spread out in Syria, Jordan, Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, Israel, Gaza, West Bank, Egypt and Turkey, while a presence of small Dom communities has been detected in Gulf Countries.

## The culture of Dom and their position in the social structures

Only a few Gypsies are able to memorize and recount their history.<sup>5</sup> The past of the Dom is still an unexplored field and all information about them is collected from tales, narratives and linguistic evidence. The Gypsy language in the Middle East is called Domari or Dowmari in the academic field. This term emerged in the beginning of the 20th century through some published articles that described the linguistic diversity in Palestine, and since then, it has been borrowed and used in a variety of contexts by the academic community.<sup>6</sup> Domari is an amalgam of local dialects and Arabic influences, a language developed by borrowed words, reflecting the history of wandering.<sup>7</sup> Due to their nomadic life, Dom people in all Arab communities are used to speak two to three different languages and local dialects in order to communicate within their respective communities and also with the host country. Domari is known to be spoken in Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey and probably Iran and Iraq.<sup>8</sup> What is of significant importance is that Domari is a language alive during the centuries without any written record. Due to the high levels of illiteracy, Gypsies cannot record their cultural traditions heritage, but they maintain it through music, singing, and dancing such as Ghawazi and Khawal.<sup>9</sup> Gypsies' history is

recounted orally, transferred from one generation to the other through tales, folks, songs and other outwardly visible signs.

In the Arab countries, the Dom's lifestyle shares a lot of communal socio-cultural features. Gypsies of the Middle East are concentrated in relatively isolated communities outside the urban centers, while engaging with nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyle. The embracement of the communal life represents their protection against the external dangers, controlling the boundaries among them and other societies, maintaining their ancient tradition. Rooted in Indian beliefs, the maintenance of a value system based on purity and impurity will be achieved by protecting the cleanliness of their soul based by protecting the relations of the community with the others (strangers, Gadjo). Separating their societies in sub-tribes divided in small groups of large families, the Dom's everyday life includes elements of tribal organization such as that of the Bedouins. Each one of these groups includes 5 to 15 families that live together under the values of communal sharing and co-habilitation. Recognizing the authority of leadership and hierarchy, each sub-tribe group has a leader responsible for governing the groups as well as taking care of individuals and their families. This communal lifestyle that lacks the meaning of property represents the resistance of Gypsies to the assimilation of the gadjos social and economic system. However, in due course what they are trying to do is to be embedded in new cultural contexts, by adopting the religion of the settled population such as Iraqi Gypsies (Ghajar) that are Shiite Muslims as well as Kurdish Gypsies (Karaj), which are mostly Sunnis.<sup>10</sup> Their religious positioning reflects the country's confessional structure, while they maintain their lifestyle, keep practicing their rituals, customs, and traditional crafts such as practicing metalwork, dentistry, basket-making, fortune-telling, dancing and music performing.

Diffused throughout the ethnically and religiously distinct population of the region, the Dom's social environment stands in contrast to the domestic lifestyle of the settled population, creating conflicts, isolation as well as curiosity. Their marginalization from social structures, the political polarization along with the long-term conflicts and the undemocratic environment of the Middle East represent an infertile ground to fight for their rights and redefine their position in Arab society. The isolation of these communities is related to their inability to find a locus in the identity of citizens defined by the nation state. As a result, they moved away from the state apparatus, losing stepwise their rights, as well as their visibility.

Nowadays, the Dom of the Middle East are living as ghosts, deprived from education, working in daily jobs or begging in the streets. In some states of the Middle East, such as Syria, the government has left the Dom without citizenship rights, while in other areas such as Egypt where national identity is associated with religion, their ethnic characteristics are ignored. Additionally, the borders of the Middle East and especially, these between Lebanon and Syria, are always porous for Dom communities, leading them to wander from place to place due to the conflicts of the region. As a result, the Syrian civil war has aggravated their living conditions. Nevertheless, currently, great efforts have begun from humanitarian and civil organizations to fight disidentification, the projection and the exaggeration of stereotypical constructions for Dom, by engaging them in social and cultural structures, ameliorating their life conditions.

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