The Islamic community of Romania is concentrated in the Dobrudja, a southeastern province of Romania lying between the Danube River and the Black Sea. The community comprises an ethnic mosaic of Turks, Tartars, Bulgarians, and Gypsies. Muslims do not affiliate with them. The great majority of the Romanian population rejects Horahane Roma because of their adherence to a religion different from the Orthodox Christianity. For the other Gypsies, they are simply known as ‘Turks’.

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

Because very few written records have survived little is known of the history of the Muslim Gypsies in Dobrudja. It is thought that they arrived in the area in the early 16th century (Turkish period) of a specific category of Gypsies serving in the Ottoman army. This hypothesis is sustained by the Special Law (1552) concerning the Gypsies of Rumelia, promulgated by Sultan Suleiman the Great, and by the Law for the supervision of the caravan of Gypsies of 1541. Others may be descendants of Gypsies that came from the other territories to the Ottoman dominions that embraced Islam. Muslim Gypsies in Dobrudja have no written culture, but they have a rich oral tradition, which includes fairytales, legends, riddles, charms, and songs. Unfortunately this tradition has been recorded sporadically thus far and it has not been analysed at all. The study of these cultural expressions would certainly lead to a greater understanding of their history.

Ancient beliefs and Islam

The Muslim Gypsies in Romania are Sunnis of the Hanafi rite. Identifying with the Ottoman civilisation, some of them proceeded to become Muslims, so we believe in the God of the Turks. The other Muslim inhabitants of Dobrudja often stress that the Gypsies do not have much knowledge of religion. They name them allah (God; allowable and haram prohibited) have been superposed on two categories of the ancestral culture of Gypsies, namely ught (gusto) and melos (impure). This taboo system is regulated by rituals, such as the use of charms, and not by resorting to Islamic teachings.

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

Linguistic aspects

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

Muslim Gypsies in Dobrudja present a typical case of languages in contact. A number of languages – Horahane (a Romanii dialect), Turkish, and Romanian, as well as varieties of these are widely used in everyday interactions. The choice of using a particular language is governed by social factors. For instance, the bulibasha’s daughter is spoken inside the community, especially by women and children. The type of Turkish used is linked to a whole spectrum of varieties ranging from the Ottoman Turkish, used for the invocation of God, to the everyday Turkish variety spoken in the area. A kind of Turkish is also used. Classical Arabic is used for the Islamic prayer ritual, the namaz, and some religious expressions derived from Arabic – but with a very specific character – are also part of their spoken language. Romanian, the official language, is normally spoken by the majority of the inhabitants.

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

Changing lifestyles

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

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

Notes

1. See also Grigore, George (1999), ‘Muslims in Romania’, ISIMNewsletter, 3.
2. The towns of Babadag, Harsova, Constantza, and Maidan are the traditional craft centres of the Hirdelezi festival, the type of Turkish used is linked to a whole spectrum of varieties ranging from the Ottoman Turkish, used for the invocation of God, to the everyday Turkish variety spoken in the area. A kind of Turkish is also used. Classical Arabic is used for the Islamic prayer ritual, the namaz, and some religious expressions derived from Arabic – but with a very specific character – are also part of their spoken language. Romanian, the official language, is normally spoken by the majority of the inhabitants. The Muslim Gypsies are considered to be one of the future possibilities.