

Representing the Margins: The Image of “Gypsy” in Early Modern Ottoman Discourse¹

By Faika CELIK

On the Etymology of *Çingene* (Gypsy): Ottoman / Turkish Perspectives

Let's begin with the term *Çingene*, the most common word that is used to designate a Gypsy or a *Roma* in Turkish. The origin of the term is still debatable. The common belief is that it originates from the Byzantine Greek *Atsinganoi*. However, a researcher of the Turkish Gypsies, Rafet Özkan contends that the word *Çingene* is a combination of two separate words: *Çengi-gan* or *Çengi-gane*. *Çengi* has two meanings: a dancing girl and a harp (*Çenk*) player. In Persian “gan” is a suffix that designates the plural of rational beings. Thus, *Çengi-Gan* would refer to either dancing girls or harp players. Since these professions had been attributed to the Gypsies says Ozkan, it is very probable that *Çingene* comes from that origin. However, there exist further etymological constructions on the word Gypsy in Ottoman- Turkish discourse. Let us look at the earliest one available to us at the present state of our knowledge on Ottoman Gypsies. This etymological construction is found in a dream narrative recorded in the seventeenth century book of architecture written by Ca'fer Efendi for his master Sedefkâr Mehmed Agha, the chief imperial architect of the period.

As related by Ca'fer Efendi, when his master, Sedefkar Mehmed Agha (d. 1617 ?) first arrived at the imperial gardens as a young janissary recruit to be trained for the imperial service, he was mesmerized by a musician performing in the garden. He was so captivated by the art of music that he wanted to excel at it. Lo and behold, he asked the musician to help him master it. Under the musician's guidance, he progressed rapidly and applied himself to his studies with

¹ Work in progress. Please do not cite or circulate without permission of the author.

such passion that he deprived himself of sleep for many nights in order to rehearse. Finally, one night, he was overcome by sleep and dreamed that

A group of musicians rise up and appear in the form of a band of gypsies. In their hands, some of them held tambourines, some harps and zithers, some violins and some pandpre, some organs, some panpipes, some lutes, some castanets, some dulcimers. In short, when the men and musicians, preparing all the instruments which they had among them, began to play in union, all the saz [instruments] which they had in their hands, the sound of the party threw the universe in tumult and resulted in trembling of the earth and the heavens. And saying to the above mentioned Aga, “if you have a liking for our art, if you want to learn it, God bless you,!” all treated him with respect and showed deference to him in a variety of ways.²

Awakening from the dream, he went to his teacher to ask for an explanation of the dream’s meaning. The musician said

In truth this art is a gypsy art. But they are an ignorant tribe. What is a note? What is time? What is harmony? What is dissonance? What is melody? What is interval? What is tone? What is song? They know not.³

Then the master explained to him these terms in detail and taught him the twelve basic notes and asked him to practice what he had taught him. However, the Aga did not practice and found an excuse to go back to his residence. When he arrived and went inside, he plunged again into the sea of thought. In short, the master’s ’ advice and words, far from putting his heart to rest, caused him distress, and addressing himself, he said,

O unfortunate wretch! As soon as you saw that art you immediately turned and ran toward it like water. Had that art been acceptable and desirable and esteemed and beloved in the sight of the Lord God the all-bounteous, that abject tribe and

² Cafer Efendi, *Risāle-i mi’māriyye: an early-seventeenth-century Ottoman treatise on architecture: facsimile with translation and notes*, edited by Howard Crane (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987), 26. Please note that this quotation is a modified version provided by Crane. I deleted Ottoman –Turkish terms given to these various musical instruments which Crane indicated in brackets. I would like to thank my colleague Gül Kale for bringing this source to my attention.

³ Ibid. As in the above quote, here too I did not include original Ottoman – Turkish terms given to this concepts in musical discourse. These are however provided in Crane’s text within brackets.

loathsome [band of gypsies] which I saw in my dream would not have shown interest in the aforementioned art. They would have turned away from it as Satan – curses upon him – turned away from Adam’s form. The best, most necessary, excellent and appropriate [thing to do] is this: not to act on the musician’s words but to go to one of the righteous ulema and advice-giving shaikhs and have him interpret the dream. Whatever he says, it will be necessary to act in accord with his noble command. Let the musician’s great happiness, eminence and good fortune be entirely his own! I do not need them.⁴

The Agha turned for an advice to the great Halveti sheikh of the period of Sultan Murad III (r. 1574-1595), Vişne Mehmed Efendi who told him:

My son, it is necessary for you to renounce that art. If that art were good, it would be practiced by the righteous and virtuous people. It would not have fallen like this into the hands of the tribe of Satan, who are evil men. Since your desire is [to learn that] art, the appropriate thing to do this: tarry a few days. If your nature inclines toward another art, consult with us again. If one is encountered which is useful in this world and the other world, let us give you blessing and permission [to follow it]. Then, with our blessing and permission, may you master that art! To see gypsies in a dream is just like seeing the tribe of spirits and demons. And [the word] gypsy [*cinkan*] means jinn [*cinler*] because the suffix *kan* is a plural [ending]. Originally [the world jinn] was *cinne*, like *zinne*. When the plural form was used in the Persian language, it became *cinnegan*, like *zindegan*. Later, lightening and softening the *nun*, they said *cingan*. From the point of view of words, *cin* is *cinne* in exactly the same way. And in the Arabic language, *jinn* is a common noun. It refers to both of these groups [gypsies and jinns]. When both types are being referred to, the plural is used. And one of these two types can be seen, the other is invisible. In short, it necessary that you turn back from this art and ask God’s forgiveness and repent to the fullest degree.⁵

As a result of this advice, Cafer tells us that Mehmed Agha turned away from music with sorrow and regret. As recent research on dreams demonstrates, this dream of Mehmed Agha is but one among many can be found in the biographical dictionaries written especially after the second half the sixteenth century to explain significant junctures in the lives of their subjects.⁶

⁴ Ibid, 27.

⁵ Ibid.,28.

⁶ Further on dreams in the early modern context, see Asli Niyazioğlu, "How to Read an Ottoman Poet's Dream? Friends, Patrons and the Execution of Fiğānī (d. 938/1532)," *Middle Eastern Literatures* ahead-of-print (2013): 1-

My aim here is not get into complexities as well as multiplicities of the dream stories found in different genres of sources in the Ottoman world. Nor can I provide detailed analysis of the questions that may arise in readers' mind about such as whether this dream was in fact dreamt; why Mehmed Agha's biographer narrated this dream while describing the "career path" of Mehmed Agha or why did Mehmed Agha want to take the opinion of one of the most influential Halveti Sheikh of the sixteenth century Istanbul to make his career choice?⁷ My engagement with this dream story is limited to reading the image of *Çingane* (Gypsy)⁸ constructed in the text by three males, all belonging to different strata of the learned hierarchy and question whether the image that they drew corresponds to or diverges from the image found in other sources from the early modern period.

Moving back to the dream of Mehmet Agha, firstly, music is deemed to be the art of Gypsies. This is not only interpreted as such by Gypsies themselves in the dream and the master musician but also subconsciously by Mehmed Agha who while learning the rules of music dreamed of the Gypsy band but nothing else. In the dream itself, we have nomadic Gypsies being

12; idem, "Dreams, Ottoman Biography Writing, and the Halveti-Sünbülî Sheikhs of Sixteenth Century Istanbul" in *Many Ways of Speaking About the Self, Middle Eastern Ego-Documents in Arabic, Persian and Turkish (14th-20th Century)*, edited by Ralph Elger and Yavuz Erköse (Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden: 2010): 171-185; idem, "Dreams of the Very Special Dead: Nevizade Atai's (d.1635) Reasons for Composing His Mesnevis" *Archivum Ottomanicum* 25 (2008): 221-33.

⁷ These questions and many other are elaborated in Niyazioğlu's various articles. See above ff.

⁸ . In the Ottoman texts, the terms used for a "Gypsy" are *Kıbtî* (in the case of female *Kıbtîyye*), *Çingene*, *Çingane*, *Cingene*. Their communal identity was embodied by the terms such as *taife-i çingane*, *çingane zümresi*; *taife-i kıbtîyan* or *kıbtîyan zümresi*. It should be noted that since the term "Gypsy" (a rendered form of "Egyptian") and its derivatives have derogatory connotations, many Gypsies prefer to be identified as *Roma*, which means "men" in the Romani language. The singular of the word is *Rom* and the adjective is *Romani*. However, there are some who would rather be called "Gypsies" in the official language of their country of residence. See Zoltan Barany, *The East European Gypsies: Regime Change, Marginality, Ethnopolitics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1; and David M. Crowe "Roma: The Gypsies" *Encyclopedia of European Social History: From 1350-2000*, Vol. V, 449. In Modern Turkey, most Gypsies identify themselves as *Roman* because *Çingene* the most common word used to designate them has pejorative implications. See for instance Nazım Alpman, *Başka Dünyanın İnsanları Çingeneler* (İstanbul: Ozan Yayıncılık, 1997), 53-56. In this study, in accordance with my sources, I generally use "Gypsies" rather than "Roma."

able to play various musical instruments and their mastery in music is so profound that the sound of music shakes the earth and the heaven. They were also represented as very welcoming to a stranger showing him respect in various ways and wishing him God's help in learning *their* art. Up until the interpretations of the dream inserted into the text, we do not see any defamation or contempt projected against the Gypsies, on the contrary what we see an appreciation and a romanticization of Gypsies' performance. Nevertheless, the ways in which "Gypsy" image within the dream was interpreted discloses abiding stereotypes attributed to the Gypsies: Representing Gypsies as talented musicians yet ignorant of formal musical rules or objectifying them as morally deficient and religiously shallow evil-doers.

Yet another significant issue that has to be addressed pertaining to Vişne Mehmed Efendi's explanation of the etymology of the word *cingen*. In Vişne Mehmed Efendi's reading, Gypsies are associated with or rather equated with the tribe of spirits and demons. This equation was substantiated by constructing an etymology in which word-play and sound of words gives a deeper meaning to the simple understanding of the words. The basis of this equation is not only similarity between the sound of jinn and cin but also —and perhaps more so — similarity between the traits attributed to spirits/ demons and Gypsies. Modern etymology would consider "unscientific" what I call a morally and theologically appropriated construction of Vişne Mehmed Efendi. Nevertheless, this etymological construction though unsound according to parameters of modern etymology is still significant and cannot be overlooked. It demonstrates not only a certain mode of thought but also represents one of the many ways to use etymology⁹.

⁹ As demonstrated by Derek Attridge, etymology can be used in many ways "... to confirm a dominant ideology, to deny the possibility of purposeful change, to reinforce the myth of objective and transcendental truth, but it can also be used to unsettle ideology, to uncover opportunities for change, to undermine absolutes and authority and do so without setting up an alternative truth claim." Derek Attridge, "Language as history/history as language: Saussure and the romance of etymology," in *Post-structuralism and the question of history*, edited by Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington, and Robert Young (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 183-211.

By constructing this etymology, I would suggest, Vişne Mehmed Efendi, was perhaps attempting to confirm a “truth” of his time that Gypsies and jinns all belonged to the same family.

Almost about five decades after Vişne Mehmed Efendi’s interpretation of “Gypsy,” we see the well-known seventeenth century Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi tackle the origins and perceptions of Gypsies by Ottoman society while he was recording his observations on the town Gümülcine (Komotini in modern Greece). According to Evliya Çelebi,

The Gypsies in this region and throughout the Ottoman domains originated in Egypt, when Moses battled with Pharoah on the shore of the Red Sea near the Sinai desert and 600,000 of Pharoah’s soldiers — along with his magicians and diviners and the tools of their trade — drowned in the whirlpool at the place known as the Straight of Qolundur. Moses put a curse on the people of Pharoah who were not present at that battle. As a result of the curse they could not remain in Egypt but were scattered abroad, condemned to wander from clime to clime and from town to town, hungry and homeless, dwelling in the mountains and the valleys, and raiding and thieving.

As the above excerpt demonstrates that while Vişne Mehmed Efendi’s “origin” story is morally and theologically grounded, Evliya Çelebi adds yet another spatial dimension to it. But where did Evliya Çelebi get the idea that Gypsies originated in Egypt? It should be underlined that not only in Evliya Çelebi’s account but also in other state generated documents, along with the term *çingene* and its derivatives, *kıbtı* constituted one of the most pervasive designation for “Gypsy.” In Arabic “kıbtı” denotes native Egyptians. Yet “Gypsy” in Arabic (at least in Egyptian dialect) is identified with the terms such as *Ghagar*, *Nawar* and *Halebi*.¹⁰ So why did the Ottomans including Evliya Çelebi adopt the term “kıbtı” instead of *Ghagar*, *Nawar* and *Halebi*? According to Eyal Ginio, adoption of this terminology is one of a Byzantine inheritance. “The

¹⁰ Nabil Sobhi Hanna, *Ghagar of Sett Guiranha: A study of a Gypsy community in Egypt*, Cairo: American University of Cairo, 1982.

Gypsies were named by the Ottoman administration as *kıptî*, ‘ Egyptian,’ a reflection of the common myth that existed in Europe that the Gypsies had originated in Egypt.¹¹

Evliya Çelebi’s remarks on Gypsies are not limited to their alleged origin and the curse imposed upon them by Moses that they should live outside of Egypt, homeless and poor. First off all, in the discourse of Evliya Çelebi, Gypsies are not homogenous category: They are categorized as Anatolian and Rumelian Gypsies each with distinctive dialects, professions and religious practices. According to him, Gypsies often speak the “languages of the countries where they are settled.”¹² Nevertheless, both Gypsies of Anatolia and Gypsies of Rumelia have their own peculiar dialect containing “thousands of ... naughty expressions.”¹³ Nominal attachment to any religion, one of the everlasting stereotypes attributed to Gypsies in different societies, can also be read in Evliya Çelebi’s account. For instance, at one point, Evliya Çelebi represents Gypsies of Anatolia as “quasi Muslims” and argues that “... they pretend to be Muslims but are not even infidels!” “The Rumelian Gypsies,” on the other hand, according to Evliya Çelebi, “celebrated Easter with the Christians, the Festival of Sacrifice with the Muslims, and Passover with the Jews. They do not accept any one religion, and therefore our imams refused to conduct funeral services for them but gave them a special cemetery outside Egri Qapu.”¹⁴

At about half a century later, Demetrius/Dimitrie Cantemir (d. 1723), appointed as a Prince of the Ottoman vassal state of Moldavia by the Ottomans, also provides information on the origins of Gypsies and their reception by Ottoman state and society at large in his *System of the Muhammadan Religion* published in Russian in 1712. Having lived and been educated in

¹¹ Eyal Ginio, “Neither Muslims nor *Zimmis*: The Gypsies (Roma) in the Ottoman Empire,” *Romani Studies* 5 14 (2004): 131

¹² Victor A. Friedman and Robert Dankoff, “The earliest known text in Balkan (Roumelian) Romani : A passage from Evliya Çelebi’s *Seyāhat-nāme*”, *Journal of Gypsy Lore Society*, 5. 1 (1991): 4.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.,5

Istanbul in the last decades of the seventeenth century and conversant in many languages including written and spoken Turkish of the time Dimitrie Cantemir insights on Ottoman society in general and Gypsies in particular should not be overlooked. According to Cantemir

The Turks and together with them the other Muslims say that people of the Gypsies are related with Pharaohs, [...] having no knowledge of letters, books and any other divine human law, [they are] spread all over the world, by the mercy and the commandment of God. The Gypsies who believe in Muhammad consider themselves to be perfectly pious by this only title, but beside this; they do not look for the commandments and the conditions of the Law; they ignore all of it without doing or preserving the Law says; there are no prayers of any kind, no fasts and they don't want to even hear about Mecca; instead of sympathy they commit larcenies, frauds, charms and witch crafts [...].¹⁵

One of the significant issues that emerges from this account is the similarity it bears with the ways in which the origin and perceptions of Gypsies had been approached in the earlier narratives mentioned above. While the biographer of Sedefkar Mehmed Agha constructs a morally appropriated origin story for Gypsies, Cantemir like Evliya Çelebi contends that Gypsies are related to Pharaohs hence hinting at Egypt as their “homeland.” Nevertheless, within all these narratives Gypsies are represented as an ignorant community indulging in various immoral activities and portrayed as only nominally Muslim, straying from normative code of conduct.

As I have explained elsewhere in detail, writing on Ottoman Gypsies especially in early modern period is a daunting task for a number of reasons.¹⁶ The most important being the sources we have. These were written by non-Gypsies, i.e., by various state authorities for varied reasons and are very much scattered in different archival classifications. Furthermore, the concerned narrative and literary sources at hand were produced by mostly male elites and reflect

¹⁵ Ana Oprüşan, “An overview of the Romanlar in Turkey,” in *Gypsies and the Problem of Identities: Contextual, Constructed and Contested*, edited by Adrian Marsh, Elin Strand (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2006), 167.

¹⁶ Further on this see my dissertation, “ “Community in motion”: Gypsies in Ottoman imperial state policy, public morality and at the Sharia court of Üsküdar (1530s-1585s),” (PhD Dissertation, McGill University, 2014), 1-7.

their prejudices. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that the process of accessing the voices of Gypsies themselves, especially in the early modern period, is often indirect and at times frustratingly incomplete. Therefore, this paper calls for further research on representations of Gypsies in Ottoman literary culture such as in Ottoman “classical” poetry or narrative sources such as in dream manuals. Furthermore, exploring visual sources might provide an opportunity to heterogenize the discourse on the representation of the Gypsies in Ottoman society.