

The Dom of the Middle East

The Middle East is home to many ancient and indigenous peoples whose powerlessness makes their history little known—indeed virtually hidden. Such a lack of power often signifies the absence of speech, of any public and recorded voice to articulate the existence, condition, and vision of a people.¹

by Allen Williams

Few people realize that the “Gypsies” are a distinctive ethnic group whose various languages and dialects share a common origin. Instead of an ethnic reality, the term is often taken to refer to a lifestyle. A general introduction to such a group of people may correct this misunderstanding, but it also runs the risk of creating the impression that they are a homogeneous people. In fact, the Gypsies are diverse. Individuals interested in learning more about specific groups should consult the Dom Research Center reports related to individual countries. (<www.domresearchcenter.com>)

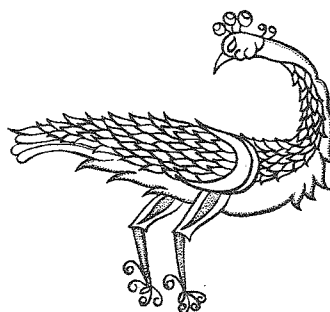
Name, Origin, and Migration

“Gypsy” is the general English term used to describe this large ethnolinguistic group; however, in their homeland (India) they were originally called Dom, meaning “man.” Later, Dom developed into Rom. Today in Europe Gypsies prefer to be identified as Romany (plura Romanies), but in the Middle East & North Africa many still refer to themselves as Dom or Domi. Here, the term “Domi” will be used for this people group found in the Middle East, while “Gypsies” will be used as a general, more recognizable designation for the larger people group.

Other names that are used to designate Gypsy people in the M.E. include Barake, Nawar, Kaloro, Koli, Kurbat, Ghorbati, Jat/Zott and Zargari. These names are usually more “tribe specific” but some are used in a more general sense by non-Gypsies. Often the terms carry a pejorative meaning. The term “Nawar,” for example, is one of the most widely used designations in the Arab world. The word is commonly used as an insult. It is applied to the Gypsies, not only as an ethnic designation, but also to designate them as worthless. The Persians use the word Koli in much the same way. These labels are a part of the general negative stereotyping of the Gypsy people in the Middle East.

Originally coming from India, the Gypsies are now scattered throughout the world numbering more than forty million people. Though their stories of persecution in Europe are widely publicized, little has made its way into print regarding the lives of the two to three million Dom who live in the Middle East. This is due largely to the closed communities they maintain for themselves.

Today few of the Dom can recount the history of their people. There are many fascinating folk tales of their origins that are still passed from generation to generation. The only written records of their history must be garnered from the annals of kings and ancient historians, which in most cases include only brief references to the Gypsies as opposed to detailed narratives.



Dr. Donald Kenrick suggested that the Gypsies might have first moved from India into Persia

when Ardashir the Shah of Persia conquered part of India (modern day Pakistan) in 227 AD. The need for workers in Persia could have instigated this initial movement.² Approximately 200 years later another factor compelled more Gypsies to leave India for Persia. During the reign of Bahram Gur (420-438 AD), the Shah of Persia, many Gypsies were taken from India to Persia to work as musicians and dancers. Later in history the Arabs are credited with prompting further westward movement of the Gypsies.

According to Dr. Kenrick, “On at least three occasions Zott (Gypsies) were sent by the Arab rulers to Antioch,

which is right on the Mediterranean coast" (669 AD, 710 AD, and 720 AD).³ When Antioch was captured by the Greeks in 855 AD further migrations and relocations occurred. Some Zott were sent to Greece while others migrated to Crete only to return to Lebanon and Israel some years later.⁴ Their migration southward toward Africa probably began during the last quarter of the first millennium. Tracing the migratory history of the Dom into the Middle East cannot rest on a single movement, but rather was the result of multiple migrations. Not all of the migration patterns progressed from east to west. Several small groups of Dom living in the Middle East moved back from Europe resulting in linguistic peculiarities within the larger Gypsy community of their present day home. The so-called "Zagari" of Iran are an example of a people who returned from Europe.

Today communities of the Dom can be seen in the following M.E. countries: Cyprus, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Gaza and the West Bank and Turkey. Turkish speaking Gypsies are also present in Greece, particularly

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in the northeast. Survey work is needed to determine the accuracy of reports that refer to Dom in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. Unfortunately, accurate population counts are difficult to secure in all of these countries. Too often Dom are not counted in the national census. Exact counts are also complicated when Dom people "hide" their ethnic identity by declaring themselves to be nationals (i.e., Lebanese, Iranians, etc.) rather than Dom.

People and Languages

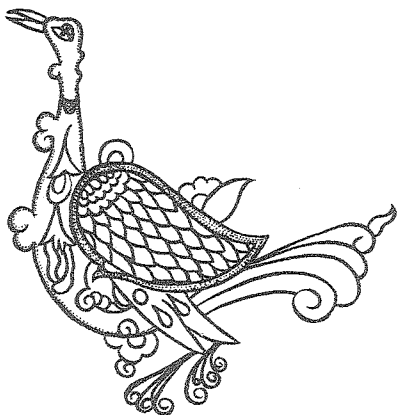
As the Dom migrated into various countries they adopted the language of the host country. It is not uncommon to find Dom who speak two or three different languages, but they generally cannot read or write in these languages. In addition to the language of the host country, they speak some dialect of Domari (the Gypsy language of the M.E.) within their families and in their communities. Domari is perpetuated strictly by means of oral tradition.

The term "Nawari" is often used as a synonym for Domari; however, Nawari is also a dialect of Domari. Like the Arabic language, Domari has many different dialects. The Arabic language is perhaps the primary factor contributing to the proliferation of dialects in Domari. Within each country of the Middle East and North Africa, Dom people know the local dialect of Arabic. When their native language lacks a word they borrow that term from the Arabic that is spoken in the area, thus regionalizing their own language. In addition to the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, Domari is spoken in Afghanistan, Russia and Uzbekistan.

Their rudimentary command of the local language and limited use of written documents has contributed to their political powerlessness. The ability to communicate through writing is a primary tool for modern self-expression and explanation. Knowledge of one's native language is essential for maintaining an ethnic distinctiveness. However, the inability to communicate in written form to outsiders leads to misunderstandings, stereotyping and possibly to harmful prejudice. The Dom people express themselves and their culture through dance and other outwardly visible signs and means. Without the ability to communicate accurately even these positive cultural expressions can be misunderstood and take on negative implications in conservative Middle Eastern countries.

Lifestyle and Religion

The lifestyle of the Dom varies widely. There are those who maintain a peripatetic lifestyle (nomadic). They offer their services as entertainers, musicians or metal workers to other nomadic groups. However, even among those groups for whom they perform various services, the Dom are viewed with suspicion. In conjunction with the nomadic lifestyle are those Dom who are migrant workers. They can be found among those harvesting the crops in the Jordan Valley as well as the tobacco harvest in the northern part of Jordan. Other tent dwelling Nawar move in and out of the Bekaa in Lebanon as do the Bedouin.⁵ Few Dom in the Middle East are pastoralists. In some countries such as Iraq, donkey and camel caravans of Gypsy entertainers still move about the country featuring dancers, fortune-tellers, musicians, jugglers and acrobats.⁶



One young believer spoke about the isolation that Dom feel when they become followers of Jesus. As a result of accepting the Christian faith they may find themselves outcasts from their own families as well as from the predominantly Islamic environment in which they live.

Turkish designs on pages 15 and 17 are bird motifs of the "Rhodian" period (1550-1600).

The concept of owning land is not inherent to the nomadic Dom worldview. Natural resources are for the common good of man rather than individual ownership. This relatively modern concept of ownership impoverishes the lives of people who once shared its natural resources. Today the Dom find it difficult to adjust to such an outlook. Few Dom own the plots of land where they locate their settlements or camps. As a result they are subjected to forced relocations.

Others might be described as semi-nomadic. They live in houses in or near a city part of the year (perhaps during the winter), but live out in their tents the remainder of the year. The houses they live in may be nothing more than tin huts. The Dom in Kurman, Iran are illustrative of semi-nomadic people. They support themselves as craftsmen, peddlers, fortune-tellers and dancers (among other occupations) in the streets of the cities. Very often the children beg in the streets rather than attending school.

Additionally, there are Dom who are settled (sedentary) such as those who live in Israel, Lebanon and northern Cyprus. They live in the huts of shanty towns, apartments or homes in cities and villages. Those who are settled have a better opportunity for education and more permanent work; however, many of the men are unable to find work simply because of their ethnic identity. A high rate of illiteracy keeps anything more than day labor out of their reach. In Lebanon a private organization provides literacy training in Classical Arabic for Nawar children in hopes that this training will enable them to go on to vocational training. This particular Nawar community lives among the refugees in the war torn area of Beirut known as *Shatila*. *Shatila* is little more than bombed out buildings, garbage heaps and shacks made from the rubble. The government has slated the area for reconstruction, which means the refugees and Nawar will be forced to find new places to live.⁷ The difficulties of housing, jobs, education and health care keep their lives unbalanced and create a sense of hopelessness.

Another example of sedentary Gypsies are the Zargari near Qazvin, northwest of Teheran, Iran. They live in the village of Zargar, which is made of mud bricks. "Generations ago, the ancestors of Zargar Gypsies migrated to Europe. Brought back as goldsmiths in the 18th century, most eventually became farmers."⁸ The Nawar of Gaza represent yet another settled group. The women dancers are among the most famous and sought after in the entertainment industry. They have their own union to prevent competition.⁹

Some of those who have settled are in transition as they seek to become a part of the social systems around them. In an effort to "fit in" they may abandon the traditional clothing, tattooing, dancing and fortune telling that are part of the stereotypical Gypsy lifestyle. They often desire to make a contribution to society and to better their own lives. This is particularly true in Israel where some of the young people have been able to complete their education and go on to secure employment.

Regardless of their efforts to assimilate into the mainstream of society, Dom people often do not have official status or citizenship in the country in which they reside. Because of their poverty they are unable to pay hospital fees when their children are born. In this case no birth certificate is issued and the possibility of securing citizenship is forfeited.

Attitudes toward the Dom are generally negative. Because of such negative attitudes toward them, a Dom will not let his or her ethnic identity be made known in an effort to secure a better job or to minimize prejudice. Instead, they will take on the identity where possible of other recognized groups. Dom Research Center field workers have reported this in Israel, Jordan,

Lebanon and Iran. For instance, the Nawar of Israel simply want to be known as Arabs. In Jordan they claim to be Turkmen while in Iran the Ghorbati (Gypsies) attach themselves to tribes of the nomadic Qashqai. However, even the Qashqai speak contemptuously of the Ghorbati calling them thieves.¹⁰ In Lebanon the Nawar want to be known as Bedouin.

The Dom themselves make distinctions between the various groups of Dom people. The Qurbati and the Nawar live in close proximity to one another in Syria, yet their lifestyles, occupations, language and general outlook differ greatly. The Qurbati have developed professional trades such as basic dentistry, metal work, carpentry and construction work, all of which have greatly improved their economic situation. The Nawar continue to focus on "entertainment, begging, and prostitution . . . They have no sense of belonging to anything and they likewise tend not to respect or follow any ideology whether political or religious."¹¹ Because of this some of the Qurbati resent being associated with the Nawar.

In Israel similar distinctions are made. Many of the local population disapprove of begging and are displeased when Nawar from Gaza come to beg in the cities where they live. Their efforts to improve their image in the community and the society at large are hampered as a result. Thus, distinctions are made with regard to economic and social factors as well as family/tribal groupings.

The Dom people tend to adopt the dominant religion of their host country. For the Middle Eastern countries this means Islam. To find Dom on the annual pilgrimage to Mecca is not unusual. While there are some devote

Muslims among the Dom, the majority are only nominal Muslims. They consider religion a personal matter and are hesitant to talk about it with anyone. Superstition and "the good elements" of many religious systems inform the syncretistic nature of their beliefs. Spiritism is dominant in their thinking regarding why things happen in the world. The fear of possession and cursing is strongly held. Nawar fortune-tellers commonly offer to make their clients a potion that will ward him or her against curses.

There are very few known Christians among the Dom. One young man spoke about the isolation that Dom feel when they become followers of Jesus. As a result of accepting the Christian faith they may find themselves outcasts from their own families as well as from the predominantly Islamic environment in which they live.

End Notes

1. Mordechai Nisan, "The Minority Plight" in *Middle East Quarterly* (September, 1996): 25.
2. Dr. Donald Kenrick, *Gypsies: from India to the Mediterranean*. Interface Collection. Gypsy Research Center, 1993, p. 13.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
5. For a brief article regarding the Bedouin and Gypsies of Lebanon and the attitudes toward them see "Real Arabs still feel second-class" in *The Beirut Daily Star*, Tuesday, November 10, 1988.
6. For a description of a brief encounter with a Gypsy caravan in Iraq see Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, *Guests of the Sheik*. Anchor Press, 1989. Particularly chapter 5 "Gypsies."
7. For an article related to the rebuilding of Beirut and Shatila (including Photographs) see Peter Theroux, "Beirut Rising" in *National Geographic*, Vol. 192, No. 3, September 1997.
8. Bart McDowell, "Gypsies: Wanderers of the World." *National Geographic*, 1970. P. 173.
9. Unpublished observations by a local Dom, 1998.
10. From unpublished field notes of the Dom Research Center, 1998. This phenomena in Iran was also observed and reported in McDowell, *Gypsies*, 1970. See also, Fredrik Barth, *Nomads of South Persia*, Illinois, Waveland Press, Inc., 1986 (reissue). Particularly Chapter VI, "Attached Gypsy Tribe."
11. Interview with a local observer, 1999.

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Dr. Allen Williams is the founder and director of the Dom Research Center which provides ethnographic and linguistic research on the Dom people of the Middle East & North Africa. Additionally, the Center promotes humanitarian projects among various Dom communities in the region. The Center's Internet site can be found at <http://www.domresearchcenter.com>. Dr. Williams has been working in the region since 1997.