

**DECONSTRUCTION OF AN IDENTIFICATION
ERROR OR HOW A ROMA SUBGROUP
WAS CONSTRUCTED¹**

Ilonai Tomova²

Abstract

This article is an attempt to deconstruct the split of a Muslim Roma group and to explain why the “daughter’s” groups obtain absolutely different reputation, social status and cultural characteristics. The main focus of the explanation is social exclusion both on the side of macro-society and on the side of the other Roma groups in the region. The analysis is based on empirical data from Roma subgroups in the town of Sliven, Bulgaria. Although it looks like the paper is focused on a particular and isolated case, some of the mechanisms of “gemination” of the ethnic group studied here probably have a more universal meaning.

Key words: Roma, social construction of identities.

Several different Roma subgroups have been living in Sliven and in the surrounding villages for centuries. They differ from each other on their traditional religion, customs, crafts, and self-identification. The sub-groups are endogamous.

- **Bulgarian Gypsies** (*Christian Roma, Dassikane Roma*) have settled centuries ago. They are the best-accepted and integrated Roma subgroup in the town. *Dassikane Roma* live apart from other Roma groups in a separate neighbourhood called Komluka or Nikola Kochev district. They have been an important part of the local working class since the mid-19th century. In the early 1990’s more than half of them preferred to identify themselves as ethnic Bulgarians, but the social exclusion they suffered in the Post Communist period “turned back” the majority of them in the Roma community. In the last decades around 200 persons from this group completed university education and now they occupy different prestigious positions: the Principle of the district pulmonary hospital; two doctors – general practitioners; journalists; engineers; economists; lawyers; managers.

¹ This article was translated by Mr. Lubomir Stoytchev and Ms. Iva Tomova; translation was edited by Ms. Elana Resnick.

² **Prof Ilonai Tomova** is the Chair of the Scientific Council of the Institute for Population and Human Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. E-mail: ilonai2000@yahoo.com

- **Turkish Gypsies** (*Muslim Roma, Xoraxane Roma*) of different sub-groups have also lived in the town and in the surrounding villages for centuries (the last of the migrants settled there in the 20th century). Local urban and rural population were widely using their crafts and services both before Bulgaria's liberation from Ottoman domination (1878) and after that. Most of them have lived in Sliven's ghetto Nadezhda since 20th century.
- **Naked Gypsies** (labelled "*Naked*" because of their extreme poverty) were not allowed to live in the town up until the end of 19th – the beginning of the 20th century. They have led nomadic way of life and have earned their living mainly by making baskets and by begging. During the winter they used to supply local people with wood. Nowadays, they constitute around one half of the total population of Nadezhda ghetto.

The local Bulgarian population has disparate attitudes towards the various Roma subgroups in the town. This could explain the different level of integration (even assimilation) or, on the contrary, the social exclusion of some of them. The various Roma subgroups in the town have a disparate way of life, social status and models of behaviour.

Nadezhda neighbourhood (former name 'Dame Gruev') was established in the end of 19th century after the majority of the *Xoraxane Roma* moved from the Komluka neighbourhood to the southern outskirts of town, in a close proximity to the Turkish quarter. The *Naked Roma*, who had no permanent dwellings in Sliven until then, joined them few years later. Now this is one of the poorest urban ghettos in Bulgaria.

The population of the ghetto consists of people from various subgroups. The so-called "*Turkish Gypsies*" are additionally divided into two big subgroups. The representatives of the first subgroup speak Turkish as their mother tongue and are known as Muslims. Only after 1989 a part of them converted to some Evangelist Churches. They usually identify themselves as *Millet* or *Turks*, especially after the emigration of the last "true Turks" from the town in the late 1950's. Their children studied at the 'Turkish school' in Sliven up until the mid-1970, a sign that the local institutions at least partially have accepted this group's self-identification. Nevertheless, the local population continues to label these people as Gypsies which has very strong implications on their social status.

Those who identify themselves as *Millet* or *Turks* have the highest social and material status both in the ghetto and within the local community. Part of them have preserved their traditional craft and continued to work as blacksmiths in a prestigious cooperative, famous for the good quality of the production. The rest became involved in the town industry as unqualified or semi-skilled workers in the late 1950's and in the 1960's. At present many of the *Millet* households run their own business – usually retail trade and sometimes taxi services, iron processing and construction work. This group is generally affected by the unemployment; however, most of the unemployed lost their jobs in the last few years and have much better chances to find odd or permanent jobs in the grey economy. The male representatives of this group have better education and professional qualification compared to men from other groups in the ghetto.

The representatives of the other large Muslim subgroup identify themselves as Roma and are called '*Musicians*' after their traditional craft. The majority of them