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01 Kasım 2019

Gypsies in Ottoman Empire according to the 16th–17th Centuries Bursa and Balıkesir Shari'a Court Records

Ömer Düzbakar*

Abstract: Various ethnical groups such as Armenians, Greeks, Jews and Assyrians who lived within the borders of the Ottoman Empire have been subjects to several researches. Unfortunately, the available researches done about the ethnical group called Gypsies are so few that they cannot even be compared to the researches available for other ethnical groups. The expression “Half Nation”, which is frequently used to identify the Gypsies who had been casted away from the society because of their life styles, is maybe the most important expression used to describe gypsies’ position in the society.

This study, which is based on the 16th–17th centuries Bursa and Balıkesir Shari'a Court Records, aims to put forward the position of the Gypsies in the Ottoman society and the empire's attitude towards the gypsies.

I owe my thanks to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Abdülmecit MUTAF who helped me have access to Balıkesir Shari'a Court Records and to İsmail TORACI who shaped my research with his precious opinions.

Keywords: Gypsy, Ottoman, the 16th–17th centuries, Bursa, Balıkesir

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, gypsies are among the groups who have been exposed to inequality that originates from both traditional status perception and society's denominational structure. They can be defined as a labor pool consisting of “unqualified” workers who work in irregular jobs with low fees or hand labor, or as an underclass that has been kept away from jobs by which they can earn money regularly or an underclass not worth even exploiting. On the other hand, gypsies are a socio-cultural group that is despised by the dominant culture. In other words, Gypsies make up a group that is under dominance in terms of cul-

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Disliking Others

LOATHING, HOSTILITY,
AND DISTRUST
IN PREMODERN
OTTOMAN LANDS

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The Many Faces of the “Gypsy” in Early Modern Ottoman Discourse

Faika Çelik

As related by his biographer, when the chief imperial architect Sedefkâr Mehmed Agha (d. 1617) first arrived at the imperial gardens, as a young janissary recruit to be trained for 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, and he asked the musician to help him master it. Under the musician’s guidance, he progressed rapidly, applying himself to his studies with 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:

A group of musicians rise up and appear in the form of a band of gypsies. In their hands, some of them hold 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 Agha, “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.¹

1 Ca’fer Efendi, *Risāle-i mi‘māriyye*, 26. Please note that this quotation is a modified