EMINE DİNGEÇ

Education of the Roma in the late Ottoman period¹

Abstract: At the end of the 19th century, activities were initiated in the Ottoman State to increase the knowledge of the Muslims and Ehl-i Perde (those with a Muslim name but who do not fulfill the requirements of Islam) Kiptis (Roma) in various fields, particularly in religion. Imams were appointed to their settlement areas. Schools were opened. In the meantime, they were also recruited into the army where they received education/training in many aspects. The aim of this article is to examine the adaptation of the Roma into the Muslim society during the discussed period.

Keywords: Kipti (Roma), Ottoman State, missionary, education, school, imam

Introduction

In the Ottoman Empire there was a period when the living conditions of the Roma (Kiptis) were improved. There are both domestic and external factors that influenced these developments. The domestic factor is that the larger, more dominant groups and Roma (Kiptis) minority groups were familiar with one another. This familiarity served as a guide in developing their habits of living together. This enabled them to determine problems and focus on solutions to these issues. The report dated 1891 submitted by Sadi Bey, a teacher at the Siroz Idadi – Mülkiye School, was significantly effective regarding this. The report submitted by Sadi Bay attracted great interest among Roma researchers. The whole text was published by Ceyda Yüksel (2009: 349–354). This report was evaluated as the first initiative concerning Roma by Ahmet Uçar (2009). Faika Çelik and Ömer Ulusoy examined this report closely (both

¹ This article was presented at the Gypsy Lore Society Annual Meeting held in Iceland between 15–17 August 2019. Here, the article was reviewed and expanded further. I would like to offer my sincere gratitude to Elena Marushiakova who brought my attention to certain points of the topic.

in 2013). In his article, Çelik classified this report as an ideational source of the reforms on the Roma and an attempt to control the population that increased significantly with the migrations from Romania to the Ottoman State particularly with the abolishment of slavery (2013). Ulusoy's interpretation is somewhat similar to this (2013). The results of all these studies are consistent within their own framework.

Sadi Bey's report was, in all likelihood, influential in starting education activities for the Roma in the Ottoman Empire. However, there are two aspects that were overlooked. The first is what was considered the outcome of this report, that is, the opening of schools and the appointment of imams being conveyed as a development aimed at all the Roma, whereas the Ottoman State selected a target group for both the opening of schools and appointing imams. In other words, a program including all the Roma was not employed. The main aim of this program was to teach religion to the Kiptis, who claimed to be Muslims but were unfamiliar with the Islamic doctrines and were consequently classified as "crypto." This program was in fact aimed at the "Ehl-i Perde Kiptis" who I mentioned in my previous studies (Dingeç, 2015). Nevertheless, because it was difficult to distinguish among the Muslim Kipti and Ehl-i Perde Kipti, this included all the Muslim Kiptis. Secondly, the studies mentioned above are only based on the relevant report that classifies these developments as reforms aimed at the Roma. Yet, there is also an external factor that influenced these developments. This was American missionaries showing an interest not only in minorities such as Armenians and Greeks, but also in the Roma. These missionaries were targeting the Kipti who were neither familiar with the basic principles of Islam nor complied with Islamic teachings. Apart from producing educated, religious individuals of high morals with the opening of these schools, appointment of imams and even recruitment into the army, there was also the intention of preventing these groups that were "in between" from becoming Christians due to the missionary activities. Taking all of this into consideration, I suggest that this was intended at establishing a common culture of education activities targeting both Muslims and Ehl-i Perde Gypsies. The point where I differ from the other two researchers mentioned previously is the claim that the state acted pragmatically and approached the topic with two main targets. This program included all the Kiptis.

The 19th century was a period where monarchy rule began to be abolished, and there were experiments with constitutional and republican rule. In this aspect, this is much different than the early modern period. The multinational empires gradually became national states. The new rights given to

non-Muslims of different ethnicity during the process of the reform movements that began with the Tanzimat were directed at protecting the Ottoman State policies of a multi-national position. However, towards the end of the 19th century the description of “millet” (nation) defined with the French Revolution began to conflict with the Ottoman definition of “millet.” In the Ottoman State, millet represented individuals of the same religious group, whereas in the 19th century non-Muslim subjects adopted the identity perception dependent on ethnicity. They took steps to become a national state. Although the Roma did not take such initiatives, this produced the formulas of uniting state subjects. One of these was gathering citizens of the state under the same umbrella, namely Islam. Developments aimed at the Roma should also be assessed within this context. Indeed, during this period Roma people also gained headway in acquiring the citizenship (tebaa) status.

In my studies mainly on the Early Modern period, I discovered that, as far as this was reflected in archive sources, the Ottoman State’s stance towards the Roma materialized within the framework of the provisions of law both in terms of their employment in state services and in judicial processes. While those who committed crimes were described as *ehl-i fesad* (corrupt people), those who had an occupation were employed for state services and the harmless were called *garip-Gurbet* (Dingeç, 2016, p. 68). Until the 19th century, the relationship of the Roma with the state only concerned issues such as employment, tax or court cases, whereas many topics not previously expressed concerning Roma were now included in commission records, reports and enactments. Issues concerning the Roma were determined. It was established that they lived in poverty; the poverty they suffered was due to ignorance and they could only overcome this with education. On the other hand, the Roma that claimed to be Muslim for centuries, who were registered under Muslim names, were invited to Christianity sometimes by force and sometimes by encouragement, while the Roma of a different Christian doctrine were invited to Protestantism. Education was the only means of the Kiptis resisting this pressure and encouragement. In view of this, it was decided that Roma should be educated. The main sources regarding this topic are some documents from the Presidential Ottoman Archives and missionary reports.

Missionary activities

In the 19th century there were many missionaries active in the Ottoman territories. Generally, the aim of these missionaries was spreading Protestant-

ism. The Roma were also included in their field of interest. Christian and Ehl-i Perde Kiptis were a target for the missionary's religious propaganda. Ehl-i Perde Kiptis, who were Muslim but neglected the obligations of Islam, were at particular risk in terms of changing their religion. As known, the idea of being a Muslim according to some was simply having a Muslim name (For an anecdote see Marushiakova and Popov, 2006, p. 85).

These groups who were already accustomed to the Islamic faith but had no knowledge of Islam attracted the attention of missionaries. Missionaries included the Roma in their activities because they would be able to encourage them to change their religion easily due to their lack of knowledge. Initially, they took notes of the Roma or groups resembling them in terms of their lack of knowledge (*The Missionary Herald*, V. XXXII, 1863) Missionaries observed their numbers, occupations and religious beliefs. These observations served as a preliminary study for launching activities for teaching Christianity in the places and time they considered suitable. They then put their projects into practice. The activities of Mr. Farnsworth, assigned to the Central Anatolian Region are rather interesting. In a letter dated 4th March 1868, Farnsworth explains teaching Christianity to a group of the Roma called "Ele-kçi" with a striking example. Here he relates that a Roma who was too old to learn began to read the Bible. According to Mr. Farnsworth's evaluation, there were seventy Protestants in Sungurlu, close to Yozgat. There were many people among these individuals who were convinced into joining a different branch of Protestantism. In all likelihood, this group was the Roma the Ottomans called Ehl-i Perde. According to the report, the "Elekçis" who were a group of the Roma were enthusiastic to learn the Bible. In Sungurlu the Elekçis were between three-four hundred in number. According to Farnsworth's narrative, the story of Uncle John, a member of this group, is as follows:

"Several years ago, one of them called Uncle John came to learn to read the Bible. He was an elderly man. He attended school with the children and began to read the book using syllables. The people laughed at him and mocked him saying "if a bear can learn to read so can Uncle John." But he was determined and now he can read very well. The Armenians we as surprised at this as the Gypsies were." (Farnsworth, 1868, p. 193).

If Farnsworth is not narrating his own works with exaggeration, then Uncle John learning to read the Bible was an excellent example to encourage those who were just beginning to learn.

Concerned that the missionaries could entice the Kiptis to Protestantism, the Ottoman State began to take action. Indeed, this was clearly defined in the report mentioned above (BOA. Y MTV, 47/180)². The state taking action to enable the Roma to learn more about Islam and become well educated was surely not a coincidence. The timing of this is particularly significant. The purpose of this was to increase the religious knowledge of the Roma and therefore protect them from the missionary activities. Indeed, one of the reasons the Roma failed to observe the Islamic codes properly was their lack of knowledge concerning the Islamic faith. While Muslims were gathering either at mosques or madrasas and learning about their religion, the Roma who lived on the margins of the society were deprived of this knowledge. In view of this, the state that neglected the Roma for centuries in terms of education planned to provide them with a religious education.

The Ottoman State providing religious education to the Roma

According to the traditional state perception, a state had three main duties: protecting its subjects, procuring justice and increasing the level of welfare by protecting production resources. Apart from these basic duties, needs such as education, healthcare, social and cultural activities were met by foundations and the wealthy. The education provided at these foundations was based on religious education. The 19th century was a period when the Ottoman State abandoned its traditional state perception. In this century, the state expanded its fields of obligations mentioned above. Significant steps were taken particularly in the field of education (Kodaman, 1991, pp. 91–129).

When the living conditions of the Roma are studied from among the Ottoman subjects in the relevant period, it is obvious that they were neglected compared with other groups. The state generated and materialized policies so the Kiptis could learn their religion better and to provide them with better living conditions. The report submitted by Sadi Effendi, a teacher at the Siroz İdadi-i Mülkiye School, served as a guide on how they were to be educated. Sadi Effendi's proposals included the Roma learning how to read and write;

² "...as the English missionaries can easily convert these to Protestantism and due to the probability of benefitting from the British policies in the future, to prevent them luring many of the five hundred thousand Kipti Muslims and many from the rural areas, the Kiptis condition must be improved..."

learning about religion, the state, Islam and humanity. It was decided that on the basis of this petition approved by the Sultan, the Roma should receive religious education and learn to read and write. While the petition in question mapped the course for the Roma to escape this deprivation, it also shed light on the relationships between the state and society that had continued for centuries. The most important thesis put forth by Sadi Effendi was that Roma who earned a living as ironmongers and laborers were never involved in theft. That is, if the Roma had an occupation they could escape poverty and therefore avoid misconduct. Owing to this education, they would perform the duties prescribed in Islam by adopting the moral standards of other members of the society. In which case, Kiptis named Ahmet, Mehmet and Ali would be familiar with the principles of Islam and would be able to proclaim the declaration of faith (kalima shahadat). Kipti women called Amine, Aisha or Fatma would not walk around the market place wearing revealing clothing (BOA. Y. MTV, 47/180). Nevertheless, the protection of the Ehl-i Perde and Muslim Gypsies from the missionary activities depended on these individuals receiving religious education. Although a significant part of the Gypsy population living in the Ottoman Empire was Muslim, some were totally ignorant regarding the Islamic principles and duties.

In parallel with all these aspects, three methods of educating the Ehl-i Perde and Muslim Kiptis were determined. The first was appointing imams to teach the Islamic religion in places where there was a concentration of Kiptis; the second was opening schools for Kiptis, while the third was recruiting these individuals into a branch of military service where they would receive some kind of basic education.

Appointing imams was the most economical, effective means of teaching the Islamic religion quickly regardless of the place. Imams were not only capable of gathering people, but also knowledgeable and skilled in conveying the principles of Islam. Moreover, they constituted a major section of religious officials. In view of this, imams were assigned to places where there was a population of Kiptis to give them and their children religious education and they received a salary for this duty³. Imams, who were responsible for performing the congregational prayers, taught the Muslims and Ehl-i Perde about the Islamic faith.

³ On 17th September 1889, an imam was appointed to provide the Muslim Kiptis living in Kragovach, that had seventy dwellings, with a religious education for a salary of three hundred kuruş. See BOA, İ. HR. 315/20204; Sezgin, 2015, p. 115.

Imams and mukhtars (heads of villages/towns) were sent to new Kipti neighborhoods that were established in later periods. In 1893 for example, a group of more than forty Kipti immigrants came from Rumelia. An imam was appointed to teach this group that settled in Bursa (BOA. TS. MA. d, 9367). Imams and muftis were also sent to territories lost by the Ottoman State so Muslim subjects could perform religious duties and activities. This was based on the clause concerning the freedom of worship of religious groups in the Treaty of Berlin that was signed in 1878 (Furat 2013:85). Therefore, the Ottoman State continued to appoint imams to Serbia that gained independence in 1878. A mufti was also sent to Nis (BOA. Y. A. HUS. 276/54).

Despite the religious freedom mentioned in the Treaty of Berlin, there was news that between the years 1892–1893 some Muslim Kiptis changed their religion. According to a document dated 22nd October 1892, the Peryajovski Kray newspaper published in Rostov reported that some Muslim Kiptis changed their religion. Yet, after some investigation, it was reported that this was unfounded (BOA. Y. A. HUS. 266/16). Moreover, Istanbul continued to receive similar information. There were even claims that the Muslim Kipti were forced into accepting Christianity or threatened that they would have to leave the country. In May 1893, when such reports began to increase, the Grand Vizier requested that the Ministry for Foreign Affairs held an investigation into the matter (BOA. Y. A. HUS 274/43). As a result of the investigation carried out by the ambassador of Belgrade and the mufti of Nis, this report was also refuted. According to the reports issued in June 1893, the Serbs proposed that the Muslim Kiptis in the towns of Pirot, Şehirköy and Alpalanga changed their religion, but the Kiptis rejected this proposal (BOA. Y. A. HUS. 276/54).

All these meant an increase in the Ottoman State's activities for religious education both domestically and abroad. As a result, the Ottoman state opened schools in certain regions to educate the Kipti children, rescue them from a life of deprivation and provide them with a lifestyle of higher standards when they completed their education. These schools were established in Rumelia where there was a concentrated Kipti population. Kosovo, Durrës, Tekirdağ, Bitola and Shkoder were just some of these places.

Basic education was provided in these schools known as "İbtidai Mekteps" (Primary Schools). Among the lessons in these schools, there were "Elifba (Arabic alphabet), Qur'an, tajwid (Qur'anic pronunciation), ilmihal (situation sciences), morals, Ottoman grammar, spelling, recitation, compendium of Ottoman history, summary of Ottoman geography, Islamic calligraphy" (Baltacı, 2004, p. 7).

Buildings were not constructed specifically as schools. Generally, a house was rented and converted into a school. Teachers, janitors and assistants were appointed to work in these schools. The costs of schools were met by the provincial authority, education foundations or community funds (MF. MKT. 135/81; 182/110; 191/9; 756/40; 1017/47). In the Kosovo province for example, a school was established in February 1891 for the Kipti children. This school was a house rented for three mecrediye (a monetary unit of that period). The head-teacher received a monthly salary of two hundred mecrediye, the second teacher one hundred, the janitor fifty and other employees forty mecrediye. Education was planned from February until the fifteenth of June. The Kipti children enjoyed attending this school. In 1891, there were more than one hundred and thirty students attending the school (MF. MKT. 756/40)⁴.

At the end of the 19th century, there was a Muslim Kipti group consisting of three hundred and twenty six males and two hundred and five females close to Terkos in Tekirdağ (MF. MKT. 182/110:1). After realizing that Muslim Kiptis here had began to forget their religion because they had no religious education, a school was opened in the Can Paşa neighbourhood for Kipti children. This school would prevent the Kiptis from being “ignorant and uneducated” and enable them to become “literate” individuals and enter the “adab-ı İslamiyet dairesi” (the circle of Islamic morals). But after a while the Hamidiye İbtidai Mektep was closed due to insufficient funds to pay the employees and for repair costs. The topic of reopening the school was raised again due to the same reasons. The Education Commission generated plans regarding covering the costs of the school. The school was decorated with flags and flowers and reopened with the chants of “long live the padisha.” (MF. MKT. 182/119:1) In 1893, forty one male students between the age of five and fifteen attended the school. At this time a teacher was employed at the school for a monthly salary of two hundred and fifty and a janitor for one hundred kuruş (MF. MKT. 182/110:5).

⁴ For example, Şahin Effendi was assigned to the school opened in Durres in 1906.

Document 1. A document regarding Opening a School for the Kiptis in the Can Paşa Neighborhood in Tekirdağ (1893)

Document 2. Names of Kipti Children Attending the Hamidiye Ibtidai Mektep in Tekirdağ (1893)⁵

BOA. MF. MKT. 182/110:5; Sezgin, 2015, p. 124.

⁵ Top Mehmed oğlu Ahmed, Şaban oğlu İbrahim, Karındaşı Mehmed, Kapıcı Değirmencioğlu Bahaeddin, Kebapçının İzzet oğlu Hüseyin, Hüsmen oğlu Ali, Canbaz Hurşid oğlu Hüseyin, Demirci Mehmed oğlu Mehmed Ali, Demirci İbrahim oğlu Hüseyin, Canbaz Derviş oğlu Rasim, Mumcu Salih oğlu Hasan, Arabacı Mehmed oğlu Kadir, Deli Hasan oğlu Salih, Hamal İbrahim oğlu Mustafa, Hamal Halil oğlu Ali, Hamal Ahmed oğlu Hüseyin, Devci İbrahim oğlu Kadir, Hamal Keleş Hüseyin

Document 3. The petition of Kurtiş bin Bayram to become a State Official

BOA, TREI.ŞKT, 97/9668

oğlu İsmail, Hamal Mehmed oğlu Veli, Hamal Hurşid oğlu Hasan, Kara İbrahim oğlu Mehmed Ali, Kirmanlı Ahmed oğlu Mehmed, Sagir Emin oğlu Süleyman, Hamal Ahmed oğlu İsmail, Azman Mehmed oğlu Hasan, Hamal Mustafa oğlu Veli, Tatar Halil oğlu Osman, Mehmed oğlu Osman, Kûlahçioğlu Salih Mehmed oğlu Mustafa, Kolcubaşı Hasan oğlu Ömer, Canbaz Kadir oğlu Hasan, Diğer Tahir, İlyas oğlu Haşim, Mehmed oğlu Kadir, Halid bin Osman, Uzun İsmail oğlu Hüseyin, Hüseyin oğlu Tahir, Çorlulu Süleyman oğlu Receb, Diğer Mustafa, İsmail oğlu Hüseyin.

Nevertheless, Kiptis who graduated from this school had difficulty in finding a job in the state departments. In a petition dated 27 September 1906, Kurtiş bin Bayram, a literate individual who graduated from the Rüşdiye school, explained that although he was employed in various places he was unable to become a member of the police force or gendarmerie. He stated that the reason he was not employed was because he was Kipti (BOA. TRF. ŞKT, 97/1668) Although there is no information available regarding the other graduates, Kurtiş draws attention to an important issue here.

The third factor mentioned above was the Roma being recruited into the army. Two aspects were taken into consideration regarding this. The first was fulfilling the demand for soldiers that increased in the 19th century. The second was the belief that they would fulfil their religious obligations and therefore enter the circle of Islamic morals⁶. Although there were reservations at the beginning, in 1873 they began recruiting the Muslim Kiptis into the army. It was agreed that Kiptis recruited into the army would be exempt from the “Kipti” tax (BOA, A. MKT. MHM. 472/53; Yılgür, 2018, p. 282; Yüksel, 2009, p. 341).

In the Ottoman State, they were not only taught how to use weapons and war strategies in the military. They were also taught the value judgments of the society and basic education such as reading and writing. In addition, all military requirements were fulfilled by the soldiers. These duties were carried out by sharing the responsibilities among the soldiers. Discipline and strict rules were enforced to increase the psychological and physiological resistance of the soldiers. Training for the adaptation into social life was also provided. In this way, the soldiers became accustomed to difficult living conditions. The purpose of this was to make the soldiers resistant and strong.

Conclusions

In this study, there is a different interpretation than in the documents which emerged from previous archives. In this paper, the reports that researchers classified as a reform and other developments were interpreted as establishing a common culture among Muslims. This paper explains that the

⁶ “asker alınan nüfus-ı Müslimine bir i’âne olmasıyla teneffüslerini mûcib ve diğer hayme-nişin olan tâ’ifenin dâhi bu hevesle iskân ve dâ’ire-i ‘ırz ve edebe idhâllerini mûcib olacağı gibi Rumeli kıt’asında bunlar pek çok hâne ve nüfus olmağla böyle bir kıt’a-i nâzikede öyle binlerce nüfus-ı Müslimeye İslâm nazarıyla bakılmayıb dâ’ire-i cem’iyyet-i İslâmiyeden eb’ad olunmaları tecvîz buyrulacağına binâen...”

programs of reforms and change claimed to be aimed at the Gypsies were in fact targeting the Ehl-i Perde Kiptis who were not properly perceived by researchers. Because it would be difficult to distinguish between the Ehl-i Perde Roma and Muslim Roma, all the Muslim Kiptis were included in this education program.

Recapitulating this, the education programs were not intended for all the Roma. In view of this, it would be wrong to perceive the discussed situation as a reform. However, the fact that this did not include education on the whole should not be evaluated as a shortcoming. The Roma who were not included in this education program were the Christian Roma. Christian Kiptis were not included in this program because this would be religion based. In this sense, it can be suggested that the “Ottoman Peace” classified as the approach of tolerance towards religion continued in the 19th century. All of these were carried out as activities to enable the establishment of a common culture and increase experiences of a common life.

The end of the 19th century was a period where the Ottoman State was confronted with its negligence towards the Roma communities. The lack of education among Roma was classified as an inadequacy of the state. The notion that corruption and misconduct could be reduced with education brought hope for change. The belief that having a profession would save individuals from deprivation was embedded. However, although education was effective in terms of the Kiptis improving themselves, it was not as effective in enabling them to find a profession.

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