

3. Cultural difference and the politics of recognition

The case of the Roma of Cyprus

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You see, he said, it is the Others and they cannot be without you and without them, there is no you. You see, he said, it is the Others and you need to confront them if you want your being to be inexhaustible and to remain just that!

Odysseas Elytis, *Axion Estin*, 1989

"I stopped walking when I came to the last house. House? To call it a house is a stretch of the imagination. It was a small container really, a 3m by 2m box. I wondered how it could be possible for a family to live in that box. Memet and Fatosh, with their two children and a third crying in its mom's arms, came near me and invited me inside. They took off their shoes and entered the 'house'. I did the same thing. I supposed it was a ritual that I had to respect. And it was. Next to me, an enormous TV was turned on even though nobody was watching it. It was tuned in to the BBC, and I was wondering whether Memet or Fatosh spoke English. They seemed so poor, illiterate and helpless, without even a smile, but really willing and kind. They answered all my questions and they asked me if I wanted to have some coffee. I hate coffee, but I accepted. That made me really happy, as I considered it as a way of breaking down the walls which separate the Roma from the Balamos. From that moment on, I had two friends who would be the point of reference for my meetings with the other Roma people. Every time I visited a new family, the very first thing they asked me was, 'Coffee?' It seemed to me that this was their ritual of getting acquainted with somebody. Why not?

"Between summer and winter, I managed to get to know them, soon after to love them and later on to start feeling the pulse of their life. Not only did I learn about their way of living but I was taught about the history of this large group of people, who are kept on the margins of society by our perceptions and narrow knowledge. In Makounta, a small deserted village in the northwest of Cyprus, one finds approximately 30 Roma families who are officially registered as Turkish Cypriots. They total 100-120 people, of which 40 are children. Most of them were settled in Makounta seven years ago. In the beginning, they had no allowances for medical treatment, education or even work. They used to live in poor tents, without any even primary facilities. After they acquired their Turkish Cypriot nationality, they were given houses, those small ones like boxes, clothes,



as well as medical and educational allowances. The problem is that, as they were settled in remote areas, their access to medical services, working areas and schools became more difficult.

“Why talk about these people? Simply because some things have a magic aura around them or a gliding fear: this shadow ... a bunch of people living in a remote village, away from the world causes only fear, the fear of the ‘unknown’. We watched them pass by us with their chariots, we watched them approach our houses opening their dirty hands and when they uttered their first word, their golden teeth glittered. This how it used to be, they existed right next to us; until a dreadful dawn when they were nowhere to be seen. After that, we heard nothing of them until the construction of this camp ... fear at the edge of its explosion. Who are they? How are they? What kind of people have they become? Without any other written sources, I started writing about the Roma, at first to satisfy my own inner curiosity. They were the Others. The Others who were not the same as me but who had in their hands the same identity card, even though their life was so different in every aspect. The Others, whose sudden presence in the southern part of the island caused a thunderstorm of political and social reactions and considerations. For the first time, Greek Cypriot people were forced to deal, consciously and responsibly, with the one thing that all of humanity fights for: the acceptance and respect of difference.”

-----> The multicultural reality

The mass dislocation of people, throughout the world and the ages, has affected the demographical composition of various places while at the same time constituting an important factor in the multicultural transformation of that society’s particular character and culture. The dominant perception of “multiculturalism”, as we know it, is the West’s recognition of the importance of cultural differences “from within”. It is comprehensible that through the process of migration, both the natives and the newcomers to a specific place, who “melted” together within the common living area, were strongly affected.

What differentiates the current reality of multiculturalism from the past is that today’s societies tend to become more and more multicultural, with groups who are now insisting on the recognition of their cultural differences. The major question that is asked today is to what extent can the cultural particularity of these members be acknowledged so as to ensure the free and complete development of their identity. The morality of political management of this issue, which includes the policies of assimilation of these groups and the recognition and acceptance of their differences, is a debatable matter. This new reality is present in one mass movement, concerning “the wandering people of the world”, as the Cypriot historian Kyrris (1978) describes them, or the “Bedouins of Europe” as they are characterised in an article on the Internet (TYPOS, April, 2006). I am talking, of course, about the Roma who today are scattered in most of the countries of the world. As Laska explains, the history of the Roma is a story of continuous struggle and flight.

Within this context, I have embarked on a personal effort to create an ethnography of a group of Roma; my study includes people who for the last four years have lived in a small village on the western side of Cyprus, as well as the dominant legal and moral world within which the management of the differentiation of this group operates inside the controlled borders of the Republic of Cyprus.

-----> The Cypriot historical reality

Originally, Cyprus, despite being a small island, was an intersection of cultures and civilisations. As an important port for ancient Mediterranean societies, it hosted many different cultural groups of the world at that time. Furthermore, being a trading centre, it also quickly became a cultural cradle, which, despite being strongly influenced by the morality and values of Greek culture, accepted and protected the heritage of other cultural groups. As the island was repeatedly conquered by other countries, permanent settlements of different national and cultural groups remained, each one leaving behind its specific remnants and attitudes. However, Cyprus managed, through all these changes, to preserve its own cultural character. Thus, it would not be an exaggeration if we acknowledge that today Cyprus is at the crossroads of civilisations.

The island has for centuries been home to the ethnic groups of Greek Cypriots (the largest proportion in numbers of the country), of the Turkish Cypriots and of special religious groups such as the Maronites, Armenians and Latins, with the latter being incorporated into the Greek-Cypriot community according to article 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus (Antoniou, 2005). After acquiring Cypriot nationality, the members of these religious groups were recognised as Cypriot citizens and now enjoy the same rights as other Cypriots; which are the outcome of their state and religious identity. The Cyprus Government, within the framework of constitutional and legal requests from the above religious groups, has committed to providing them all the facilities relevant to their educational and religious needs. In addition to a complete respect for their religious freedom, at the basis of the principles of human rights including tolerance, lack of discrimination, varied information and of the right to vote, special policies are also involved, such as the foundation and support for the Armenian School Melconian, the establishment of a Maronite Primary School in 2002, the enrolment of students from these groups at the University of Cyprus as well as the creation of places of worship – such as Maronite and Armenian churches.

Moving away from these recognised groups of the island with ensured rights and obligations and with the clearly established right to live safely within the boundaries of the Republic of Cyprus, there are smaller groups, culturally different from the majority, which remain in the shadow of the other ethnic groups. Unfortunately they are not autonomous or independently recognised. One such group is the Roma, known as Gypsies or *Kkilintziri* as they are commonly referred to in Cyprus. “Are you talking of the *Kkilintziri*?” (Interview, October 2004), was the first reaction of the people who were questioned during my ethnographic work. “We used to call them *Kkilintziri*” (Interview, March 2005). In 2001, several members of this group moved from the north side of Cyprus to the south, alarming the Greek-Cypriot government while simultaneously reaffirming its own existence and, therefore, the necessity of confrontation with society.

-----> The history of Roma in Cyprus

The Roma are a minority in Cyprus, who, at present, suffer more than others. Therefore, they should be provided with, in their rights as Cypriot citizens, the fair place they deserve in the realm of this democracy. However, such a procedure is complicated by the history of the Gypsies on the island and it can be pursued fairly only if it is considered with an acknowledgement of their specific historical



background. Tracing their history is not a simple matter, mainly because sources are always minimal and inconsistent. Furthermore, its complexity demands an in-depth, multi-level study attuned to new perspectives. Every “insignificant” detail of “our” lives, but “their” lives as well, provides an opportunity to look for deeper meaning.

According to prevailing historical knowledge, the first written reports indicate that the Cypriot *Kkilintziri* or Gypsies appeared in Cyprus beginning in the Middle Ages and specifically from 1468, at the time of the Venetian possession of the island, as it is testified in various documents of the commander of Cyprus at that time, Estienne de Lusignan (Kyrris, 1969). From the same time period, we have a written report, found in the chronicle of Cyprus by Florios Voustronios, which highlights the fact that the Roma paid taxes to King James II. Moreover, the French traveller André Therét, in his written records from 1549, refers most likely to Roma when he remarks that on Cyprus, as on other Mediterranean islands, he met the “Egyptians or the Bohemians” and observed that their simple way of life was supported by nail production by men and belts by women, products which were sold to the local population (Kenrick and Taylor, 1986, p. 1). However, the view that appears to prevail among others, since it is the only one that is historically documented, is the one of Soulis (1946) and Kyrris (1969), who contend that the Roma of Cyprus came to the island as soldiers from Corfu. According to them, the Roma arrived for military purposes, as happened with other groups in the past, such as the Armenians, the Maronites and the Mardais. By the end of Venetian rule of the island, the military role of the Roma and other racial groups had deteriorated while during the Turkish rule, most of them became Muslims and were used by the Turks to guard paths in the mountains. Furthermore, it seems that during Turkish rule, a second wave of Roma arrived on the island. It is believed that they arrived along with the Ottomans in 1571 and that they were under the latter’s command.

Nene, 75 years old, told me,
“Me Gypsy! Gypsy me!”
And Ibrahim, near her age, agreed:
“We *kkilintziri*, from Kormatzit”
(Interview, 23 October 2004)

According to Papadopoulos (1965), those Roma ended up on the island as a result of Ottoman actions, during which they gathered from various areas of the east all those who were “undesirable persons, tanners, basket makers, water bringers ... and those cultivating the lands” and brought them to the island (Marsh and Strand, 2003, p. 5).

– And where do you work? Near here?
– Well, we gather olives, grapes and beans ...
– Are you well paid?
– Ehm ... OK! But if my son doesn’t work for
a day we will starve! We don’t want to starve.
(Interview, 2 November 2004)

The fate of the *Kkilintziri* of Cyprus could not be, and was not, different from the historical destiny of continuous struggle and pursuit common to Gypsies around the world. Everywhere and all times they were poor, neglected, chased; the victims of historical and political currents who remained unknown to the rest of

society, oppressed and without a voice. In Cyprus, the numbers of Roma nomads began to shrink, and they were once again considered “unwanted” as a result of the increasing tensions that followed the end of English rule on the island, the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus and the collapse of the vulnerable and weak constitutional negotiations. Already in 1964, fights broke out between the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots, only four years after independence and the creation of the constitution. The final outcome of this shrinking Roma population, which hit a peak with the tragic events of the Turkish invasion, was their choice to live in the northern part of Cyprus along with the Turkish Cypriots, since they thought that they had found an old “natural ally” (Marsh and Strand, 2003, p. 6). Williams (2000) believes that the main reason for this choice was more of a linguistic one than a religious one, since most of the Roma spoke Turkish (Marsh and Strand, 2003). In addition, because of the invasion, the suspicion and hostility of the Greek Cypriots turned and was directed against the Roma since the old suspicion that they were spies for the Turks had been reinvigorated.

“We used to be afraid of the Kkilitziri.
And they were afraid of us too. We didn’t go
near them. Our parents told us to beware...
They used to come to the village in August...
and then one day they were gone...
gone during the invasion...”
(Tasoula Xirihi, Interview, 3 March 2006)

According to research done by the Administrative Commissioner (AYT/E March 2003) into the living conditions of the Roma who settled in the village of Makounta, within the framework set by the Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960, the Roma living in Cyprus were considered to be members of the Turkish-Cypriot community. However, they were not called to decide, according to paragraph 2.3 of the constitution (Antoniou, 2005), the community in which they would like to live in as was done with the Armenians, the Maronites and the Latins, because as Muslims the Roma were not given the right to be a special religious group.

In October 1999, a group of Roma started to move from the occupied part to the Greek-Cypriot south, to escape their poverty, unemployment and racism. Around 20 families crossed the green line, which is the border between the Turkish-Cypriot north and the Greek-Cypriot south. The Greek-Cypriot Government, recognizing their Turkish-Cypriot identity, set them up in the Turkish-Cypriot parish of Limassol, near the old port. Some other families were transferred and settled in Turkish-Cypriot houses in Mouttallos, where there was the Turkish-Cypriot parish of Pafos and later the settlement area of Greek-Cypriot refugees. They were not given new residences and they were not settled in areas where they would mingle with the local Greek-Cypriot population; instead, they were only recognised as Turkish-Cypriot citizens, and as such they were placed in areas where the housing was in a very bad state.

A year later, in 2000, while the movement of Roma to the south continued, authorities realised that they had to decide on a specific political line and take measures to deal with those in transit, as well as for the provision of help to the newcomers. This moving of the *Athigganoi* (untouchables), as the Roma were now called by state officials (a fact which indicates the lack of knowledge or substantial interest in these people and of the spasmodic actions on behalf of the government

concerning their identity and the provision of substantial help), was done by the families themselves, each one of the them having three, four or even more children. According to this data, the ministry council decided, on 8 March 2000, the allocation of appropriate accommodation areas for the temporary location of those moving to the south and the verification of their right to Cypriot citizenship, given the danger of illegal entry of Turkish spies, immigrants or even foreign immigrants with the purpose of securing work in the free area, and eventually their permanent settlement. However, these measures never materialised. Partial measures, which were taken periodically, did not aim to protect the Roma's interests. In the following years, a complete plan to integrate the Roma into society and provide them with measures of social welfare was never developed.

Meanwhile, the Roma who continued to cross the border were settled in deserted Turkish-Cypriot houses, which did not have the necessary repairs, often without electricity and water, under circumstances of unbelievable crowding and sometimes without licence or authorisation from the state, which is considered to be the legal administrator, observer and guardian of these properties. This resulted in the annoyance of some of the local population and ended in the formation, by the then Minister of Internal Affairs, of a plan of "scattering" the Roma, as it is recalled by the District Commissioner (AYT/E 3/2003, p. 4), away from over-populated areas where a danger of their forming ghettos was present. It is obvious that the minister believed that by pushing the Roma away from residential areas the problems caused by their appearance and settlements would be solved. By the year 2001, a new wave of Gypsies from the north side to the south, due to their rising financial misery, alarmed the Greek-Cypriot government while simultaneously bringing their existence to the public's attention, which therefore highlighted the necessity for their recognition.

– Me Turkish Cypriot, me! No Roma.
– Roma, Roma Me! And Turkish Cypriot...
(Interview, 15 October 2004)

-----> The politics of acceptance and recognition

One cannot but wonder about the reasons why such a clear situation would encounter so many obstacles, acts of resistance and problems. Different human rights documents and charters, mostly creations of the so-called "sensitive" Western societies, claim without exception that a democratic society must treat its members as equals and, therefore, recognise and respect their right to difference. The main issue today is to determine to what point the cultural uniqueness of these marginalised groups can be recognised in order to enhance the free and complete development of their identity within the context of the "other" dominant culture. The matter of cultural or political recognition within the boundaries of a country is a debatable and negotiable subject with significant moral and political ramifications. Some people often have trouble accepting the culture of the "Others", perhaps due to the fact that they have difficulty perceiving themselves as "Others" as well.

As Papageorgiou states, "The just recognition does not constitute merely a matter of just keeping our typical behavioural codes towards others but it is primarily an essential human need" (Taylor, 1997, p. 20). A psychological aspect of this need,

which is associated with the need of a person to be accepted and to belong somewhere, is added by Rockefeller (in Taylor, 2000). Every person, or group of people, can claim an original way of life; everyone has an individual “measure”, an individual identity. Herder stresses that there is something special in each manner of existence, which is expressed as a way of life and is the outcome of uniqueness and authenticity (Taylor, 2000). This need does not have a social derivative but it is something born in a person, therefore, it should be respected by everyone. Herder promoted the matter of authenticity, which characterises modern philosophical thinking, from the individual level to a collective one, as the idea of a people with a common cultural inheritance.

Within the collective group, the need for uniqueness and authenticity originates in social transactions and the experiences of people, leading us to question if authenticity can remain unproblematic and pure. The value of such a vague idea could be approached by looking for the ways in which authenticity valorises a significant difference. As Taylor so rightly claims, “if I am not loyal to myself [and to my internal voice] I lose the meaning of life” (2000, p. 77). “Every internal voice has something special to say”, he continues. And by articulating its own authenticity it is self-defined. It realises its own original possibility: that each person has the task of finding his or her own path. That traditional “authority”, as Taylor suggests, must be redefined to give people, who are today called inferior citizens, the chance to live without obstacles.

“Playing and having fun and that’s all for the young Gypsies. They want to stay out all day long. They suffocate inside the class.”
(Teacher, Interview, 8 April 2006)

“Gypsies were poor people who had nothing. They were satisfied with a piece of bread and two olives to be fed. I think they were a happy community because of their simplicity and we have to take them as an example. Gypsies were not slaves of their desires.”
(Michael Pitsillides, Interview, 29 April 2001)

Perhaps, it is this original, internal historical voice that the Roma obeyed and that they managed to remain faithful to in their traditional nomadic culture, without any interference from the surrounding cultural and social propositions that caused such great changes to the identity and cultural expression of others. Society has inevitable points of exchange and transaction at different levels, such as linguistic, within meetings, within trade as well as other financial actions and compromises. Such exchanges and hybridness are also at work in the case of the Roma. However, their basic principles, ideas and the way they face reality appear to express a general stability, innovative obedience and protection as sacred ideals. Furthermore, it is a fact that the history of this specific group of people, or at least those who were part of my own ethnographical work, is characterised by many discontinuities and also by the lack of sufficient sources of information, which render the study of the evolution and the re-birth of the Roma quite difficult. The only consistent and sure thing that I could observe in

their behaviour was their secrecy; they are filled with an oppressed fear that has always dictated their choice of new places so as to protect themselves from the dominant “Others”. They characteristically said “What can we do? We leave secretly to save ourselves. I have done that ever since I was a child” (Interview with Ibrahim, 23 November 2005).

“According to the commissioner of the village of Makounta, Roma people get their things ready during the night and they leave the area after midnight, without anybody seeing them, to go to the north part of Cyprus, where their relatives live. Sometimes, they go because they are informed that they can work for awhile, somewhere in the north. But why do they leave at night? I realise that during the hot summer months they may do this because they prefer to travel with the coolness of the night. But what about in winter? This habit seemed very suspicious from the very beginning, therefore I was tempted to ask them whether they passed to the southern part by using illegal military check points. At that moment I felt like an investigator but I had to do it. On the other hand, I think that an ancient fear pushes them toward these nocturnal escapes. The only certain thing is that fear begets fear and this is probably what they try to escape from every time. Besides, this used to be how they crossed the southern borders seven years ago.” (author’s notes)

The way they move from the north to the south side of Cyprus reveals a realisation, on their part, of how negatively charged and problematic their identity is. They act as if they were illegal immigrants trying to pass secretly the frontiers of another country to escape from a negative situation. The difference with the Roma is that they can not be considered as illegal immigrants; they are Cypriot citizens and as such they should be treated as equals with their Cypriot counterparts. The unorthodox ways they use to cross over to the south part of the island make their identity even more problematic and questionable in the eyes of the Greek Cypriots.

“Personally, I am fascinated by what Roma people do. I don’t know if they themselves realise it or not, but by this nocturnal dashing, they give the impression of being haunted, dark and malice...despite the reactions and the suspicions that they provoke, it seems to me that this inventive manner of moving gives them a gliding power which helps in the revival of a previous life and simultaneously inspires fear in the ‘Others’. This hiding around and moving away in fear of the ‘Others’ is really funny since the ‘Others’ consider their nocturnal moving as a threatening situation as well.” (author’s notes)

Thus this mutual fear causes great upset. A paper on the Internet claimed that “anti-Roma sentiment has broken out following the arrival of Roma from northern Cyprus” (ERRC, June 2004). “There came the *Kkilintziri* now to create a problem. Who invited them?” (Interview, 3 October 2001) Their identity had not changed; they were still considered poor, miserable and thieves at times, but this time it was burdened or even cursed by a shadow. Now, they were not simply the *Kkilintziri* but “exploiters” and “self-interested”, since they left the north side where they had no rights and came to the south part where they could enjoy the same rights as the Greek Cypriots (such as governmental allowances, free medical care, child support and free housing) as well as the right to come and go to the north side. The Greek Cypriots’ opinion was that “they came here to eat” (interview with K. Panayi, 13 March 2006).

Their subsequent isolation in small, deserted villages that give the impression of ghettos, along with the government’s arrangements to accommodate them in

small houses of poor and questionable quality, prove the lack of an organised official policy to address their needs. An example of this lack of policy was the answer given by the Minister of Internal Affairs of Cyprus, Mr Christodoulou, to the intense hostility of the residents of Kotsiatis, a small village a few kilometres away from the capital, to the programmed settlement of a Roma group. As reported by Hellicar (2001), the minister tried to reassure the residents of the area by announcing the removal of the Roma from the promised housing as well as the construction of a separate settlement at least three kilometres away from the area of Kotsiatis. Such an action would have resulted in a Roma ghetto and locals would be forbidden to approach. Furthermore, it would intensify the spread of inaccurate stereotypes of the Roma and that would consequently lead to a cultivation of fear, aggressiveness and acts of violence towards them. All this coming from a republic that claims to be a providential state which cares for its citizens' primary needs and supports them financially and psychologically in difficult times. The efforts made by the government were spasmodic and isolated whereas the rejection of the locals was continuous. All this confusion is revealed in a typical heading of an online newspaper in which the Roma are referred to as a "political hot potato in Cyprus" (*Cyprus Mail*, 24 April 2001).

"I was astonished when I learned from the Roma themselves that they chased away Mohamet's family because they caused problems in the community. I also admired their progress and peacefulness. How could the 'Others' not want them just because they were poor and untidy?" (Auto-ethnography, 23 October 2004).

"The government has never really bothered seriously with these people. There is no information or data reporting on the Gypsies."
(Administrative Commissioner, Interview, 22 February 2005)

"... do not worry. The Gypsy campus will be constructed at least 3 kilometres away from your village."

So why are the Roma not recognised as Cypriot citizens just as the Turkish Cypriots, the Armenians, the Maronites or Latins are? Is their exile to the margins of society facilitated by the fact that their identity is confused?

"The Roma people of Makounta are Gypsies who are recognised as Turkish Cypriots. They insist that they are Muslims but in reality they have their own religion. They use the Muslim identity in order to avoid problems with the 'Turkish government' in the north of the island. Most of them were born in Morfou (north Cyprus), where they insist that they have properties. They speak Turkish and some of them Greek as well, but the commissioner and some of the oldest members of that Roma group claim that they have their own special language too, maybe Romanitsib, the language of Roma. The Turkish linguist at their school who helps the Turkish-speaking students to learn the Greek language points out that she finds it very difficult to understand what the Roma children are saying, as they use words and syntax which come from other languages. It is remarkable that young Roma say that they are not Gypsies but only Turkish Cypriots, most probably because this identity gives them more rights, allowances, recognition and protection. However, the older ones do not hesitate to clarify that they are Gypsies. According to their stories, after the sad events following the destruction of Minor Asia, a

lot of Roma people escaped to Cyprus and they stayed. Of course, they have no historic memory whatsoever. It is proven that due to the lack of written reports, the Roma have no memory of more than three or four generations. When asked “how do you know that you are Gypsies?”, most of them answered that they were told so by their grandparents. It fascinates me that their relationship with the state is totally impersonal. They have never spoken with the authorities and all their needs are discussed between them. It is obvious that they do not have the necessary abilities to handle power relationships with the state. This is one of the reasons for which they have never negotiated with the authorities concerning the recognition of their identity. I feel that any encounter with the state produces a fear in them and this fear leads to their marginalisation. In the end, where is their voice?” (author’s notes)

It is a fact that the quest for cultural recognition is a difficult procedure which is sped up only when the “Others” enter into public dialogue with important people (Taylor, 2000). Through this dialectic relationship the identity of the “Other” is revealed, which is needed to claim its recognition. This is the substantial difference that makes the present times different than others. In the past people did not refer to matters of “identity” and “recognition” because identities were more clearly defined and therefore less problematic. Assimilation was the primary “healing” method for the protection of the “authenticity” of societies. The Roma appear to have a unique and continuous resistance towards cultural assimilation. Their nomadic way of life and their different way of thinking, their free spirit and their close, small societies keep them attached to their own culture and popular tradition adds a “problematic” characteristic to their identity, that of disobedience. It is these “disobedient” cultural groups that Taylor characterises while stressing the need to recognise and respect their identity and differences, simply because from we have much to gain from this different kind of contact. Contact with others can be made in a lot of ways: politically, socially, financially and there is the risk that identity can be transformed or even deformed by an encounter with important people. The important people are the “Others” and we represent the “Others” to those from whom we make demands or claim our rights.

Thus, today, the claim for recognition is constituted at two levels: in the sphere of consciousness and in the public sphere. In the sphere of consciousness, the transformation of identity and the self occurs within the context of a continuous dialogue and debate with important people. The contact and the dialogue with these people give us the possibility to realise exactly how different we are from them and affirm our right to this difference. Undoubtedly, something like that appears in the case of the Roma whom I study. At the social level, the realisation of the fact that identities are enhanced through an open dialogue gives the policy of equal recognition a special meaning. “Equal recognition is not merely something which fits in a healthy democratic society...but its rejection can damage those who undertake it”, states Taylor (2000: 85), which leads them to their isolation in a faulty, distorted and deprived way of existence. The projection of an inferior image of others so that this image is then internalised and accepted, even by the targeted group, can lead to distortion and oppression. Racism is produced and reproduced, while at the same time threatening the meaning of authenticity. The Roma have been trapped within such a painful dead-end situation. By internalising the ancient image of inferiority projected on them by others, they were led to their current self-depreciation, which was and is one of the most powerful tools for their oppression. “I feel that their relationship with the state creates fear and that this fear produces their marginalisation, which produces and reproduces another form of marginalisation and, finally, what they accomplish is to stay in the

margin. Where is their voice?” (auto-ethnography, 3 September 2005). Their own mistaken acceptance of the distorted image of their culture has left them no other option but silence and the inability to claim their dialectical rights in the public sphere, which results in their continued oppression. As stated by Adorno, “at this case the speech of the oppressed-isolated-displaced is dictated by hunger. The poor chews words to be fed” (Katsika and Politou, 2005, p. 18). He continues by saying that:

“this half-chewed language has the necessary word of resistance, which no matter how inaccurate it is when listened to, it is the one which contains the dialect of freedom that is a necessary provision for the freedom of speech.”

The Roma of Cyprus demand the restoration of their rights: bigger houses, with more rooms. “I sleep with my wife and children, all in the same room. Shame, shame! Children are now not children, they understand.” They keep protesting for easier access to medical services and more chances to work, for rights having to do with their primary needs as defined in the first level of Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs. For the time being, their demand for the political recognition of their Roma identity remains unheeded. They care only about their most basic needs: having a piece of bread for the day and a place to sleep. As for their civil rights such as the right to vote, not a word. They do not talk about that.

To be free, as expressed by Fanon, “they should cast away all the inferior images of themselves” (Taylor, 2000, p. 120). They should seek inside themselves the ideal of their authenticity; for this authenticity creates both the difference and its recognition. There is no way the “important Others” could understand the authentic existence of a group – in this case the Roma of Makounta. For decades, the politics of the West consisted of the “superior whites” being raised above the “inferior non-whites” simply because their authenticity was expressed uniquely by its owner thus reaffirming its authentic nature.

– Where are the houses? You come and go,
come and go ... where are the houses?
– Take me to get an identity card ...
I don’t have ...
– We give you our names for
the government?
(Interview, 24 November 2005)

Still, according to Taylor, the policy of recognition means two different things. On the one hand the policy of universality valorises equality of all citizens in dignity. The objective of this policy was to assure rights and titles, and to avoid creating different categories of citizens. It is this exact policy that Cyprus is struggling to apply in the case of the Roma. On the other hand, the development of modern thinking in terms of identity created the policy of difference, according to which each individual has the right to be recognised because of the uniqueness of his or her identity. The policy of difference begins with the acknowledgement that this special element of uniqueness “has been ignored, demoted and adapted from the ruling to the majority. And this adaptation is a crime against the idealism of authenticity” (Taylor, 2000, p. 87). This uniqueness is something not yet recognised in the case of the Roma of Cyprus.

“They don’t comply, they don’t care to send their children to school, to learn how to be clean and to wash themselves like our people.”

(Commissioner of Makounta, Interview, 2 October 2004)

“Gypsy students do not concentrate during the lesson, they don’t listen, they don’t ameliorate like the other children at school.”

(Teacher, Interview, 14 March 2005)

The handling of “difference” in the framework of a community is not a simple matter. The educational system, as the primary institution of support in the procedures of social and cultural integration, is continuously called upon to play an important part in the creation of a favourable environment for the acceptance and recognition of the plurality and association as the basic elements of a social being. Cultural plurality, as an expression of political difference, introduces a system of thought which accepts that the ways of life and the values of people are different and it functions in such a way as to allow equal opportunity for everyone to play a full part in society. However, in the Cypriot educational system, there are no such allowances for the groups of “Others”, and specifically for the Roma whose education differs from any other educational experience. The lack of relevant books, the lack of interest in their culture, their inability to learn in their mother tongue, their constantly interrupted studies due to continuous moving back and forth between the north and the south of Cyprus all underline the neglect of this cultural pluralism.

“Children are integrated into normal classes, which are classes of mixed ability. Their school ages clearly do not correspond to their chronological ages. Meirem Raif is 11 today and is only in the fourth grade. According to catalogues of schooling the education of these children is spasmodic and discontinuous since they often miss school for days or even weeks due to their trips to the occupied side of the island for long periods. Several students stopped their studies in primary school from their first or second month; often some of these children, even the little ones, stay home to attend to their smaller siblings, since their parents and their older siblings work. Therefore, of the 14 children enrolled at the beginning of the year, today only 8 attend classes regularly.” (ethnographic records, 12 March 2006)

The dominant view of the teachers regarding these children is that they do not care about their education and learning. “They enrol at the beginning of the year and then they disappear”, is a common statement from teachers (Interview with Mr M. Panayi, 12 March 2006).

“The biggest problem that these children encounter in class and generally in school is the language problem. As a result of this weakness, we encounter different defence mechanisms from these children who usually express themselves with indifference while, in extreme cases, this defence takes the form of violence. Therefore, to what extent are these children going to be interested in their education in an environment that is so hostile and strange? Some of these children, however, love school since they see other Roma friends or relatives who come from nearby villages” (*Autoethnography*, 11 March 2006).

“I like school here! It’s nice here! It has a class, a good teacher. I play with my relatives at break time... Sometimes I stay home and I take care of my small brother.”
(Melek, Interview, 15 March 2005)

“Melek is entirely indifferent at school. She doesn’t compromise, she doesn’t understand what school means. Most of the time she is on the north side.”
(Teacher, Interview, 15 March 2005)

Trying to learn about Other helps in their understanding and in ours as well. When one seeks information about the Other, which is done primarily through ethnography, certain aspects are essential. The research needs to use or even invent the right tools, which facilitate interpretations, in such a way that the subject is not trapped within closed pictures but that his or her identity is outlined as objectively as possible.

“Why write? Why do an ethnography of these people? I wanted to write and talk to somebody about them. I wanted to expose with every single detail all I had witnessed while among them, so that the Others would learn to see behind their memories. I wanted to write in order to give a voice to these Roma people, so that they could find the courage to fight for their acceptance and equal recognition.” (author’s notes)

Certainly, it would be an insult for the ethnographer to consider, and to be certain, that he or she has captured the intimate thoughts of “his” or “her” people; the ethnographer can never be sure, just curious and able to estimate. That is the reason for which the contemporary form of ethnography has to be critical, self-critical and self-reflexive. This is what my own ethnographic work aspires to. That is what I call “ethnography and auto-ethnography”. Thinking and re-thinking about yourself.

During the months that I came to know the Roma, not only did I learn about their way of life but also about the history of a large group of people who are kept in the margins by situations and chance. I also gained special friends, different from others, who reminded me of ancient habits and inspired intense thoughts and feelings.

“The truth is that watching them sitting on the ground so comfortably and not caring if they got dirty or not made me jealous. Primitive desires bathed me and I longed to be close to the earth as well. In a way, I felt free. Days after, at the school where I worked, I had the tendency to sit on the floor. And I liked that! I was really enjoying it!”
(*Autoethnography*, 10 October 2004)

Within this framework I give you my definition of inter-culturalism, which proposes a new kind of thought and a new philosophical and practical perspective. One of the values I propose is that we have to live with different people and that is not a

misfortune as we are used to believing, but a unique chance to know and reflect upon ourselves. It is an opportunity to valorise the fruit of sharing living space and historical experience that “no other product of the world cultural supermarket can ever replace”, as Papageorgiou states (Taylor, 2000, p. 12). By learning about the Roma and exhibiting their culture and their needs, I hope to convince the authorities of my country to acknowledge their authentic uniqueness and to try to cover their needs within the framework of renovation, multiculturalism and dignity from which we can all gain. I am not their voice; it is they who shout to be recognised with dignity, however through my hand.

“I am a teacher and the students that I meet in school classes are different from every point of view. It’s true that, when you are not aware, it is hard to find a decent way to take care of them, to meet their needs. At the very beginning, the lesson on inter-cultural education that I was taught at the university gave me the impression that it would provide the means and the ways, the educational methods to confront my differently oriented students. However, soon after and through my ethnographical effort and its consequent difficulties, I came to realise that I was gaining something else from this experience, something more special. There is nobody who could provide us easy methods of acceptance of difference and diversity in neutral and non-native frames. What is important is to be capable and sensitive enough to realise when difference is disregarded and rejected in an unfair way and consequently fight against this rejection.” (author’s notes)

What is more, it is important to understand our limited role within the totality of human history and that the recognition and respect towards the multiple cultures around us helps us to enrich our own existence. To sum up, we are the “Others” and without “Others” we cannot know ourselves. We need them.

“I am the Other when I am, my actions are more mine, if they are of the others, to be able to be who I am, I have to be the Other, to leave me and search me among others, Others who cannot be without me and they give me full existence, I am not, I cannot be, it is always Us, life is far and away, it estranges and isolates us and always finds a face to spend away.” (Octavio Paz, *Piedra de sol*, 1957)

The Roma are a part of our culture and history. They are part of this world and they should reclaim their rightful position. During those months that I was with them I felt an immense love for the struggles seen in their eyes and the pleading present in their gestures: “Do not be a bearer of memories... we are part of this land” (Kiris, 1978, p. 95).

“Write down what I am going
to tell you now!”
(Interview, 15 February 2006)

“How fine it is to be called a Gypsy. Though it is not easy a Gypsy to be. I don’t know what I’ll become I don’t know. It would be fine to be a Gypsy. I would adore a Gypsy to be. I do not know what a Gypsy is. I don’t know.” (ROM, a gypsy song)



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