

Yuksel's trying to tell me something, but I'm not sure what. He mutters something in Turkish and watches my face expectantly. Understand? "Hayir, affedersiniz." No, sorry. Two of the few words I can even pronounce. He shakes his head in mock frustration and gestures at my bag. I fish out the crumpled pages he's looking for – the vocab list extracted from my Istanbul guidebook. It's mostly food, but when I've had no translator, it's got us by. It turns out that there's a wedding tomorrow – and I'm invited.

Yuksel's family has lived in Kucuk Bakkalkoy, on the Asian side of Istanbul, for generations. They are Roma. Turkey is home to one of the largest Roma populations in the world - an estimated two million people. Like the Kurds, the Roma – who are thought to have arrived in the region during the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and to originate in India – are not legally recognised as an ethnic minority within Turkey. Yet here as elsewhere, the community is subject to frequent discrimination – ranging from overt harassment to more subtle institutional racism.

Roma families are often poor, their children do badly at school and rates of imprisonment are high. Roma are largely excluded from the jobs market and are widely regarded as thieves and gangsters by the majority. Tourists are warned off visiting 'dangerous' Roma neighbourhoods, even by otherwise open-minded *Istanbullus*.

Others exoticise the Roma, reducing them to meaningless stereotypes. "Ah, the Gypsies," sighs the woman in the photo shop each morning, as she leafs through the prints I'm giving to Yuksel's family. "Gypsy people not Turkish. Strange people, interesting people. Always singing and dancing..." I cringe, nod and smile politely, wishing I had the words to challenge her patronising tone.

*"Here, we are  
not free"*

Over recent years many Istanbul Roma have faced the added hardship of having their homes demolished under publicly funded regeneration schemes. Left with few options, some have decamped to shanties a stone's throw from their former homes, which will be replaced with apartments.

This is what's brought me to Yuksel, and his warm and dignified community. In 2006, 240 Roma properties were pulled down in Kucuk Bakkalkoy, and Yuksel – who has the deeds for his land – is still fighting for justice through the courts.

As I get to know them, I look beyond the privation and see ordinary people taking pride in their surroundings and doing their best to get by. I see how they remain proud of their Roma heritage and retain their distinctive culture. And I hear how despite everything that is thrown at them, they love their country.

"I love Turkey very much but here we Roma are not people," Yuksel tells me several times, his normally gentle face flashing with anger. "I was born here and I grew up here. My father was born here, and my grandfather. I have Turkish ID; I've served in the army; I am Muslim. So why this discrimination?"

"People's behaviour can sometimes be very racist. They don't like Roma people and they treat us differently. They say 'Gypsy' but we are not Gypsies, we are Roma. Here, we are not free. But in the world, everywhere, Roma people have difficult lives..."

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Centuries of exclusion from the mainstream have forced Roma people to become enterprising. Like many Istanbul Roma, Yuksel makes his living through selling flowers.



Wife, Nigar, is the mother of Yuksel's 10 children, who range from five years old to 28. Two sons are in prison, leaving the family responsible for their wives and children.





Kucuk Bakkalkoy is one of three Roma neighbourhoods demolished in Istanbul's urban renewal project. With nowhere to go, many people are still living amid the rubble.



Education for Roma is very weak and many youngsters drop out of school early. "Our children don't have a future," says Yuksel.





Family – and particularly children – is at the heart of Roma culture, with large extended families typically living and working together.



Istanbul is home to the oldest Roma settlements in Europe, with some dating back 1,000 years. The city's Roma population is now thought to number about 300,000.





Until recently, many Roma have shied away from fighting for their rights, amid nationalist pressures which paint such activities as a betrayal of the Turkish state.



Turkish Roma usually marry young, and the groom's family traditionally pays a dowry to the family of the bride. This bride is 15 years old.





Many Roma - including Yuksel - do not like the term 'Gypsy', which has negative connotations in Turkey. But others believe the term should be stripped of its stigma and reclaimed – as is starting to happen within the British Romany community.





The Turkish word for 'Gypsy' – *Cingene* – is from the Byzantine Greek term *ασιγγανοί*, meaning 'don't touch people', possibly because Roma were seen to keep to themselves.



Lost Roma occupations include metalwork and horsemanship. Some still make their living through music, acrobatics and belly dancing but most scrape by through unskilled work.





18 members of Yuksel's family – including several grandchildren and his five-year-old son (above) – have lived in a wooden hut since their house was bulldozed in 2006.

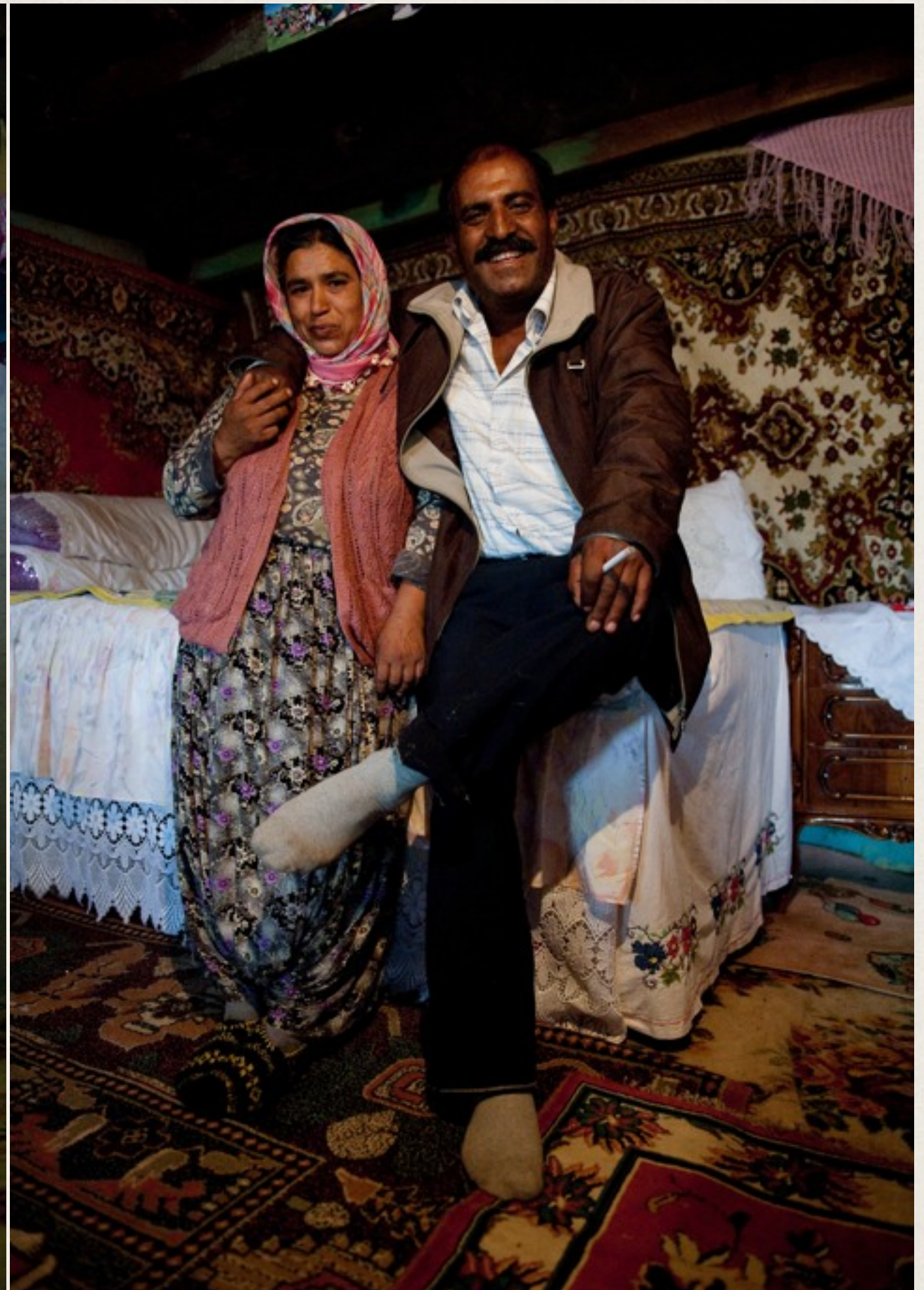


Despite – or perhaps because of – their difficult circumstances, the Roma families I visited were house-proud, with cheerful paints and drapes brightening up their small homes.





Analysis of Romanes shows strong links with Indian languages such as Hindi. While Yuksel's family happens to speak mainly Turkish, other Roma use it to varying degrees.



There are thought to be 12 million Roma people in Europe today. Unlike many Roma further west, most in Turkey are Muslim.