

# Jerusalem's Dom People



By Amoun  
Sleem

**T**he Dom are the Gypsy people who live in the Middle East and North Africa, and call their culture and their language Domari. They are originally from India, like the Roma or Lom. It is widely believed that the Dom left India in several migratory waves between the third and tenth centuries. While there are many stories about why or how the Gypsy people left India, we cannot say which story is correct because their early history is undocumented. When they left India, the people called Roma spread throughout Europe, whereas the others, called Dom, migrated to the Middle East. They now live in Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Egypt.

Two stories recount how the Dom migrated to Palestine 400 years ago. According to the first, they reached Jerusalem with Saladin whom they served as servants, blacksmiths, and soldiers. During the Saladin era, the Dom were famous blacksmiths who produced spears and horseshoes. They were also well-known as horse breeders. These two crafts earned Dom society its important status in the eyes of the world. Another account claims that the Dom migrated to Palestine during the Ottoman era and were welcomed for their skills in horse breeding and valued as able blacksmiths. They merged with the local people, adopted the Muslim faith, and began to speak Arabic.

Even though accurate statistics are lacking, it is believed that more than 2,000,000 Dom live in the Middle East. They identify themselves as Dom, which means “man” in Domari, while the local Arab population in Jerusalem calls them *nawar*. Approximately 200 Dom families reside near Lion’s Gate, behind the ancient walls of the Old City, and in Shu’fat Refugee Camp. Fifty percent of their families are headed by women. While larger populations live in Gaza and the West Bank, many Dom families from Jerusalem now live in Jordan, having fled during and after the Six-Day War of 1967. While prior generations of Dom were nomadic, holding occupations such as blacksmiths, horse dealers, musicians, dancers, and animal healers, other Dom people have lived a sedentary lifestyle for more than 100 years.

Domari belongs to the Indo-Aryan family of languages and is considered one of the three main existing varieties of Gypsy languages, along with Romani and Lomavren (spoken by the Armenian Gypsies, or Lom). According to the Romani Project, based at the University of Manchester, the Domari and Romani languages are related but not sister languages, as was once thought. Rather, these languages split before the Gypsy people left India. According to Dr. Ian Hancock, their language also indicates that Domari-speaking people left the Indian subcontinent earlier than the Roma or Lom. As is typical for Gypsy populations, they accepted the local language and religion, in this case, Arabic and Islam. Moreover, Domari

**The Dom community in Jerusalem is a minority. Some members live in the Old City and others live in Shu’fat Refugee Camp. Most families have more than five children. They speak Arabic and have become integrated into the wider society in many ways, though they strive to retain their unique culture and traditions.**

vocabulary contains Persian, Kurdish, Turkish, and Arabic elements, but there is no writing system for Domari among the Dom people.

Domari is spoken in Palestine, but it is severely endangered in Jerusalem because there seem to be few speakers left. The Dom in Jerusalem have assimilated into the neighboring Arab communities, and the younger generations have blended into the local society and adopted its culture, language, and religion. Because of this, the Dom language is rarely used in everyday speech, and the traditional dress and other customs have largely been abandoned.

This self-inflicted and imposed assimilation has contributed to the

discrimination and marginalization that the Dom people face from both the Jewish and Arab populations and has led to the economic and social limitations that come from being identified and recognizable as Gypsy. These problems are perpetuated by a high drop-out rate among schoolchildren that leads to widespread illiteracy.

Food in the Domari culture is not only about cooking but also about hospitality and enjoying a meal in a community. Although Domari people live in very poor conditions, they consider it important to invite others to share meals because this brings joy to everyone. The spices that the Dom use come from all the places where nomadic Domari Gypsies have lived and have been passed down from one generation to the next. The Domari people are very proud of their food and most happy to share with the world this extraordinary culinary experience of traditional Gypsy cuisine.

In an effort to document Domari life, history, culture, and traditions, the Domari Society of Gypsies in Jerusalem was founded in 2000 with the aim to open doors that have been closed to the Dom and to protect the Dom culture and traditions by encouraging handicrafts, such as the making of pillows, bags, wallets, and accessories with the typical mix of colors that identifies the Dom. The Domari Society Center has offered courses for women in manicure, hairdressing, and handicrafts, and hosted many lectures to expose women to important ideas, such as best practices in child-rearing. In addition, the center is working on projects for children and teenagers and offers tutoring to advance their academic abilities and protect their future. The most challenging course was the barber course that graduated 11 teenagers, providing them with valuable skills and enabling them to offer stylish haircuts to others. The teenagers who graduated feel that



Palestinians have always accepted the Gypsy community.

they have achieved a dream, having obtained a barber certificate at this young age. As a result of its efforts not only to motivate its members to obtain an education but also to offer lectures about the importance of studying, the Domari Society is happy to share that Jerusalem's Dom community has its first young female lawyer. The community is engaging with the center to encourage many more Dom people to graduate, enabling them to work and hold solid positions in society.

As the founder of the Domari Society of Gypsies in Jerusalem, I am a Dom who has experienced firsthand the effects of severe discrimination, cultural marginalization, poverty, and adult illiteracy on our community that is a minority within Palestinian society. My familiarity with the needs of the Dom community was the impetus for my dream to found the Domari Society. This nonprofit organization is the only institution in the Middle East committed to the Domari people, and its activities are funded by donations from individuals and organizations around the world.

The first Domari community center was opened in 2005 in the Old City of Jerusalem and later moved to its current location in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Shu'fat. In addition to the activities noted above, the center provides hot meals, medical care, and other services to community members. It is also a great place to meet. Handicrafts made by Dom women are sold to contribute to their income and encourage economic independence. The center also raises awareness concerning the Domari community and its needs by engaging in activities and events that include the wider population, such as bazaars, open house days, public awareness campaigns, and internet communication.

The Domari Society's aim is to improve the quality of life of the Dom people in the Middle East, striving to help them reach social, economic, and legal equality and independence. It aims to help bring an end to discrimination against the Dom people and to help them be better integrated into Israeli/Palestinian society, while retaining their cultural identity. The Dom community must have access to education and vocational training in order to break the cycle of poverty and create possibilities for a better, more prosperous future for all Dom people.

The Dom community would be more than happy to welcome you at the center. For more information and contact details, visit the center's website at [www.domarisociety.com](http://www.domarisociety.com).

*Amoun Sleem, the director and founder of the Domari Society of Gypsies in Jerusalem, is a Dom who established Domari Gypsy Center in 2000 to protect Domari culture and traditions, to improve Domari life, and to help eliminate racism against the Dom. She has published two books: Dreaming of Jerusalem and The Dom of Jerusalem: A Gypsy Community Chronicle, and is working on other publications to make available information on this segment of the population. Amoun hopes that the Domari community will obtain minority status in the Holy Land and that bridges can be built between the Dom and other minorities in order to create a more cohesive society where all are respected and understood.*

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