



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Construction of National Identities: Armenian Peoples of Armenia and the Diaspora

Topic of Research

At times when nations become more fragmented and less bound by their traditional cultural-territorial entities due to various conflicts and historical events, the dynamics of identity construction within peoples of different ethnicities, yet of the same nation, must be understood in the confines of both ongoing complex historical and political processes, and ongoing national narratives. At present, the Armenian nation is made up of different constituents and different ethnicities: Armenians of the Republic of Armenia, and that of the Diaspora, each with its own histories, historicities, and cultural backgrounds, with many overlapping strains.

Even though today over ninety-three percent of the population of the Republic of Armenia is ethnically Armenian, we should not overlook the fact that its population is made up of Armenians from completely different historical and cultural backgrounds, and Armenia is not ethnically/nationally as homogeneous a country as we might initially think. Furthermore, the Armenian Diaspora, with its even larger Armenian population than that of the Republic of Armenia, has its own specific historicity, and the historicities of the two peoples do not necessarily

concur with each other. During different historical time periods, there has been tension and social conflicts between local Armenians and various immigrant groups of Armenians (de-territorialized and re-territorialized) who have settled in Armenia over the years, and also strains between Armenians of the Republic and that of the Diaspora. As peoples of nations become more and more fragmented, it becomes imperative in understanding new ways in which cultural differences of peoples with different historical backgrounds and different historicities, yet of a common nationality, are negotiated and manifested within the same (trans)national and territorial framework. In conjunction to studying the construction of identities of Armenians (of the Republic of Armenia) within the confines of historical and nation building narratives, furthermore, it is necessary to conduct a comparative research on the construction of identities of various diaspora Armenian communities and the interactive role that they play in the construction of identities process.

Relevance and Contribution to Field

The scholarly significance of my project will be in its contribution to the following theoretical frameworks.

- Historicizing Anthropology:

In order to understand the dynamics of identity construction of peoples with different histories and historicities, it is necessary that the process be historicized. When historicizing, Braudel's *On History* concept of the *longue durée*, a time scale over the long-term becomes essential. This process cannot be examined over short periods, where there is always the danger of divorcing individuals from their historical contexts. By adopting the long-term approach, we will be better prepared to confront the problems of change and continuity, as it has been argued by scholars who have historicized societies in their studies, such as Ohnuki-Tierney did in her *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities through Time*. But most studies done by anthropologists who have historicized their works have given preference to ecological or geographical continuities (as has been the case with Braudel) and have used shorter periods to highlight the dynamic roles of individual agents and their relationships to various cultural forces. There have been practically no studies that apply the methodologies of Braudel's concept of the *longue-durée* to diaspora peoples, and to de-territorialized and re-territorialized peoples for whom history has not been one continuous flow within the same geographic area. My research will try to fill this gap by historicizing the dynamic forces of nation building processes within the context of de-territorialization and re-territorialization of peoples with a common nationality, but with different histories and different historicities, and the role that an outside entity, a diaspora community, plays in this process.

Also, studies done by social scientists on ethnic and national conflicts have either been on inter-ethnic conflicts within or across state boundaries. There has practically been no research on intra-national and intra-ethnic conflicts within nation building processes. Similarly, my research will try to fill this gap by studying the forces that operate within the same national group, constituted of communities with different cultural and historical backgrounds, which now reside

in the same nation-state, and of a diaspora community that even though it is outside the territorial boundaries of the nation-state, is still part of the all encompassing nation building process.

- Identities at Boundaries, Borderlands, and Border Zones:

Another useful concept in understanding the construction of (national) identities are boundaries, and border zones, a concept that has been aptly formulated by Berdahl in her analysis of German re-unification and identity in the borderlands, (*Where the World Ended: Re-Unification and Identity in the German Borderland*). Boundaries define both territorial and socio-cultural space. They become demarcations through which identities are experienced and defined. Anthropologists have always studied the relationship between socio-cultural boundaries and the dynamics of identity construction through social behavior and modes of representation. But within the various approaches to the study of boundaries, there has always been a tendency to emphasize unity and homogeneity in the study of culture, where even individuals are missing, as seen in the works of Barth and Evans-Pritchard (*The Nuer*).

Recently, there has been a new approach within the study of borderlands. Rosaldo (*Culture and Truth. The Remaking of Social Analysis*) has been one of the first to conceptualize borderlands as both literal and metaphorical spaces where the concept of culture can be redefined. The case of Nagorno-Karabakh provides us with a perfect opportunity in studying the dynamic forces that take place at border zones since it is, literally and socially, the borderland between two states who are vying for the same contested land, and where its people, even though are Armenian, embody both Armenian and Azerbaijani cultures. And yet, the Armenian government, under its slogan of “One Nation, One Culture,” has been trying to create a single Armenian national identity from all the various Armenian peoples within its borders and of Nagorno-Karabakh, which technically is not part of Armenia, and of Armenians of the Diaspora, who are not even within its jurisdiction.

Research Methodology

One of the ways of studying the construction of identities of a composite nation is through its modes of representation and cultural poetics. By analyzing and comparing the production of modes of representation of various cultural and national narratives (state media, plastic arts, cultural texts, and historiography) and the personal narratives of the artists and authors (with different historicities) who contribute to the production of cultural texts, we are able to better comprehend the various underlying currents of identity construction within the forces of national narratives. My approach is to investigate the interactive forces between modes of representation and state narratives within the public sphere, to see on what level they influence and reshape each other. To observe the processes of identity formation, one of my foci has been, in parallel to participant observation, conducting life history interviews of artists and authors (with different historicities) in conjunction with an examination of the production of their cultural texts, and comparing them to the production of national narratives. Being for immediate consumption, cultural texts and national narratives become crucial in

interactive and identity (re)formation processes. They create an immediacy and interactivity between the public sphere and the sources of cultural and national narratives, where the interactivity becomes the arena of negotiations and construction of identities. By focusing on methodologies, such as oral and life histories that bring in personal meaning to the process of valuation, allows researchers to better understand how meaning is experienced and the ways in which experience is assigned by various agents as elaborated by Cohler, (*Personal Narrative and the Life Course*). Life stories of peoples and that of authors of cultural texts, in conjunction with national and personal narratives, provide a rich forum where identity construction of the different elements gets negotiated and manifested through the various modes of representation, because life histories and oral histories become key factors in bringing forth data and theoretical frameworks that will have a decisive impact on the objective of the research, as Wallace shows in *Life Stories*. Examining the narratives of identity construction within the modes of representation and cultural poetics becomes essential, because identity is unthinkable without narrative. People tell about themselves and others through various modes of representation. Identities become narratives of formation as they go through space and time as seen in Friedman's work, *Mappings*.

My primary research site was the Republic of Armenia and to a lesser extent the contested region of Nagorno-Karabakh, an enclave between the Republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Within Armenia, my main research site was Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, and its surroundings, where over thirty percent of the population resides. Besides the capital, I also conducted research at some of the major cities of Northern and Southern Armenia, such as Gyumri and Sisian.

Some of my Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

a) Attempts at Creating a National Unity: Even though there is always the attempt, within the state narrative, to construct a cohesive national unity within various Armenian peoples (both of the Republic and the Diaspora), there are always fissures within the state narrative that challenge the attempted national unity. One of the main cultural government slogans of "One Nation, One Culture," in its efforts of creating national unity, was constantly being challenged by various entities. This challenge against national unity is also apparent in the oppositional forces to the government. The ethnicity of the current president of Armenia and various government officials (even though they are all Armenians) are constantly invoked in criticizing the government in the way that the country is being run, even though all of the entities involved are part of the same nation. There is a constant tug-of-war between forces trying to create a national unity, and forces trying to challenge that unity. And within this discourse transpires the dynamic forces of the construction of identities.

b) Historical and Cultural Continuity: For the Armenians living in Armenia, there is a historical and cultural continuity that goes all the way to pre-Christian and pre-historic times. Prehistoric pictographs, or the *Karahunj* in Sisian (the equivalent of

the Stonehenge) which predate the Great Pyramids of Egypt and the actual Stonehenge itself, are as much a part of today's Armenian identity as their Christian tradition, even though at the time of their implementation and utility, the Armenian nation, as such, was not even in existence. The circumstance is the same for certain pagan rituals that today are still practiced in Armenia. Through the ages, the Armenian Church has absorbed many pagan ceremonies into its official doctrine, but for the ones that it hasn't (or couldn't) they have remained outside official national and religious narratives, even though they are still practiced by Armenians as part of their cultural heritage. The worship of trees is a primary example of a pagan ritual that today is still in existence, but is proscribed from official narratives. As for diaspora Armenians, the situation is quite different. There is a disconnectedness with the past, particularly when it is part of prehistoric and pre-pagan landscapes.

c) Historical Memories: Historical memories function on different levels for different Armenian entities. For Armenians living within the Republic of Armenia, history is one continuous flow within the same geographic area. Even though there are various gaps within the historical memory of the people, those gaps are filled in and bridged over with various narratives. As for diaspora Armenians, mainly for the ones who are the descendents of the survivors of the Armenian genocide, history begins with the act of genocide and displacement, policies perpetrated by the Ottoman government against the Armenians during WWI. And this same historical genocide is constantly invoked by different Armenians in different manners. For most diaspora Armenians, it has become the genesis of their existence as a de-territorialized and displaced people. As for the Armenians living in the republic, invoking the genocide has become a self preservation tool against more recent threatening forces, both political and social.

d) The Role of Monumentality and Anti-monumentality within the Construction of Armenian Identities: The concept of monumentality within the production of various modes of representations, of cultural and national narratives, is very prevalent within territorial Armenia, whereas just the opposite is true for Armenians of the Diaspora. The anti-monumentality of various cultural and national narratives, or the lack of it, is prevalent especially within the representation of cultural and national narratives, especially in the fine arts. The role of a territorial existence and its identification with a sense of belonging has a major role in various modes of representation of cultural and national texts.

Suggestions for Future Research Agendas

Since Nagorno-Karabakh is still a contested region between Armenia and Azerbaijan, practically no research has been done within its boundaries to investigate many of the issues pertaining to various scholarly topics and governmental policies. From my preliminary research, I can attest that there is a wealth of information that is not accessible from any other region, and because of its unique attributes, it can contribute substantially to the advancement of existing scholarly discourse.

