

REPRESENTATIONS OF SUPPRESSED INDIGENOUS CULTURAL MEMORIES: THE COMMUNITIES OF THE SAMI PEOPLE OF FINLAND AND THE KURDS OF TURKEY

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Abstract:

In my paper I intend to examine how the historical marginalization of Sami and Kurdish history and culture affects the cultural identity of these ethnic groups. I discuss how recent political discourses and state interventions have influenced the images of the past and identity politics in the Sami communities living in Finland and in the Kurdish society living in Turkey. Furthermore, I describe how these assimilated minorities have alienated from their own identity due to a damage of their collective memory caused by devastating historical events. The paper also focuses on the ways these two minorities give meaning to the past and strengthen their cultural identities through different forms of art. Both Samis and Kurds express their identities in several creative ways. Their historical realities, individual histories, memories of assimilation and common values are reflected in joiks, folk music and cinema. These are strong ways of remembering and expressions of identity in both cultures. Traditional songs, films, documentaries reveal histories, reproduce cultures and shape the memories of both Sami and Kurdish people. Therefore, I will discuss how the patterns of their cultural memory have an impact on the representation of their identities in the above art forms.

Rezumat:

Acest studiu prezintă modul în care marginalizarea istorică a culturii și istoriei popoarelor sami și kurd afectează identitatea culturală a acestor grupuri etnice. De asemenea, vom analiza felul în care discursurile politice recente și intervențiile statelor au influențat imaginile trecutului și politica de identitate în comunitățile sami care trăiesc în Finlanda și în societatea kurdă care trăiește în Turcia. Aceste minorități asimilate s-au înstrăinat de propria lor identitate ca urmare a deteriorării memoriei colective cauzată de evenimente istorice deoastatoare. Cele două minorități dau sens trecutului și își consolidează identitățile culturale prin diferite forme de artă. Realitățile lor istorice, istoriile individuale, amintirile legate de asimilare și valorile comune sunt reflectate în joikuri, muzica tradițională și cinema. Acestea sunt modalități puternice de amintire și expresii ale identității în ambele culturi. Cântecul tradițional, filmele și documentarele dezvăluie istorii, reproduc culturi și modelează amintirile poporului sami și ale kurzilor. Memoria culturală are un impact asupra reprezentării propriilor identități în formele de artă de mai sus.

Keywords: cultural memory, Kurd, Sami, history, identity, art

Sami people have been the victims of oppression throughout history and although they lived on the periphery, they had the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties. These traditional societies are held together by the survival of their culture, language, identity and tradition, even though these traditions and identities are changing in time.

Due to Finnish language policies and assimilation adult Samis have realized that they couldn't talk anymore about day-to-day events in their own mother tongue and that they had been denied the use of something invaluable, the Sami language. The discovery of these adults that they were not able to participate in a conversation in their real mother tongue was an eye-opener for them. Most of them felt ashamed and even blamed themselves for disappointing their communities and for not being able to develop their abilities to use Sami in socially appropriate ways. New education policies had replaced the Sami history, language and culture with an alien "mother tongue" till the Sami identity became alien for them. These happenings were transformed into painful memories which were difficult to talk about. Sami have carried memories related to themselves as a marginalized minority, being the 'other'.¹

As Minde claims, the Sami people's experience and view of past events

¹ Svensk Information, John Erling Utsi, Anna-Stina Lindén Ivarsson, Marianne Wanger, Lars-Ola Marakatt, *The Sami – an Indigenous People in Sweden* (Västerås: Edita Västra Aros, 2005).

are more relevant than their actual history. Sami speakers share memories from the past which has been dominated by negative discrimination and characterised by hostile attitudes of the Finnish public institutions. Any matter related to the Sami population has been considered as “beggarly, old-fashioned, reactionary and – in many circles – heathen”.²

Sami people associate shame with the happenings from their youth and school years and therefore these narratives from the past which may hurt the speakers are remembered and told with moderation. The minority’s vulnerability and lack of authority hindered them from struggling against the assimilation strategies. As demonstration of the harm produced by the majority’s measures would be complicated, the incidents of the past have been rapidly left behind. Even so, many Sami people have strengthened their identity and no longer feel ashamed but they disapprove the assimilation policy which has made them feel inferior.

The traditional Sami songs, the joiks (*luohti*) are a way of remembering, a way of expressing emotions, happiness or sorrow. As the Sami writer Johan Turi depicts, joiking “is a way of remembering fellow human beings. Some people are remembered with hate, some with love and some with sorrow.”³

Joiks have numerous collective functions as tools for family and group building, sharing memories and raising the awareness of their own cultural heritage. Joiks could create harmony among people and thus they have been able to preserve their ethnic and cultural identity in the times when several Sami generations have been persecuted. For the Sami, joiks represent the bond with nature, and the land that is joiked is essential for building their identity. The land conveys meaning to their existence and is a continuous reminder for the Sami of who they are and what their past appears like. In the case of Sami people cultural identity is not connected only to their mother tongue but also to the way they interact with their relatives, own community and land. The special meaning attached to these is part of their collective memory and identity. Although many Sami speakers have been assimilated into the Finnish culture by the government’s racist policies, the Sami traditions have survived.⁴

Yet, Finland has never come to terms with its past dominated by

² Henry Minde, ‘Assimilation of the Sami – Implementation and consequences’, *gáldu čála – Journal of Indigenous Peoples Rights* 3 (2005): 1-35.

³ Cited in Circumpolar Studies, <http://members.uarctic.org/participate/circumpolar-studies/course-materials/bcs-322-peoples-and-cultures-of-the-circumpolar-world-ii/>, accessed at 10.05.2015

⁴ <http://www.utexas.edu/courses/sami/diehtu/giella/music/yoiksunna.htm>, accessed at 10.05.2015

nationalist feelings and increased discrimination. Politicians have never discussed and reassessed the issues and they are not aware of what had happened in the past. Though, today the Sami minority's demands must be reflected in politics at every level, the historical memory of the Sami community must be recognized, and its collective memory should be understood by the majority population.

The Sami language, the family environment, arts and media are considerable means of expressing and shaping ethnic consciousness and cultural autonomy. Sami artists who have been separated from their communities and friendly environment by educational policies promoted by the Finnish majority, reveal their feelings of alienation, loss of faith in themselves and dignity by paintings or literary works. Sami artifacts may disclose the disagreement that has occurred between the Sami and Finns and the discrepancy regarding their past and future. Sami museums contribute as well to the determination and depiction of Sami history from their own standpoint.⁵

The current official policies regarding the Sami population have had an impact on the narratives and images of the past which in turn have affected the state views related to the Sami. As Ojala argues, the history of the Sami people is "a history that, until very recently, constantly has been written from the "outside".⁶ Investigations into the Sami matters haven't been done emphasizing the significant problems for the Sami. Unlike the Finnish history, the past of the Sami minority had to be persistently clarified and protected. In fact the Sami were considered a community poor in history, lacking in action, change and progress, while the Finnish community was active, rich in history and developing. Due to the pursuit of a homogenous national history Sami experiences and historical images have been isolated. The Finnish authorities have aimed to limit the Sami's freedom to act and rejected their memories of exposure to demarcation, deprivation and prejudice. The connection to the past and the vision about the past are relevant in the building of minority identities. Therefore, homogenization of the Sami historical events and culture should be diminished and the historical view should be taken into account as Sami people oppose the lack of wider self-government.

⁵ <http://members.uarctic.org/participate/circumpolar-studies/course-materials/bcs-322-peoples-and-cultures-of-the-circumpolar-world-ii/>, accessed at 10.05.2015

⁶ Carl-Gösta Ojala, *Sámi Prehistories. The Politics of Archaeology and Identity in Northernmost Europe, Occasional papers in archaeology* 47 (Västerås: Edita Västra Aros, 2009): 82.

Kurdish memory-making

Memory-making influences the identity of Kurdish people. Individuals in Kurdistan have been struggling for their ethnic identity while being exposed to cultural and linguistic homogenization within the framework of the nation-building programme. The history of Turkey has been in line with the state principles and it was referred to as the only way to view past events. This vision of history pursued to misrepresent the past, remodel provincial narratives and belittle the historical memory of Kurds.⁷ The construction of Turkish national identity has been obtained by interfering in the Kurdish collective memory and institutionalizing the 'official' history. These direct interventions caused discontinuities in the Kurdish identity and memory by giving specific meaning and building distinctive memories. Çakır perceives "the appropriation of symbols, memory and myths" as a means "through which loyalty and attachment to the nation are achieved".

Still, Turkish Kurdistan is culturally liberating itself and is gradually globalized. Its institutions struggle against the Turkification of the area. The history and culture of southeastern Turkey are reconsidered and this fact consolidates Kurdish identity.

Kurdish cinema exists from the 2000's and it represents a way of self-depiction and it is also a means of gaining official recognition for Kurdish people. As the young journalist Tsiropoulou formulates, "Kurdish cinema is taking a front seat".⁸ More and more Kurdish films are presented on international level which draw attention to this unseen nation. Nowadays a few hundred documentaries, short films and feature films have been shown to the public worldwide. According to Memed Aksoy, a young film director, "cinema is now 120 years old and Kurds have been making films for the past 20 years, so, we are 100 years behind"⁹. Kurdish films were produced and distributed especially in Iraq after Iraqi Kurdistan had gained its autonomy.

Kurdish cinema discloses untold histories from the Kurdish standpoint and thus shapes the memories of this community impeaching the Turkish government. Kurdish narratives unveil Kurdish histories and at the same time examine Turkish national identity. Özgür emphasizes the absence of meaning

⁷ Beril Çakır, "Crafting Symbolic Geographies in Modern Turkey: Kurdish Assimilation and the Politics of (Re)Naming", in *Conflict, peace, security and development: theories and methodologies*, ed. H. Hintjens, D. Zarkov (Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2015), 150-166.

⁸ Jenny Tsiropoulou, "Kurdish cinema evokes ethnic memories & history of resistance", <http://mongoosmagazine.com/features/kurdish-cinema-is-memory-and-resistance/>, accessed at 13.05.2015

⁹ Ibid.

which characterized the Kurdish cinema especially in the 1980's.¹⁰ Due to political limitations and censorship the Kurdish language could scarcely be used and the Kurdish question itself was inexistent. It is possible that we have seen Kurdish films before but we haven't realized it because Kurdish names had been altered to Turkish ones, the Kurdish language had been avoided and even Kurdish music had been replaced.

In contrast, the films produced in the 2000's reveal undeniable historical realities that were hidden to the general public. These narrated individual histories and memories shape the collective consciousness and cultural identity of the Kurds. Oral culture, collective interpretations of devastating past events and folk music which are present in the films play a fundamental role in declaring Kurdish identity and shaping the memory of the community.

Kurdish documentaries about past events in southeastern Turkey reflect the discrepancy between the Kurdish realities and the official history. Memories about mass destruction are erased and manipulated by the authorities as Turkish history doesn't remember the centuries of oppression. It memorizes not more than the civilizing process of the Kurdistan area. According to Bilir, remembering is appalling to Kurdish individuals as one of the documentary characters confesses that "childhood memories haunted me and want me to find them".¹¹ Documentaries highlight the differences and contrarities between the actual experiences of Kurdish women and children and the history of the authorities represented in newspapers.

Identity and the past are also constructed through Kurdish websites which function as representations of memory and sites for remembering. Kurdish online media helps develop the Kurdish communicative memory which implies an ordinary form of remembering, and also helps build their collective memory. Through these websites Kurdish people all over the world are connected and have the possibility to share the individuals' recollections – which are inconstant due to the flowing of time –, personal interpretations of past events, pictures, Kurdistan maps and various writings. In the same time the exposed documents from the past and the memory practice are at the public's disposal for interpretation.

However, Nikunen argues that collective memory is "often contested

¹⁰ Çiçek Özgür, 'The fictive archive: Kurdish filmmaking in Turkey', *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 1 (2011): 1-18.

¹¹ Ilknur Bilir, "Kurdish documentaries on 1938 Dersim massacre in Turkey", https://www.academia.edu/9064705/Kurdish_Documentaries_on_1938_Dersim_Massacre_in_Turkey, accessed at 12.05.2015

and easily configured, abused, and manipulated”, “and it can be highly political”.¹² Although Kurdish memories cannot be recorded officially, people strive for formal recognition and for the future of the nation.

The identity of younger and more educated Kurdish generations is also reinforced by the help of communication networks. The presence of mass media in the lives of young Kurdish people influenced the revival of memories and willingness to strive for their ethnic identity. According to Tavasoli and Adhami identity is built by such elements as history, collective memory, geography, institutions, power and vision.¹³

Tavasoli and Adhami discuss the concept of collective memory in relation with different age groups that share a bond. Since newer generations experience dissimilar historical episodes, they have different interpretations for the already existing narratives. The historical memory of Kurds is transmitted by communication from one generation to the other and is shaped by political, cultural, mental and social elements. As all Kurdish generations have a specific memory and a specific identity, they contribute with distinct evaluations and narratives which have an impact on how historical events are remembered and represented in the media.

Duman argues that Kurdish people were constrained to conceal their true identity because the only tolerable identity was the Turkish one.¹⁴ “Since “remembering” is considered as a political opposition movement, people did not want to remember the past or talk about it.”¹⁵ Kurdish people were even ordered by the Turkish nation-state to forget their past and prohibited from communicating the history to their offspring. Kurdish history and culture were forced to be forgotten at collective level. For the past of ethnic minorities is regarded as a threat to the authorities, the government succeeded in ruling the memory of the minorities by oppression, blasting and manipulation.

Yet, history has been uncovered by the media and the offences and violations of the Kurds’ basic human rights were drawn attention to. In recent years Kurdish narratives, remembrance and re-examining the past have prevailed over the forgetting processes. The past and future of the Kurds are linked through memory which can be considered as an instrument to rebuild

¹² Kaarina Nikunen, ‘Re-imagining the past in transnational online communities’, *Transit* 8(2) (2013): 1-17.

¹³ Gholamabbas Tavasoli and Jamal Adhami, ‘Historical memory, ethnic identity and globalization: an intergenerational study in Sanandaj’, *International Journal of Social Sciences* 2(2) (2012): 1-15.

¹⁴ M. Zeki Duman, ‘Trying not to forget forgetting: place of social memory in the construction of the historical and ethnic identity’, *Journal of Economic and Social Research* 14 (2) (2012): 83-99.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 97

the past and which may be distorted if connection with someone's family, community, language and culture is lost.

Conclusions

The representation of identity in Kurdish cinema is influenced by the structures of cultural and collective memory. Kurdish films have a significant role since they unveil the Kurdish history against the formal history and bring repressed memories to the surface thus initiating the recovery process. Aksoy, the film director, claims that the Kurdish cinema is considered a cultural richness, a strength, a source of artistic resistance against homogenization and a way of striving for acknowledgement.¹⁶

Turkish officials should not make use of remembering to shed light on the reputable Turkish history while the deprived Kurdish groups see remembering as a way of revealing the inequity of the past.

As for the Samis nowadays, they keep a connection to their families and group, but the Sami collective memory and narratives are not easily understood, accepted and esteemed by the individuals of the Finnish culture. Samis in Finland have been striving for their narratives and representations of the past in particular when the state was interpreting minority history. The images and the experiences of the past are associated with the Sami identity illustrations. Marginalization of the Sami particular experiences and histories can be avoided by dialogue and cooperation.

Today's politicians and the majority population in Finland should have some awareness of the consequences of the assimilation process to understand better the memories of those who had been affected personally.

¹⁶ Jenny Tsiropoulou, "Kurdish cinema evokes ethnic memories & history of resistance", <http://mongoosmagazine.com/features/kurdish-cinema-is-memory-and-resistance/>, accessed at 13.05.2015

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