

MIGRATION, MINORITIES & REGIONAL IDENTITIES

Turkey and the Black Sea region are located between different geographical regions such as the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Their location perforce constitutes them as a physical bridge and has traditionally pitted them at the crossroads between different historical forces and empires. This was as much a feature in prehistoric and historic times as in the contemporary era, when trans-boundary migration remains an important domestic and international concern. The interplay between these diverse historical forces and migratory patterns has been a significant factor in shaping the region's domestic and social make-up over time. It has played an important role in forming cultural identities whether at individual, regional, national or supra-national level. Simultaneously, these processes in relation to migrant communities have also influenced the neighbouring areas around Turkey and the Black Sea region. This Strategic Research Initiative aims to promote research interests across different academic disciplines that pertain to the themes of migration across time in Turkey and the Black Sea coastal region.

Whose is the Baklava? Politics of reconciliation and cultural extimacy

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Is the promotion of cultural similarity between societies marked by relations of enmity a safe path by which to promote reconciliation and peace? In the history of Turkish-Greek relations, the celebration of discovering how 'similar Turks and Greeks are' has been a stable discursive and emotional element in almost all initiatives for rapprochement. This celebratory narrative would, usually, iterate the 'common Aegean or Mediterranean culture', the enjoyment of similar foods, drinks or customs, or would circulate around the realisation that in both languages there is a word, *kéfi* or *keyif*, untranslatable in western European languages, to express the process of reaching enjoyment during an evening with friends, music and alcohol.

In my recently-published book, *Turkish-Greek Relations: Rapprochement, Civil Society and the Politics of Friendship* (2014), I present a more complex picture of the above schema as part of a wider exploration of a long history of common efforts for peace and reconciliation. Severe stereotyping maintained through the teaching of history, biased media reporting and a lack of face-to-face interaction has led the Greek and Turkish communities to imagine each other not only as 'enemies' but as radically different 'others', as the exact 'opposite' of each one's national self. In both official national narratives of the past, Greek and Turkish alike, the 'other' has been extensively depicted as barbaric, cunning, dirty, etc. Therefore, I argue in the book, the moment when one realises that one shares something 'intimate' with such an 'other' – like the cultural objects or practices one thought were unique to oneself – can be a puzzling experience. The moment of realising the similarity to one's imagined opposite

can be a moment that poses puzzling questions instead of providing easy answers; it can be a moment of intense personal or societal transformation with no secure outcome.

Take, for instance, the examples of the *Karagöz* or *Karagiozis* shadow puppet theatre, the hundreds of identical melodies in traditional songs sung on both sides of the Aegean in Turkish or Greek, the sweet *Baklava* or *Baklavás*, the aniseed-based alcoholic drink called *rakı* or *ouzo*. Despite scientific (or usually pseudo-scientific) efforts to designate the origins of these products or practices, and despite their valid or otherwise results, there is a simple fact underlying the experience of enjoying or consuming them: generations of people on both sides of the Aegean have grown up knowing – and feeling – that *their* version of each one of these cultural objects or practices is part of what they themselves uniquely 'are'; it has been a significant means for imagining themselves as part of 'a nation'.

Michael Herzfeld's (2005) concept of *cultural intimacy* has been pivotal in explaining these ideological and affective mechanisms that link together national identity with a number of dispersed cultural practices and modalities of enjoyment. Cultural intimacy explains how people perform their national identities while imagining that they have their own unique and exclusive ways of doing and enjoying 'things' that outsiders might find unfamiliar, weird or even appalling. The concept of cultural intimacy answers the questions of how cultural practices are construed as 'similar' or the 'same' despite their variance within the limits of the nation-state, and how they can affectively connect communities under common single names of nationhood.

But what happens in the moment when the shared cultural practices cross contentious borderlines that politically separate instead of unite? What happens when the ability to acquire such a *single overarching name* to cover for

the dispersion of these practices and enjoyments wanes? As argued, the moment that ‘Greeks’ and ‘Turks’ realise that such elements of material or immaterial culture are actually diffused in similar versions across their borders becomes critical. It is a moment when emotions of surprise usually force an answer to be sought along the sway of a contentious pendulum: *ownership vs sharing*.

In the first case the result is a feeling of antagonism over the proof of ownership of the element that is proclaimed as ‘common’. This usually takes the form of the question posed in the title of this article: *whose is the baklava?* This is a question that in most cases scales up, from interpersonal chit-chat and feelings of uneasiness, to institutional ‘battles’ for the recognition of the ‘origins’ of the practices in question at the level of supranational institutions like UNESCO or the EU. The case of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ reaction to UNESCO’s decision (4.COM 13.73) of 2009 to recognise the Turkish ‘origins’ of the shadow puppet theatre of *Karagöz*, with the Greek ministry claiming the ‘Greekness’ of the Greek version of *Karagiozis*, is such an example (see *Today’s Zaman*, 3 September 2009).

The second option offers a self-reflective point of contact and communication that connects instead of separates. But again the answer here can vary between two different approaches: on the one hand, the lyrical and emotionally loaded discourse of celebrating the ‘common culture’ by overlooking differences for the sake of a ‘Greek-Turkish friendship’ or, on the other, the more neutral realisation that cultural practices know no national borders, that they are almost always ‘copies’ with no ‘original’ and that both Greeks and Turks can eat *their* baklava – even if this means that one can also compare them and argue that one might be ‘better’ than the other (and in the case of baklava the Turkish version, especially pistachio-filled, would be hard to beat!).

Despite the mundane or even funny character of such moments, the translation of these feelings of surprise, when realising that one resembles one’s ‘enemy’, become moments of *the political*. They become moments which, as Laclau and Mouffe (2001) argue, can fix new hegemonic interpretations of how things are (or of the meaning invested in things) and promote ‘friendship’ instead of ‘enmity’.

In my book, bringing into a dialogue the work of Herzfeld and the psychoanalytical theory of Jacques Lacan, I propose the concept of *cultural extimacy* as a prism to understand this puzzling process. Extimacy, in Lacan’s theory (cf. Miller 1994), is the psychic condition where the limits between the inside and the outside are blurred, where cause and effect between external stimuli and internal processes are less clear and where the imagined singularity of the subject as having clear boundaries from its ‘outside’ is shaken.

Similarly, if *cultural intimacy* successfully speaks of the way cultural practices generate a surplus of enjoyment by producing a feeling of belonging as part of a plural singularity (we ‘Greeks’ enjoy *souvlaki*, we ‘Turks’ enjoy

döner, etc.), *cultural extimacy* tries to depict the dynamics of a similar enjoyment that is marked by the separation of a hyphen (as in *Greek-Turkish*) and draws its affective surplus from the sway of a pendulum between friendship and enmity. Cultural extimacy signifies the fact that the realisation of cultural similarities across the border is deemed to remain always incomplete, unable to find an overarching name to give meaning to the ‘sameness’ discovered, always in sway between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, and therefore always open to contestation. It means remaining exposed to the hate-stimulating discourses of cultural ownership but also open to the creativity of the politics of peace and reconciliation.

While only a few months are left until the completion of my BIAA research fellowship in March 2015, cultural extimacy will be part of my new research project, which aims to compare different cases of rapprochement politics between contentious dyads in the Mediterranean, the Caucasus and the Middle East; these are areas where, as argued above, cultural practices are scarcely contained within national borders, language or ethnic boundaries.

References

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Greek (above) and Turkish (below) versions of baklava. Photos by N. Bratt, L.W. Yang; creative commons licence.