

## LIVING IN THE PRESENT: THE GAGAUZ IN MOLDOVA

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In this paper I explore different ways of relating to the past in terms of a sense of belonging and claims over a certain territory. I shall describe the conditions in which Gagauz intellectuals - nation builders - produced competing historical narratives for the origin of the Gagauz people and the length of Gagauz settlement in southern Moldova. The content and form of these competing claims about the past do not however, make use of or relate to social practices among "ordinary" people. For their part, the latter relate to the past and reproduce a sense of belonging to the place through values attached to work on the soil and the commemoration of the dead. Their closest attachment is to the small rural communities in which they live; the larger unit, or "imagined community", to which they relate is still the Soviet Union. The process of downsizing the imagined community – by which I mean deconstituting the already existing one – is slower among the Gagauz than it is for larger units such as nation states (e.g. Moldova). I aim to show that the technique of construction, in this case the narrative of the Gagauz past produced by the nation-builders, can scarcely function ontologically. This is because, unlike the social practices that connect people to their past and locality, the nation-builders lack the tools to connect past knowledge to present experience and knowledge as they attempt to create a Gagauz national imagery.

The Gagauz were given land under the Russian Empire and they have better memories of the Russians than of the Romanians. Romanian rule is remembered in terms of oppression and corruption. In daily conversations, when old people want to threaten children, they say things along the lines of "now you will get a good beating like from a Romanian master". On the other hand, the prosperity of the post-war period, improvements in agricultural production through mechanization within *kolhoz* structures, better education and other welfare state benefits during the Soviet period made a generally favourable impression on the Gagauz population, despite bitter memories of the Second World War and Stalinist oppression. The Gagauz were socialized to the idea of the Soviet Union as their country. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, children continued to read the old books at school where it was stated that their country was the Soviet Union. Yet it would of course be wrong to give the impression that everything remained unchanged.

### **Gagauz claims to nationhood**

The declaration of Moldovan as the state language in 1989 and the accompanying legislation and negative attitudes towards non-Moldovans led to an increased polarization of ethnic relations. According to a report that was officially approved by the Moldovan parliament in 1990, the Gagauz were not considered to be indigenous to Moldova, and their homeland was deemed to be Bulgaria. This report also regarded them as a national minority, not a nation or people.

Perhaps not surprisingly, this report provoked the Gagauz leadership. After all, throughout the years of struggle politically active Gagauz had tried to prove that they were a nation with its own rights and territory. Indeed, a Gagauz ethnographer (M. Marunevich) has written a short history of the Gagauz in a pamphlet arguing that the Gagauz were in Southern Moldova before the Moldovans.

The question of their origin as Turkified Bulgarians or Christianized Turks, which engaged linguists and historians alike at the turn of the century, was scarcely a subject of political debate. The question of Gagauz origin was thus more of a concern for politically active people and scholars than it was for ordinary Gagauz or Moldovans. The Gagauz nation-builders all agree on a Turkic origin, although they connect themselves to various Turkic tribes. In doing so, they usually silence the issue of conversion to Christianity. However, these competing claims have not as yet become established as a coherent national narrative; rather they can constitute a work in progress. Yet their competition has contributed to and continues to legitimize the existence of a nation called the Gagauz and the place Gagauzia.

Naming and possessing a locality seem to be central to nationhood or in a broader sense to peoplehood. Knowledge about a place most of the time revolves around the authenticity of the relationship between the place, the people and their history. In the case of the Gagauz, the name of a former minority in the Moldavian SSR is given to the territory in an attempt to render the nation authentic. However, in the Gagauz case, the way nation builders have asserted and justified their claim to possess a locality differs from the way in which ordinary people claim attachment to the territory where they live. When we look at the oral narratives of the Gagauz, we do not find origin myths or common legends about a past in southern Moldova. Nor are there school curricula which integrate the asserted Gagauz past produced by nation-builders into children's' acquired knowledge. Instead we find the products of a fading oral tradition which

includes ballads telling of the oppression under Ottoman rule as well as narratives of the recent past - i.e. Romanian rule and being part of the Soviet Union.

### **Agricultural setting, work and property**

A particular social setting can be seen as the social form and locality through which belonging is reproduced. A sense of past is only one of the ways in which belonging is (re)produced. I would argue that the commemoration of the dead as well as notions of work and property are principally instrumental in shaping the way in which the Gagauz relate to the past and thus in moulding their sense of belonging to their villages or small towns. For Gagauz villagers, work has a moral value that is surely influenced by socialist ideology. However, as documented by other studies (Lapland 1995; Verdery 1996) pre-socialist notions of work still have an influence on perceptions of property, personhood and belonging to a community and place.

Agricultural work is hard and weather conditions can have very adverse effects on the crops in southern Moldova. Droughts occur almost on a regular basis and the resources for irrigation are very limited. Everybody is dependent on the soil (*toprak*) in one way or another. Most food comes from what people cultivate in their own garden and plot of land. The *kolhoz* helps families to cultivate their own piece of land by providing tractors and seed.

The general belief is that if somebody works they can manage to survive despite hardship. The old people who experienced Romanian rule and both world wars feel that they have experienced all sorts of regimes and rulers, but think that they survived by working hard. Once, when we were talking about economic difficulties, a man told me that "a person who works on the soil, s/he does not have a dollar or lei at home but is not hungry. It is also difficult to be a master to people who work on the soil" (*Toprakta çalışsan insanda evde dolar yok lei de yok ama aç değil. Toprakta yashaan insana çorbacı olmak zor*). Likewise if a woman had long nails and nail polish, others might criticize her by saying that she could only have such nails because she apparently did not engage in working the soil. In this way, the soil as a substance has a social value through engagement with it.

The older generation who had been children during Romanian rule and youngsters during the Second World War would recount their previous experiences. These anecdotes would be passed on during winter evenings or while engaged in more relaxed agricultural labour such as cleaning corn, sorting vegetables etc. The narratives would include such issues as how they had been

excluded from the army during the wars because they had not been trusted as a group and so on. However, they spoke of doing military service in other parts of the Soviet Union or in Romania during Romanian rule. Old women, on the other hand, would tell stories about the arrival of the Germans and the appropriation of grain and agricultural products during the period under Stalin (especially during WW II). In this way, narratives of the past are usually conveyed through (and within the context of) agricultural labour.

Agricultural labour has a moral value attached to it in many other places too (Lampland 1991; Haukanes 1999). It is seen as a central key value in society and a part of social identity. The way people are attached to the wider economic systems and politics is also related to the values attached to notions of work in general. One of the criticisms directed against socialism in the village where I lived was that socialism paid everyone equally, irrespective of how much they worked.

Although villagers generally owned private land before Soviet rule, they were not large landowners. Those who had private land were self-sufficient but still poor. Many old people tell not of losing their private land but of the poverty they experienced before the Soviet period. I know of nobody in the village who asserted a claim to the plot of land that their parents or grandparents owned before the establishment of Soviet rule. Thus kinship did not justify claims to property. To recap: when it comes to legitimizing access and claims to land, prior ownership of property is not regarded as an important value whereas hard work is. Just as on this local level prior ownership had little influence on the claims asserted over a piece of land, the assertion that the Gagauz were in Southern Moldova before the Moldovans was not the argument used among people to justify the desire for Gagauz autonomy. (Yet the desire certainly existed: a large majority in the area (78 %) voted to be included in Gagauzia). In their attempt to assert a Gagauz collective identity, the people's sense of belonging has helped nation builders to establish Gagauzia. It was the place, or to be more specific the village or small town where they were born, worked on the soil and where their parents were buried that stimulated such a desire.

### **Commemoration of the dead**

During Easter and various Saints' days the dead are celebrated. Easter is regarded as an important period of renewal, when cleaning activities are carried out in each household and the whole family goes to the graveyard, eats and drinks wine at the graves and celebrates the souls of their dead kin. Some who lived in other towns, or even in other republics such as Ukraine or Russia,

tried to come at Easter to participate in these celebrations. It is possible to argue that, besides providing their livelihood, the soil where the Gagauz live bonds them to the dead kin who are buried at that place. The graves of their relatives, which only go back as far as two generations, connect them to a past short enough to be remembered by living generations.

### **Identity, past and present**

The Gagauz population is attached to the place where they live through various activities, some of which I have described here. This place in general terms corresponds to a web of relationships and performances of tasks. Not having an established narrative of the past as a nation in that territory, and not having extensive previous land ownership, their assertion of identity is based primarily on present performance.

The nation-builders who try to produce a historical narration seek to present a collective unified past; although this project is not necessarily challenged by the local social practices of ordinary people, the nation builders do not make active use of such practices. Daily and ritual practice produces and reproduces a sense of collective identity, while at the same time the discursive space which is usually determined by the nation-builders is also a site for ordinary people to participate in the production of a common Gagauz national identity. However, the activities and public rituals that bring out the distant past are either almost or entirely absent in the daily life of people. "The past can only be an object of knowledge insofar as it is exemplified by, and identified with, particular actions or events that have been played out in the localities" (Harris 1995:105). In the Gagauz case the distant past and the narrative of origin are not yet an object of knowledge as seen as part of a national narrative but they have the potential to be integrated into the coherent national narrative which has yet to be established. The ontological premises, which are necessary to enable a nationalist ideology to succeed, are rather weak in the Gagauz case. What, then, are the implications for the Gagauz nation-building project?

### **Conclusions**

Nation-building processes in their initial periods are mostly examined through what they constitute, in an attempt to achieve an "imagined community" (1983). However, while constituting the imagined community the active producers of national imagery also deconstitute the already existing one, in other words they try to downsize the already established imagination, in this case the former Soviet society. Double minorities of the former Soviet Union (i.e. those who live in a non-Russian republic) in this respect are in a difficult position. Lacking the tools of

a nation state needed to promote extensive use of their own language in education, bureaucracy, etc., they are slower in the process of downsizing the Soviet imagination. Depending on their pre-socialist past, those who do not have a well-established historical narrative of their collectivity, one that is exclusive to the group, try to establish one by drawing on their Soviet notions of nationhood or peoplehood. The Gagauz are one example of this. As Tilly argues, people take from the past histories the particular forms of claim-making in addition to a history of their relation to potential objects of their claims (Tilly 1994:247). The Gagauz nation-builders have taken their claim making for the territory from Soviet notions and 19th / 20th century nationalist imagery. Despite the slow pace of their integration of people's social practices into an exclusively Gagauz national imagery and historical narrative, the attempt to create a new unit named Gagauzia has succeeded – at least in the legal sense. The Gagauz case thus illustrates the complexity of the relationship between highly motivated nation-builders and "ordinary people" lacking in passion for the nationalistic project or a distant past which might connect them to their locality.

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