SMALL IMAGINATIONS: GREEK CYPRIOT CHILDREN'S CONSTRUCTIONS OF "THE TURK"

by

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INTRODUCTION

> "There was a Turk, a Greek and an American and they went up a very tall mountain. The American took his shirt off and threw it down. The Turk asked him: 'Why did you throw your shirt down?' And the American told him: 'We have a lot in America.' Then the Turk was jealous and took his watch off and threw it down. The Cypriot [she means the "Greek"] says to the Turk: 'Why did you throw your watch down? It's so nice!' They were all friends. And the Turk said: 'Ouh, we have a lot in Turkey.' Then the Cypriot takes the Turk and throws him down from the cliff and the American says: 'Why did you throw the Turk down the cliff?' And the Cypriot said: 'We have a lot of them in Cyprus.'"

When Elena, a sixth grader, told me this joke she laughed with her heart. It was meant to be a joke, to entertain. But the matter to which it referred was a serious one, for Elena and all the other children I worked with and who at times would tell me jokes like this. The choice of Turks in the punch line is not accidental of course. It is precisely the reason for it being a joke. The Turks are a well-understood problem for Greek Cypriot children. They are the invaders, the occupiers, the enemy. Therefore, as a group they have a unique position in their imaginations.

This paper describes and analyzes how Greek Cypriot elementary school children perceive, imagine, and talk about Turks as a people. My attempt is to illustrate the process of ethnic identity construction in childhood as it takes shape in contemporary Greek Cypriot society.

The data I present here were collected during a year of intensive ethnographic fieldwork (July 1996 to July 1997) carried out in the southern part of Cyprus, the area controlled by the Republic of Cyprus. The aim of the study was to examine ethnic identity construction among Greek Cypriot children attending elementary school (Spyrou 1999). The project focused on two communities and their respective schools, one urban community near the buffer zone in Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus, and a rural community about one hour's drive south-west of Nicosia. The school emerged as a major site for the study of ethnic socialization but other contexts outside the school were also studied in order to account for the multiple sites and agents that are responsible

for children's ethnic socialization (e.g., the home, the playground, the coffee shop, and the afternoon school). A variety of different methods and techniques were used to collect data including observation, participant-observation, interviewing, sorting and ranking, drawing, essay-writing, picture and poem interpretation, photography and video recording. The data I use in this article mainly come from classroom observations and interviews with children.

CONTEXTS AND FRAMEWORKS OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

For understanding contemporary issues of identity construction in Cyprus, the Ottoman rule of the island in the late 16th century is an important historical period to consider. Out of the first Ottoman soldiers who were stationed on the island and later by conversions of Greek Cypriots to Islam grew the Turkish Cypriot community of the island. When Cyprus came under British colonial rule (1878-1960), the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities experienced their first problems as each community turned to its respective motherland, Greece and Turkey, for a sense of collective identity. During 1955-59 Greek Cypriots carried out an anti-colonial war with the purpose of overthrowing the British and uniting Cyprus with Greece. The result of this war however was not union with Greece but the granting of independence to the island.

During the 1960s, intercommunal strife broke out and both Greece and Turkey got directly involved in what came to be known as the Cyprus problem. The rise in 1967 of a dictatorship in Greece led to disagreements between the dictatorial government and the government of Cyprus. An ultra-nationalist group directed by the Greek dictators engaged in underground terrorist activity against the government of Cyprus aimed at overthrowing it and uniting the island with Greece. This activity culminated with a coup against the government of

Cyprus carried out in 1974. Though the coup failed, Turkey claiming to intervene in order to protect the Turkish Cypriot minority,[1] invaded Cyprus and occupied 37% of its territory. Since 1974 the two communities have lived apart and a physical boundary separates the Turkish occupied north from the free south which is controlled by the Republic of Cyprus. Negotiations between the two sides have so far proved to be unsuccessful in finding a solution to the problem.

Today, and non-surprisingly, the primary ‘other’ against whom Greek Cypriot children construct their identities are the Turks. In the process of growing up in a society where they are constantly made aware of the “abnormality” resulting from the Turkish occupation in Cyprus, they learn that Turks stand as the major obstacle for the reinstatement of peace and tranquility in their country. The recent history of Cyprus has helped create and sustain the image of “the Turk” as the principal enemy of Greek Cypriots and the Greek nation at large.

Anthropologists, most notably Fredrik Barth, have contributed a great deal to our understanding of identity construction in interethnic contexts. For Barth (1969a; 1969b), ethnic boundaries are social; cultural differences are important only as long as they help maintain ethnic boundaries through social interaction between groups. Though Barth's approach tells us much about the maintenance of ethnic boundaries resulting from interaction between groups, it tells us nothing about ethnic boundary maintenance in the absence of social interaction between ethnic groups, as is the case with the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities in Cyprus. The boundary that separates the two communities is not only physical but also a symbolic, relationally constructed boundary (Cohen, 1982, p. 3), constantly created and recreated by the members of the two communities in the process of making sense of who they are. It is essentially an ethnic boundary but one which is erected and maintained through different processes than those outlined by Barth. These processes are those which, broadly speaking, constitute ethnic

socialization, that is the cultural learning that allows members of one ethnic group to construct their self-identities as distinct from those of others. What is interesting of course in contexts like Cyprus is that the absence of actual physical inter-ethnic contact implicates both individual and collective imagination in this process. Below, I illustrate the process of identity construction as it takes place in the classroom.

'US' AND 'THEM'

Nationalistic discourse aims at what Bakhtin calls canonization or the "process that blurs heteroglossia, that is, that facilitates a naive, single-voiced reading" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 425). Whether it manages to persuade or not, it comes with authority attached to it (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342). Through emotional appeals, it seeks to construct a grandiose community which can only be imagined but never fully experienced through direct contact.

It is to nationalistic discourse that teachers have often turned to in the classroom in their efforts to explicate self-identity. On occasion, they would appropriate highly loaded and emotional language full of imagery. In his description about the fall of Constantinople, Christoforos, a rural teacher, explained that after the Turks entered the city they "slaughtered the Greeks." The use of the word "slaughter" conjures images of the killing of animals with knives. The word "massacre" (*sfaghi*) in Greek when used to describe genocide (e.g., the Armenian genocide--*i sfaghi ton Armenion*) comes from the same root emphasizing the cruelty involved in the act of genocide. Such language, of course, aims to arouse an emotional response. The image is one of ruthless murderers and innocent victims. The evaluative response is one of disgust: *those who do such things are certainly not civilized humans; only barbarians could do such things*.

Indeed, the very construction of a national identity is based on this self/other frame of reference where the 'self' always emerges as superior to the 'other.' It is a kind of logic that seeks to define the 'self' in terms of the 'other' but in the process both 'self' and 'other' emerge as two polarized opposites that cannot exist (in that form) but in relation to one another. To put it another way, *there are Greeks because there are Turks.*

Such polarized understandings of 'self' and 'other' were often constructed in the classroom. As the primary 'other,' Turks emerged as the defining opposite of Greeks. The logic is one which sees Greeks as civilized, Turks as barbarians, Greeks as peaceful, Turks as warmongers, Greeks as courageous, Turks as cowards.

Consider the following example where Turks are used as a yardstick for measuring other 'others.' The teacher's comment takes place during a class discussion about Egyptian civilization in a geography lesson for the 5th and 6th grades of the rural school.

Teacher: "From what we read, were they [i.e., the Egyptians] people with civilization (*politismo*)? Were they, let's put it this way, barbarians like the Turks, the Ottomans, who have always been barbarians?"

The teacher's question here operates at a number of different levels. Though its aim is to elicit a response about the state of Egyptian civilization--which is after all the topic being discussed--it simultaneously constructs a particular understanding of Turks, both present-day and historical. It positions the Turks in the unquestionable and undeniable category of "barbarians" but it also offers them as a reference point to help the children respond to his question appropriately: *Of course the Egyptians had more civilization than the Turks*.

It is not surprising that teachers themselves allude to this dialectical construction of 'self' and 'other' in the classroom. In a discussion about the siege of Mesolongi in a 6th grade history

class, the teacher for example pointed out that: "The common element which made all of them fight together was the Turk (*o Tourkos*)." The teacher's comment points to the need for having an 'other': *you need an enemy to give your collective existence meaning*. The use of the singular term "the Turk" (*o Tourkos*) is a semantic strategy for essentializing the 'other.' "The Turk" as a descriptive term of the 'other' seeks to individualize the collectivity in an absolute manner. *There are no different kinds of Turks but "a Turk" who is homogeneous, undifferentiated and captures the essential nature of all Turks*. As the saying goes "if you have seen one, you've seen them all."

TURKS AS THE ETERNAL OTHER

The history which becomes relevant in understanding and explaining the present is the history of animosity between 'us' and 'them.' In the classroom, teachers often equate present-day Turkey with the Ottoman empire. The expansionist tendencies of the latter are seen as necessarily being in line with the expansionist tendencies of Turkey today. In this manner, an essential historical continuity is established. History proves the nature of "the Turk" who is, in all fundamental respects, one and the same, then and now. *If his ancestors were barbarians, he must be too; if his ancestors had expansionist tendencies, he too must have the same tendencies,* and so on. Through this process of illustrating the 'other' historically, an eternal enemy is constructed; an enemy who, like 'us,' is immutable, unchanging, primordial. By collapsing time and historical contingency identity is fully essentialized.

But in their constructions of "the Turk," children not only have the distant national history to draw on but a much closer and more intimate history, that of their own country. Who the 'other' is may be validated if events in the present--lived history--provide affirmation for the essential, unchanging nature of that 'other.' In the following example, both the teacher and the student (during a lesson in Greek with the 4th grade) construct "the Turk" as barbaric and

heartless by reflecting on the violent events that took place during the summer of 1996 on the buffer zone:[1]

Teacher: "How do you feel about the way they [i.e., the Turks] killed them [i.e., the Greek Cypriots], about the barbarous, barbarous way by which they killed them?"
Chariklia: "Mrs, the Turks don't have a heart."

The teacher in the above example constructed the Turks as barbaric, an image which Chariklia in turn found easy to reaffirm in her mind and in the minds of her classmates. The buffer zone events became an anchoring experience--an illustrative example--on which she and other children drew from to describe the Turks. Local history feeds into the larger history of the nation where it finds a framework for interpretation; there is, after all, nothing really surprising regarding the Turks' behavior given what children know from history. Lived history is incorporated into the larger history of the nation in a powerful manner; the children have seen what happened and had all the evidence to crystallize in their imaginations the image of "the Turk" as a barbarian.

But nationalist logic proceeds one step further: the adversarial relationship between 'us' and 'them' is not just a "fact" of history; it is also a "fact" of the future (however speculative such a rhetorical statement may be). In short, what happened in the past between the two groups is likely to happen again and again in the future. For, after all, these are the same people. Thus, the "barbaric" nature of the Turks is not just a thing of the past but something they will also exhibit in the future. It is their nature, something that cannot be changed. This "history of the future" is predictable given what is known about the past and the present. The implications for 'us' are

[1] In August 1996, following a demonstration by Greek Cypriot and foreign motorcyclists on the right of free movement on the island, violence broke out at the buffer zone. A Greek Cypriot male, who was caught in the barbed wire while demonstrating, was killed by Turkish and Turkish Cypriot counter-demonstrators and several others were wounded. One week later, a similar demonstration at the buffer zone led to the murder of another Greek Cypriot male who attempted to bring down a Turkish flag from its pole.

also quite clear given this kind of imagination: *'We' need to do what our heroic ancestors did when they had to face the Turks. 'We' need to stand up to 'them' and liberate the homeland.*

THE TURKS IN CHILDREN'S IMAGINATIONS

When I asked the children to name "a group of people who are very different from 'us'" most of them mentioned the Turks. Also, much of what the children told me about their own sense of identity was defined in relation to Turkey and Turks: *unlike Turkey, Cyprus is civilized; unlike the Turks who destroy our churches in the occupied territories we do not destroy their mosques in the south; and unlike the Turks who kill those who cross the buffer zone we just arrest them.*[2]

In our conversations, many children described Turks as barbarians, bad, egoists, terrorists, torturers, warmongers, quarrelsome, rapists, wild, murderers, vandals, looters, heartless, revengeful, hateful, malicious, devious, ungrateful, unfair, jealous, illiterate, impolite, dirty, liars, foolish, crazy, and thieves. The characterization "barbarian" as both a descriptive and evaluative term of the Turks was at the heart of most of the children's explanations. But why are they barbarians, I would ask. The children always had responses for what seemed to them in many ways a naive question on my part, especially given that I am a Greek Cypriot myself and I should know. For Kyriakos [6th grade], the Turks "came and terrified Cyprus. They took it with barbarous behavior, they enslaved it, and they killed many people." The Turkish occupation of Cyprus is for many children the primary proof that the Turks are barbarians for to take someone else's homeland is uncivilized. The children also readily justified their beliefs with examples

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[2] This kind of categorization is what Eriksen (1993) terms "digital," where a clear and unambiguous boundary is erected between 'us' and 'them.' "Analogic" categorizations, on the other hand, allow for differences of degree so that a group can be more or less similar to 'us.'

from the national history they learned at school. Popi [6th grade], for example, pointed out that the Turks have occupied and still continue to occupy territories that were previously Greek, like Constantinople.

GOOD TURKS, BAD TURKS AND THE DEPTH OF STEREOTYPES

Though most of what is said in the classroom is clearly ethnocentric and aimed to erect and sustain a boundary between 'us' and 'them,' occasionally some teachers present children with other kinds of understandings. Teachers come from a variety of ideological backgrounds and their own personal beliefs and understandings do, on occasion, even if mostly in a low-key manner, enter the classroom lesson. Consider the following example where the teacher is careful to draw a distinction between governments and people, between politicians and ordinary citizens:

Charitini: "In Greece they call the Turks stinky dogs (*vromoshilloi*)."
Teacher: "Is it good to say these things?"
In mild protest, Charitini said that the Turks did bad things to 'us.' The teacher proceeded to explain that many Turks had no choice but to follow the orders of those above them--their leaders--when they invaded Cyprus.

Though the teacher's statement denies the Turkish people of real political power--that is, Turkish people are coerced into carrying out their government's wishes--at the same time, it suggests that ordinary Turks are not, as they are often presented in stereotypes, bad people. Such a construction, of course, has to compete with the more negative constructions of Turks, but it nevertheless constitutes another construction that children may be exposed to--one that many adults, both inside and outside the school, will voice from time to time.

Similarly, though children often resorted to absolute, negative evaluations of Turks (e.g., *Turks are bad*) when asked to elaborate most of them had a more critical understanding of who Turks are. Thus, when I asked them *whether all Turks are bad* as their previous assertions implied, many of them explained that "there are both good and bad Turks." Some of them distinguished between "Turks" [i.e., mainland Turks] and "Turkish Cypriots." Much in line with

their teachers and parents, these children described Turkish Cypriots much more favorably than Turks: *Turkish Cypriots are good people who also suffer as a result of the Turkish occupation while Turks are bad because they invaded and occupied Cyprus* (see Spyrou n.d., in print).

Labeling and stereotyping are not immutable attributions as they might initially appear to be. Rather, they are discursive strategies that take place within specific conversational contexts. They can be shifted and reassigned to account for the complexity of categories if and when necessary. Thus, for example, the same child who in one context labels Turks as evil may present a different understanding of Turks in another context: as a group made up of both good and bad people, for example. Neofitos [6th grade], drew a distinction between the Turkish government and the Turkish people:

> "There are many from Turkey who are good. It is not because they occupied us. They say it is a democracy but it is not a democracy. Whatever the president wants, it is over. It is fascism. It is not the people's fault. It is the fault of those who told them [to do these things]. If they did not command them 'Go and do that' they would not go."[3]

Many other children pointed out that they dislike or hate the Turkish state, the Turkish military, and the Turkish politicians who are interested in making wars with other countries and who force the ordinary people to obey their orders.

It is important to recognize that children's understandings of an ‘other’ (and the ‘self’) are often much more complex and less stereotypical than initial inquiry might suggest. In the context of some conversations (e.g., at school or when discussing certain issues during an interview) children may readily resort to stereotypes: homogenized evaluations of the ‘other’ that completely ignore internal variability. In other contexts where they are required or are asked to be more critical, the children may present more complex understandings of the ‘other.’

Stereotypical categories, are not what they appear to be on the surface. They have depth, even if their depth, is still to some extent stereotypical. As I have illustrated, for many of the Greek Cypriot children I worked with, the category of "Turks" they refer to in their stereotypes is a minimized category which includes only those Turks they perceive as being 'bad.' In other words, the stereotypes shrink to the "worst" of the group. In discursive practice, the national category itself (i.e., Turks) becomes a label for the negative of the 'other,' not a label for the nation as a whole. If the stereotype fails to communicate that, it is because it is a stereotype after all; it is not meant to deconstruct or complicate a category but to simplify it.

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[3] In his study of East and West German children, Davey (1987, p. 52) also noted that the children distinguished between the government and ordinary people.

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