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# Constructing identity through symbols by groups demanding self-determination: Bosnian Serbs and Iraqi Kurds

Revised draft for *Ethnopolitics*

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## Abstract

This contribution revisits the question over which much ink has been spilled in the study of national self-determination; who are the people? More specifically, we ask how national identity in self-determination claims is constructed. Drawing on observations from two case studies we submit that cultural/ethnic definitions of national identity continue to underwrite self-determination claims. We argue that these practices have been central to the process of defining and reproducing the group identity on behalf of which the claim to political autonomy is made. The use of symbols and practices referring to territorially bound distinct nations with different linguistic and cultural features compared with other groups inhabiting the state reinforces the assertiveness of self-determination claims. Despite their differences, Bosnian Serbs and Iraqi Kurds typically follow similar trajectories in their use of ethnic, cultural and territorial symbols to reinstate the validity of their demands.

## Introduction

The political and rhetorical currency of one of the most contentious international principles of the twentieth century, the right to national self-determination, shows no signs of depreciating. The conflicting demands for the right to self-determination in Crimea by Ukrainian and Russian populations in 2014 are but one example of the principle's continued potency. The International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion in 2010 on Kosovo's independence did not consider the unilateral declaration of independence a breach of international law. This decision, coupled with the fact that 110 UN member states recognised Kosovo's independence, implies a reduced importance of obstacles to realising self-determination demands of separatist groups (Wolff & Rodt, 2013). The criticisms levelled by early critics of the principle are no less pertinent today; issues to do with its content, its bearers and implementation continue to define the debates (Margalit & Raz, 1990). At the same time, the profound tension between the promise of political autonomy to oppressed communities held by the right to national self-determination and the continued primacy of state sovereignty enabling rejection of such claims by states remain.

These and a number of other *problematiques* underpinning national self-determination have inspired a substantial body of literature. Analyses ranging from

legal and political to normative have sought to address issues such as conceptual shifts in the right to self-determination (Beran, 1984; Buchanan, 2003; Griffiths, 2003; Hannum, 1996; Koskenniemi, 1994), institutional solutions to the secessionist demands of separatist groups (Horowitz, 1994; Moore, 1998; O’Leary & McEvoy, 2013) and the relationship between norms and practices of sovereignty, nationalism and self-determination (Fabry, 2010; Mayall, 2013). These scholarly debates provide useful explanatory and normative insights to understanding the resonance of self-determination and the continuing political fragmentation of world territory. Yet, this theorising has predominantly operated at the macro-level; on the whole it lacks a systemic micro-level study of groups demanding self-determination.<sup>i</sup> Moreover, the use of national symbols to promote and present national unity is a significant component of the micro-level analysis on nationalist group strategy to cultivate group awareness. When established on ethnic symbols to emphasise unity of identity, the political assertiveness of separatist nationalisms increases (Heraclides, 1991).

Smith’s ethnosymbolist approach explains the resonance of nationalism and national identity with ethnic, cultural, linguistic and territorial symbols. According to Smith “naming and self-definition and the cultivation of shared symbols, myths, values and traditions” are common characteristics of both nations and ethnic communities (Smith, 2009, p. 30). Smith uses the concept of *ethnie*, which he considers as the pre-modern origin of national identity, meaning “named human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories and cultures, having an association with a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity” (Smith, 1986). He perceives an *ethnie* as the pre-modern root of a nation, and nations as modern constructs that emerged due to large-scale economic and political transformations in Europe. Although Smith considers his approach as modernist, the way he defines *ethnie* renders Smith’s approach more primordialist than modernist.

Although the ethnosymbolist approach acknowledges the importance of historical, political and economic circumstances, its argument on *ethnie* and symbols appear to give resonance to group identity and separatist demands. The primordialist dimension of this approach fits well with its ready acceptance by nationalists. Kurdish nationalist scholars, for instance, often cite Smith’s approach in their study of Kurdish nationalism to explain the resonance of identity (Hassanpour, 2003). Nationalists tend to adopt primordialist lenses in understanding their identity and communicating this understanding to outsiders and would-be nationals. Therefore, as Guibernau also argues, despite its cultural focus, the ethnosymbolist approach has significant political implications, not always positive, because cultural symbols and characteristics implicitly aim to legitimise self-determination demands of nationalisms (Guibernau, 2004).

Building on the potential political implications of ethnosymbolist arguments, this paper offers an analysis of the ways in which ethnosymbolist claims are

embedded in the self-determination demands of two separatist nationalist movements, Iraqi Kurds and Bosnian Serbs. The aim is to make tentative suggestions on the construction and reiteration of group identity, and the political implications of such processes on the self-determination claims of these two groups. In both cases we observe a set of similar practices; the use of language politics, deployment of communal symbols and spatial practices linking geographical spaces with their respective identities. These symbolic practices reproduce and foreground ethnic identities, generating a cultural background for the self-determination demands of separatist groups. It is important to note that this paper does not take primordialist claims on the origins of nations for granted and finds modernist accounts on nation-building more convincing. However, it acknowledges the instrumentalisation of primordialist or ethnosymbolist claims in providing content to political demands such as self-determination. The use of ethnic symbols and practices by nationalist, separatist groups is one such strategy, as we illustrate below.

### *Reproducing 'Self'*

To begin with, it is useful to briefly elucidate the concept of national self-determination. This is no easy task; national self-determination is a travelling concept, a script that can be used to justify very different sets of demands. In its external sense it refers to sovereignty, while internal self-determination is generally understood as democracy. At the same time, the logic of self-determination lends itself to both statist and secessionist arguments (Koskenniemi, 1994) and can be conceived as a legal, political and cultural principle. In its legal form it is a principle of international law that grants people the right to define their destinies. It can be understood as a political concept in that it asserts peoples' right to self-rule (De-Shalit, 1996) and a cultural principle in that it foregrounds the realisation of the cultural rights of groups (Tamir, 1991).

It is primarily the latter two conceptualisations of national self-determination referring to the internal aspects of the principle that are of interest to us here; the ways in which groups claiming the right to self-rule understand and represent their identity on behalf of which the claim is made. We are interested in separatist groups with a political aim to reduce and/or transfer the power of central government over a particular territory to the population or elites representing the population on that territory (Cabestan & Pavkovic, 2013). Both Bosnian Serbs and Iraqi Kurds have been represented by nationalist political organisations aiming at secession from the state they are located in, and they both seek to achieve this aim through self-determination<sup>ii</sup>.

Ethnic or national symbols used by Bosnian Serb and Iraqi Kurdish nationalists operate as a medium for communicating the perceived distinctive

characteristics of their groups. The effectiveness of symbols in presenting group identity as distinct derives from the fact that the linguistic, religious, ethnic or territorial attributes these symbols represent are usually seen as objective, rather than subjective. According to modernist accounts of nationalism, national identity and its components are subjective, imagined and/or invented (Anderson, 1991; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). What nationalism does is transform subjectively perceived and fluid traits into more concrete and objectively perceived ethnic features (Smith, 1981). Making reference to a myth of common descent, shared memories and language, and irreplaceable cultural values, is necessary for nationalists to generate group solidarity and mobilisation (Smith, 1996.). The self-determination demands of separatist groups build on such perceptions. According to Smith, we should recognise the continuing power of identity and generate solutions to enable the implementation of national ideals. Failure to do this will only invoke further conflict and instability. This normative undercurrent in Smith's approach fits well with the arguments of nationalist groups about what their future should look like; but discussing the normative dimensions of this debate is not the aim of this paper.

The calls for self-determination by Iraqi Kurds and Bosnian Serbs are interesting in the sense that similar patterns of legitimisation of their respective demands are apparent in cases that are very different. The Bosnian Serbs enjoyed a position of power in the Yugoslav Republic and hence opposed its dissolution. The bitter war against the Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) and Croats ended in 1995 in an internationally-brokered peace agreement that divided the country into two entities, one of which (Republika Srpska, RS) is dominated by the Bosnian Serbs. Since the war, the Bosnian Serb political program has vacillated between demands for outright secession and greater political autonomy within Bosnia.

The Kurds in Iraq are one of four Kurdish communities in the region, the other three residing in Turkey, Syria and Iran.<sup>iii</sup> They constitute the largest non-Arab community in Iraq and have not been in a position of power until recently. The de facto Kurdish autonomous area was formed in 1991 after the US intervention to protect Kurds from Saddam Hussein's military campaigns. With the 2003 US intervention, the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI) with significant political, social and economic autonomy was officially established. It is generally accepted by analysts and scholars that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) eventually aims for independent statehood. The KRG's representatives recently declared plans to hold a referendum to decide on independence, which can be considered as an indicator of such intentions. However, the KRG's plans for a referendum have been postponed due to the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham's advances in Iraq, and also due to the limited US support for Kurdish independence derived from the US's underlying aim to keep Iraq united.

## *Language Politics*

The discussion turns now to exploring how the above groups have sought to construct identities in an attempt to legitimise claims to self-determination. Language is central to any discussion of national identities (Kymlicka & Patten, 2003) and consequently, the 'self' on behalf of which national self-determination claims are made. In the cases of Bosnian Serbs and Iraqi Kurds language is one of the most significant cultural markers on which their respective nationalisms are built.

The war that tore Bosnia apart resulted in the deconstruction of the common Yugoslav language, Serbo-Croatian, and the emergence of separate languages. The differences between the languages are minor, mainly based on differences in dialects. Scholarly studies in the run up to the war in the early 1990s sought to prove a link between specific dialects of Serbo-Croatian and ethnic identities; in reality, however, the different dialects and spelling conventions did not correspond with the religious and purportedly ethnic boundaries (Greenberg, 1996). Yet, in the region where the only substantive signifiers of national identities are religion and language (Hammel, 1992), it is perhaps inevitable that language politics has become an integral part of the political claims for autonomy. Today the separate languages reflect the wider, on-going statebuilding dynamics in the country; while the Bosnian Muslims have adopted a number of Turkish words in the vocabulary of the newly invented Bosnian language based on Serbo-Croatian (Torsti, 2004), Bosnian Croats and Serbs are using scripts and dialects associated with their respective mother tongues. Language politics is not, however, merely an issue of semantics or choice of alphabet. Not only does the development of distinct languages function to reproduce exclusive national identities, but the recent invention of the Bosnian language in contrast to the long linguistic pedigree of Croatian and Serbian is often cited as a proof that no historic Bosnian nation exists. This serves to highlight the distinctiveness of the Bosnian Serb peoples and in doing so, rationalise their demands for greater self-determination.

Similar dynamics can be observed in the case of Iraqi Kurds. The use of Kurdish and attempts to make it an official language and standardise it can be interpreted as a practice that reproduces distinct Kurdishness. Kurdish nationalism makes references to the distinct vernacular practice of Kurds compared to other languages in the region, mainly Arabic and Turkish. Kurdish is an Indo-European language with four main dialects, Sorani and Kurmanji being numerically the largest two. Kurmanji and Sorani speakers can understand each other but the two dialects are usually considered as distinct. Kurmanji is usually written in Latin, whereas Sorani is in Arabic alphabet. There are also phonological and some grammatical differences between the two dialects.<sup>iv</sup> The Kurds in Iraq have demanded the officialisation of the Kurdish language and its equality with Arabic since the formation of the Iraqi state, which was granted in the 2005 Iraqi constitution. The

demands for officialisation of Kurdish, as well as standardising the two main dialects, has been an important component of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq. In this process, the use of Kurdish in public life has been further widened through the opening of education institutions and publication houses, television and satellite channels which use Kurdish. As Arabic has ceased being the dominant language, new generations have begun to share and practice a stronger sense of *Kurdistani*, the idea of being from Iraqi Kurdistan (Aziz, 2011).

### *State Symbols*

If linguistic practices have sought to reproduce and reinforce the distinctiveness of Bosnian Serbs and Kurds at a more abstract level, the use of separate state symbols has served as a distinctly visual claim to nationhood. Flags and emblems are used as symbols of identities in both cases and have provided content to claims on the existence of a distinct identity and efforts to politically institutionalise that identity through self-determination. In the case of the Bosnian Serbs, the repertoire of symbols of the new Bosnian state was commissioned and imposed (in the absence of domestic consensus) by international actors. The Office of the High Representative (OHR), the representative of the international community in the country, chose a flag depicting Bosnia's European future symbolised by yellow stars in blue background. The flag was received with little enthusiasm; it is predominantly the Bosnian Muslims who fly the flag in the absence of alternative mother-country flags. In the RS the Bosnian flag is largely absent. Bosnian Serb flag, closely resembling the Serbian tricolor, is dominant in the landscape. According to opinion surveys, the new national anthem has faced similar fate: large majority of Bosnian Serbs consider the Serbian, rather than Bosnian, national anthem as reflecting their loyalties (Kostic, 2008). The design of the new Bosnian currency was likewise contested by the Bosnian Serbs. The initial idea proposed by the OHR according to which joint symbols would appear on the coinage was replaced by the decision whereby the entities had their respective cultural and historical figures printed in the notes that were circulated in their entities.

In the case of Iraqi Kurds, in turn, the KRG coat of arms features the Kurdish eagle, a prominent visual symbol of Kurdish identity. It makes reference to a specific eagle species inhabiting the mountains of Kurdistan with qualities such as self-reliance, strength and pride, that Kurds attribute to their nation. During interviews with Iraqi Kurdish political representatives on questions related to identity and independence, the Kurdish eagle and how it represents the characteristics of the Kurdish nation came up repeatedly.<sup>v</sup> Another symbolic reference the eagle represents is Kurdish claims to an ancient ethnic history, as the eagle was the symbol of the Median empire that was located in today's north-west Iran and south-east Turkey between 678-549 BC. Kurdish nationalist historiography traces Kurdish

genealogy to the Medes. The use of the eagle also makes reference to the memory of Salahaddin, the first king of Egypt and Syria. Many archaeologists have claimed that the eagle, also used in the Egyptian coat of arms, is the personal symbol of King Salahaddin, who is believed to have Kurdish origins.

### *Cartographic Practices*

A further feature central to the process of creating the national 'self' is the construction of a visual link between the group and territory. The use of ethnic demarcations such as street names and cartographic depictions has implications similar to those associated with the use of flags and emblems. In the Bosnian case a number of different practices are readily observable. The communist and multi-ethnic past has been rejected through the replacement of pre-war street names in the RS capital with those of Serb heroes and no references to the Muslim community have remained (Torsti, 2004). Renaming of public spaces and towns in accordance with ethnically-defined criteria are an essential part of creating alternative cultural narratives pertaining to nationhood. Other symbolic practices that challenge the very notion of Bosnian statehood pertain to cartographic representations of the nation. Maps are frequently used to make claims about identity and territory; schools, as well as weather forecasts, in the RS are found to use maps showing either the RS only or the RS represented as a distinct geographical space from Bosnia (Torsti, 2004). This creates an association between purportedly 'natural communities' and 'natural boundaries' (Koskenniemi, 1994).

In the Kurdish case, Kurdish nationalists, and those scholars who take the Kurdish nationalist historiography for granted, consider territorial attribution to be a key indicator of Kurdish ethnic identity (McDowall, 1996). Kurdish nationalist historiography claims that the use of 'Kurdistan' as a collective territory goes back over two thousand years. Although it was defined as a relatively small area in recent historical texts, today Kurdistan is presented as encompassing a much larger land. Greater Kurdistan is often depicted in maps and used as symbols of Kurdish identity both by Kurdish nationalists and outsiders. As examples of 'propaganda cartography' (O'Shea, 2004), maps of Kurdistan are used to assert the Kurdishness of the area and to justify Kurdish self-determination claims. Although Iraqi Kurdish nationalist organisations delimit their political goals to northern Iraq, they utilise the map of Greater Kurdistan as a national symbol.

### *Conclusion*

The aim of this paper has been to briefly explore the ways in which groups claiming to possess the right to self-determination generate and reproduce the 'self', or the people, on behalf of which they make such claims. Creating and emphasising difference between the culture of the group in question and other groups in the



society functions as a way to represent the self-determining group as distinct people. In the above cases this has been done through a set of symbolic practices, entailing the use of dialects to create purportedly distinct languages as well as the use of state symbols and cartographic representations of the group's territory.

What the above discussion implies is that the often-cited conceptual shift from ethnic to territorial 'selves' as the basis of self-determination demands (Moore, 1998) understates the continued salience of ethnic communities. This is not to endorse or legitimise primordial arguments but rather to highlight the ways in which such accounts are used to reproduce the people on whose behalf self-determination claims can be made. Micro-level analysis of the construction of identities of self-determining groups provides thus significant insights to understanding the salience of the self-determination principle. Although the above observations are subject to methodological caveats pertaining to the representativeness of the cases and more comparative work is undoubtedly needed to investigate further the aforementioned practices, it is nonetheless striking how cultural representations of the 'self' underpin even self-determination demands formulated in non-cultural terms. A case in point is the recent Scottish independence campaign. Whilst Scotland is represented as an 'ancient nation'<sup>vi</sup>, much of the reasoning put forth by the yes campaign foregrounded the right of the Scottish people to have a government that reflects the priorities and values of the Scottish people rather than Westminster. This implies distinction between the Scottish and the English in that they are alleged to possess a different set of values and preferences<sup>vii</sup>.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Notable exceptions are Rocher 2014; Economides 2013; McGarry and O'Leary 2010

<sup>ii</sup> The claims made by Bosnian Serbs have largely shifted away from the demands to secession to the right to self-rule within Bosnia.

<sup>iii</sup> A small number of Kurds reside in Armenia.

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.aclweb.org/anthology/P13-2054>

<sup>v</sup> Interviews by Kaya during fieldwork in Erbil and Sulaimaniya, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, April-May 2014.

<sup>vi</sup> 'Scotland's Future – Your Guide to an Independent Scotland', p. viii. Available at: <http://www.scotreferendum.com/reports/scotlands-future-your-guide-to-an-independent-scotland/>

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid*, pp.viii-xi.

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