

## Preserving National Identity while Integrating into Another Culture

Hripsime Tonoyan

**Abstract:** *This article analyzes the importance of keeping national identity. The aim of the article is to persuade that it is very important to keep traditions and customs of one's own culture when integrating into another society by the example of Bulgarian Armenians. The bases of cultural differences are discussed. This paper is aimed at showing that a community can preserve national consciousness, faith, language and culture and at the same time integrate into another cultural background so well that no one considers them foreigners.*

**Key words:** *cultural context, biculturalism, customs, traditions, bilingual, interpersonal interactions.*

### INTRODUCTION

According to Cassirer's beautiful metaphor, language and culture are the organs, the "special eyes"; each of us is born with. How do we each start acquiring a special way of looking at the world with the first breath of air and continue doing so until we die, rarely thinking of whether the words in our language, or the signs of our culture signify real or imaginary entities? [5:10]. They are a given we are born in, the only reality we experience, and we can think of no other, until we get immersed in another language and culture. A large human community inhabiting a certain geographical area can be a nation if all its members can communicate using the same language in its standard variety, if they are organized in state institutions such as the government and the legal system, if these institutions are recognized by all and apply to all, and if the people have for centuries shared common values, beliefs customs and traditions.

One's nationality becomes significant by contrast with another in much the same way that ethnocentrism comes into relief when its basic

Culture affects one's behaviour and structures one's perception of the world. The same goes for subcultures. Hence, sciences are no more than coherent systems of human learning arising within certain subcultures, represented by groups of people that share many common values, methodologies and ethics, which all enables extensive communication between them while at the same time distinguishes and somewhat separates them from other social particle.

Culture is known to have many meanings. One of them refers to the spiritual and material achievements of humanity. On the whole it is possible to distinguish three kinds of culture. They are elite culture, folk culture and popular culture. These cultures are closely connected with one another and one culture is part of the others. Folk culture is the culture of everyday life and routine relations of social life. Folk culture consists of traditional knowledge and practice. It is like a habit of people, thus this culture does not change very quickly.

### CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS

A tradition is a practice, custom, or story that is memorized and passed down from generation to generation. The stories preserved are also referred to as tradition. Traditions are often presumed to be ancient, unalterable, and deeply important, though they may sometimes be much less "natural" than is presumed. Some traditions were deliberately invented for one reason or another, often to highlight or enhance the importance of a certain institution. Traditions may also be changed to suit the needs of the day, and the changes can become accepted as a part of the ancient tradition. Every country and every nation has its own traditions and customs. It's very important to know traditions and customs of different people because it will help you to know more about the history and life of different nations and countries.

One can not judge the customs of others from a preconceived set of ideas learned elsewhere, rather, one must understand how various customs have developed to

contribute to the smooth functioning of a society. Custom refers to habitual ways of going about everyday activities. Individuals learn their cultures' customs at a very early age and come to take them for granted as the appropriate ways of accomplishing the tasks people face on a regular basis. Some of the clearest examples of cultural differences occur when people encounter different customary ways of working, entertaining, or interacting with others. When people begin to understand others' customs and to see how they make sense, they begin to internalize the concept of cultural relativity. Especially important for the individuals involved are those customs that are understood to be totally appropriate, with any other behaviours seen as ignorant. Even more than becoming bilingual, if not started as a small child, becoming bicultural seems to be both an advanced attainment and difficult to understand if one has not experienced it. No one is born bicultural any more than anyone is born in a language. Children who hear one language at home and another in school or on the street are already well on the way to becoming bicultural. Biculturalism conveys important intellectual advantages, but according to Seelye (1993) it also can entail stress, especially concerning self-identity.

Given positive social attitudes toward linguistic and cultural diversity, the second language and culture do not take anything away from one's native heritage but are additive and enriching. For someone bilingual to an extent in Bulgarian and Armenian, for example, being bicultural is like being able to see the same situation through both Armenian and Bulgarian. Having more than one language and culture is a resource for the society and gives the individual more choices in behaviour and thought, therefore more freedom. Hall et al. (1996) argues that human beings must learn to separate their perception of self from the cultural extensions of their selves that they fabricate in response to adaptive pressures. These cultural responses can easily lose their functionality as circumstances change. People become bicultural in response to adaptive needs. Bicultural individuals are faced with the need to identify those belief forms that have cross-cultural validity in satisfying aesthetic and moralistic needs, and to differentiate the form from the need.

People experience strong emotional reactions when their cultural values are violated or when their cultures' expected behaviours are ignored.

### **THE BASES OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES**

Clearly, it is impossible to prepare individuals for every conceivable difference they may encounter, even in a long training program devoted to one specific culture. People's thinking cannot remain static in this fast-moving world. People must acquire new information to meet the new demands they face. The manner, in which this is typically done, regardless of the exact knowledge to be learned, differs from culture to culture. Because people cannot react to every bit of information to which they are exposed, they organize information into categories. When a given category becomes important to a culture's survival, it is broken up differentiated into smaller units. The practical result is that if people from other cultures do not differentiate a knowledge area in the same way, they may be seen as ignorant or at best backward. In people's interpersonal relationships, one of the major reasons for both categorization and differentiation is the basic human need to form in-groups and out-groups. In –groups consist of people who can be trusted, whereas out-group people should be kept at a distance.

With their knowledge as a base, people make sense of their worlds. A basic feature of this sense making is causal attribution, that is, making judgements about the causes of the behaviour people observe, both in them and in others. People living and working across cultures have to decide whether others are truly helpful or simply polite.

### **BULGARIAN ARMENIANS**

Bulgaria is a very beautiful and wonderful land. Bulgarian culture is their treasure and they have to be proud of it. Bulgarian literature, dances, sportists are wonderful.

Bulgarians are smart and warm. Their poets write so beautiful things, so touching the soul... Bulgarian music is loved from many people far away from Bulgaria. Some of the Bulgarian traditions have many traits in common with the Armenian traditions and customs. For thirteen centuries, Bulgaria- the cradle of Slav culture, the land of Orpheus and Spartacus has given the world men of great achievements, mysterious Thracian treasures and burial tombs, magnificent frescos and many brilliant examples of ancient applied arts. Bulgarian festivals and customs date back to ancient times. Full of beauty, gaiety, mystical voices, fiery dances and brightly coloured costumes-Bulgarian folklore has to be seen, felt and experienced.

The Armenians have lived in the lands of today's Bulgaria as early as the foundation of the Bulgarian state on the Balkans. In 1881, at the first census of the Bulgarian population, the number of Armenians was 3,440. After the massacres in the Ottoman Empire during the period 1894 to 1915, and the Ottoman-Greek war in 1922, thousands of refugees sought asylum in Bulgaria. Thus the number of Armenians rapidly grew to 47,000. Towards the end of the last century, the Armenian community in Bulgaria amounted to 22,000 people. This number has approximately doubled as a result of the settlement of a fresh wave of refugees from Armenia during the last decade.

Since its establishment, the Armenian Community in Bulgaria has been leading diverse and extensive public life by actively participating in all fields of the country's economic, cultural, and social life. The Armenians and their historical faith were an inspiration for noted Bulgarian poet Peyo Yavorov to write one of his most recognizable works, the poem *Armentsi* (Armenians), describing the Armenians as 'forlorn exiles, a miserable fragment; of an ever-brave martyr-people; little children of a troubled slave woman-mother; and victims of a legendarily great feat'. He wanted to represent the genocide and exile over the Armenians. Although he was a revolutionary man – he was fighting against the Turks in Macedonia, and that time he was one of those who met the Armenians running.

The Armenians in Bulgaria are, on the one hand, an extremely sturdy community which has preserved its identity even in the years when doing it was not easy; on the other hand, they are completely integrated into the Bulgarian society and participate in all public spheres of life. Historically, they have been known as skilled artisans in trades traditional for their community. Nowadays, quite a few of ethnic Armenians are active in the field of information technologies. Many are the Armenian names related with the spheres of art and science in Bulgaria. The outstanding presence of Armenian family names among the authors in the fields of Bulgarian art and science, in turn, has stimulated a reverse process - interest on the part of the Bulgarian public in Armenian culture and history.

### **The role of preserving language and faith**

There is one thing most characteristic of the Armenian communities outside their home country. They have tight relationships, support each other and do their best to preserve their cultural identity. Their solidarity is so popular that Bulgarians started joking that all you need is put three Armenians together and they will immediately build a church, found a school and start publishing a newspaper. Armenians actively co-operate to establish connection between themselves and the "host peoples". That is how Armenians in Bulgaria have both managed to keep their traditions and still be active citizens, bringing prosperity to the country. According to Aram Hadavian, a priest at Ruse Holy Virgin church, the Armenian minority alone stand closest to the Bulgarian nation. And that is why they have never created problems for the government. The Armenians are called to preserve their language, religion and culture; they shouldn't give their traditions up. In the past, because of the numerous dominations that the people of Armenia had suffered, the church played the role of a uniting centre for all Armenians. It substituted the government, the court, the schools. Today, with Armenians living abroad, the church again plays as the centre of their universe. It is at church service where most of Bulgarian-Armenians talk

their native language. There people meet not only to pray to God, but to socialize and to find out what's new with their friends. Preserving the Armenian consciousness is truly genes, as a man from the congregation said. Religion, Christianity to be exact, is a vital part of that consciousness. Language during service is a privilege. For many Armenians, the church is the only place where they can speak it. A booklet with the order and texts of service in both Armenian and Bulgarian was published by Aram Hadavian at Ruse Holy Virgin church. That could also stimulate people to learn the Armenian language better. It all is connected with the fact that the young Armenians in Bulgaria tend to break the dogmas of their ancestors that they should go to church, they should speak Armenian, and they should not marry a person who is from a different nationality. Keeping the "purity" of the blood used to be an obligation out of question for every Armenian in the country. And that's the natural way for a development of a nation-where young revolt against the rules created by their predecessors. Anyway, the Armenian people have been put to the test of time and have survived, keeping their identity. Massacres, emigration, insecurity and assimilation proved weak and couldn't wipe them out. In spite of their having lived in Bulgaria for so long, they keep their face and traits. But then again, they have managed to integrate so well that no one considers them foreigners. That is a life approach worth envying.

### CONCLUSION

Learning foreign culture can widen understanding of their own and other cultures, it can create opportunities for personal expression. But preserving national traditions, customs and native language remains an indispensable question for a community faced with the task of helping young people appreciate the richness that cultural diversity brings to our lives.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hripsime Tonoyan, Administrative assistant to the English Department Chair, Gavar State University, Armenia, Phone: +374264 2-2523, E-mail: [Tonoyanhripsime@rambler.ru](mailto:Tonoyanhripsime@rambler.ru)

**The paper is reviewed.**