

ROOTS OF BELONGING AS SPACES FOR INTEGRATION. POTENTIALITY OF GEORGIAN IDP SCHOOLS IN INTEGRATION PROCESSES

Abstract

This article supports the idea that anthropology offers practical contributions towards more effective and co-participated development and cooperation processes. The work addresses institutions and those active in the context of integration of the displaced Georgians of Abkhazia. I propose the so-called Abkhazian School, which is usually stigmatized as a metaphor for the failure of integration process, as a space for a successful encounter and meaningful exchange between the community of the displaced (IDPs) and local people, by fuelling the interests and needs of them both. My position sets on the ethnographic terrain I have been researching and working in the last three years; furthermore develops through the presentation of crucial anthropological concepts such as identity, memory, space, belonging and socialization. Specifically, I focus on the connection between identity of IDPs and the land of Abkhazia during their dislocation in Tbilisi.

(140 words)

Keywords

*Anthropology of Cooperation and Development, Georgian Internal Displacement, Abkhazian Schools
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Article

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future.

Simon Weil, 1952

By joining cooperation and development programs, anthropologists demonstrate that the ethnographic approach can significantly contribute to the development of concrete and feasible responses to target groups' needs (Assal, 2002). In fact, empiric and participated methodology can help shape durable and effective programs of empowerment by involving recipients as decision makers, rather than mere receivers of aid projects (Badurdeen, 2010). This article focuses on the question of the Georgian internally displaced persons (IDP)¹of Abkhazia(elders, adults and youth that flee during the 1992-1993 war²) transmitting their sense of

¹International law does not provide any legal definition of Internally Displaced Person (IDP). Scholars, practitioners and policy makers refer to UN guiding principles on internal displacement, in which IDPs are defined as “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an *internationally recognized* State border” (Deng 1998). In this article I address to IDPs, as forced migrants and as *devnili* (დევნილი), the Georgian word used by most of the social actors I worked with.

²The civil war that brought to the loss of Georgian sovereignty on the breakaway region of Abkhazia. The conflict is still frozen and unsolved. *De iure* Abkhazia remains part of Georgia. *De facto* the territory is not under Tbilisi control and declared as independent State. As a consequence of the armed war, around 240.000 ethnic Georgians (IDPs on Georgian

rootedness to post-displaced offspring(children and youth with IDP status but born out of Abkhazia, after the flight). My research started in the role of a youth worker in the Caucasus region, and continued in my PHD's ethnographic fieldwork, where I concentrated on the extended network of an IDP school³ in Tbilisi⁴. Although these schools are identified as obstacles to integration (Matiashvili 2004), I recommend to redeem the Abkhazian⁵ schools as potential fabrics of integration for post-displaced generations of children (Loughnaet *al.*, 2010). Finally, I seek to illustrate how both non-governmental organization and formal institution can contribute to an effective and active co-participated integration process centered on the emancipation of IDP schools.

perspective and refugees according to the Abkhazian one) left Abkhazia and looked for rescue on the other bank of Enguri River, ceasefire/border between Abkhazia and Georgia. The conflict is frozen, and the situation remain unsolved.

³There is an open question about how to name these schools specially dedicated to IDPs. I adopt the expressions Abkhazian (cfr. Footnote 5) and IDP school.

⁴In 2014, I volunteered as a trainer of non-formal education activities in an IDP school of Tbilisi for one year, including the coordination of an integration project. I had the chance of spending time with pupils and teachers of the school and with local and international volunteers engaged. During the ethnography I carried out for another year (2016), I was hosted for a while by an IDP family whose aunt is the director of an IDP school, mother a teacher and the child a pupil. Although, I was no longer directly working in the school, I often visited it and the settlement where it is located, especially to spend time with teenagers. Lastly, I have met and interviewed several representatives of institutions working in the sector of education, especially dedicated to IDP. Since 2014, I am committed in peace building and intercultural dialogue projects gathering Caucasian youths, including Abkhazs (see note n.5) and Georgians.

⁵ With the term "Abkhaz", I refer to the ethnicity, while with "Abkhazian" I denote anything related to the territory of Abkhazia, for example inhabitants regardless the ethnic background or people coming from there.

Ethnographic evidence, allows me to suggest that rather the construction and maintenance of the Abkhazian identity the IDP operate, is not a mere nostalgic remembrance of the past but a political battle to ensure younger generations of their return to the lost land. This struggle takes place both in the restrained familiar context as well as in the extended community.

«If in the future there will be the chance of going back to Sokhumi, who will go if not my children!? If not my grandchildren?! If not the persons who are interested and have roots there, who would go?» (IDP mother)

Socialization, intended as the durable embodiment of the group of origin's ways of perceiving, thinking, representing and behaving, as well as the assimilation of intersubjective attitudes (Dubar, 2000, p.84); is a phenomenon that should be kept under critical consideration in order to better understand how to address the enhancement of social integration of the IDP students in the local context. Specifically, the needs and interests of this kind of transmission and socialization and the responses produced should be identified and investigated.

“It is a current and popular belief that people do not know who they really are unless they can trace their roots” (Tuan 1980, p.6). Roots branch off into land. Far beyond the physical dimension⁶ of the territory on which people exist, the *spatial* and social construction of land is at core of identity construction (Massey, 1993; Gupta and Fergusson, 1997). Rather than a container, space should be considered a social category like gender and age (Turton, 2005). Tangible presence is not necessary to live a place. This can be observed in IDP children that have usually not been displaced themselves. «Hello, I am Giorgi, I am 9 years old and I will go back to Abkhazia, it’s ours!» a pupil first introduced

⁶Concept of *spatiality* (Massey, 1994) showed time ago that places can no longer be treated as physical extension or fixed object, but must be approached as subjects.

himself to me when volunteering in his school. Distancing oneself violently from homeland generates economic, social, cultural, legal, and social mechanisms of survival which do not unhinge the attachment to the place (land) (Malkki, 1995). As such, the myth and memory of Abkhazia represent a remedy to the ordeal of the unwanted (and unaccepted) exile. On a community level, the return is foreseen and preached⁷ (*ibidem*, 1995, pp. 228, 229). Internal displacement, as other moving human flows, generates imagination of places and lands, those abandoned as well as those looked for. These productions do not root on the territory itself but more on the connection perceived with them (Appadurai, 1996)⁸. This imagination offers my research important insight.

«We do everything, so that the children won't forget where they are from and where their roots are. Each event, every lesson or any other thing, when given the chance, we connect to Abkhazia» (Director)

People re-territorializing elsewhere (Knox 95) keep a tight connection with their *lost* land. Collective memory revitalizes the past and allows to maintain a continuity with a previous life, in the frame of a deeply changed external order (Li Causi, 2008, p.20). This process might take place whilst settling into a collective center which is supposed to be receiving escapees in a transitory emergency period but ends up becoming their home for decades (Malkki, 1997). Discourses and practices on Abkhazia become ubiquitous among IDPs. The redundant

⁷Most IDPs I have talked with stated they would go back to Abkhazia, generally. Around half of the young and young adult generation says they want to be given the possibility of entering the land, even if they might opt for not moving permanently there. Many representatives of organizations working with IDP say that the return is more a question of rhetoric than effectiveness; in fact, they doubt that many *devnili* would return to Abkhazia if they really could. Despite this, all IDPs I spoke with, claimed the right for their community (and to some extent to all of Georgia) to return. The modality of return is the main issues of discussion, in terms of human security and political sovereignty.

⁸This enhances the stereotyping and the orientalism of land (Said, 1979).

memorial search and the perpetuation of the *virtue of the refugeeness* (Malkki, 1995, p.105) which often occur in Abkhazian schools, are responses elaborated by a vacillating and suffering IDP identity (Candeau 2002, p.10) that barter an uncertain future with a recoverable past. «Refugee populations may indeed be vulnerable in statistical terms», nevertheless this evidence «should not blind us to the considerable resilience of many individuals, families, and communities in the face of major life adjustments and stressors» (Ager, n.d, p.23; cfr. Ager, 1999). Resilience configures as political engagement for returning home. In this case study, this takes place while producing *devnili* identity in relation to Abkhazia, which contributes to shaping the human experience of displacement (Kabachnik et al., 2014, p.2). In fact, displacement draws “new maps of desire and attachment” (Breckenridge&Appadurai, 1989, p.22) as well as new identities. Integration, as commonly intended, might sound to some *devnilebi* as a constraint or as the capitulation, including abandoning the faith in return. It is understandable why familiarization with local place and people might be resisted.

«If you ask our first-grader, “Where are you from?!” he will tell you some city or village in Abkhazia and he will never tell you that he is from Tbilisi! [...] Because we believe that we certainly will go back to Abkhazia. There should be someone, who wants to go there». (Director)

The risk of living for long in a place that is not (fully) *considered* home would be for post-displaced generation to forget about Abkhazia and about the *duty* of going back. Many of my adult *devnili* informants stated clearly that they feel guests *here*, Tbilisi, because they only belong to *there*, Abkhazia. Several of them see their exile and their staying *here* as an ordeal to overcome through pain, faith and dedication, as a diaspora. Many of post-displaced children consider themselves as rooted in Abkhazia and express their nostalgia for home, despite never having set

foot on that territory. Their only real acquaintance through family, neighborhood and community memory. «I am proud that my little girls say they are from Sokhumi even if they were born here. It makes me feel I have given them their roots», a mother shared with me. During all stages of their socialization, IDPs produce the social co-constructions of *Hereness*, Tbilisi⁹, where they live, and *thereness*, Abkhazia, where they can't but wish to be (Curry, 1999). In fact, community identity is not simply transmitted by elders /leaders but renewed (if not rebuilt) by youth/receivers lifelong (Dubar, 2000). Among youngsters, the discussion on this topic is much more open and heterogeneous. For example, a certain disturbance for the speculation on their being *devniliis* also noticeable. One of first times I entered the Abkhazian school in which I volunteered a child provoked me by asking whether I had come to the school to see "refugees".

IDP schools opened in 1995 as temporary practical solutions to provide education in, or near, collective centers where the more vulnerable *devnili* were living in the most precarious conditions. The general expectation was a prompt return to Abkhazia (Loughna, Bregvadze&Partskhaladze, 2010, p.19). In addition, there was also the explicit will to keep the IDPs together, maintaining the administrative structures aimed at consolidating culture, memory, identity and connection to Abkhazia. Under these circumstances, IDP teachers and educators could maintain their jobs (*ibidem*; Matiashvili, 2004) and «raise the mood and distract our children from the trauma of war and unbearable life» (IDP and Pedagogue). Back then, the pupils of Abkhazian schools were actually displaced. Today's post-displaced generation, who maintain their IDP status, can more easily attend mainstream public schools and lay ground for their professional future in Tbilisi, thanks to generally improved living conditions and the more organized (but still inadequate) programs of state support. Positions on this concern vary between different social actors and representatives of

⁹And all *de facto* Georgia as extent.

institutions I have dealt with (IDPs, non-IDPs, NGO and institution related to displacement). Some scholars and many practitioners (for example Matiashvili, 2004) consider the schools as enhancing the separation of IDP children from the rest of local society and as triggers of marginalization, effectively «when you have an IDP life, made of IDP things and Abkhazia is just everywhere... what do you feel you can do in Tbilisi or elsewhere?! You just want to go back to Abkhazia and think nothing is possible here» (field notes). Questions are raised as to whether IDP schools are still a necessity.

As a researcher, I identified the Abkhazian School as a privileged point of view for observing the cultural and social construction of Abkhazia. This becomes evident as soon as one steps into the school and sees the wall in the entrance decorated by a “we will return” graffiti, more recently covered with decorative murals, and plenty of pictures portraying the beauties of Abkhazia. The collective center in the external outskirts of Tbilisi. The school is situated in the same living block together with inhabited rooms and apartments. Some of the doors of the corridor do not access classrooms but flats. The coexistence of classes and families within the same physical unwelcoming space (that is slowing becoming safer and more enjoyable), makes the strong connection between the family and school environment obvious. «IDPs are a big family when they share the same collective center, especially at the beginning» (retired) and «If I still had a spouse he would not be able to keep me at home: for me school is really a family! » (Director). The continuous presence of Abkhazia in daily practices and discourses within the space of school constitutes one of main reasons for discussing about IDP schools as it is mainly considered an obstacle for a serene re-territorialization of its pupils. However, there is no immediate solution to this a sentiment so strongly ingrained within the *devnili* community. This includes the closing down of IDP schools. During my fieldwork, I wondered whether school established as such a great a center of power in defining the integration of its children. Initially, I was in favor of the thesis mentioned above, but, following the several surprises which

normally appear in qualitative research, I changed my mind dramatically. I paid extra attention to the context of the IDPs I was in touch with, especially those living in worse conditions. If poverty and vulnerability are general problems affecting the displaced Georgian population (Dershem, Gurgenedze&Holtzman, 2002), they are also particularly meaningful when defining the space of school as they create uncomfortable and inappropriate learning environments (Loughnaet *al.*, 2010, pp. 18, 48), much more so than the rhetoric around Abkhazia. With inappropriate environment, I mean namely overcrowded living and studying places (any desk at home or proper space for doing homework), impossibility to access private tutoring (common for last-graders before national examinations) and the scarce conditions of schools (unstable electricity, partial heating, improper sanitation) (cfr. Loughnaet *al.* 2010, p.32). Beside dedicated ministries and IDP families' financial support, NGO's and international donors provide most of needed reparations and materials in IDP schools.

Critiques of the institution of Abkhazian School report that it impedes and slows down the proper integration of IDP youth in local communities and encourages the further labelling and marginalization of IDPs. Though the interaction with the rest of the population is limited, I believe this is mostly due to the collective centers being located in the extreme outskirts of the city. At this point, I wondered whether integration should be imposed from above, focusing on the causes of a certain resistance on behalf of IDPs. In fact, many IDP express their preference for familiarizing with other IDPs, «because we have the same understanding and feelings on many things... because we are all *devnili*. And we know what it means...others cannot understand us, and we can be much supportive of one another» (young IDP working in NGO sector).

Most pupils, teachers and families live in the same settlement of the school. IDPs of other collective centers and private accommodations, who take even more than one hour to reach the school from home, also attend the school, and the number of non-IDP pupils increase every year. The reasons attracting non-IDP families are that «we implement so many

formats that do not exist in other schools. First of all this, and also the relations between us [educators] and schoolchildren, and among pupils as well» (director, November 2016). Several local and international NGOs implement creative and extra-curricular activities, such as language gaming workshops, artistic laboratories and cultural trips and/or visits. This is in line with a common endorsement expressed by researchers who take up different positions regarding IDP schools (Matiashvili, 2004; Loughnaet *al.*). Two IDP siblings who had previously attended mainstream school, explained to me that their parents decided to move them from one school to another mainly because of the presence of such extracurricular activities.

Another attractive reason for new pupils to subscribe to Abkhazian School is the connectedness among children and between teachers and kids. Attenders of IDP Schools show more mutual support, for example by looking after younger children and doing homework together in a more noticeable way than regular schools. There is a closer relationship between teachers and pupils, due to a smaller student/teacher ratio (Loughnaet *al.*, p.24) and the common belonging to *devnilic* community. IDP teachers have two different missions. One is to guarantee the preservation of the memory of Abkhazia and the sense of belonging. Another is to use the empathy deriving from their common trauma of displacement, to develop the best method to take care of their children.

Those IDP children who study in Tbilisi public schools do not have information about Abkhazia or they have very shallow information. In my opinion, it is not a right approach to this issue. (Director)

The director's last sentence underlines how certain representatives of the IDP community feel this need of a specialized separate education system. The problem of integration cannot be solved by ignoring this clearly formulated and strongly sustained need, though it opens up many questions concerning the discrimination that IDPs might operate themselves against non-IDPs. This aspect deserves an appropriate

analysis which does not find place in this work but might inspire future ones.

Most kids I spoke to, identified themselves as having two homes: the one in which they live, Tbilisi, and the one of their origins, in Abkhazia. So, the *spatial* relationship to Abkhazia vary *intergenerationally* (*ibidem*, p. 42). In fact, older and adult generation claim there is no home *here* «I have always felt as a guest, I like it, but this is not my people, and this is not my place. I do not live inside my house; my home is in Sokhumi» (professor). Parents did not attend IDP schools and their offspring did. Though the children would like at least to see Abkhazia, but most say they do not know if they would live there or not, «I love Abkhazia, I am proud of being *devnili* but my house there is burnt and maybe there is nothing waiting for me. I want to see the seaside, but all of my friends and family live here» (teenager). However, some sharply state there is no place for them if not there in Abkhazia. “

«Here I am doing nothing, look where we live!
If I were in Abkhazia... I would have four
houses and all of my family. What can we do
here!? My father is a doctor and he's not even
paid enough. In Abkhazia he had his own
office». (Student living in a collective centre)

When I asked the school's director whether all the attention given to Abkhazia in her school could have constitute an obstacle to integration to Tbilisi life, she answered:

«This problem generally does not exist,
because more than twenty per cent of pupils are
locals, first; then there are events, sport
[competitions], our children participate
together with other children. [...] Now
teachers, the majority are IDPs but some are
Tbilisian or from other parts of Georgia. So,
there is not really such a problem». (Director)

Despite a certain marginalization, the IDP school appears a threshold, through which people come and go. It hardly appears as a block hindering integration of its pupils to Tbilisi life; this statement overestimates the school's effective power. I believe that families and living environments are those creating the barrier to integration, especially when living conditions are hard and people live isolated. On the other side, family and living environment are those factors boosting and promoting commonality with non-IDP peers. School, which can have an important role in both cases, but not the decisive one. Socio economic vulnerability is, once more, the main reason for the frictioning integration.

«Poverty, unemployment, unsuitable dwellings are problems of IDPs, not integration. If IDPS could live in better conditions, such problems wouldn't even exist. If parents can work, they can have better houses and in better houses the family can live better and they would meet many other people». (IDP leader of peace building initiatives)

Rather than IDP schools, it is Georgian policy toward IDPs that should be more critically examine as well as co-construction of relationship between IDP and non-IDP population.

What I did identify as a concrete risk preventing integration, is the exasperation of the unrealized dream of returning to Abkhazia, as well as the domination of a nationalist (sometimes chauvinistic) rhetoric which characterizes many practices and discourses that grow in some of IDP spaces and the community as a whole. The same concern is shared by active youth workers and IDPs well integrated in Tbilisi life. Such extreme attitudes can be moderated through encounters of alternative perspectives when confronted possibilities from realities different from the one lived out.

«I don't say that I say I will go in Abkhazia tomorrow and I don't sit with my packed suitcases. I am not like this! Life continues, if you want or not you need to work, raise your children and you should live. When will happen the return back in there nobody knows. If I stayed sitting on my suitcase, I should have done it for twenty-three years. Some people really do it, they have very strong belief of returning back... and don't do anything. Maybe it hinders the process I don't know...» (Mother)

When strongly resilient to integration, IDPs are not resisting because of school. The problem should, once more, be investigated in terms of the living condition they struggle with and with the assistance received after the traumas of war and during the difficulties of displacement. More active and creative resolutions to problems could be initiated by IDP communities. This improvement of preparation to active citizenship and social entrepreneurship through schools would be helpful.

I want to clarify that by stressing positive aspects that can be found in Abkhazian schools, I am not gilding the pill by presenting IDP schools as a fully successful process of learning and integrating. Nevertheless, I have observed it remains the primary choice of many families (Loughnaet *al.*,p.50) and that it includes positive events and aspects characterizing the school life of both IDP and non-IDP pupils. This could positively influence mainstream education school system, enhancing a more mutual and supportive interschool dialogue and cooperation. The more Abkhazian and ordinary public schools grow closer, the more the ghost of insulation fades. Abkhazian schools should be improved in their formative offer and, above all, in their structural condition, in order to figure as a proper learning environment. Teachers and directors, who part of the cultural elite of the displaced community, would feel more comfortable in opening up to local life and guiding their children in this process, without it necessarily being labelled as “integration”. That is

why, this article seeks to encourage Government and NGOs to fund and implement youth projects attended by both IDPs and non-IDPs. Workshops, travels and extra-curricular activities greatly contribute to personal development and active citizenship. Initiatives could be extended to address teachers and educators, and, why not, parents. Studies that assume different positions in regard to IDP schools agree on a similar kind of proposal. (Matiashvili, 2004, p.30; cfr. Loghua, 2010, p.50). Well integrated young IDPs should then be assigned responsibility roles in the programming of integration projects. This way all triggers hindering integration would be foreseeable and, finally, spontaneously downsize and possibly there will be no need of a separate school system anymore.

Ultimately, this article expresses the notion that real question to pose should not concern the maintaining or closing down of Abkhazian schools, but how to exploit them to succeed in the goal of integration with the local community, including the preservation of Abkhazian identity. I believe IDP schools should continue their existence, encouraged to welcome more non-IDP children and teachers (Loughna *et al.*, p. 50), involving them in all school activities whilst simultaneously ensuring the proper enrollment of post-displaced pupils in mainstream schools. Finally, it is important to point out that if, as illustrated above, space is fundamentally co-constructed by its inhabitants, then spaces dedicated to integration should not be excluded from this pattern. IDPs should become definitively main player of integration programs, without conceptualizing it as a loss of Abkhazian identity but as the possibility of enjoying more their staying out of Abkhazia, unless they could return. And what better space if not the safe and promising school environment, which is not only promoted by the government or by NGO but sustained and guided by the IDP community.

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