

## HOW CULTURE BUILDS NATIONS: THE POWER OF SYMBOLISM OVER NATION-BUILDING

“Culture is the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behavior.”

- James Spradley, Anthropologist (Spradley, 2022, para. 4)

*POCHKHUA GELA*

*THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA, GEORGIA*

### ABSTRACT

Nationalism studies differ in terms of approaches to the subject. Various opinions on a given topic focuses on different aspects of nationalism, its core elements, and causal links between ends, ways, and means. This paper focuses on culture, arguably one of the most influential dimensions among other layers constituting and shaping nationalism among different nations. In doing so, it considers Anthony Smith’s explanation of national identity, which, according to the latter, is shaped by a fundamental consensus among the population on things like culture, religion, history, language, ethnicity, political values, and norms of behaviour and aims and other related notions. The causal link between nation and culture is revealed by making a holistic account of different sub-elements of culture like memories and narratives; language, poetry, and art; national folklore and symbols; social norms, traditions, etc, in different historical eras and seeing their role in a nation-building process. The paper also focuses on a modern-day example, an ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine that has exceeded the boundaries of a mere military domain and is also visible from a cultural perspective. The paper’s main finding is identifying elements affecting nation-building and making it work. While all these different elements of culture were, are, and will be used in the future in a nation-building process, perception remains a vital factor. Culture and its elements can certainly significantly impact nation-building. However, in the end, it will always depend on how individuals, communities, and populations perceive national symbols, the historic heroic deeds of their ancestors, poems and literature, and norms of social behaviour and traditions. Without socially constructing these perceptions, the “us vs them” narrative might not materialize.

*Keywords: norms, culture, nationalism, traditions, behaviour, symbols, elements, notions, nation-building, narratives*

## *Introduction*

Nationalism helps us understand how nations are created and how people participate. It helps to understand why individuals identify with something greater than they are and what causes deep emotional attachments between them and large human communities (Kramer, 2011, p. 7). There are numerous ways to study factors that influence and shape this process, focusing on culture as one of the prominent methods. Culture, like nationalism, is a multi-faceted notion. It can be related to a range of things, from the habitual behaviour of individuals to religious rites involving masses, literature, art, language, or even items perceived as national symbols. These different layers of culture affect the nation-building process. To find if there is a causal relationship between the two, this paper explores key elements of culture from historical and modern perspectives. Findings are summarized in the conclusion.

### *Nation, identity, and culture – is there a connection?*

The discourse around nationalism is wide-ranging. Some authors debate on its origins, while others tend to study typology by concentrating on beliefs in universal human rights (liberal nationalism) or race and ethnicity (integral nationalism). However, many historians and scholars tend to agree that all nationalisms take on a cultural dimension because culture and its elements powerfully stimulate the process of nation-building (Kramer, 2011, p. 24). The cultural dimension pervades various aspects of human lives. Its elements include language, traditions, religion, beliefs, national folklore and symbols, poetry and prose, etc. Culture deeply connects with how individuals live, think, communicate, and act.

The word culture comes from Latin *culture*, meaning “to cultivate,” while nation originates from the word *natio*, which, used in ancient Rome, means “birth” or “decent.” Importantly, in its original Latin form, it meant *community under the law* to which an individual belonged because of his or her birth (Schulze, 1996, pp. 99-100). Hence, one of the ways to understand how the nation is formed is to imagine people living in a specific geographical space, sharing unique cultural and historical traditions that give them a feeling of having a right to form an independent political entity called a state and live in that state having a sense of protection and boundaries (Kramer, 2011, p. 1). Moreover, if others recognize a nation as one with territorial boundaries, then with time, it can evolve, becoming a union of communities called states. The process of formation of a state takes time and effort. Nations have their ways of life. They seem “real” and last forever but come and

go under changing historical circumstances (What is a Nation? n.d.). Culture alone cannot guarantee the survival of the nation.

Understanding nation-building requires understanding what *national identity* is and how it is formed. National identity is about an individual's strong feeling of being affiliated with a large community with its peculiar characteristics. In other words, a nation can be seen as a community with fundamental consensus about culture, religion, history, language or ethnicity, specific cultural, social, and political values, norms of behaviour and aims (Smith, 2008, p. 19). This consensus on a shared worldview creates national identity (Kremer, 2011, p. 55). The question is, which factors are involved in creating that consensus, and is culture one of them?

### *Examining Key Elements of Culture*

As history has shown, nation-building was a universal process, yet not all states had walked similar paths. For instance, if we consider the 18th century, we will see a dichotomy in forming a nation as one, whole entity. In the Western hemisphere, nation-forming was aided by the creation of specialized state institutions like the army and educational entities like academies. These state institutions helped to homogenize various ethnic, linguistic, or even religious groups into one nation. In contrast, Central and Eastern European nations did not have homogenous national cultures. For centuries, populations were fragmented or subject to foreign imperial rule (Berend, 2003, pp. 44-45). Nevertheless, culture, traditions, history, poetry, literature, national heroes, and symbols significantly impacted nation-building.

Nationalism did not stop existing after nation-building was accomplished. The people living in newly created states continued to support nationalistic ideas, and various state institutions continued to support national thinking and culture, in its broader sense, as an effective way to strengthen, nurture, and disseminate national sentiments among the masses. Why? Once unleashed, this process can hardly stop because the emerging sense of "national" is more potent than "universal" because all cultures in themselves carry "uniqueness," which effectively generates a sense of being something different. Nationalism continues to be alive to this day because cultural and political boundaries continue to effectively separate "us" from "them" (Kramer, 2011, p. 23). If *nation* and *culture* use the same building blocks, then there should be a causal relationship between these two notions. One naturally "feeds" the other and even causes changes over time. To illustrate this point, essential elements that define culture as a phenomenon are examined below with a brief look into history.

### *Memories and narratives*

Culture is strongly linked with individuals' memories. With time, individuals' memories become shared national memories. It happens through the "territorialization of memory" when memories shared mainly by the population become attached to territories that afterward are perceived as historic homelands. Usually, such places are shrines, extraordinary historical or religious monuments, or places of battle. Such shared, public memories fuel national sentiments (Smith, 1996, pp. 453-454). Looking back into history, we will see that a firm belief that an individual's life is inseparable from the nation can even lead to self-sacrifice. For instance, the historical deeds of Nathan Hale (American martyr), Claude Rouget (French lyricist), and Johann Fichte (German philosopher) demonstrate that nationalism is culturally constructed, and personal and public identities do overlap (Kramer, 2011, p. 8). The deeds of these fine gentlemen show that memories, with time passing, can become national fantasies and myths as they have the power to inspire future generations (Kramer, 2011, p. 16). Thus, national cultural identity is constructed through memories and narratives that continue to live in the minds of future generations, amplifying their sense of pride and belonging to the nation. Individual memory becomes a collective and, finally – cultural memory of the nation and its history (Kramer, 2011, p. 17). To this end, exploration of the past, specifically - the rediscovery of history, became so important in the 19th century that nationalists living in countries of Central and Eastern Europe often resorted to history and memory in their attempts to strengthen their nations (Berend, 2003, p. 46). This process was called. "cultural purification." Nationalists used culture to identify themselves with the earliest, usually medieval, documented national history. They wanted to cleanse their culture of unnecessary elements and create it anew in a strictly vernacular mold by rediscovering, authenticating, and reappropriating history (Smith, 1996, pp. 450-451).

### *Family, society, and nation*

Identity is not given; it is formed. In ancient times, individuals were loyal to the communities where they were born. They were eager to follow norms and laws developed in those communities (Schulze, 1996, pp. 99-100). Therefore, the identities of group members were formed within the families and communities they lived in. Families are starting points in the identity-forming process of individuals even today. Children are raised by traditions, certain morals, historical examples, and codes of conduct that have deep roots in ancestral memory and the historical-cultural legacy of their state. In other words, one's belief in national selfhood develops

through specific cultural experiences while living with the family (Kramer, 2011, p. 2). People live and interact in a society. Thus, the information they get outside their families also shapes adults' views. Individuals are continuously affected by information coming from interaction with schoolmates, neighbourhood friends, college and university fellows, work colleagues, etc. Ultimately, this information forms one's views on everything, including matters of nationhood and state. Individuals can develop several identities during their lifetime. Everywhere, people identify themselves with specific groups of society that share similar hobbies, favorite football teams, and anti-animal cruelty movements like vegans or lovers of nature. However, the most vital prerequisite for the societies' emergence as nations has always been people's will to be one nation with a common language, history, traditions, blood ties, etc (Berend, 2003, p. 45).

### *Language and Education*

Although some scholars warn against overestimating the role of language in nation-building, most still agree that the culture in which one has been taught to communicate becomes the core of his or her identity (Gellner, 1983, p. 61). Language is not only a way to communicate and express oneself, but it also helps to be self-aware; thus, it forms our identities as well (Kremer, 2016, pp. 56-57). The best example of language significance in nation-building would be 18th and 19th century Germany, where, according to Friedrich Meinecke, the concept of *Kulturnation* consolidated the nation by merging what was called "Vaterland" (fatherland) with the "Muttersprache" (mother tongue) in a mind of ordinary German commoner (Kremer, 2016, p. 53). Education managed to integrate lower classes of society into a single German nation, stopping its organization exclusively according to classes. The process was similar to one in Great Britain earlier (Kremer, 2016, p. 57).

Another example might be the life of German philosopher Johann Herder, a staunch proponent of so-called "cultural-linguistic nationalism." Herder idealized folk poetry and art to the point that, later, his work was admired by nationalists of other European countries. The works of Herder and other philosophers of that time told how cultural approach helps the nation-building process. They successfully incorporated ordinary commoners into one monolithic society because they developed cultural bonds with the folk by wandering amongst them, sharing their stories and art, and simply socializing (Berend, 2003, p. 49). These examples help to see a connection between culture, language, and nation-building.

### *Poetry and art*

Popular poetry and art give a distinctive flavor to every nation. Poets and artists, masters of telling stories about historical deeds of “good old times,” acquired exceptional significance in the era of *Romanticism*. This period was one of those times when artists and writers used their skills to pen their views on the matters of nationhood. Romanticism in central and eastern parts of the European continent glorified individualism and an exhilarating cult of the nation, making Romanticism a significant nation-building movement (Berend, 2003, p. 44). Back then, literature and art, and all the subjectivity attributed to them, played a significant role in the fights for freedom and justice. Figures like Byron, Schiller, and Botev became national heroes due to their passionate attitude toward the cause (fight for freedom) and their poetic and artistic skills. Slovenian, Czech, Hungarian, Polish, and other writers contributed not only to a mere discovery of the past (through their poems and novels) but also to the creation of publishing houses for books and newspapers. In a later period, the printing press had an even more significant impact on strengthening national sentiments and nation-building throughout the European continent as nationalists and revolutionaries actively used it to amass popular support and urge people to the streets (Berend, 2003, pp. 46-48). So, poetry, songs, music, and other art forms were essential in creating national historical myths. Their narratives were usually about love, patriotism, unity, and self-sacrifice (the more glorious, the better!). Such narratives wrapped in various tales, songs, poems, and parables significantly strengthened patriotic sentiments and the sense of belonging to a nation.

### *Us vs Them*

Another important aspect of culture in nation-building is related to its ability to amplify “us” and “them” thinking, where specific individuals see themselves as a part of “in-group” and perceive members of other groups as inferior (Schulze, 1996, p. 98). This effect allows nations to differentiate themselves from people of other cultures. With time, it generates particular views about nations. For instance, France is regarded as “old” (political nationalism), Germany is seen as both “old” or “new” (cultural or ethnic nationalism), and the United States is primarily considered a “new” nation – a melting pot of diverse ethnic and immigrant populations (cosmopolitan state) (Kramer, 2011, p. 26). Amplification of “us vs them” assuredly leads to a sense of national uniqueness because it makes people believe that they are entirely different (and even better!) than everybody else. That imaginary thinking has usually been a product of socially constructed campaigns that aimed at strengthening the sense of national unity or achievement of certain political ends

almost everywhere. For instance, the expulsion of Jews and Moors in Spain and persecution of Protestants in France and Catholics in England served that goal well long before the revolutions of the 18th century, not to mention American nationalism that got amplified after President Bush's call for action against global terror (Kramer, 2011, pp. 21-23).

### *Putting pieces of the puzzle together*

Culture, with all its elements, affects and shapes individuals' thinking so that they start identifying themselves with the sum of all parts. The views on the wholeness of the nation are achieved through traditions, literature, art, and national or religious symbols such as flags, coats of arms, crosses, ancestral monuments, history, and the legacies of famous figures. These attributes help to solidify the nation and make it distinct from other nations (or even look exceptional in countries with aggressive nationalism) (Kramer, 2011, p. 3). Moreover, if we assume that a nation, using the inherited right of self-determination, which is based on constructed shared history (Kramer, 2011, p. 11), creates the state, then it is easy to see the following causal link: culture solidifies a nation; nation creates a state; in turn, the state creates institutions to ensure society is charged with national sentiments. That way, the state's survival in preserving its sovereignty or sense of unique identity is ensured.

As regards the discourse among historians and scholars on a given topic, there are no necessarily right or wrong approaches to studying nationalism. Different theories are like different lenses to examine the subject. Although some argue that national identity is formed around ancestral ties, ethnicity, and blood, it is more than that. Individuals may not necessarily be related to distinct ethnic groups to identify as part of the same community or political entity or even share one language. Anderson's view of an "imagined political community" shows that individuals who have never seen and will probably never see each other would still identify with the same political entity (Kramer, 2011, pp. 18-19). It is about how one imagines/feels being part of a group or a nation or, as Smith defines it, about cultural traditions and shared history (Kramer, 2011, p. 12).

To this point, one can examine the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian dispute about common historical ancestry over Kievan Russ. Russia's claims over this ancestry aim to show the indivisibility of Russians and Ukrainians as a nation. People who call themselves Ukrainians, however, do not share this view, seeing Kievan Russ as a cradle of Slavic, albeit Ukrainian nation. Ongoing confrontation can be an exciting case that gives valuable insights into how nations are constructed today. There

are many ethnic Ukrainians among those fighting under the Russian flag against Ukraine in the ongoing military conflict.

Conversely, many Russian-speaking individuals are defending what they believe is their statehood because they affiliate themselves with Ukraine, not - Russia. The question here is why large parts of the Russian-speaking population living in Ukraine, and not necessarily seeing themselves as ethnic Ukrainians, still prefer to identify themselves with the state of Ukraine. The survey data shows that their identities have gradually shifted from pro-Russian to pro-Ukrainian after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The process intensified since Russia established control over Crimea in 2014, especially considering the ongoing “Special Military Operation” launched in February 2022. Today, a large portion of the population in Ukraine sees *citizenship* as the most essential part of who they are (Barrington, 2021, pp. 162-168). Thus, based on this example, identities are also formed by external variables unrelated to blood ties, nationality, language, race, or religious beliefs. Citizenship, in the case of Ukraine, is the glue that binds together its diverse populace, which now affiliates itself with the state of Ukraine like it never did before.

### *Conclusion*

To conclude, nationalism and culture indeed have many layers. In the imagined West, assimilating newcomers into one society is more accessible than in the East. Perhaps the more eastwards we go, the “thicker” the layer of culture becomes. Culture was, and will always be, an integral part of a country’s nationhood because culture is both a byproduct of humans’ deeds and a driving force for future action; as for the question of good and evil, culture alone cannot necessarily catalyze violent deeds. Ultimately, it all depends on the “cultural purification” process, namely the degree to which nationalists will try to “purify” everything they see as exogenous. If that degree takes a drastic scale, the consequences might be dire. The state will most likely be shaken by the stand between nationalists and the “rest” they regard as alien.

Conversely, if the “purification” process does not alienate minorities, then nation-building will go on peacefully. Lastly, culture is a great tool to construct identity socially. It positively preserves nationhood in states comprised or dominated by a single nation (nation-states). It can continuously strengthen the sense of “us” and “them” to resist the assimilation process imposed by a more powerful neighbour.



Nation and culture strengthen each other; as such, they are intertwined. Culture has the power to preserve. “Purification” has the power to destroy.

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