

TRANSNATIONALISM AND DIASPORAS: THE KURDISH EXAMPLE

Östen Wahlbeck

Institute of Migration
Piispankatu 3
FIN-20500 Turku
FINLAND

Tel. +358-2-2317536

Fax: +358-2-2333460

E-mail: osten.wahlbeck@abo.fi

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Introduction

'Refugee studies' has recently developed into an independent research domain with its own institutions, journals and discourse.¹ This scholarly domain has largely been uninformed by contemporary discussions concerning diasporas and transnationalism. This paper argues that refugee studies can benefit from the contemporary diaspora discourse. Examples from a study of Kurdish refugee communities in Europe suggest that there are advantages to be gained in connecting these two discursive domains, as well as from encouraging discussion between them.

In recent years there has been an increased interest in the notion of diasporas among social scientists. Lie (1995) argues that there has been a change of focus in recent publications in the sociology of international migration. Instead of studying international migration the focus is often on transnational diasporas. The new diaspora discourse has thus meant that the former interest in immigration and assimilation has largely given way to an interest in transnational networks and communities (Lie, 1995). The establishment of transnational communities is related to more general processes of globalisation in the contemporary world. Thus, issues like transnationalism, deterritorialisation and globalisation are widely discussed among migration researchers and social scientists at large.

An area of research where issues like diasporas and transnationalism would seem to have a specific significance is the area of refugee studies. Surprisingly, however, publications in the area of forced migration are seldom informed by the contemporary discussions related to transnationalism and diasporas.² There is an abundance of literature on refugees, but only a small number of publications make an effort to discuss conceptual or theoretical questions. One weakness with refugee studies is that most research 'has been tactical, *ad hoc*, diffuse and reactive' (Robinson, 1993, 6). In addition, the existing empirical studies have to a great extent been uninformed by general sociological theory and the experiences of refugees are rarely distinguished from those of other migrants (Richmond, 1994). Similar arguments are presented by Steven Gold (1992) who finds that refugee studies in the ethnographic sociological tradition are rare, and that policy-oriented research has dominated the

field at the expense of independent, holistic scholarship. Malkki (1995b) argues that there is an implicit functionalism in refugee studies. Processes of transformation in identity, culture and cultural tradition are described in an uncritical way with the concepts of 'adaptation' and 'acculturation.' Key concepts like 'identity' and 'culture,' which are both widely debated and held problematic in the social sciences, are too often used in an uninformed and confusing way in refugee research (Steen, 1992). Not surprisingly, there is a need for more adequate theories and clearly defined concepts which could describe the specific experiences of refugees.

This paper argues that the discussion concerning transnationalism and especially the concept of diaspora can provide refugee studies with some of the conceptual tools that are needed to study refugees in an increasingly global world. The concept of diaspora can take into account the refugees' specific transnational experiences and social relationships. Likewise, it is also possible that studies of transnationalism and diasporas can benefit from the more empirical tradition in the area of refugee studies. There is a danger that the enthusiasm for the concepts of transnationalism and globalisation could end up in a 'global babble,' with no practical relevance for research (Abu-Lughod, 1991). Empirical studies of refugees can indicate ways in which the processes of globalisation exert a practical influence on people's everyday lives. Thus, there is much to gain from connecting the contemporary diaspora discourse with more traditional studies of forced migration.

In this paper, results from a comparative study of Kurdish refugees constitute the basis for a discussion of the concept of diaspora and its relevance for a sociological study of refugees in the country of exile. The paper argues that the traditional way of looking at ethnic relations, in terms of a relation between strictly localised minorities and majorities, is inadequate to describe refugees' specific experiences. Instead it is argued that the concept of diaspora, understood as a transnational social organisation relating both to the country of origin and the country of exile, can give a deeper understanding of the social reality in which refugees live.

Globalisation, Transnationalism and Deterritorialisation

In the contemporary world the process of globalisation is challenging the traditional ways in which migration and ethnic relations have been conceptualised. Globalisation may be defined as a 'social process in which the constraints of geography on the social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding' (Waters, 1995, 3). International migration and new technological developments have made various global, transnational and even totally deterritorialised social relations possible. This is obviously not leading to a new uniform world culture (Featherstone, 1990). Instead, the contemporary global world with its drastic expansion of mobility is a place where 'difference is encountered in the adjoining neighbourhood, the familiar turns up at the ends of the earth' (Clifford, 1988, 14). Consequently, the local and the global become increasingly intertwined in a process of 'glocalization' (Robertson, 1995).

The social relations emerging from these contemporary developments are not easily confined within the borders of nation-states. Thus they can be regarded as transnational, a term which indicates a relation over and beyond, rather than between or in, the nation-states. The discussion of transnationalism has been especially vibrant within anthropology (Kearney, 1995, Hannerz, 1996) where the localisation of cultures and social relations has been questioned by many authors (e.g. Clifford, 1992; Gupta and Ferguson, 1992). Some of the most interesting contributions to the discussion on transnationalism and international migration have been made by Glick Schiller et al. (1992) and Basch et al. (1994). These books are especially valuable in that they are based on empirical research. In their studies among migrants from the Caribbean and the Philippines living in the USA, Basch et al. describe how the migrants' social, economic, political and cultural networks involve both country of origin and country of settlement. These processes are described using the notion of transnationalism:

We define "transnationalism" as the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. (Basch et al., 1994, 7)

The contemporary processes of globalisation and transnationalism do not diminish the importance of ethnicity, on the contrary, it is given a new significance in a global world (Featherstone, 1990; Hall, 1991; Waters, 1995). One major change is that the connection between ethnicity and locality has become blurred. 'Ethnicity, once a genie contained in the bottle of some sort of locality

(however large) has now become a global force, forever slipping in and through, the cracks between states and borders' (Appadurai, 1990, 306). The processes of globalisation have, among other things, led to the emergence of deterritorialised ethnicities.

It is plausible that deterritorialisation would be an especially salient feature among refugees, who have been forced to leave their country of origin. For example, the Tamil refugees in Ann-Belinda Steen's (1992) study have one obvious thing in common:

They do not form a 'people' or a 'community', which means that they cannot be represented 'as if' one was anthropologizing in a Jaffna village in the North of Sri Lanka. There is thus no question of writing a monograph in the conventional sense of the term, assuming an easy correspondence between a people and a place. 'The setting' (or the equivalent) cannot appear at a crucial point in chapter one. For refugees there is no such fixed setting; this is, indeed, *the whole point about them*, regrettably missed in many refugee studies. Moreover, it is this point which clearly distinguishes migrants from refugees. Migrants 'decide' to leave and to re-create their life in another place; refugees are torn away from their homeland and still cling to it. ... In the case of refugees *everything* that should normally define them in a socio-cultural context is non-existent, or rather, still back home (e.g. in Sri Lanka). (Steen, 1992, 110)

In addition to various transnational social relations, deterritorialisation as a lived experience seems to be intrinsically connected to life in exile. The deterritorialised experience of refugees is well described by Edward Said, himself a Palestinian exile. He argues that life in exile cannot be separated from the memory of the homeland:

For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. (Said, 1990, 366)

The deterritorialised experience and transnational social relations of refugees have implications for the adaptation of theories of ethnic relations to refugee groups. In the literature on ethnicity, an ethnic group is often regarded as being defined by its relation to and interaction with other groups (e.g. Barth, 1969). An ethnic minority is thus defined in relation to the ethnic majority within a specific society. However, it is difficult to adapt this relational context to the deterritorialised reality in which refugees live. Gisèle Bousquet (1991) finds that theories of ethnic relations are not easily applied to refugee communities. She disputes Abner Cohen's (1969) idea that ethnicity is used to mobilise the members of an ethnic group within contemporary urban political conflicts, on the

grounds that the Vietnamese refugees in her study arrived in the host-country as an already distinct culturally and politically self-identified ethnic group. Unfortunately, she does not develop her challenge much further than this, nor does she draw any wider conclusions from her results. It can be suggested that the problem has nothing to do with theories of ethnic relations as such, but with the strict localisation of ethnic relations that these theories usually assume. In an increasingly globalised world ethnicity might also be defined in relations which are transnational or even totally deterritorialised. 'Although much of the theoretical writing about ethnicity has been concerned with the attachment of an ethnic group to a territory, in fact ethnic communities are often concerned precisely with their *detachment* from a territory' (Rex, 1996, 103)

The Transnational Kurdish Refugee Community

The argument presented in this paper is based on results from a large comparative study among newly arrived Kurdish refugees (Wahlbeck, forthcoming). The ethnographic fieldwork was carried out in 1994 in Finland and in 1995 in Britain. These two countries were regarded as sufficiently different in order to make a comparative study. The most important material consisted of semi-structured interviews with both male and female Kurdish refugees from Turkey, Iraq and Iran. The aim of the interviews was to obtain a broad understanding of the refugees' situation and problems as seen from their own point of view. In addition to the interviews with refugees, Kurdish associations were studied through interviews and participant observation.

Aspects of deterritorialisation and transnationalism were evident in the Kurdish communities in both countries during my fieldwork.³ In Britain, for example, when asked if they felt that they belonged to an 'ethnic minority' in the UK, many Kurdish interviewees had problems in understanding the question. Because of the continuing relationship which most refugees have to their countries of origin, they wanted to think of themselves within this framework and not within the framework of British ethnic relations. A refugee from Turkey who had lived for seven years in London had a very good understanding of the meaning of the term 'ethnic minority,' but still found it incomprehensible to think of the refugee community in these terms:

Ö: Do you consider yourself to belong to an ethnic minority then, because people in Britain sometimes talk about ethnic minorities?

R: No, I get really angry when they say Kurdish minority. I do not. Kurdish people, Kurdish nation I would say.

Ö: But I mean in England, an ethnic minority in England?

R: In England?

Ö: Yes, in England.

R: Hmm -- Maybe we are a minority, but I do not know ethnic minority, I do not like the word minority.

Ö: OK, it has to do with --

R: It is sort of like discrimination, in a way, one way of --

Ö: Yes. So the reason you do not like the word minority is because it has to do with that you do not feel like you are a minority in Turkey?

R: How they can call twenty million people a minority is just amazing. There are nations which are smaller than that, what, for example, is the population of Holland or Luxembourg?

This quotation exemplifies that the Kurdish refugees' ethnicity is primarily defined within the context of social relations in the countries of origin. Because of this orientation towards Kurdistan, it is difficult to regard the Kurdish refugees as an ethnic minority within the framework of the countries of exile. This supports the argument that theories of ethnic relations are not easily applied to refugee situations. However, this does not mean that refugees do not constitute ethnic groups. As most scholars within anthropology and sociology agree, ethnicity is always defined in terms of a relation between social groups. In the case of refugees, the most significant relation is not within the country of settlement. What matters is the deterritorialised social relation with the country of origin which is maintained through transnational contacts. Thus, instead of strictly localising the ethnic relations of refugees it is useful to understand their social relations as something transnational.

The results from the fieldwork indicated that the Kurdish refugees' relation to their societies of origin was not only a matter of memories; it was an ongoing and continuous relation. All interviewees continued to be influenced by contemporary developments in Kurdistan. In particular, the political developments played a large role for the refugees. A woman from Turkey said:

I think all Kurdish refugees have the problems in Kurdistan still inside them although they are away from there. They still think about Kurdistan and have it with them here, they have relatives still living there and hear news from Kurdistan. When they hear that villages have been destroyed it affects them directly although they are living here.

After several years in exile the Kurdish refugees continued to feel alienated from the receiving society. Instead they continued to relate to their countries of origin emotionally and psychologically in several different ways. However, the connection with Kurdistan did not only have a psychological aspect; there were also quite tangible flows of information, ideas, capital and people between the countries of origin and the countries of settlement.

The Kurdish refugees continued to keep in touch with their old friends and relatives in Kurdistan and in other countries all over the world. There were various social, economic and political relations and networks between the diaspora and Kurdistan, as well as between different countries in the diaspora. For example, personal contacts were maintained through telephone calls, letters and personal visits. With the help of these contacts the Kurds living in exile are able to keep up social relations with fellow Kurds both in Kurdistan and in other countries in the diaspora. It is not uncommon for Kurdish refugees to make trips all over Europe in order to keep in touch with friends and relatives. During the summers 1992 to 1994, before the violent internal fights in Kurdistan, many Kurdish refugees from Iraq also had the opportunity to visit Northern Iraq because of the introduction of the 'safe haven' protected by the United Nations.

Furthermore, the refugees continued to have a connection with Kurdistan through the mass media, including newspapers, radio and satellite-television. During recent years fax machines and the Internet have also been used as channels through which Kurds in the diaspora can keep in touch with each other. Modern technology has clearly made it easier to sustain transnational social networks. Yet, modern technology is expensive and most Kurdish refugees cannot afford much else besides a radio, letters and occasional phone calls to their relatives. To follow the latest news from Kurdistan sometimes takes up a large part of the day for the refugees. This was the case for a refugee from Iran who lived in a small provincial town in Finland:

I am following news in foreign languages, all the day I am listening. The French radio in the Persian language, Voice of America in Kurdish, and also news from the German radio. It is important to follow what is going on. ... From France we are also sent the newspaper of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, and from Helsinki and from Sweden I get newspapers. Our cultural organisation has a newspaper as well .

Besides radio and newspapers, television is also an important source of information. The new satellite channels on television have significantly improved the possibility for migrants to get

information from their countries of origin. A young man from Iraq living in Finland explained how he obtained news from Kurdistan:

I follow the Finnish television and radio, but I do not have any Kurdish newspapers. I do listen to Voice of America as well as Arabian radio programmes. However, where we live there are no Kurdish or Arabian newspapers available. My wife's brother has a satellite dish and we follow Arabian programmes on his television. They will start a Kurdish channel in Holland soon and we are thinking about buying a satellite dish ourselves .

It was obvious that satellite dishes were seen as an important investment, although only few could afford them. The television channel mentioned in the quotation above was the Kurdish satellite channel MED-TV. This television station is a good example of extensive transnational co-operation among the Kurds in exile. MED-TV started its broadcasts in the spring 1995 and produces its programmes in different European countries and distributes them all over Europe, the Middle East and northern Africa. The station is financially supported by private benefactors in the Kurdish communities all over Europe. Besides MED-TV, many Kurds, especially from Iraq, followed satellite programmes from various Arabic-speaking countries. However, since MED-TV uses the Kurdish language it rapidly became popular among the Kurds in Europe. Before MED-TV, the only international broadcast in the Kurdish language was the weekly news on short-wave radio sent by Voice of America.⁴

The various social relations of the Kurdish refugees create a transnational community not bound by the geographical borders of either the countries of origin or the countries of settlement. These types of transnational social relations raise issues which have been largely overlooked in conventional refugee studies. The creation of transnational social networks is less difficult today because of various aspects of the process of globalisation. For example, with the help of modern technology it is now easy to retain personal relationships over vast geographical distances. Undoubtedly, the process of globalisation has a profound impact on the social relations of refugees and migrants in the contemporary world.

The Concept of Diaspora

Globalisation, transnationalism and deterritorialisation are phenomena which have a significance for all migrants in the contemporary world. However, there are some significant differences between ordinary migrants and refugees. It can be argued that refugees have a distinctive relationship with both the country they have been forced to flee from and the country where they are involuntarily settled. One of the classical articles in refugee studies argues that 'it is the reluctance to uproot oneself, and the absence of positive original motivations to settle elsewhere, which characterises all refugee decisions and distinguishes the refugee from the voluntary migrants' (Kunz, 1973, 130).

Many refugee communities display a political and social orientation towards the country of origin. In many cases political events and conflicts in the country of origin continue to influence and often divide the communities (cf. Bousquet, 1991; Gold, 1992; Steen, 1992; McDowell, 1996; Valtonen, 1997). In fact, the social structure of a refugee community is largely a continuation of patterns in the country of origin. In many ways refugees continue to be part of their old social settings. In the case of refugees, *political* allegiances and relations in the country of origin obviously have a special significance. It can be argued that the very strong political orientation towards the 'homeland' is different from the relations other migrants have towards their countries of origin. Thus, it can also be argued that the concepts of transnationalism and deterritorialisation are not enough if one wants to describe the specific refugee experience that distinguishes the refugee from the ordinary migrant. Obviously, refugee research needs a new conceptual framework in which the refugees' deterritorialised and transnational social relations can be described. There is reason to believe that the concept of diaspora can provide this conceptual framework.

Originally, the concept of diaspora referred to the dispersal of the Jews from their historic homeland. Today it is often used to describe various well-established communities which have an experience of 'displacement,' like the overseas Chinese, the Armenians in exile, the Palestinian refugees, the Gypsies or the whole African diaspora (cf. Chaliand and Rageau, 1991; Safran, 1991; Clifford, 1994; Cohen, 1997). It is common to argue that one criterion of a diaspora is forcible dispersal. Chaliand describes diasporas as 'born from a forced dispersion, they conscientiously strive to keep a memory of the past alive and foster the will to transmit a heritage and to survive as a diaspora' (Chaliand, 1989, xiv).

Diasporic phenomena obviously have a long history and are not only associated with the modern world (Cohen, 1997). What, however, is new in the contemporary world is the steadily increasing impact of globalisation. It is a process which, through the ease of international mobility and by facilitating transnational social relations, increases the opportunities for diaspora formation. The concept of diaspora is clearly associated with transnationalism, as Tölölyan writes: 'Diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational moment' (Tölölyan, 1991, 4). Today the concept of diaspora is used increasingly to describe any community which in one way or another has a history of migration (Marienstras, 1989). The concept has been regarded as useful in describing the geographical displacement and/or deterritorialisation of identities and cultures in the contemporary world. This approach includes writings on syncretism, 'hybridity' and cultures of resistance among groups of migrant origin (cf. Gilroy, 1991; Hall, 1993; Brah, 1996). Thus, today the concept of diaspora is used to describe the processes of transnationalism, the experience of displacement as well as the salience of pre-migration social networks, cultures, politics and capital, in a wide range of communities (Sheffer, 1986, 1995; Safran, 1991; Clifford, 1994; Shain, 1995; Tölölyan, 1996; Cohen, 1997).

The concept of diaspora seems to encompass the transnational and deterritorialised social relations of refugees as well as to outline the specific refugee experience. The concept can conceive the political project in the 'homeland' which plays such a fundamental role for many refugees. Seeing refugees as living in a diasporic relation is a way of throwing some more light on the special relationships that refugees have with both the society of origin and society of settlement. Thus, the concept of diaspora can also help to bridge the artificial 'before' and 'after' distinction commonly applied to migration, and hereby it can encompass the refugees' own definition of their situation.

The diasporic consciousness of the Kurdish refugees was especially evident in the political activism of the Kurdish community. The Kurdish refugee organisations in exile are often greatly influenced by the political and social divisions and allegiances in Kurdistan. As with other refugee communities, the Kurdish community is a highly politicised community. There was an often expressed indirect support for the 'Kurdish cause' and the struggle of the Kurdish people among the Kurdish organisations studied in this research. A worker in one organisation in London explained the political affiliation of Kurdish organisations in the following way:

You know, we are not a football team, or some English organisation like that. We are political refugees. There is a specific reason why we came here, and that reason is political, and of course one still wants to continue with something that earlier has taken up your whole life.

Because of the continuous political activism among the refugees most of the Kurdish associations in exile are directly or indirectly associated with political parties in Kurdistan. On the one hand, this often leads to internal divisions in the refugee communities, but on the other hand, these same divisions also can unite those refugees who share the same political beliefs and background in the country of origin. The associations and informal networks growing out of this unity can be used as a resource to solve the problems faced by the refugees in their new country of settlement (cf. Wahlbeck, 1998). One of the Kurdish parties which gathers a large support among Kurdish refugees from Turkey is the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan, PKK). A man from Turkey explained how important it was to have an opportunity to meet people with the same political opinions:

I am extremely satisfied with the fact that in every place there are supporters of the PKK. And I believe that if this information centre did not exist in Finland, in that case it could happen that the Kurds would all become mentally ill. But with the information centre, and when we are working and we are getting information about our own country, this helps us a lot. It is like morality, our life. For example, without this party I am nothing.

It seems as if diasporic political activity also serves the function of reinforcing an identity and a sense of order and purpose in the fragmented lives of the refugees. The diasporic consciousness expressed in the quotation above was apparent among most of the interviewees. There are several features of the Kurdish communities which characterise them as a diaspora in accordance with, for example, William Safran's (1991) precise definition.⁵ The forced displacement of the Kurds, their collective memory of their original homeland, the alienation and discrimination they experience in Europe, their wish to return to Kurdistan, their collective commitment to the restoration of their homeland and finally their transnational social networks, are all features of the diasporic relations displayed by the Kurdish refugees in Europe. Therefore it can be suggested that there is enough reason to talk about a Kurdish diaspora, despite the fact that the Kurdish communities in Europe have a relatively short history. The notion of transnationalism is not enough if one wants describe the specific experiences of Kurdish refugees in exile. Instead, the concept of diaspora gives a more detailed description of this transnational community.

Pitfalls of the Diaspora Discourse

The concept of diaspora is useful for a description of the refugee experience and the transnational social relations of refugees in exile. However, there are a couple of important issues one needs to take into account when using the concept of diaspora. There is a danger that the concept of diaspora, with its preoccupation with ‘migrant communities’ and their relationship to the country of origin, may disregard the host-society and the power structures involved in majority-minority relations. If this happens, the introduction of the concept leads back to culturalist and other social and psychological theories in which immigrants are largely seen as choosing to integrate or not, and exclusionary structures and ideologies, like racism, are not seen to play any significant role.

Theories and discourses that diasporize or internationalize “minorities” can deflect the attention from long-standing, structured inequalities of class and race. It is as if the problem were multinationalism - issues of translation, education, and tolerance - rather than of economic exploitation and racism. While clearly necessary, making *cultural* room for Salvadorans, Samoans, Sikhs, Haitians, Khmers, and so forth, does not, of itself, produce a living wage, decent housing, or health care. Moreover, at the level of everyday social practice cultural differences are persistently racialized, classed, and gendered. Diaspora theories need to account for these concrete, cross-cutting structures. (Clifford, 1994, 313)

It is important to remember that there is no reason to see diasporas as a solely positive development. As Clifford says, ‘Suffice it to say that diasporic consciousness “makes the best of a bad situation.” Experience of loss, marginality, and exile ... are often reinforced by systematic exploitation and blocked advancement’ (Clifford, 1994, 312). Although diasporas are often defined in relation to nation-states, it must be remembered that a diaspora cannot provide its members with the same services and opportunities that are provided by a state for its citizens. Thus, it is important not to see diasporas as a positive and sufficient alternative to egalitarian welfare states. Furthermore, there is not necessarily any reason to celebrate the social qualities of diasporas. As Ong and Nonini point out, ‘there is nothing intrinsically liberating about diaspora cultures’ (Ong and Nonini, 1997, 325). On the contrary, diasporas can revive old forms of oppression in a new setting.

Another important issue in the discussion of diasporas is the question of time. This was first pointed out by Richard Marienstrass (1989). He argued that, ‘certainly, the word diaspora is used today to describe any community that has emigrated whose numbers make it visible in the host community.

But in order to know whether it is really a diaspora, time has to pass' (Marienstras, 1989, 125). For example, in the case of the Kurdish refugees, one cannot rule out the possibility that the diaspora might disappear over time. There is still a possibility, at least theoretically, that political changes in the Middle East in the future will make a return migration possible. The future developments of a diaspora also depend on the structures and policies of the country of exile. Future generations may, if they are accepted by the host-society, be assimilated into the societies in which they live. On the other hand, xenophobia, discrimination and racism might effectively rule out any assimilation. Thus, although the Kurds in exile today clearly live in a diasporic relation, only time will tell if they will become a permanent diaspora.

Despite these cautious remarks, my argument is that a sociological analysis of contemporary refugees has much to gain from the concept of diaspora and the diaspora discourse. The point is that regardless of whether refugees are a permanent diaspora or not, the concept of diaspora can throw some light on refugees' specific relationships to their countries of settlement and their countries of origin. It can be suggested that the concept of diaspora solves some of the analytical problems connected with refugee studies. The diaspora concept can relate to both the country of origin and the country of reception, and can bridge the gap between the periods before and after migration. Thus the diaspora concept, with its connection to both the country of origin and the country of settlement, is useful for understanding the duality of the social relations of refugee communities. However, for the refugees themselves there is, of course, no duality, since the diaspora is one real and lived transnational experience.

Conclusion

The results from the study of Kurdish refugees suggest that refugees sustain transnational social networks and have a diasporic consciousness. This indicates that the diaspora concept might be a useful concept for describing the specific refugee experience. The diasporic relations in the refugee communities mean that theories of ethnic relations are difficult to apply to refugee studies. For example, the Kurds did not regard themselves as an ethnic minority within the context of the country of exile; instead their ethnicity was defined within social relations in the country of origin. The label 'diaspora' is, perhaps, especially appropriate in the

case of the Kurdish refugees because of the influence of Kurdish nationalism, which commits many Kurdish refugees to the restoration of their homeland. However, this paper suggests that the concept of diaspora can also be a useful analytical tool in the study of other refugee communities. This is because the concept can, at the same time, relate to both the country of settlement and the country of origin. In this way, it can also describe the transnationalism of refugee communities in general.

The dual orientation towards both the country of origin and the country of resettlement is not as contradictory and paradoxical as it seems. In the refugees' own experiences their country of origin and their country of exile, as well as the time before and the time after migration, constitute a continuous and coherent lived experience. The separation between before and after migration, as well as the separation between the country of origin and country of exile, is largely forced on the refugees' experiences by the outside observer. The concept of diaspora can help the researcher to rethink these issues and to understand the transnational reality in which the refugees are forced to live. Thus, the notion of diaspora can bridge the artificial duality in which the refugee experience is conceptualised.

Notes

¹ The most influential journal in the scholarly domain of 'refugee studies' is the *Journal of Refugee Studies* published by Oxford University Press since 1988. The largest research institutions are the Refugee Studies Programme at the University of Oxford, UK and the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University, Canada, both established in the 1980s.

² Some of the few serious attempts to connect refugee studies and contemporary transnational theories are found in the studies of Hutu refugees in Tanzania by Malkki (1992, 1994, 1995a) and the discussion of forced migration in the Middle East by Shami (1996). However, in the wider area of refugee studies these publications can be seen as exceptions.

³ In addition to the study by Wahlbeck (forthcoming), some other recent studies of the Kurdish communities in Europe also describe transnational networks and diasporic political activism. Thomas Faist (1997) discusses the existence of 'transnational social spaces' among Kurds and Turks in Germany, while Martin van Bruinessen (1996) uses Benedict Anderson's term 'long-distance nationalism' to describe the ways in which the Kurdish diaspora has become connected to the Kurdish movement in the Middle East.

⁴ The Kurdish satellite channel MED-TV has also had far reaching international political repercussions. The whole project has enraged the Turkish government, which is perhaps not surprising bearing in mind the oppression of the Kurds in Turkey and the Turkish authorities' discontent at any Kurdish cultural expression. According to the Turkish government, the station was a PKK organ and they demanded that it should be closed down. Among other counter-actions, the Turkish authorities directed intensive diplomatic pressure against the channel (Hassanpour, 1997, 1998).

⁵ The concept of diaspora is currently very popular and there are numerous definitions. The range of phenomena supposedly spanned by the concept is such that it is in danger of losing its explanatory power. In order to be able to use the concept analytically the author has preferred the precise definition presented in the first number of the journal *Diaspora*, where according to William Safran diasporas are:

Expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics: 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original "center" to two or more "peripheral," or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland - its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe they are not - and perhaps cannot be - fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return - when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (Safran, 1991, 83-84)

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