

## Diaspora: A Brief Introduction

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"Diaspora" derives from a Greek verb that means "to sow, to scatter." Its triconsonantal root, *spr*, takes various forms with the addition of vowels and gives us 'spore, sperm, spread, disperse,' or the Armenian *spurk* for diaspora."<sup>1</sup> Today, 'diaspora' refers to dispersed populations that, like seeds scattered away from the parental body of the homeland, do not assimilate completely but rather manage to reproduce in new sites of settlement a social formation, a culture, and an identity that remains linked to the homeland's.

Though Greek in origin, the term was first used to designate the exile and scattering of the Jews in the famous translation of the Torah into the Greek "Septuagint" by seventy Jewish translators.<sup>2</sup> In Greek-dominated, multicultural Alexandria, Jews retained links and loyalty to their homeland and Temple while also increasingly adopting the Greek language and Hellenic culture. It was in this bicultural, hybridizing situation that the term "diaspora" acquired many of the nuances of meaning it retains today, even as others have changed in the past three decades.

Diaspora's original connotations of dispersion and exile now also encompass a larger semantic field; the term is sometimes used to refer to a range of ethnic communities and to a variety of categories of people, like political and war refugees, im/migrants, ethnic and racial minorities, etc. This "ease with which diaspora is used as a synonym for related phenomena"<sup>3</sup> simultaneously empowers the term and causes conceptual problems, according to scholars like Khachig Tölölyan.

As a result of the rapid expansion of the term's use, ascertaining the meaning of "diaspora" in a comprehensive manner can be difficult. As Kim D. Butler states, "definitions and understandings of diaspora get modified 'in translation' as they are applied to new groups..."<sup>4</sup> It therefore becomes important to develop a list of

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<sup>1</sup> Khachig Tölölyan. "Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 5, no. 1 (1996): 10.

<sup>2</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 1971.

<sup>3</sup> Khachig Tölölyan. "Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 5, no. 1 (1996): 10.

<sup>4</sup> Kim D. Butler. "Defining diaspora, refining a discourse." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 10, no. 2, (2001): 189.

characteristics which are intrinsic to the dynamics of diaspora and which transcend each and every individual case.

Colin Palmer noted, "If all movements of people do not result in diasporas, what, then, distinguishes diasporas from other movements of people?"<sup>5</sup> Numerous scholars have created guidelines and limitations to the classification of diaspora, such as William Safran, whose defining characteristics of diaspora are:

- 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 that 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.<sup>6</sup>

In an alternative scheme of categorization, Robin Cohen formulated five different categories of diaspora: victim, labour, trade, imperial (which may be considered a form of trade diaspora), and cultural (not indigenous to the area from which they dispersed, i.e., Caribbean) diasporas.<sup>7</sup> Cohen believes that variations in the diasporic experience exist, and that the categorization of diaspora is meant to offer at least a partial explanation as to what makes each community in each location different from another. As Butler states,

A people that is expelled will necessarily develop a different cultural ethos from those who flee, or who are taken as captives. A group that leaves *en masse* also differs from a group that gradually constitutes itself after a protracted period of individual emigrations.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kim D. Butler. "Defining diaspora, refining a discourse." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 10, no. 2, (2001): 191.

<sup>6</sup> William Safran. "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (1991): 83-84.

<sup>7</sup> Robin Cohen. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 1997, p. x.

<sup>8</sup> Kim D. Butler. "Defining diaspora, refining a discourse." *Diaspora*. 10:2, (2001): 199.

Finally, one must consider the three stages of the diasporic experience, which can be applied to cases of diasporic communities with some variation. These three stages are that of: home, away, and return in some form, whether in physical return migration or a persistent turning towards the homeland, to help it and be helped by it. This situation is complicated in recent decades by the fact that “home” has lost its centrality for some diasporas but remains a very important nodal point in the new diasporic networks that have developed in the era of transnationalism and globalization.

“Home” is the starting point for almost all diasporic communities – it is Armenia for Armenians, China for the Chinese, Greece for the Greeks, Italy for Italians, etc. “Away” is the place in which both the physical and mental process of the diasporic experience occurs through the processes of displacement from the old and emplacement in the new. These processes can involve alienation and marginalization, whether it be political, economic, social or all three. Finally, some form of “return” or re-turning occurs. Some diasporans return to a homeland which, they discover, is no longer the homeland of memory, nostalgia, and myth, as nurtured in diaspora. Many changes occur while the diaspora group is away. In her novel, *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri shows how the foreground of her narrative (what is happening in the novel’s present) is always somehow linked to the background (memories of life in the homeland); this remains true regardless of the character’s generation, but of course memory becomes a less reliable guide over time<sup>9</sup>. Khachig Tölölyan also notes that a collective memory is a foundational element to the identity of a diasporic community.<sup>10</sup> Thus, one does not necessarily have to physically return home to be a part of a diaspora, but some notion of home, collective memory and group history must always be part of the conceptual and emotional discourse of the diasporic culture.

It is clear that the field of Diaspora Studies requires much more work in terms of solidifying concepts and applying such concepts to specific case studies. The Zoryan Institute, as well as a select few other centers of research (see links for information), is pleased to be at the forefront of this dynamic and developing field. Please check back for updates in the Diaspora section and contact the Institute for any questions, comments or concerns.

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<sup>9</sup> Jhumpa Lahiri. *The Interpreter of Maladies*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Khachig Tölölyan. “Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment.” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*. 5, no. 1 (1996): p. 14.