Chapter 16
Art and Agency:
Transforming Relationships of Power in Iraqi Kurdistan

Autumn Cockrell-Abdullah
Kennesaw State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter places the practices of Kurdish visual artists working in Iraqi Kurdistan within the historical context of the Iraqi state and discusses the production of artwork, particularly the creation of the Museum of Modern Art and the Sulemani International Film Festival, as they demonstrate the transitional nature of power and the struggle for cultural dominance within Iraqi Kurdish society. Once the sole or major patron of most artwork produced in Iraqi Kurdistan, the government is no longer funding most projects. The loss of this major patron has significantly changed the relationship between government (patron) and artist (client) creating opportunities for artists to develop alternative sources of support. The work of these artists reveals the struggle of a nation to transform historical relationships of power and to develop a sustainable civil society and a long-term, sustainable peace.

INTRODUCTION

The "Kurdish Question", as it is sometimes called, refers to a regional conflict including a people who stretch across territories that include the countries of Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria. The Kurds have often been referred to as "the world's largest nation without a state" (King 2014, Brenneman 2007). This "question" has spanned more than two centuries and includes complex historical, political, social, cultural and economic factors. While there is no politically recognized independent state known as "Kurdistan", it is socially recognized by millions of Kurds as their ethnic homeland (King, 2014: p. 3). Since 1992, however, the Kurds within the state of Iraq do have a recognized territory referred to as the Autonomous Kurdish Region. "Kurdistan", as both an imagined homeland and a territorial reality in northern Iraq, functions as a quasi-state and is a powerful motivator for many Kurds in the Middle East and around the world. Today, Kurds in Northern Iraq are employing Kurdish ethnic identity in unique ways to gain greater advantage and justification for an independent Kurdish state in Northern Iraq. To consider the

negotiation and strategic adaptation of relationships of power within Iraqi Kurdistan is, in fact, to deeply consider the relationship between politics and culture (Conklin, 1997) yet it can be hard to pinpoint exactly what cultural dynamics are at play especially in a question as complex the Kurdish one. The work of political scientist, John Paul Lederach, focuses on understanding the dynamics of protracted violence and why breaking violent patterns of behavior is so difficult. It also highlights peacebuilders' capacity to imagine and create constructive processes that are rooted in the real-world challenges of violence that are able to transcend these destructive patterns (Lederach, 2005; Maiese, 2016). Lederach places the creative process at the center of conflict resolution and encourages us to engage the creative process in ways that help to bring about social change that may transform human relationships.

Oliver Ramsbotham, noted for his original approach to handling 'intractable' conflict along with the works of John Paul Lederach and John Galtung argue in favor of a place for the arts in conflict resolution as a means of "energizing the field by liberating the imagination and the emotions in pursuit of creativity in peacemaking" (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2011: p.358). Where might we begin that we have not begun before? What critical sources of knowledge are, as yet, left untapped? What alternative approaches might we pursue to gain access to such knowledge? In answering these questions, we may rightly view the Arts as a highly significant tool for Kurdish people who are internally diverse, dispersed and in a state of liberation to bring together their notions of the Kurdish nation as state (Gundogu, 2010). Kurdish art, then, presents itself as an interesting intersection for social critique where peoples, cultures and institutions overlap and where identities are performed and contested.

Considering our focus on the protracted nature of the Kurdish Issue in Iraq, we will first map the multiple of stages of conflict through which the Kurds have traveled, from the creation of the autonomous Kurdish region, after the first Gulf War, up until the present time. From this point, we will examine the unique potential of the Arts to inform the peacebuilding process and, in doing so, engage with Michael Shank and Lisa Schirch's models for strategic arts-based peacebuilding. Utilizing these models, the chapter will then consider the changing nature of patron-client relationships in Iraqi Kurdistan, between government-as-patron and artist-as-client. An examination of this patron-client relationship will demonstrate a weakened patron-client relationship and points of contestation but suggests that despite structural changes to the bureaucracy in Iraqi Kurdistan, the patron-client relationship model predominates in relationships of power in Iraqi Kurdistan.

BACKGROUND

Following the US-led coalition in Iraq in 1990, popular uprisings erupted first in the south of Iraq and then in the Kurdish cities when, during the first Gulf War, Kurds in Northern Iraq were able to secure Kurdish territories from the Ba'athist regime. May 19, 1992, six months after Kurds had gained these territories, the first elections were held and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) was formed. The hopes for a homeland for the Kurds and the imaging of an independent Kurdistan took a dramatic turn with the formation of the KRG. For the first time in modern history, Kurdish people had gained some stability, recognition and measure of internal sovereignty (Natali, 2010: p. 29). Denise Natali finds that the product of the first Gulf War was a partially legitimized Kurdistan Region, The 1990 Persian Gulf War and its subsequent aid programs rescaled the development trajectory of the Kurdistan Region. During this period, humanitarian relief to the Kurds reflected larger transformations in the aid regime that

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