

History – Migration – Anthropology: New Perspectives on Migration and Migration History

Comment on

**“Organisations and community structure:
Migrant organizations in Amsterdam 1960-1990”**

by

Floris Vermeulen

Institute of Migration and Ethnic Studies

Department of Political Science

University of Amsterdam

In this paper, Floris Vermeulen compares the creation of “ethnic civic communities” among Surinamese and Turkish immigrant groups in Amsterdam by investigating the growth of registered civic organizations associated with each group. He finds, in the end, a marked contrast between the two: while postcolonial immigration by Surinamese, particularly immediately after independence in 1975, led to organizational strategies that favored isolated and ultimately unstable “civic community,” the transformation of Turkish immigration from guest workers to “permanent” residents and efforts to retain Turkish cultural tradition promoted groups that were better integrated, creating a stronger sense of “civic community.”

Vermeulen wants to look historically at the ways in which communities have been built and to explain why the Turkish community in Amsterdam at the end of the century seems to be thriving, while the Surinamese community is faced with decline. After an examination of the pertinent literature on ethnic communities, Vermeulen argues that three sets of factors explain the differences between Surinamese and Turkish civic organizing: social and historical characteristics of the groups, institutional opportunities allowed by the state, and influences of the country of origin. For example, the sheer number but relative fragility of Surinamese civic organizations can be explained, according to Vermeulen, by the ethnically divided (African and Hindustani) groups within colonial Suriname, the sizable subsidies paid during the first decade

after decolonization but then removed, and the traditional “distrust” of civic organizations in Suriname itself. By contrast, Turkish organizational success has much to do with the ability of Turks to overcome or at least minimize internal ethnic and religious conflict, the preliminary lack of state subsidy and subsequent recognition of Turks as an official minority entitled to certain rights, and both the foundation of groups by Turkish-based organizations and the continued intense interest in Turkish politics and culture by the immigrant community.

At the end of his paper, Vermeulen raises some interesting question for further research. He notes that, “Of course a civic community is much more than just the number of migrant organizations; their internal networks maybe more important” (28). This rejoinder seems particularly important. Obviously, officially registered organizations can only tell us so much about the practice of ethnic “civic communities.” Certainly, kinship systems, religious communities, and others also act as powerful catalytic forces in the formation of communities among immigrant groups. Furthermore, the number of groups, even when divided by the number of members of each community (the “organizational density”), tells us little of the actual social and gender make-up of the groups and even less about the relative power of the groups to construct community or to create the institutional space in which civic community can thrive. Certainly the number and types of groups is significant, but we need to know more about how they function and relate to each other and to the state, particularly at the level of the quotidian. Finally, we need to know more about the historical context in which this organization occurs; Vermeulen is most insightful when he steps away from general frameworks and tells us about the details of organization, the historical context, and the changing relationship of ethnic groups to the state.

This paper raises some important questions about the role of ethnic organizations in constructing community. These questions almost invariably lead to the archive. Answering the difficult questions of internal organization and inter-group coherence can only be undertaken at the level of the everyday, forcing the scholar to confront the difficult and often ambiguous conflict between structures of power and the agency of groups and individuals.

Comment by

Robert Stephens
Department of History
Virginia Tech