
ARMENIAN IDENTITY RE-EXAMINED¹

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Being and feeling Armenian has been seen to be dependent on a variety of variables. Armenian identity has often been examined as a symbolic construct. In the symbolic construction of Armenian identity, attention has been given to historic memory, the Armenian genocide of 1915 and to the moral imperative put in particular on Armenian women as bearers of culture. Among their multiple identities, Armenians, it has been observed, give particular importance to the notion of the "diaspora". As Ulf Bjorklund points out, according to most diasporans, the Armenians are portrayed as "(1) an ancient people, a 'nation' with (2) a primordial and unbroken link to a God-given land, Haiastan; in spite of (3) heroic defense and martyrs willing to die for their faith and nation, they have (4) been almost exterminated and expelled from the Fatherland, Hairenik; now they (5) live dispersed at the mercy of various host populations in the Spiurk; but they have never given up their link to the homeland, and one day (6) they will return to the lands, *tebi yergir*"².

As I learned through my fieldwork and personal experiences, Lebanese Armenians and Montreal Armenians conceive themselves as a "diaspora" community. In Susan Pattie's terms, "The question of diaspora, not only in its relationship to the homeland, ancient or modern, but the nature of its construction, is critical to the understanding of contemporary Armenian life... While the underlying root paradigm of suffering and sacrifice links and informs Armenians and their communities around the world, the ways in which this is interpreted and acted upon are myriad"³.

Armenians, in spite differences, have a consciousness of a shared experience, as in the case of London Armenians discussed by Vered Amit Talai, "Communities such as that found in London (or in this case, in Lebanon) are ... seen as communities in exile from their true motherland... Armenians today are seen as still caught in the middle between contemporary superpowers, their national aspirations and

¹ Notes towards understanding Armenian identity as an anthropologist and an Armenian woman living in the Armenian Diaspora.

² Bjorklund Ulf, "Armenia Remembered and Remade: Evolving Issues in a Diaspora", *Ethnos* volume 58, III-IV, 1993, p. 335-360.

³ Pattie, Susan Paul. *Faith in History: Armenians Rebuilding Community*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997.

territorial claims being subjugated to international conflicts, over which they have little tangible influence. (This has led to a charter, which puts) the moral imperative imparting to successive generations a 'duty' to perpetuate their ethnic identity"⁴.

Among the Armenians, there are several ways of representing their Armenian identities, Armenia, and the Armenian nation. Throughout the Diaspora, Armenians have established organizations ranging from religious institutions to political, cultural associations and educational institutions to consciously maintain their Armenian identities. These representations have undergone changes and are changing with changes in Armenia and its re-independence.

Often, the definition of being an Armenian includes language. However, it is to be stressed that Armenians are divided along different dialects and there are two major written standardized versions of Armenian. The Armenian national or Apostolic church has two Sees: the Holy See of St. Echmiadzin (in the Republic of Armenia) and the Cilician (now residing in Antelias, Lebanon). Lebanese Armenians speak Western Armenian so do the majority of the Montreal Armenians, and the inhabitants of 'Anjar speak their own dialect along side the standardized Western Armenian language.

There is a knowledge and understanding of the fragmentary nature of being Armenian. In this fragmentation, elements of unity have/ and are being constructed. Some of these elements have been the 1915 Genocide which had befallen on Western Armenians, and the heroic resistance of Armenian patriots. After February 1988, the rise of the national movement in Armenia, the Karabakh movement and the Sumgait massacres have been elements of re-definition of Armenian identity.

Based on re-examinations of my fieldwork research carried out in 1980-1981 and 1986-1987 among the inhabitants of Haouch Moussa ('Anjar) – a Lebanese Armenian community in the Beka'a valley of Lebanon, gender and ethnic identity become unraveled as an articulation of several factors. Among their multiple identities, Armenians give particular importance to the notion of the "diaspora". Through a reconstruction of the practices and experiences (and their genesis) of the people in question, as Lebanese and Armenians {and therefore, of my own history as a Lebanese and an Armenian (and a woman)}, the many faces of identity become evident. The settlement itself was established in

⁴ Talai, Vered Amit (1988). "When Ethnic Identity is a Mixed Blessing: Armenians in London". *Ethnos* 53: 50-63; also see Talai, Vered Amit (1989). *Armenians in London: The Management of Social Boundaries*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

1939 by Armenian refugees deported from their original habitat in Mount Moussa {made famous in F. Werfel's novel⁵. The inhabitants of 'Anjar, define themselves in opposition to other Armenians. Unlike other diaspora Armenians, such as Montreal Armenians, Armenians of 'Anjar see themselves as having a geographic locale - a territory - through which they can maintain their existence as a collective.

The inhabitants of 'Anjar are constantly reminded in their day-to-day activities that they are at the same time the only non-Arabic speaking group in the region, and are part of several larger totalities. As Lebanese citizens they are part of the Lebanese state structures and socio-economic formation, and co-exist as a collectivity with several other groups and communities with whom they have various relationships. Furthermore, along with these other communities they are part of the international division of labour. On the other hand, as Armenians they are also part of both the Armenian community in Lebanon and the diaspora, as well as in Armenia. As such then, the identity of the Armenians of 'Anjar is also the product of quite diverse historical experiences. My interest in the expression of identity among the inhabitants of 'Anjar is closely related to my own quest to have an understanding of my own identity as a Lebanese/ Armenian/ and a Canadian-Armenian: a fragmented-self. After having lived in the multi-ethnic situation of Montreal with its "dual majority" culture (in P. Anctil's terms), I came to realize the historicity and context dependent nature of identity formation. During my discussions with the inhabitants of 'Anjar a multitude of collective identities were recognized (by those present): a). as inhabitants of 'Anjar; b). as descendants of inhabitants of Mount Moussa; c). as inhabitants of the Central Beka'a valley; d). as Lebanese citizens (or inhabitants of Lebanon); e). as Armenians. Depending on the context, one or the other (or several of these identities) were brought in and stressed. In addition, the inhabitants viewed themselves as "refugees" and victims of "international politics". The multiplicity of the collective identities (and related concerns or issues) is expressed in the following extract from an informal discussion with one inhabitant of 'Anjar:

"We often ask ourselves 'what are we doing here?' This is not our land. We cultivate it, but when the political currents turn against us, we will be deported once more. After all, not long ago, we were forcefully uprooted from our historical homeland and that was our land (and to

⁵ *Die 40 Tage des Musa Dagh.*

think that we would be left in peace in 'Anjar which is not our historical homeland!?). We may be deported any time despite our Lebanese citizenship. After all, we do not know what is going to happen to Lebanon...”.

Armenians of 'Anjar consider themselves to be in a rather different situation from other Armenians elsewhere, but with whom they share the same concerns and obligations: "Unlike Armenians, in let us say, cities, or in Europe or for that matter in North America, we have a better chance of preserving our Armenian culture. We also are a community in exile, but we, unlike other Armenian communities of the diaspora a. live in semi-isolation, and that constitutes our blessing, b. have a common collective history (unlike the other communities we have a memory of a homeland and a history of a collective resistance or uprising, which has made us world-known, especially through Franz Werfel's novel). I remember when an Armenian poet from Soviet Armenia had come and visited 'Anjar, he was impressed greatly, and said that we are living in a little Armenia. We have created our little sanctuary in which we are not only preserving our culture, but are turning it into a living culture. Unfortunately, however, the crisis in Lebanon has had its negative impact on our community. Many have left the area. We are afraid that, if this continues, 'Anjar will be completely depopulated and that would be a major blow to the Armenian culture as a whole. The threat of assimilation will befall all".- " 'Anjar is the space of memories of a homeland in exile".

The teachers of Armenian language, literature and history often express concern that the courses that they teach are not sufficient to perpetuate Armenian culture. Such courses are also subject to government policies and regulations. As one school principal pointed out:

"The educational curriculum has to be approved by the Lebanese government. The students have to be prepared for the Lebanese governmental exams and as a result, we have to give priority to subjects in these exams. Armenian language, literature and history are not part of the programme. They are given over and above the required courses. Hence, some students do not take these courses seriously. Nonetheless, I must say that the majority of our students are interested in learning Armenian. Many of our graduates have become teachers of Armenian language, literature, and history in other schools of the Armenian diaspora. Still others have become Armenian poets and writers".

Although Montreal Armenians claim there are forty thousand Armenians living in Greater Montreal, yet the statistical evidence indicates there are only about twenty thousand inhabitants in Montreal who identify themselves as being of Armenian ethnic origin, immigrants

and their descendants. The earliest Armenians in Canada were mainly male sojourners and had lived in the area of south western Ontario. Often early migrants were faced with racist Canadian immigration laws. Armenians were classified as Asiatic and therefore, were not "looked upon favorably by the Department of Immigration". None- the-less, during the late 19th and early 20th century, due to humanitarian grounds about 3100 Armenians had already been admitted to Canada. The majority of these early immigrants had settled in Southern Ontario, and gradually in Montreal. Many of these were orphans and refugees –victims of the Ottoman Turkish atrocities. During the period between 1930 and the Second World War, due to strict immigration regulations, new Armenian immigration decreased to 74 individuals. It is only during the post-World War II period that the immigration policy was revised and until 1962, the Canadian Immigration Act was discriminatory⁶. Montreal Armenians are of different backgrounds and have different historical experiences, yet they have found several media or invented new ways through which they could maintain their Armenian identity. A stress on family ties and friendship; cuisine – with its spices: "Allspice, coriander (powdered and whole), cayenne pepper, cumin in a square jar, fennel seeds, cardamon, innamon (powdered and in sticks), sumac, black nigella seeds, zaatar, saffron, paprika, oregano, basil. And mahleb"⁷ and dance have become paths through which Armenians express their culture and perpetuate and maintain their identities not only as Armenians but also as gendered selves.

As described above for the case of the Lebanese Armenian community in 'Anjar, for the Montreal Armenians too, although there is a moral imperative or a duty to perpetuate Armenian identity, there is an absence of a unified prescriptions on how to do so. Armenians of Montreal have expressed their sense of a community by establishing a variety of organizations and institutions. The earliest of such attempts dates back to the 1920s when 'Armenian Union of Montreal' was founded. Early on the community started to organize genocide memorials on April 24 - the date Armenians commemorate the 1915-1923 genocide.

The second such association was "The Armenian Women's Benevolent Association", founded in 1931 (today it has become the ladies auxiliary of the Armenian Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator). After the 1950 s with the growing number of Armenian immigration in Montreal other institutions and organizations were established ranging from

⁶ Kallen E., *Ethnicity and Human Rights in Canada, Toronto: (1982). SAGE.*

⁷ Balakian Peter, *Black Dog of Fate: A Memoir. New York: Basic Books, 1997, p. 7.*

religious institutions to political, cultural associations and educational institutions. Many of these associations are branches of larger Armenian organizations with a long history.

Montreal Armenians have numerous voluntary associations and institutions such as, the Armenian Community Centre, the Armenian Apostolic church, St. Gregory the Illuminator and the Diocese of Montreal affiliated with the Sea of Etchmiatzin, Alex Monoogian centre, the Centre for Armenian Catholics, the community centre of the Armenians of Istanbul, other regional associations. There are also other churches such as the Armenian Biblical Brotherhood Church, the Armenian evangelical Church of Montreal the First Armenian Evangelical Church of Montreal. There are three day schools, Sunday and Saturday schools. Montreal Armenians have also organizations that cut across religious-denominational and political affiliation⁸. These are the Armenian Medical Association of Quebec, established in 1976; the Canadian Armenian Council of Commerce, established in 1985; The Armenian Studies Association of Quebec, established in 1982 (and which is not functional nowadays); the Armenian Student Association with branches in various Montreal colleges and universities. The Concordia University Armenian Students Association is one of the earliest of such non-factional associations. Founded 33 years ago at Sir George Williams, it became a forum and a space where Armenians of diverse backgrounds could meet and have a dialogue. The Armenian Women's Association of Canada (the organizer of this symposium) also aims too be non-denominational. There are individual initiatives as well to promote Armenian culture and provide a prescription for Armenian ethnic identity.

In Montreal, as elsewhere Armenians are in the continuous process of creating, re-creating and re-defining their identities. Preserving Armenian language to some extent, membership in the voluntary associations, enrolment in institutions, stressing the importance of friendship, the family and home along with maintaining Armenian cuisine and dancing Armenian dances constitute prescriptions available to Armenians in order to perpetuate and maintain their ethnic identity and through it their gender identities and their gendered spaces. However, the dances and cuisine of Montreal Armenians are as fragmented and divers as the Armenians themselves. Armenians in their preoccupation with preserving and perpetuating their culture have been engaged in an objectification process of their culture: recording and abstracting on-going practices as

⁸ For a history of Armenians in Quebec and Montreal see Chichekian, Garo (1989). *The Armenian Community of Quebec. Montreal: Imprimerie Rapido.*

well as re-defining what is Armenian about their cultural practices. In this process they have been creating a new sense of being a collectivity with its own collective memory-history and culture.

Montreal Armenians are considered in the multicultural setting of Greater Montreal as an invisible minority and practice their ethnicity only during their leisure time-or time set aside from work⁹. Often, the definition of being an Armenian includes language. {As language has been particularly politicized in Quebec¹⁰, it is to be noted here that the Armenian educational institutions were founded after the Quiet revolution. In any case, Armenians were and have been rather impartial to the issue of bilingualism and a francophone Quebec. For Armenians, the more languages one learns the better he/she becomes as a human being}.

Often identity is defined in terms of the Other and history. In the Montreal context, the definition of Armenianness has included a comparison of their lifestyles with the assumed lifestyles or cultures of other Montreal's "imagined communities" (in B. Anderson's sense of the term)¹¹ or abstracted cultural ethnolinguistic groups and ethnic groups.¹² Often this has involved a discussion of the notion of family. As Mrs. Ani, in an informal conversation over notes:

"We-that is to say Armenians, unlike the francophones and anglophones, but very much like the Italians, Greeks, and other Middle Eastern groups, have a strong sense of family, kinship ties and friendship. For us, the family is a sacred institution in a non-religious sense. We do not allow our children to leave home at any age. We keep them until they are married off-even then, we keep a strong tie with them." This same idea was expressed through a different setting by Mrs. Haygo: "Our superintendent or concierge is a francophone woman from St. Eustache and she once noted that she was quite surprised to see that my son who graduated from university a couple of years ago is still living with us-has not left the nest. I told her that we love our children and we would never let them out of our sight. It is through our constant care and guidance that our children do not end up experimenting with drugs."

Both men and women members of the Montreal Armenians note the importance of family, kinship and friendship in defining their identities as Armenians. In practice, however, it is the women who maintain the

⁹ Anderson, Alan & James S. Frideres (1981). *Ethnicity in Canada*. Toronto: Butterworths.

¹⁰ For a fictionalized description of the politics of language see Ternar, Yeshim (1991). "Ajax las bas", pp. 59-65, in *Orphaned by Halley's comet*, Stratford, Ont.: Williams-Wallace publishers.

¹¹ Anderson, Benedict (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (Revised edition). London: Verso.

¹² *Ibid.*

home, family and kin ties. Men and women have their own separate sets of friends, yet friendship is significant for both sexes. There is still to some extent differential treatment of daughters and sons in some families.

Armenian identity for Montreal Armenians, as for their counterparts in 'Anjar, involves participation in their local organizations, communal celebrations such as the annual commemoration of the 1915 Armenian genocide on the 24th of April, the celebration of the 1918 Armenian Independence on the 28th of May, participating in demonstrations of solidarity with Armenia and protest against the position of superpowers with respect to Armenia and the Armenian cause, observation of religious feasts such as Easter, or grape blessing ritual.

Montreal Armenians like the Armenians of 'Anjar define their ethnic identities in terms of their daily patterns of interaction, their emphasis on family, friendship, and the practice of ethnic cuisine¹³. Through their various practices to re-invent a collective memory, a sense of community and an ethnic identity for themselves, Montreal Armenians as their counterparts in 'Anjar, conceive of themselves as hyphenated Armenians. In the case of Montreal Armenians though the emphasis is on being "a diaspora of a diaspora". In constructing or inventing their ethnic identities Armenians also set their gender identities and relations. Their identities as gendered selves are woven through their constructed ethnic identities in their everyday realities: in their cuisine with its definitions of male and female tasks and space; in their dances and its male and female steps; in their male dominant organizations and public space; in their values which put emphasis on family and friendship. "One has to choose to be Armenian" in the diaspora (Ani, in the film "Back to Ararat").

As a diaspora Armenian Armenia has been for me a virtual Armenia in my memory and has been the space of memory, songs and maps of my childhood. It is the dream and site of desire for many Armenians living in exile. After the re-Independence in 1990-91 (September 21, 1991) the dream became a reality for many of us. It became accessible and yet it is only a fragment of the historic homeland - the space to where ancestors could rest in peace. The scars of the genocide include the inability to have burials for the victims. "We cannot carry the cemetery of our ancestors on our backs"¹⁴.

The Republic of Armenia located around lake Sevan has an area of approximately 30 000 sq. kms. Its present boundaries are the result of

¹³ For more details on Montreal Armenians see **Arahamian, S.** (2003) "Gender Relations and Identities among Montreal Armenians", *Armenian Review* Vol. 48, nos. 3-4, p. 47-59.

¹⁴ **Balakian, Peter** *op. cit.*, p. 247.

historical experiences and treaties¹⁵. Half of its 3 million 283 000 inhabitants live in the Ararat plain which constitutes only 10 % of its territory. It is also one of the most "national" of the ex-Soviet republics. According to the 1995 "National Report on the Conditions of Women", of the Republic of Armenia, in cooperation with the UNDP, "For centuries, the people of Armenia... viewed the family as a key value and the primary factor that kept the nation together".

The history of the last centuries of the Armenian people has been marked with tragedies culminating in the 1915 genocide. In this self-conceptualization of Armenian identity as one based on a series of tragic events culminating in the genocide and continuing with the 1988 earthquake and the Sumgait massacres, issues of gender and class are undermined, as Di Leonardo¹⁶ points out: "The vision of ethnic community ignores class, regional, demographic - but especially gender - differences within ethnic populations"¹⁷. However, the Armenian woman was "tan chrag", the light of a home: "Armenians believe that woman is the keeper and maintainer of life and therefore she should live longer"... It is cold and gloomy in a house without a woman"¹⁸.

Before the introduction of Christianity as a state religion in Armenia, (301 A.D.O, there was a cult of Anahit. The early churches were named after women martyrs: Gayane, Hripsime, Marine. Women continued to be significant. There are numerous accounts of the importance of women in politics and public life - in particular of aristocratic women. The queen was as important as the king in the Monarchy. The emphasis on family values and kin ties reinforces Armenian patriarchal values. The Armenian woman was the head of the household. She was responsible for the planning of the activities related to the maintenance of the household. As such she was responsible for the division of labour. She reached this position only at a relatively older age and through it, she became a source of transmitting patriarchal values.

For Armenian men and women, the transformation in gender relations and identities took place during the Ottoman domination that lasted over six hundred years. During this period, Armenian values became more and more repressive towards young women. The second half of the 19th

¹⁵ Mouradian, Claire. *De Staline a Gorbachev, histoire d'une republique sovietique: l'Armenie*. Paris, 1990, p. 13-14.

¹⁶ Page 229 in Di Leonardo, Micaela (1984). *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience: Kinship, Class, and Gender among California Italian Americans*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Tsovinar Tsovinyan, "I'm from Armenia". In Tatyana Mamonova (ed), *Women in Russia*, Boston 1984, p. 67-72.

century and beginning of the 20th century is marked by attempts of Armenian women to organize for change¹⁹. Throughout the late 19th century and early 20th century - until the genocide of 1915, Armenian women attempted to liberate themselves and engaged in the liberation struggle of their oppressed nation and were conscious that "the liberation of women necessitates the liberation of all human beings"²⁰.

In spite of the efforts of many Armenian women to liberate themselves, yet in many Armenian communities, in particular in the diaspora, as recent studies have shown, Armenian community as well as family life have silenced the Armenian woman. I encountered in my own journeys among contemporary Armenian women, a re-examination of their history and the history of the European and North American women's liberation movement. In what follows, I will summarize this history – a history narrated to me by men and women I encountered at the Institute of Ethnography in Erevan. Armenian women have been known to have played a significant part throughout history, especially as warriors, in the struggles for survival that have marked Armenian history²¹.

During Sovietization "women (were supposed to be freed) from all forms of slavery and humiliation"²². However, none of that hope materialized and Armenian women were faced with a situation of double standards much like their counterparts in the Soviet Union. As noted by Ester Reiter and Meg Luxton²³, Soviet views assumed women and men have quite different natures. This implied a "celebration of femininity" and a glorification, motherhood. During the Sovietization period in Armenia, women entered the labour force as doctors, nurses, engineers, skilled labourers, agriculturalists etc. and yet continued to be responsible for domestic labour. They became party members, workers and servants in their own homes. Men were not expected to provide house-work. Child-care remained the responsibility of women. In addition, women were/and are expected to please men and obey them. They were/ and are to obey their fathers, brothers, and husbands. Women themselves maintain and perpetuate these values.

¹⁹ **Arahamian, S.**, *The Inhabitants of Haouch Moussa: From Stratified Society through Classlessness to the Re-appearance of Classes*. 1989, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation.

²⁰ **Rowbotham Sheila**, *Women, Resistance and Revolution*. London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1972, p. 11.

²¹ **Darbinian, Vladimir** (1993). "Kin Azatamartikiner" (= Women liberation warriors). *Aspar* volume 1, no. 1, p. 6.

²² **Bilshai Vera**, *The Status of Women in the Soviet Union*. Moscow, 1957, p. 22.

²³ Page 56 in **Reiter, Ester and Meg Luxton** (1991). "Overemancipation? Liberation? Soviet Women in the Gorbachev Period". *Studies in Political Economy* 34, Spring, p. 53-73.

"In 1986, Gorbachev announced the creation of a unified system of women's councils or Zhensoveti. These are voluntary organizations, set up at work places and in residential communities, at the level of town, district, region and republic. ... /these/ now present at least the potential for a women's movement"²⁴. However, as a review of the literature indicates, many assumptions about gender differences are biologically determinist in their approach and "preclude an analysis of gender hierarchy and male privilege"²⁵.

During my recent visits and stays in Armenia, I received contradictory messages from women. Women with post-secondary education still aim to please men. When a man enters a home, he is surrounded with caring women who give him all their attention. Young women do not wish to bear female infants, and pray to be "blessed" with male children. At the same time there is a realization for a need to have women's grass roots organizations. There is also an emphasis that the situation for Armenians is a difficult one: we have a moral imperative to alleviate the pain that has befallen on us as a nation. Women have always put priority for the liberation struggle of the Armenian people. Although invisible in the public arena, women have always been at the forefront during times of crisis: such as the 1988 earthquake, as well as in uprisings and in the early stages of the Karabakh movement²⁶. Whereas Armenian women were at the forefront of this movement, today they have once again been reduced to the background.

To conclude, Armenian identity in Montreal, 'Anjar or in Armenia becomes embedded in memory – memories and narratives of a tragic history marked by the genocide.

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ԱԲՐԱՀԱՄԵԱՆ Ս. Ա., Փիլ.-դոկտոր (Կանադա)

Ամփոփում

Հայկական ինքնության դրսևորման հիմքում է պատմական հիշողությունը. հատկապես, 1915 թվականի Հայոց Եղեռնի մասին, ինչը այն բարոյական հրամայականն է, որի ազգապահպան՝ մշակութային կրողն է հայ կինը:

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53-73.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ **Aprahamian Sima** (1999). "Identity: Memory, Ethnoscapes, Narratives of Belonging in the Context of the Recent Emerging Notions of Globalization and its Effect on Time and Space". *Feminist Studies in Aotearoa Journal* N 60 (A peer reviewed E-Journal, published in New Zealand).