

# ՀԱՅԴՈՒԿ

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**ARMENIA&THE  
CUSTOMSUNION**

**BETWEENHOST  
&HOME**

**THE NEED FOR A  
MODERNARMENIAN  
MYTHOLOGY**



## Հայդուգ / Haytoug

[www.Haytoug.org](http://www.Haytoug.org)

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# EDITORIAL

## MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

**Every year in April, a familiar echo of discontent and disappointment in ourselves is heard far and wide. It is during this month, when our communities become the most active, that the perpetual cynics lay it on the strongest.**

Community organizations become subjected to harsh judgments of being overly invested in genocide recognition, of singing and preaching and making unrealistic demands that keep us in an endless cycle of self-gratifying protest. These echoes of discontent and disappointment reinforce the idea that we have wasted our energies on one dimension of the Armenian Cause that has become a failed strategy.

While critique of the genocide month may sometimes be tolerated if supplemented by recommendations for alternative action, a majority of that discontent is simply a misconception about what we are actually doing. This self-deprecation often comes from those who might not fully understand what the most active segments of our community are invested in.

The articles written throughout the following pages are a product of the month of April. They discuss a wide-ranging set of issues that transcend the genocide narrative. This Spring 2014 Haytoug does not submit to one unique theme, as most previous editions have had. The contributors were

told to simply write about what interested them the most, and the results serve as validation that even amongst the April madness, our interests reach far beyond genocide recognition. Armenian youth have something important to say. Whether it be about activists in Armenia joining the online global community, or its government joining the Russian-led Custom's Union; the need for modern day heroes or a better understanding of female heroines from our past; looking forward to new means of activism that breaks us out of the Armenian bubble, or recommitting ourselves to our militant roots.

We don't live, work or fight exclusively for one thing, because our interests as well as our politics are dynamic. These articles speak to the complexity of the Armenian world, and to the fact that while genocide recognition is at the top of our agenda, it does not stand alone. These articles speak to the politics, culture and imagination of Armenian youth, however brilliant or dull they may be. These articles speak to the fact that we are in motion, we have visions and dreams, therefore are not nearing our mortality as those disheartened echoes in April suggest.

Self-reflection of our shortcomings is important, but those April judgments should not become a feel-good narrative for change. The Haytoug does not generally offer final answers or solutions, but it raises questions on behalf of Armenian youth who do not succumb to crippling generalizations.

# Armenia and the Customs Union

...the discussion continues



**I**n September of 2013, President Serzh surprised everyone, when during a working visit to Moscow, he announced Armenia's decision to join the Russia-led Customs Union (CU) instead of signing the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) and the Association Agreement with the European Union (EU), which the Armenian government was planning to sign in November of 2013 during the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius, Lithuania. The Armenian leader insisted that the choice towards greater integration with Russia and

other former Soviet republics that make up the CU stemmed from the country's interests and that 'being in the same system of military security makes it impossible to isolate yourself from a corresponding economic territory.' Most observers, however, agreed that the decision was largely a result of Russian political pressure, and its economic benefits to Armenia were not as obvious as the President suggested. Attempts to salvage the situation by emphasizing Armenia's commitment to further develop the ties with Western Europe were unconvincing and did not have the proper effect on European officials, who flatly ruled out the possibility of Armenia being both a member of the



Customs Union and signing the Association Agreement with the European Union.

Given Armenia's geopolitical challenges, the economic considerations of either choice were always the less important ones, and the political dimension prevailed since the beginning of the negotiations with the EU. Therefore, it is important to analyze the political situation that pushed the Armenian leadership further into the Russian orbit. It is difficult to underestimate the influence that Russia has on Armenia: it controls most of the country's energy sector, industry and infrastructure; Russian troops protect Armenia's borders with Turkey and Iran; and the Russian military base in Gyumri acts as one of the cornerstones of Armenia's national security system. There is also the Artsakh issue and Russian ties with Azerbaijan, which are always used as leverage to exert pressure on Yerevan. Needless to say, the lack of legitimacy of the current regime in Yerevan does not contribute to its ability to withstand Russian pressure and is also partially responsible for many foreign policy blunders, including the ascension into the Customs Union. All of these factors made it very difficult for Serzh Sarkissian to refuse Vladimir Putin's offer to join the Customs Union, especially in light of growing arms shipments from Russia to Azerbaijan and the deepening economic cooperation between the two countries, both of which are very concerning for large segments of the Armenian population.

Armenia's 'choice' (though the word should be used very carefully, given the amount of pressure exercised on the leadership in Yerevan to opt out in favor of this decision) to enter the CU further strengthened Russia's grip on our country. Having lost Georgia and now Ukraine, the regime in Moscow is doing everything in its power to improve its positions in other post-Soviet republics. Armenia was an easy target, given the degree of economic, political, and military dependence of our country from Russia. The ascension into the CU has further limited Armenia's field to maneuver in the international political realm and has put Armenia solidly into the column of Russian loyalists. The recent events in Crimea and Armenia's pro-Russian position on the issue, though fully justi-

fied in light of Artsakh and Ukraine's openly pro-Azeri stance during the war and in subsequent years, have even further solidified that view in the eyes of the international community. History does tell us that being overly dependent on one country (traditionally, Russia) has not always played to Armenia's advantage, but it seems that the widening divide between Russia and the West has lessened Armenia's ability to have the kind of 'complementary' foreign policy, which has kept it relatively neutral and balanced in its approach to international issues in the past.

The Armenian government touted the merits of its decision to enter the CU by appealing to the econom-

**...a legitimate government that enjoys the trust of its own people and works to defend the interests of the Armenian nation]**

ic advantages of the pact for the country. Among the claims made by Armenian officials were that through its membership in the CU, Armenia would be able to obtain Russian natural gas at a discounted rate and the investments of Moscow-based companies in Armenia's economy would help the country cope with the economic difficulties it is currently facing. It should be mentioned that Russia did drop the 30% export tax on natural gas for Armenia upon the signing of the agreement, but that happened only after the prices on natural gas itself were raised by 50% in July of 2013. The Armenian government subsequently gave up its remaining 20% share of Armenia's natural gas distribution network, the ArmRosGazprom Corporation, to pay off the accumulated \$300 million debt for gas imports and granted the Russian energy giant, GazProm, 30-year exclusive rights to Armenia's energy markets, thus deepening its dependence on Moscow.

Russia then agreed to lower the price of natural gas to \$189 per 1,000 cubic meters (higher than what it was before the July increase), but the Armenian consumers



reverse the course taken by the Sarkissian Administration towards greater integration with Russia, at least not as long as the ruling elite in Armenia remains in power and is not replaced by a government which will have the political will to abrogate the agreements with the CU. Even if that were to happen (a highly improbable scenario), such actions would deteriorate Armenia's relations with Russia and potentially create large geopolitical challenges that could do severe damage to our national interests. As it has happened many times throughout our history, Armenia had two choices, both with potential negative

still experienced an average of 18% increase in their gas bill and will continue to face uncertainty in future years as the current price is fixed only until 2018, when the rates will once again have to be renegotiated.

As for additional investments into Armenia's economy, similar promises were made in mid-2000's, when the Kocharian Administration gave up a number of strategic industrial plants and factories to Russia to pay off Armenia's big debt to its strategically, but those promises largely remained unfulfilled. There is little indication that Russia intends to invest in Armenia's economy this time around, with the exception of the funds being channeled into the energy and infrastructure sectors, which Russia controls and the benefits from which are largely derived by Moscow itself, not the government or the people of Armenia. According to the Armenian National Statistical Service, Russian aggregate investments in Armenia's economy declined by 33.6% and went from the \$86.2 million figure reported in 2012 to \$58.6 million in 2013. The claims that Russian investments in the Armenian economy may exceed \$5 billion after the country joins the CU have yet to be verified by any real developments on the ground, but the trend during 2013 was in the opposite direction.

implications, and it opted out for the one that seemed safer and more obvious to the ruling elite (of course, not without the consideration of the interests of the elite itself).

This does not mean, however, that our country must resign itself to its fate and continue to sacrifice its interests in the face of Russian pressure. Armenia can have a more balanced foreign policy and be less dependent on its neighbor to the north, but that would require having a legitimate government that enjoys the trust of its own people and works to defend the interests of the Armenian nation, and not just those of a small group of oligarchs and the ruling class that aims to strengthen its grip on power irrespective of how that affects the long-term viability of Armenia. Only a government that is elected by the people and works for the people can effectively deal with both internal and external challenges facing Armenia and take the necessary steps to strengthen the foundations of our statehood, so that we can do a better job of fending off foreign pressure and defending our country's interests in that complicated and dangerous region of the world.

Given the current situation, Armenia cannot

*David Arakelyan*

# Complaining

## Keep Complaining

In high school, I had the privilege of being introduced to a hottie named Bedros Tourian. Granted, I was not battling tuberculosis, but I totally understood him and could relate so well to his teenage angst. Also, he looked so mysterious in the only known photo of him in every *Կենսագրութիւն* of any Armenian textbook.

As a sixteen year old girl (and quite frankly, currently as a 23 year old pseudo-adult), I often found myself in a state of complaint. Tourian, tormented by his own woes, also complained regularly. His most famous works include, *Տրտունջք*, a long tirade against God for granting him with such misfortunes, and *Զղշում*, a follow-up apology and statement of regret for getting so dramatic.

As Armenians, this ‘complaint culture’ is far too familiar to us. We are arguably the most unlucky ethnic group of all time, and thus we have had a lot to complain/protest about, most recently including complaining about people who complain.

How many times this April did you hear, “what’s the point of protesting, it hasn’t gotten us anywhere!”?

Tourian’s response to such a statement would be, “Um, have you learned nothing from my career?! It was my poetic complaints that gave me the reputation of being the Armo Edgar Allen Poe!”.

In all honesty, we enjoy it. We’re addicted to the drama and get a high from any opportunity to voice our concerns. Just as Eskimos have over fifty words for ‘snow’, our vocabulary is equipped with just as many phrases to describe ‘tragedy’. Ever wonder why Mesrob Mashdotz decided to incorporate THIRTY SIX letters in the alphabet? No, not just to frustrate you during every *ուղղագրութիւն* test of your mismanaged youth, but because one can use each and every one of those sounds to construct the perfect whine. I’m certain the giant *է* on the altar at church doesn’t actually stand for *էութիւն* like they told us in school, but because the extension of the vowel, ‘էէէէէէէ’, is perhaps the most used phrase in our language.

Are we masochists? Why do we find such pleasure in complaining about our suffering?

I am in no position to talk about the political implications of such complaints or what the true solution is to our woes; but internally, complaining about the injustices we’ve faced has brought us together on foreign soil. Complaining is our form of self expression. Complaining has kept the memory of it all so alive. Complaining has forced us to hold on to our beautiful language and not lose touch with Tourian’s masterpieces.

In my favorite Tourian piece of all time, *Իմ Մահը*, he writes

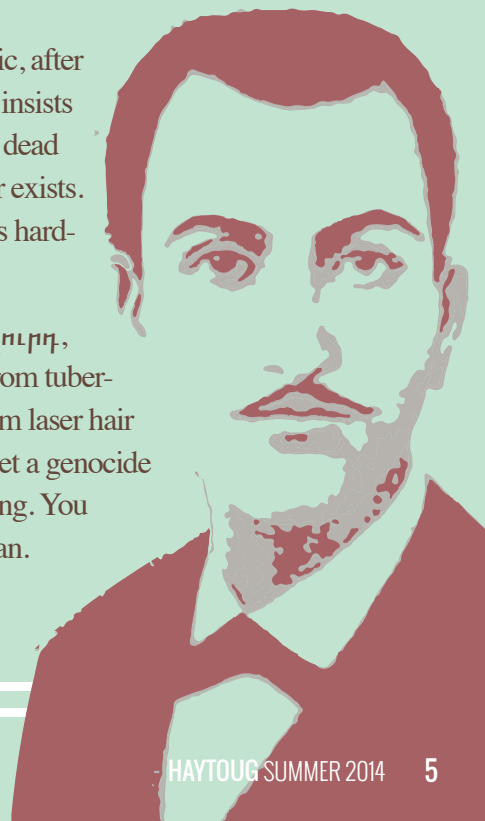
Եթէ տոգոյն մահու հրեշտակ  
Անհուն ժպտով մ’իջնէ իմ դէմ...  
Շողիանան ցաւքս ու հոգիս,  
Գիտցէ՛ք որ դեռ կենդանի եմ:

Իսկ աննըշան եթէ մնայ  
Երկրի մէկ խորշն հողակոյտն իմ,  
Եւ յիշատակս ալ թառամի,  
Ա՛հ, ա՛յն ատեն ես կը մեռնիմ:

He’s not being unrealistic, after all he is dying. However he insists that he will only actually be dead when his memory no longer exists. Via his self expression of his hardships, he has stayed alive.

Therefore, Հայ ժողովուրդ, whether you are suffering from tuberculosis or complications from laser hair removal, or even trying to get a genocide recognized; keep complaining. You may become the next Tourian.

*Marae Sarkuni*





## Mountains Away

We heard the rumble of hooves fast approaching.  
Pressed against the trench dug along the mountain pass,  
A dozen of us eagerly waited  
For the Ottoman platoon riding through,  
Galloping towards us,  
Unaware of the ambush the highlands presented.  
The butt of that Mosin  
I firmly placed against my shoulder,  
Lining up the sights  
With the red fez bouncing on the commander's head.  
I could not miss this shot.  
Revenge, I had promised for the thousands of innocents dead.  
I held my breath as I squeezed the trigger.  
A riderless horse raced past me.

The first poem, "Mountains Away", tries to capture a brief moment of the guerrilla fighting which fedayees utilized. The second poem, "Upon the Demand of Our Surrender in Arakelots Monastery", captures an instance during the siege at Arakelots Monastery. An entire Ottoman regiment consisting of 1200 men had besieged 30 to 40 Armenian fedayees in Arakelots (Holy Apostle's) Monastery in 1901. After a more than twenty-day siege, the Armenians were able to secretly escape. Andranik's courage, leadership and witty escape from the monastery with his men brought him great fame among Armenians and fear among Turks. While this poem is not entirely historically accurate (the Turks did not retreat, as the poem suggests), the Turks did send a messenger into the monastery demanding the surrender of the Armenians.

## Upon the Demand of Our Surrender in Arakelots Monastery

He stood there,  
Looked down at me,  
Fidgeted.  
My height sparked discussion  
Among new recruits,  
But any battle tested Turk  
Knew that the glare of a fedayee  
Was to be avoided.  
It was a fanatical glare,  
One that would sober up a drunkard  
Upon eye contact.  
His right hand held the note  
His commander had scribbled.  
It had begun to shake  
And he stuttered the last words:  
De-de-mands your sur-surrender.  
Twelve hundred Turks stood uneasily at-ease outside,  
The older soldiers taking their time with the greens  
To convey the menace of the fedayee stare.  
We were outnumbered thirty to one  
But they would retreat.  
We were sure of it.  
No man wanted to encounter that glare.

*Aram Hovasapyan*



# Սիրոյ Խենթ

Սիրահարուած եմ ես  
Սիրահարուած եմ ես ցաւի մը հետ,  
Որուն քոյութիւնը մարդկանց վիշտ կը պատճառէ

Սիրահարուած եմ ես պատմութեան մը հետ  
Որուն լայնատարած իրականութիւնները  
Սրտիս կորիզը կը քանդեն

Սիրահարուած եմ ես ազգի մը հետ  
Որուն ամենամօտիկ ընկերը  
Տառապանքն է եղած

Սիրահարուած եմ ես հողի մը հետ  
Որուն վրայ երբ շնչեմ  
Նախահայրերուս հոգին կ'զգամ

Սիրահարուած եմ ես պայքարի մը հետ  
Որ վերջ չունի, ու իր վերջ չունենալը  
Յաւելեալ սէր կը պատճառէ

Սիրահարուած եմ ես մշակոյթի մը հետ  
Որուն Սիամանթոները ու Րաֆֆիները  
Մինչ այսօր սերունդներ կը կերտեն

Սիրահարուած եմ ես լեզուի մը հետ  
Որուն գիրերուն քեղեցկութիւնն ու հնչիւններու քաղցրութիւնը  
Կարելի չէ գտնել աշխարհի չորս ծաքերուն

Սիրահարուած եմ ես գաղափարի մը հետ  
Որուն զինուոր ըլլալը կեանքիս կու տայ արժէք

Բայց ես նաեւ կ'ատեմ,  
Կ'ատեմ այն մարդկանց որ իրենց կեանքի ընթացքին  
Երբեք չեն սիրահարուած

Այո՛ կ'ատեմ այդ մարդկանց  
Որոնք կեանքի ընթացքին  
Վիշտ չեն ունեցած ու ցաւ չեն զգացած

Ես կ'ատեմ այդ խելացիին որ, մինչեւ մտածէ  
Խենթը արդէն գետից անց կը կենայ

Բայց անկասկած սիրահարուած եմ սիրոյ հետ  
Ու դարձած անոր խենթը  
Եւ այդ խենթութեան համար  
Ամէն գիշեր կ'երազեմ  
Ու կը պայքարիմ ամէն օր:

Գասպար Ճիվելէկեան



# BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY

**M**oving to Los Angeles nine years ago was a complete shock to my system. I was of the first Syrian-Arménians from my generation who moved here and transferred to the Armenian Youth Federation (AYF). It might have been naivety or just idealism, but I thought leaving Aleppo's AYF for America's would not have been a big change. It is after all, the same organization, with the same central ideology and mission. Yet the approach to our cause and mentality of the membership here was so unfamiliar to me. I suppose my own mentality was unfamiliar to them as well. I didn't make many friends, even though friendship was one of my highest expectations from the AYF. The hardest thing for me was going from having a big group of friends to having none. **Ընկերու թեան մօտեցումը շատ փնտռեցի:** I was a part of an amazing youth organization, so why didn't I find it right away? Was it because I didn't speak English, or because there was an assumption that I was not progressive minded? **Տարբեր մոլորակէ եկեր եմ որ մէկը ինծի մարդու տեղ չեր դներ:**

No matter how uninviting and foreign it felt, it was never reason enough to leave. Over the years things got easier for me, especially as more young people left Syria and settled here. A few of us quickly built strong bonds and created our own ghetto hangout in a friends' garage. It was our escape, where we could listen to our own music, play cards, and interact in Armenian, with no judgments being passed.

As I've gotten older and become more comfortable in Los Angeles, I've learned to express my opinions and try to understand the opinions of others, even though we are so often at odds. Despite the fact that I have overcome the initial culture shock sting, there are

still very deep contradictions between my ideas and those of many of my ungers.

The underlying clash seems to be what we consider important tools necessary to fight for our cause. I am completely unconvinced of the social media craze. Twitter, Facebook and Instagram campaigns are the latest trend, used as a means to raise awareness about the genocide, Kessab crisis, Karabakh, Turkish inhumanity, etc.

We get a few thousand people to read a sentence or two about these issues and it excites us. I don't see anything real or genuine about this tactic, because it's a temporary satisfaction that has little tangible results. Not too long ago, AYF members were willing to risk their lives or spend it imprisoned, to raise awareness or bring justice to our cause. I can't feel the effect of a #hashtag on my skin, or in my bones, or running through my veins. In the most recent social media campaign about Kessab, hundreds of thousands were involved in postings, and much of the international community was made aware of Armenians fleeing their homes. But were the 100,000 tweets worth more than a 100 men physically defending our churches and homes? That is an essential question I think our people must contemplate and answer.

It is no secret that our people still face real dangers in our homeland and throughout different diaspora communities. Our security is threatened along the Artsakh borders, our schools and churches in Syria are being destroyed, and we can never know what we risk losing next.

At a certain point we need to get out from behind the computer screen and build our courage. **Օրերը ինչ՞ կը բերեն չես գիտեր:** As Armenian youth, we need to always be prepared for the unexpected; move past the point of raising awareness





and become individual soldiers, prepared to take on the real threats our people face.

Unfortunately in this American reality, which I have slowly become accustomed to, youth are too self-interested. They have too much to risk losing and are too comfortable with their possessions. Ungers used to travel for weeks on horseback to participate in a meeting; today we have people Skyping into our chapter meetings for mere convenience.

The situation that exploded in Kessab is a very important and sobering example. One could have never before imagined that this peaceful and beautiful town would be on the verge of collapse. All of our historical communities can one day be under attack. We have to learn to defend what we have built. Yesterday was Artsakh, today is Kessab, and tomorrow it can be our communities in Anjar, Istanbul or Bourj Hammoud. These cities have historical, cultural and political significance in the Armenian Diaspora reality. We have already lost too many of our national treasures, and have neither the will or luxury of losing any more.

Our enemies are still pursuing their age-old agenda to destroy us, using any opportunity to crumble what we have built. It is dangerous to assume the threat has ceased. Being ready means being ready for battle wherever it may be, even if it is not in Southern California. We are one nation, one small people, and we cannot rely on anyone but

each other. As the Catholicos Aram I stated a few days after the Kessab attacks,

«Աշխարհի մէջ ուր որ հայ ժողովուրդի զաւակներ դժուարութեան դիմաց գտնուին, այդ դժուարութիւնը յաղթահարելը ամբողջ հայութեան առաջնահերթ պարտաւորութիւնը պէտք է դառնայ:» The head of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia then demanded that Armenian military units immediately be sent to Kessab to protect the Armenians there. If a call to action is being proclaimed from our religious leaders, than it's time for the rest of us, and especially for the AYF, to wake up and become a force to be reckoned with.

Nearly a decade has passed since I settled in Los Angeles, yet my Syrian-Armenian upbringing remains a strong influence in my life. It is difficult to say whether or not my thoughts on how the AYF should pursue its goals are a matter of that upbringing or just an unalterable conviction, but I suppose it is not important anymore. So long as I am able to take part in a healthy exchange of ideas and beliefs with other members who share the same passion for our cause - regardless of differing approaches - I think the AYF will remain one, strong, global entity in our fight for justice.

*Garo Sarkissian*

# Between Host and Home

## Ethnic Identity in Relations Between Diaspora and Armenia

**In our constant struggle between the hostland and the homeland, the Armenian identity has found a home in its imagined community.** The Armenian experience embodies the very essence of the concept as stated by Benedict Anderson, “it is an imagined political community and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each, lives the image of their communion.” Ethnic identity amongst Armenians does not stem from a specific state or ancestral homeland, nor is it a construct of their host states. It is developing in that grey space between the two, in a suspension that we can classify as an imagined community. Although Armenian ethnic identity embodies the tension and duality characteristics associated with a diasporan identity, it is imagined in a sense that it is removed from a geographical location, declassified from the requirements of physical existence, and reduced to a mythical connotation.

This becomes complicated because we, as diasporans, have a subjective sense of belonging to a nation, but we do not realize the objective implications of this belonging. Our diasporan communities compartmentalize our identity into pockets: language, religion, education, political involvement, the Armenian Cause, etc. In doing so, we dissect our community down to our mere basics, so as to allow for its survival and even its contextual prosperity.

The ambiguity of the question, “where is my

homeland?,” makes it a difficult one to answer because there are strong variations overlapping between the definitions of Armenia and diaspora. The essential division between Armenia and its communities abroad continues to be the question of how the two can relate. How do we relate the Republic of Armenia to our current context?

Theorists of nationalism have deduced that nations develop certain paradigm shifts throughout their history that often classify themselves accord-

# Where is

ing to the differences and harmonies between internal and external forces. The philosopher, Etienne Balibar, has stated that there is a two pronged illusion, consisting of the idea that there is a univocal ethnic designation that is handed down generationally and that that makes up our process of development. Essentially, we become a culmination of that “development process,” a clear byproduct of our ethnic history. It is simple when national identity construction is enveloped in a single, unitary identity. Yet, in the case of Armenians, we have a multiplicity of identities that have developed throughout our history.

Among Armenians, the shift from a primary identification with an ethnoreligious community to an ethnonational identity was gradual and occurred in far-removed places in the diaspora.

It is important to note that assumptions and conclusions about the current state of diaspora and Armenia relations with respect to Armenian iden-





texts that outline identity in Armenia communities and of theorists of nationalism and ethnicism. The results are generalized, but generalizations are not always clear-cut expressions. We are supposed to have differing opinions as we are not a monolithic entity that only subscribes to one conclusion.

A diaspora is created when there is a dispersion of a group of people from their homeland, either voluntary or by force. Members of the group share collective memory and myth of return. As these ethnic groups develop in their host countries, they maintain strong ties with their origins.

# my homeland?

tity follow the same multifaceted and ambiguous nature of the question itself. It should be recognized that there is no specific conclusion that one may reach in analyzing this issue, where there is such a high degree of variety in experience. Even concrete findings may be construed as pliable because it is in regards to an issue that we have such a strong affinity to.

The ideas presented in this article are byproducts of a series of interviews conducted among Armenians from various sectors of society, representing Armenia and diasporan communities in the United States, Syria, Lebanon, France, Russia, Argentina, Uruguay, Australia, India and Ethiopia. The sample groups were varied with respect to age, gender, and class. The substantive questions reflected the views and experiences that each subject identified with during a given time period. Much of the historical analysis is conducted through literature review of

Because of their dispersal, the diasporic identity is not simply an extension of the homeland. It is not a monolithic entity, but is more in tune with the diversity of the various locations of settlement. Thus, what may be considered the homeland for some does not always correlate with what others identify with. At times, these boundaries do shift and, especially in times of conflict, they become quite blurred.

Dispersion has been a central element in Armenian history. The first diasporic communities were created in 1045, when the last Armenian Bagratuni kingdom collapsed and triggered a wave of migration of Armenians to Europe, fleeing the impending Seljuk Turkish invasion. The Armenian kingdom of Cilicia was created by those migrants who fled to the west. Once again, when the Cilician kingdom fell in 1375, another wave of migration scattered these Armenians all throughout Eastern Europe and

the Russian Empire.

In the pregenocide diaspora, Armenian communities became the centers of culture, as they made conscious attempts to preserve their ethnic identity. The first Armenian book, Hagop Meghapart's *Urpatakirk* (Book of Friday), was published in Venice in 1511. It was followed by the development of the Armenian printing press in 1565. In Lvov, a city in the current republic of Ukraine, an Armenian play was published and staged in 1668. Amsterdam saw the printing of the Armenian Bible in 1666. In 1672, when an Armenian named Pascal opened the first literary coffee house in Paris, a small boutique that later became *Le Procope*, he insisted that all employees dress in traditional Armenian clothing. Whereas Madras, India, saw the printing of the first political Armenian newspaper in 1772. The Mekhitarist Catholic monks in Venice were publishing old historical texts and developing new ones by 1717.

An important paradigm shift occurred as diasporans, influenced by events taking place outside of their homeland, began to assert similar demands back home. Revolutionary activity emerged from cities where intellectuals and students, along with the workers, mobilized around socialist ideologies. In the Russian Empire, diasporan Armenians were influenced by the Marxist ideal of "going to the people." In adapting this to their homeland, they revised "going to the people" as "going to the homeland," creating the foundations of *tebi yergir*. Rather than struggling through Russian autocracy, they believed they were meant to focus on the liberation of Arme-

nians in the Ottoman Empire.

Arguably, the most significant paradigm shift between diaspora and Armenia occurred in response to the genocide. To the survivors of the Armenian Genocide, the homeland, as they had known it, was literally and physically lost. These genocide survivors soon formed the prevalent character and culture of the diaspora, overlaying their traditional communities. With the creation of the first Armenian republic in 1918, there was now an emergent state that became the center of national identity. Although it only constituted 20% of "Greater Armenia" and lasted until 1921, it was a tangible home-

land that Armenians could see as relative to their ethnic identity. Thus, this was a time where national identity joined with ethnic identity.

When the Soviet Union encompassed the first republic in 1921, the federal struc-

ture of the USSR allowed the Armenians to build a nationstate. Nevertheless, it became clear that the Communist ideology that appeared to be prevalent was merely a facade that covered the ethnic inclinations of the majority of the population. When the Armenian Communist Party commissioned the creation of a monumental statue of Joseph Stalin, architect Rafael Israyelian designed a pedestal for the statute to stand on. He later confessed that the pedestal resembled a three-nave basilica Armenian church, stating that the "glory of the dictators is temporary, so that is why I designed it as an Armenian church." Foreseeable to Israyelian, the statue of Stalin was toppled and replaced with *Mayr Hayasdan* in 1962.



From 1946 to 1948, Soviet authorities encouraged a repatriation drive to Soviet Armenia from many of the prominent Armenian communities, effectively bringing in over 100,000 people. These repatriates introduced a new chasm in Armenian society and polity, with the newcomers being classified as “aghbars” (meaning brother, but used as a derogatory term according to its mockery of the Western Armenian dialect). Soviet Armenian authorities expressed concern that the homeland was the sole “cultural nourishment” of the diaspora. Their communities faced weakening Armenian identity in foreign lands and relied on the homeland to strengthen those attenuating strands. Thus, diasporans were classified as a mere annex that was reliant on the homeland for cultural support.

The following paradigm shift set the stage for the foundations of the current trajectory in Diaspora-Armenia relations. When Armenia gained independence from the Soviet Union, there emerged unprecedented opportunities for contact and cooperation between diaspora and the state.

With the onset of the Karabakh movement, the homeland developed great, but vaguely defined expectations of the diaspora. Increased contact meant more information about the other, and both sides initially did not like what they saw. Some in the homeland believed that assistance came with a pricetag. In the diaspora, on the other hand, there was a belief that those in the homeland were opportunists who were corrupted by the Soviet Union. They were not the “pure” Armenians that they had been expecting to find. There was a mutual shock in realizing that both sides were culturally different from one another in terms of values and outlook, despite what they had always been led to believe.

The Spitak earthquake of 1988 was resultant in another paradigm shift as massive devastation took the lives of 25,000, while leaving half a million people without shelter. Although they were not predominantly unified in their efforts, the diasporans mobilized a large-scale assistance, which set the stage for yet another paradigm shift. This new tra-

jectory also brought about new resentments. Diaspora was identified as elitist far withdrawn from the “dark years” those in Armenia were experiencing. The diasporans were colored as possessing an air of superiority over their counterparts in Armenia. On the other hand, the diasporan began to feel that they were being utilized only as cash cows that could not refuse assistance to Armenia, but were always being denied an opportunity to have control over the expenditures.

Once again, it is important to note that these are not political observations, but based significantly on human experience. It is an attempt to question on what exact bases does one Armenian identify themselves as different than another.

Different entities with different interests and identities make up the nation. This is not to say that one side does not concern themselves, or empathize with, the problems of the other. Yet, historical experiences and current imperatives differ, and that results in the incongruence of priorities. The diaspora is very heterogeneous, as the various host countries have undeniably colored each community with various habits, tastes and characteristics. “Where is my homeland?” is still an open question, and there are many alternatives; from the hostland, the homeland, to even a ubiquitous imagined community.

Our identity as Armenians has always tethered on the edge. This tethering can allow for yet another paradigm shift, one of mutual understanding and cooperation. There exists a great irony: when we refer to the concept of the homeland, an idea that should be the most unitary, we are led to be the most divisive. This thread that ties diasporans to the homeland is the objective of ethnic identity, the idea of belonging to one group while realizing that there are real and material differences. Yet, despite the differences, we are still incline to tie that knot and work to reformulate the relationship.

*By Nare Kupelian*



# From Yerevan to Texas



## How Global Networks Can Change Armenia's Future

Many of us might at times find ourselves in situations where the sudden question arises, “How did I get here?” I found myself asking that question in Austin, Texas at the annual South by Southwest (SXSW) Festival. SXSW is a 10-day interactive festival and conference that brings together a network of people to discuss the latest in cutting edge technology, film and music. The magnitude of this event is unprecedented with 2,200 musical performances, 400 film screenings, and over 25,000 attendees. It was in this remarkable environment, considered to be the largest technology conference in the world, where tech giants Twitter and Foursquare were launched. So how did I end up here as a panelist for a discussion on online communities, specifically speaking about Armenia? And why is any of this significant for Armenia?

This story takes us back to 2012. At the time I was living in Armenia, working for a global development organization called Counterpart International. The organization partners with communities and local groups to drive and sustain a country's own development. Counterpart is supported by USAID and their mission in Armenia is to strengthen civil society and provide support for local government. One of the ways they do that is by sustaining 41 youth centers throughout Armenia. These centers can be found in communities as large as Dilijan, to as small as Gomk, a border community of roughly 200 people. These centers serve as a place where youth can develop new skills, build self-confidence, drive their communities forward and advocate for issues they believe are important. Unfortunately, the amount of information and resources the youth in these centers have access to are limited. While Counterpart and other

supporting organizations provide multiple layers of skills training, civil society projects and activities, they are unable to harness the amount of information that would be accessible if the center took part in online communities. Making these centers cyber accessible would not only allow youth to have more relevant and updated information, but also would ensure less dependence on foreign organizations. In the next 4 days, we will create more information than was created from the dawn of man until 2003. This reality means that Armenia must find ways to harness all that available and free information, to improve outcomes, increase speed, and reduce costs of development in our homeland.

Online communities serve as a filtration system for newly updated information, bringing communities current and relevant information much more quickly. It was a giant step forward, when in 2012 we began to introduce online networks to youth involved in Counterpart International's centers, by working with the organizers of the Social Good Summit. The Social Good Summit is a partnership between several large organizations, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the United Nations Foundation, that harnesses networks between different groups of people, to help leverage their knowledge for a cause.

In 2012, we hosted a summit in Yerevan to explore ways of using technology and innovation for development. The mission of the summit was to bring global communities together to solve issues facing local communities more effectively. Bringing together experts from different sectors, ranging from entrepreneurs and technologists, to world leaders and local activists, was a way to connect globally and solve locally. During this summit, young leaders from rural

communities in the outskirts of Armenia heard from activists and community leaders from Palestine and Nairobi about citizen election monitoring and fraud reporting. It was fascinating to see how Armenia's youth came together with the global community as stakeholders in some of our world's biggest challenges. Activated youth started a number of initiatives that came to life on the heels of this event, from websites to podcasts to cross-community partnership, their toolkit for problem solving had undoubtedly expanded. Armenia was able to foster collaboration and learn from unique experiences of other people, as well as have a say in the global civil-society arena. The Social Good Summit has since brought together over 20,000 people from over 175 countries.

In 2013, we wanted to explore what would happen if we extended the Armenia network to Counterpart youth projects in other countries by facilitating a conversation between them. Videoconferences with youth in Armenia and their counterparts in Bangladesh were one way we realized this objective. Youth in Bangladesh were struggling to gain representation in their communities and local governments. Participants from Armenia understood their frustration because they also had similar issues that they solved in a past initiative. Through this dialogue, youth from both countries were able to share their strategies and support one another in their goals. There was a transaction of proven methods from Armenia to Bangladesh based on common experiences. This is significant because it provides a measurable outcome, but also serves as an exchange of empathy and empowerment. They connected through their joint experience and motivated one another. Youth in Bangladesh were exposed to new ways of organizing, and the youth in Armenia were empowered because they were now the ones giving their expertise to the global community. Also, by having different skill sets and weakness they were able to compliment each other's objectives. This example speaks volumes on two fronts. First, it shows the growth cycle of the online community, because Armenia went from being recipients of new information in 2012, to being strategy advisors to Bangladeshi youth in 2013; and secondly, it is an immensely empowering position that builds confidence and motivation in local organizing.

There are many challenges facing global online communities that can discourage involvement. These challenges include a lack of sustainability, language barriers, and

limited access to resources. But it is imperative not to get bogged down by these restraints, because they can be easily overcome. For an online community to succeed it must have a solid initiative tied to action, willing participants, and a computer with Internet access. Language barriers are diminishing everyday with smarter algorithms that make online translation more accurate. And this is not about tested

It would be foolish to assume that Armenia's **solutions** have to be Armenian

methods of development, it is about beneficiaries gaining access to information and groups of people who are active and care about the same issues. It also keeps participants accountable to a larger community. In Armenia, we faced many challenges that could have deterred us from participating in these online initiatives, but one thing I learned from development work is there is no such thing as a silver bullet. Instead it's about taking action, measuring, tweaking, and allowing ideas with a solid foundation to grow and evolve.

Armenia's involvement in the Social Good online community has grown into a web of connections and partnerships. These connections are very valuable in an increasingly globalized world. Each one of these brings with it a wealth of information, expertise, and most importantly diversity. Personally, I find diversity and a collective front to be the most valuable contribution of online networks. At times we are starved for new ideas and concepts that we shouldn't expect to always find within our own culture. It would be foolish to assume that Armenia's solutions have to be Armenian. The country can grow and develop by adopting best practices from hundreds if not thousands of different places.

During my panel discussion at SXSW, I had the opportunity to share Armenia's active participation in an online global community. As my colleagues from around the world and I sat there discussing our experiences, a global map lit up in my mind with colorful lines connecting Armenia to Bangladesh, Palestine, Nairobi, Texas and on and on. I see these lines multiplying, each one representing different partnerships for various initiatives, ventures or causes. I see these lines as cyber trade routes that open Armenia up to the world and the world to Armenia.

*By Nishe Modoyan*



# IT AIN'T UP FOR DEBATE

## Feminism is our Past ... and Future

**T**hrough persecution, progress and the perpetual pathos of nation-building, feminist resistance has been at the center of Armenian ideological, political, social, and economic development. Often times one hears the intentional misrepresentations of our community as inherently “patriarchal” and racist notions of the Armenian community that state that sexism “is in our blood.” Yet such sentiments fail to recognize not only the long standing contributions of ungerhous past and present, but that such constructions of the Armenian community are monolithic, inaccurate, and are the work of powerful (often imperialist and/or assimilationist) forces seeking to unravel us from our own incredible history. Our history is more accurately defined by the understanding that feminism has been essential to the Armenian struggle for all, including men and those that don't fit a gender binary. Our history is more accurately defined by the strength and resilience of Armenian womyn that have for centuries stood in the face of significant forces seeking to deter, disrupt and displace them, and the instrumental role they have played in shaping the nation, in both thought and action.

### The Basics: What it Is, and What it Ain't

To begin, “feminism” is loosely defined as the struggle for political, social and economic equality regardless of gender, sex and sexuality. It is a term that is constantly up for dissection and evolves to fit



the needs of our communities. For this discussion it is essential to employ one of the most powerful concepts that has come out of modern feminist discussion: “intersectionality,” a term coined by visionary Kimberle Williams Crenshaw. Intersectionality requires that we not only acknowledge how we all have multiple forms of identity—race, class, gender identity, sexuality etc.—but that systems of power that delineate who is worthy of humanity and who is not, i.e. sexism, racism, classism, work together to oppress [1]. Just as race and ethnicity served as the defining factor to deny Armenians fundamental rights and ultimately their existence in the Ottoman Empire, so too sexism worked through the form of sexual violence as a tool of ethnic cleansing, stigma, and coercion against Armenian womyn, whose bodies were transformed into sites of “subhuman” race, gender, and nation.[2] Utilizing such understanding, reveals that in order to truly develop feminist theory and action, we need to recognize difference between communities and acknowledge the specificity of our histories and struggles.

Often times, Armenian womyn are asked to divide and displace portions of their identity. Especially in the face of mass murder and political enemies, Armenian womyn have been told to separate their identity as womyn from their identity as Armenian, to see these parts of self as mutually exclusive rather than part of a whole. The examples can be seen ubiquitously from Western feminists condemning womyn who choose to practice tradition and culture that is often

womyn were intended by nature to perform different tasks” and thus are in no need of an equal rights declaration [3]. Additionally, these arguments are coupled with the demonizing of feminists themselves. As Barbara Tomlinson reveals, mischaracterizations of feminists in general as “angry, unreasoning, shrill, humorless, ugly, man-hating.. [are] designed to undermine feminist politics by making its costs personal, and to foreclose feminist futures by making feminism repulsive



gendered, to Armenian womyn speaking out against sexual violence on college campuses whose perpetrators are Armenian and being labeled a ‘traitor’ to the community. These mechanisms seek not only to divide us but fail to recognize the ultimate goal of all forms of social justice: equality for all. A true commitment toward Armenian identity **REQUIRES** inclusivity, that recognizes not only both race/ethnicity **AND** gender but also multiple intersections with sexual orientation, class, ability etc.

Tired and overplayed anti-feminist argument have existed throughout history, from ancient Armenia to the current Republic. Indeed, even a mere skim of our history reveals the same anti-feminist argument used again and again, against feminist movements around the world. For example, the drafting of “The Declaration of Armenian Womyn’s Rights” by womyn representatives of the nationalist intelligentsia, Serpouhi Vahanian-Dussap and Zabel Assadour, were met with uproar. This included the vocal opposition from a member of parliament Kirkor Zohrab who declared “men and wo-

to young womyn” [4] These tropes and stereotypes are intentionally created by forces that seek the demise of social justice work. Thus, understanding how feminism is inextricably bound to our own history is an act of responsibility to our collective memory and a reclamation of dialogue of our past, present and future.

## By the Pen, By the Barrel of A Gun: Womyn in the Armenian National Liberation Movement (1862-1922)

Beckoned by the vision of a free and united Armenia, womyn took to the frontlines on the battlefields of the intellectual and the physical. The tireless work and contributions of Armenian womyn during the national resistance are extensive though often marginalized or overlooked in nationalist literature and rhetoric. Examples of the active role of womyn are numerous as womyn found the necessity to not only defend their communities, but envision alternative futures for the people and homeland they loved. To begin, revolutionary womyn were imperative in the founding of the Hunchak (1887), Dashnak (1890), and Armenagan



(1885) parties, especially in the illegal distribution of nationalist literature and party communications/pro-propaganda in the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, from carrying weapons between villages, enabling communication lines, and taking up arms themselves, womyn actively participated in the defense of Sassun (1894, 1915), Zeitun (1895), Van (1908, 1915), Urfa (1915), Shabin-Karahissar (1915), Mussa Ler (1915), and Hajin (1920) among others. Indeed, womyn also participated as armed fighters in the defense of the Armenian communities in Baku, Zangezur, and Karabagh; they were instrumental in the Occupation of the Ottoman Bank and the attempted assassination of Sultan Hamid. [5]

Images of female fedayees provide a rare look into our powerful past. They speak to the ways trauma can break conventional gender roles expected of womyn. The national resistance brought new opportunities to engage in aspects of Armenian life never before experienced. Famous womyn fighters included Mariam Chilingirian, Khanem Ketenjian, and Sultan Simian among many others. The famous Sose Mayrig, of course, cannot be overlooked for her commitment to both family and nation, as a fedayee whose bravery won her immortal respect. Nationalist rhetoric, however, often relies on old tropes of the “nurturing” and “motherly” nature of these womyn, which indeed, are part of these womyn’s history. However, they are more accurately described as dedicated organizers with firm commitments to their communities, resisters of oppressive foreign forces, and ultimately characterized by their passionate vow to fight for their loved ones, even in the face of great personal sacrifice. Indeed, Armenian history is not immune to progressive womyn activists and revolutionaries, is it in fact defined by them.

Essential to the distribution of nationalist fervor and feminist discussion was the medium developing by womyn writers in the Ottoman Empire: the newspaper journal. Though often short-lived and suppressed, womyn visionaries utilized this medium to unite womyn voices across boundaries, both physical and intellectual. Marie Beylerian, was one such visionary, who dared to create space for Armenian

womyn to vocalize their interpersonal and institutional struggles as the founder and editor of the first Armenian feminist journal entitled *Artemis*. Extraordinarily progressive for its time, *Artemis* ultimately strived to “deal with the aspirations of Armenian womyn, rectify the injustice to them, to cultivate their intellectual and physical development and to promote their equality and liberation” [6]. Regarded as threatening to the institutional order, provocative and “radical,” *Artemis* was banned in Turkey, but received a wide range of attention in the Diaspora [7]. Perhaps most awe-inspiring about her work, was her commitment to intersectionality, as Beylerian firmly engaged in direct criticism of European feminist movements’ insistence on a universalism of womyn’s experience and the blind overthrow of traditional institutions. Beylerian argued that feminism had to be adapted to womyn’s context, rejecting notions of Armenian society as backward or inherently anti-feminist, or feminism as merely a product of Westernization.

Other powerful contemporaries of Beylerian used literary forms as resistance highlighting themes such as trauma, genocide and of course, revolt. Employing rich imagery, striking self-reflection, and poignant observation, Western Armenian writer Zabel Yessayan wrote extensively on the injustices she witnessed during the genocide and was the only womyn on the list of Armenian intellectuals targeted by the Young Turks on April 24, 1915. Poetry and prose were also used to communicate great political ideals by her sister in struggle, Shushanik Kurghinian, one of the most profound writers of Eastern Armenia whose work is truly characterized by an unwavering defiance against sexism [8]. Shushanik Kurghinian articulates so beautifully, in the poem *I Want to Live*, the need to work hand in hand with men for the betterment of Armenians.

*I want to act, equal, next to you,  
as a loyal member of the people,  
let me suffer again and again, night or day,  
wandering from one place to another  
always struggling for the ideal of freedom...[9]*

June 7, 1907



Throughout history, feminist struggle for Armenian womyn meant both resisting traditional institutional barriers to womyn's employment, rights, and participation in civic and political life, but also seeing such feminist liberation as fundamental to the collective vision of a better Armenian nation. These obligations of nation, family, church etc. often in Western hegemonic feminism are condemned as antithetical to womyn's rights, but womyn especially of nations with long histories of persecution, colonialism, and genocide, remind us of the necessity of cultural institutions for personal and collective survival.

While it is essential to work to preserve our past, history must inform our struggle to define what it means to be a fedayi today. Feminist writers from diverse communities have unearthed the importance of understanding that resistance comes in many forms. For Armenians this notion is unambiguous and unapologetic. Who else, except a community so ravaged by forces seeking its cultural, political, and physical destruction, can understand that dance, poetry, art, music, protest, even the necessity of celebration as a community, is about survival. In the words of Audre Lorde, our history beckons us to engage in resistance, to speak to the silence, to be unwavering in our conviction and dedication to our people because "we were never meant to survive," especially as womyn [11]. Indeed, ungerhousis and ungers alike, when the legacies of our past fedayis knock on our door, will you open it?

*by Sophia Rakel Armen*

***\*Please Note: For the purpose of this essay, and in all other writings, I utilize the spelling of women with the letter "Y" instead of "E." This is not a spelling mistake but rather a conscious decision, reflecting on movements of the past, to actively reclaim my language and challenge social constructions/norms and have readers pause and reflect on the pervasiveness of gender in language***

#### Sources:

- [1] Crenshaw, Kimberle. 'Intersectionality: The Double Bind of Race and Gender. Perspectives Magazine, 2004. pg 2
- [2] "A Fate Worse than Dying: Sexual Violence in the Armenian Genocide" <http://www.palgrave.com/PDFs/9780230542532.pdf>
- [3] Zeitlian, Sonia "Nationalism and the Development of the Armenian Women's Rights Movement," Armenian Women in A Changing World. pg 87
- [4] Tomlinson, Barbara "Ideologies of Argument and the Trope of the Angry Feminist." Transforming the Terms of Reading. pgs. 1-3
- [5] Zeitlian, Sonia "Nationalism and the Development of the Armenian Women's Rights Movement," Armenian Women in A Changing World. pg 89
- [6] Rowe, Victoria A History of Armenian Women's Writing, 1880-1922, pgs 134-145.
- [7] Ibid., 139.
- [8] "I Want to Live: Poems of Shushanik Kurghinian" Shushan Avagyan.
- [9] Ibid., 67-69.
- [10] Lorde, Audre. "A Litany For Survival." The Black Unicorn

#### Recommended Resources for Further Learning:

- "Armenian Women" <http://armenianwomen.wordpress.com/>
- "Queering Yerevan" <http://queeringyerevan.blogspot.com>
- Lara Aharonian and Talin Suciyan. Finding Zabel Yesayan. Film.
- The Other Voice: Armenian Women's Poetry Through the Ages by Diana Der-Hovanessian
- Out of Darkness: An Armenian Woman's Story by Ramela Martin
- Lion Woman's Legacy: An Armenian-American Memoir by Arlene Avakian
- Voices of Armenian Women by Armenian Women's International Association
- A History of Armenian Women's Writing 1880-1922 by Victoria Rowe
- Armenian Women in a Changing World: AIWA International Conference, London, England, September 1994 The Five Lives of Leah: The Saga of an Armenian-american Woman by Sarkis Takesian

# a Meta-morphosis awaits

**While the Republic of Armenia is abundant with social, economic, political and environmental issues, diasporan Armenians also face various challenges within their communities.**

These include our quest for genocide recognition, cultural preservation to combat assimilation and gaining political leverage within our host governments. Countless arduous occurrences throughout Armenian history have undeniably submerged our people into a deep ravine within the international playing field. Throughout the past century, we have steadily ascended, with each upward movement so infinitesimal that our overall progress has been difficult to gauge. As we approach the cliff's edge, the once mighty roar of our voices echoing through the trenches has simmered down to a mere purr. The need for our struggle's evolution is blatant and the time for metamorphosis is now. Trying as it may be, we must overcome our retrospective considerations and evaluate our challenges with an untainted eye. Some may argue that improving the implementation of our efforts will allow us to attain the progress we seek. Nevertheless, I believe that our greatest need for improvement lies not in our execution, but in our approach. To begin with, we must dismantle the Armenian identity construct and replace its rigid barriers of exclusion with more comprehensive parameters. Next, we must limit the sensationalization of our past efforts, which intensifies the disconnect within the current nature of the Armenian struggle and the setting in which the battle is being fought. Finally, we must wean ourselves off incessant autovictimization and redirect our efforts to cater to a larger audience. While no single action can stitch the cleft that has torn us from actuality, taking these steps

will give us leverage while lifting the obstructions placed before us on our path towards justice.

The traditional, all-encompassing Armenian identity, comprised of our language, music, customs and values is now challenged by a newer construct. The bifurcations within the development of our identities can arguably be attributed to the instability we have endured. Each ordeal has further dispersed the Armenian people, bringing forth an abundance of unique personal narratives that have made us lose sight of our shared, collective narrative. Rather than expanding the boundaries of the Armenian identity construct with more fluid criteria, these unique narratives have given rise to multiple exclusive pseudidentities. Furthermore, each of these pseudidentities is used to lessen the value of rivalling pseudidentities while indirectly delegitimizing the narratives that were used to construct them. Subsequently, we are quick to draw conclusions and categorize one another. Suddenly, third generation Armenians, half-Armenians and Armenians who don't speak our linguistic form are "not Armenian enough" or they're the "wrong kind of Armenian." Our immediate priority should be coalescing the fragments of our shattered Armenian community, while building strong ties with non-Armenian groups. The primary phase of realizing this goal involves the deconstruction of the aforementioned pseudoidentities. Subcategorical exclusion must be eradicated and our differences must be embraced for adding depth and richness to who we are. Though we have scratched the surface of our complex and problematic identity structures, let us examine a specific example to further our understanding of this issue.

The unceasing glorification of our past heroes has well overplayed its role of inspiring us to remain dedicated to our cause. It has, in turn, defined specifically the criteria of dedication. The tales of our heroes, gun in hand, ready to die for our people, no longer serve as examples of activism. Rather, they have become the fetishized standard of activism. I believe that our reluctance in exploring new means of progressing our struggle is attributed in large part to fear – the fear of criticism, the fear of humiliation and the fear of failure, because we have no room to fail. Many under the influence of this creed sheepishly chant “միայն զէնքով կայ փրկութիւն,” which means “salvation comes only through armed struggle.” This archaic school of thought has stunted our growth by discrediting contemporary forms

of activism and those who engage in them. While armed struggle may have been our only option at certain times and in certain settings, it is not our only option here and now. It would be shameful and negligent to disregard the abundance of resources available to us simply because we're fixated on what we have historically resorted to. Among my greatest hopes for coming generations of Armenians is to hear them chant “միայն խելքով կայ փրկութիւն,” meaning “salvation comes only through knowledge.” By arming ourselves with information, rather than bullets, we can make our struggle more relatable to others and employ more powerful tactics by engaging untapped pools of Armenians and the numerous skills and ideas they have to offer. Unfortunately, modifying our impressions of other Armenians is not enough to purge the impediment before us. We must also alter how we view ourselves.

The final step to bring our progress to fruition involves abandoning the notion that we are victims and subsequently increasing the palatability and relevance of our efforts. Even the slightest knowledge of Armenian history makes it easy to understand the origins our victimization. Nevertheless, we have spiced and seasoned this phenomenon out of proportion, in the true Armenian fashion, and our victimization is now manifested in detrimental ways. Rather than focusing on making our cause relatable to others, we confine our efforts within the walls our communities. This mind set stems from the fallacious assumption that no one will care to join us, as they have never joined us before. For example, the hundreds of genocide commemoration events we organize each year serve little purpose beyond preaching to the choir. Furthermore, among the reasons to justify our innumerable protests are to gratify our elderly and to inspire our youth. These events themselves are not abysmal, but the same cannot be said about the hackneyed thoughts behind them or the self-serving outcomes they aim to yield. Simply put, the “for us by us” attitude has long outlived its use and we need more people on our side. Our discrete actions may or may not change, but altering the thoughts behind them would ensure that they are no longer hollow. Genocide commemoration events should focus on celebrating the culture we were able to safeguard, rather than lamenting over the endangerment it endured. Furthermore, building coalitions with non-Armenian groups would cause thousands more to chant by our side, aiming to defend all human rights rather than Armenian

rights exclusively. Our reach would extend globally, rather than locally and any other endeavor we undertake would prove more fruitful.

In conclusion, we must seek to change our attitudes, rather than our discrete actions, to ensure our continued progress. Ironically, many who pride themselves as being the preservers of their skewed interpretation of our identity are arguably the greatest detriment to our forward movement. As mentioned earlier, our initial undertaking involves dismantling and redefining our identity construct. Instead of wasting our efforts to change the masses to fit a mold, we should expand our boundaries to include them as they are. Next, we must redefine the criteria of dedication and activism by no longer sensationalizing our previous efforts and focusing on the here and now. While speaking of dedication, we often hear the expression “կեանքի գնով,” meaning “with the price of one's life.” Unfortunately, the use of this saying is usually coupled with the speaker's interpretation. I, too, believe that true dedication to our cause must be paid with the price of one's life. However, this does not mean one must die for the cause... rather, one must live for it. Finally, we must cease our constant autovictimization, which continually feeds our need for isolation. It is crucial to realize that our seclusion will not aid in preserving our cultural identity. It will instead cause us to quietly fade away all alone. We must reach out and embrace non-Armenian communities and continue our battles side by side. Many groups have endured similar tribulations and our unwillingness to collaborate makes it seem as though we have assigned a higher value to our justice over theirs. Ultimately, this all trickles down to swallowing our unwarranted pride. Only then can our narratives, identities, pasts, presents, struggles, battles and justices go from mine, yours and theirs- to ours.

*Vahe Lapedjian*





# The Need For A Modern Armenian Mythology

**M**ythology is one of the most powerful forms of artistic expression. It is also one of the most important aspects in defining cultural identity. When one thinks of Greek culture, one often remembers the Trojan War and the subsequent trials and tribulations of Odysseus or the brave 300 who withstood an onslaught of Persian fighters. One may also remember Prometheus, the god who gifted humans with fire. This is a testament to the power of mythology. After thousands of years, Greeks, and the rest of the world, still relate to these stories; stories that are at times based loosely on fact, and at other times, works of pure fiction. In both cases the author(s) of these stories were engaged in a dialogue with the history of their people and the world in which they found themselves. In other words, we know that the Greeks went to war, that some warriors were valiant, and that their stories were worth recording. However, the act of mythologizing these warriors, i.e., giving them super powers of strength and bravery, or the super wisdom of humility and modesty, was not a historical matter. Rather, it was the personification of cultural ideals that the listener or reader was meant to understand and aspire to, and most importantly, to identify with, and be proud of. One can imagine the children of old playing war and taking the role of Achilles or Hector as the children of today pretend to be Superman or Batman.

Today, those who find themselves living in the United States are exposed to a mythology based almost purely on fiction. Since the United States is a new country composed of peoples from different cultures, it has a relatively short history to draw upon and a lack of linear cultural identity. However, the need for



a singular identity clearly exists. The recent reactionary outcry to the Super Bowl Coca-Cola commercial is one indication. The commercial presented a series of different cultures living in the United States with the Star Spangled Banner sung in a multitude of languages. A large backlash resulted, with many Americans outraged that the Star Spangled Banner should not be sung in any language other than English. The outcry may have been a result of the little commonality between the different cultures that inhabit the United States, English being one of the few unifying factors. Thus, one way that Americans identify with their nation is language. Americans also identify themselves with the American Revolution and the Constitution, both of which are highly mythologized.

One might assume that for a story to qualify as mythology, it must be born in antiquity. However, many definitions of mythology do not hold such a standard. Bruce Lincoln, Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago, defines myth as “ideology in narrative form.” When one applies this defi-

tion of mythology to the American Revolution and Constitution, the picture becomes a little clearer. The American Revolution is laden with ideological struggle, and found within that struggle, is the embodiment of American ideals. Those ideals are, but not limited to, liberty, equality, and opportunity. The Constitution is the realization of those ideals - a sort of sacred text. Most importantly, today, the founding fathers are often viewed as the standard of patriotism, each embodying a different ideal.

To a lesser degree, Americans identify with their involvement in WWII. However, the fiction born as a result of WWII is one the most powerful and culturally shaping mythos of all, the superhero. During WWII, Superman was used to sell war bonds. He was also depicted battling against Axis forces. In these cases, a fictional character was used to communicate needed

**30% of Americans cannot name the Vice President, 35% do not know which century the American Revolution took place in, but most Americans can name at least one superhero.**

action to its society. The reason Superman was appealing at the time, and to this day, is because he is depicted as a blue collar, ordinary, American man, that displays radical super human powers when he is called upon. One can imagine how much this character resonated with a people called upon to fight for their country. In this era, several other superheroes were created. These include, but are not limited to, Batman, Captain America, Wonder Woman, etc. Each of these superheroes is representative of ideology in narrative form. The ideologies represented in these characters mirrored existing American ideals, as well as ideals that the authors communicated to their readers and viewers. One might recall Superman, a character that had a regular job, held strong moral values, held a sense of justice, and always acted within the law. These ideals are a mirror to American society in the late 30's and early 40's. However, the dialogue between Superman and society begins at the break of WWII, whereupon the authors instilled a sense of duty for country within Superman. It worked. Superman sold war bonds to fund the war and helped recruit troops. This is an example of mythology establishing

identity by embodying American ideals, and shaping its present culture by engaging in contemporary issues.

In our present day, America is experiencing unprecedented immigration from a multitude of countries, as well as the unprecedented segregation of these immigrants. That is, whether ghettos are self-imposed or a part of larger issues, they are commonplace. Social circles of immigrants and their children also predominantly consist of their respective minorities. However, most children, including immigrant children, often want to watch superhero movies and dress up like the characters they see - characters of distinct American mythology. The superhero mythology is intoxicating to millions upon millions of Americans and those intoxicated by the mythology are knowingly or unwittingly adhering to an American identity. 30% of Americans cannot name the Vice President, 35% do not know which century the American Revolution took place in, but most Americans can name at least one superhero. Here's the big picture. The contemporary mythology of superheroes has created the modern American identity. In other words, one need not have any knowledge of American history to understand what it is to be an American, because the superheroes embody the history. One need not ever read the Constitution to understand the ideology of America, because the ideology is personified in the superhero.

In the former paragraphs, we have seen the importance of mythology in defining a culture and creating national identity. There are several implications and lessons regarding mythology and identity that can be applied to Armenian culture. First, there exists a fallacy of homogeneity in the Armenian people as a whole. In other words, Armenians are not a homogenous bunch. Like Americans, Armenians cannot identify as being Armenian based solely on their physical properties. For example, skin tone and facial features often vary dramatically from one Armenian to another. Similarly, in how immigration to America presents rifts in national identity, Armenians belonging to different diaspora communities, as well as Armenia proper, present rifts in Armenian identity. Whether we like it or not, regional culture is undoubtedly absorbed and incorporated into Armenian diaspora communi-

ties. This absorption is not a lack of will to stubbornly remain as Armenian as possible; rather, it is the nature of being human and living outside of one's country. While it is true that Armenians have more in common with one another than less, each diaspora community has relatively distinct cuisine, dialect, and manner. Confronted with these realities, like Americans, language is one of the more powerful forms of identity that Armenians possess.

Second, The immediate circumstances of existence and experience are the most powerful and shaping to the human psyche. Like the Greeks, Armenians have an ancient mythology. However, Greek children no longer dress up like their ancient heroes. As such, Armenian children no longer dress up like Haig and Pel or David of Sassoon. It is tempting to blame the assimilation of Armenians within their respective diaspora communities, or the Russification of Armenians in Armenia proper to explain this phenomenon. However, this blame is misplaced. The lure of American superhero mythology comes from its ever evolving and adaptive nature. The fact is that Armenian children, and Armenians in general, have more in common with Superman or Batman, American mythological figures of the modern age, than they do with their own ancient lore. This might seem bewildering, but consider for a moment the radically different time and environment one finds oneself in compared to that of the ancient world.

Third, Armenians currently share the majority of their identity as Armenians in an event that has many elements of mythology. The Armenian Genocide is undoubtedly one of the most, if not the most identity shaping event in recent Armenian history. The historical aspects of the genocide are not mythologized, however, the subsequent incessant novels, plays, films, and paintings concerning the genocide have created a mythological monster, i.e., ideology in narrative form. The problem here lies in the kinds of ideology one

must place in an event like the genocide. These ideas and ideals include, but are not limited to, victimization, mourning, fear, distrust, love, hope, strength, and tragedy. In other words, in obsessing over the geno-



cide, a dark mythology was inadvertently created that has seen very little updates. The mythology, a mirror of Armenian circumstance, psyche, and identity during the genocide, still reflects back to us. This identity is, to say the least, off putting for many. Currently, a subtle rejection of this identity is taking place. In one incar-

nation, young Armenians are quickly assimilating into their relative diaspora regions, adopting the national identity and mythology of other peoples. In another manifestation, young Armenians are staying Armenian and frantically searching for pride within their people's history and their contemporaries. There are certainly many sources of pride one can find in Armenian history, however, as previously stated, immediate circumstances of existence and experience are the most powerful and shaping to the human psyche. Also, a sense of pride, that is, a feeling of general pride for one's people and equally one's identity is instilled through generations of mythology.

So what does this all mean? It means Armenians need a new mythology. Armenians need a new mythology because Armenians cannot identify themselves as Armenians through physical appearances. Armenians cannot identify themselves as Armenians through cuisine. Armenians cannot identify themselves as Armenians according to their ancient mythology. Armenians no longer wish to identify themselves solely on the mythos borne of the genocide because Armenians want to experience feelings of pride rather than those of tragedy. Most importantly, Armenians, like all peoples, want to stay relevant. They need modern heroes. They need contemporary ideology. Myth is the cultural force that can address and resolve these issues.

*By Christopher Bedian*



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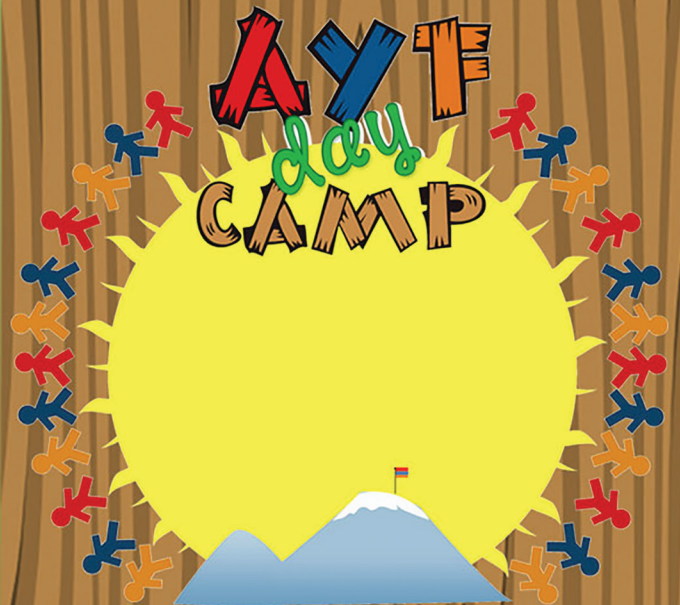
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