
CONTESTING IDENTITY GROUNDS: CASE STUDY OF ARMENIAN MIGRANT ORGANISATIONS IN THE NETHERLANDS

N. GALSTYAN

A current debate in migration studies focuses on the concept of “old” or “classic” and “contemporary” or “modern” diasporas¹. For the “classic” diaspora approach is underpinned by the development and application of a model or set of criteria given by numerous authors that constitutes a diaspora: forced separation from the homeland, the evolution of national sentiments over time, an idea of return, political influence, concerns about the homeland’s future, sense of solidarity. For a long time there was no necessity to go into this debate on definition in the case of Armenian diaspora which evolved after the 1915 Genocide. It was one of the transnational communities that has practically fitted any of the diaspora definitions. Armstrong defined the Armenian diaspora as an archetypical form of diaspora having a “sacral myth” that sustains their collective identity². As the circumstances, dynamics and means of migration have multiplied in recent decades, the consideration of ‘new’ or more contemporary forms of diaspora have required an expansion and rethinking of the classic literature, particularly in terms of identity maintenance.

The article examines the identity grounds of Armenian migrant communities in the context of recent migration waves to western countries as one of the cases of the new formed diasporic communities. The article explores the peculiarities of contemporary diasporic identities, it focuses on the issues surrounding the language and religion maintenance as the key diasporic identity elements. The article implies the conceptual lenses of “classical” and “contemporary” diasporas to the Dutch Armenian community and shows how these theories interplay in contemporary circumstances.

The research was conducted among the main organisations of Armenian community. Contemporary studies focus on diaspora as a process, action constructed by the organisations. The latter ones are often the main illustration that immigrants distinguish their ethnic or national identity from others. Ethnic organisations are the institutionalized reflection of the dynamics taking place in the diasporic community³. By placing migrant organisations in the centre of the study, we aimed

¹ *There is no consensus on the definition of “diaspora” and “community” terms in the literature and throughout the discussion I will use both terms. This is an attempt to remain neutral and override discussions on diaspora/community definitions which is out of the scope of this study.*

² **Armstrong J. A.** Mobilized and proletarian diasporas (The American Political Science Review, Vol. 70, 1976, -2).

³ **Schrover M. & Vermeulen F.** *Immigrant organisations [Journal of ethnic and migration studies, 2005, 31 (5)].*

to apply the most recent approaches to explore the main dynamics of contemporary diasporic communities.

The most feasible way of studying diasporic identities was through applying qualitative methodology, since it is primary connected with subjective understandings, feelings, opinions and believes, attempting to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them⁴. We conducted semi-structured interviews with the representatives of 12 Armenian migrant organisations. As supportive methods we used observations and document analyses. The research concentrated on the main cities where the organisations are placed. This also covered the main communities where there are large numbers of Armenians

Armenian Community in the Netherlands has two main historical phases. Armenians migrated to the Netherlands in the 17th century from Ottoman Empire and the main reason for migration was trade. There were some 500 Armenians living in Amsterdam, concentrated in the central parts of the city⁵. These migrants opened the first organisation: St. Karapet Armenian Church in 1714.

By the end of the nineteenth century there was a decrease in their social and economic position of Armenian community. As a result, the community did not last long and Armenian migrants moved to other European countries. The document sources as well as the interviews indicate that the other main reason for the decline of Armenian community was assimilation into the Dutch society.

The interviews indicate that current Armenian community has emigrants from the various and quite different destinations: Indonesia, Greece, Turkey, Iran, and the Middle East, alongside very recent arrivals from the former Soviet Union. The second phase of Armenian Community in the Netherlands has started after second World War. In 1948 approximately 50 families migrated from Indonesia, a former Dutch Colony. On 1956 Armenians from Greece migrated to the Netherlands. Another migration flow came from Iran on 1963 after the Iranian Revolution. Between the 1960s and 1970s nearly 400 Armenian families from Turkey arrived to the Netherlands due to the guest worker agreement between Turkey and the Netherlands. Further, their relatives and family members joined them and they concentrated mainly in Almelo. Following this, due to economic crisis, socio-political reasons and wars a number of Armenians living in the Middle East (Lebanon, Iraq, Syria) arrived to the Netherlands as refugees. The other big migration wave was after the collapse of Soviet Union, when many Armenians from Armenia migrated to the Netherlands. According to the representatives of the organisations interviewed, the majority of these Armenians arrived as asylum seekers, due to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and socio-economic reasons. Almost all the leaders of the organisations have stated that there is an

⁴Matthews B., & Ross, L. *Research methods: A practical guide for the social sciences*. New Jersey, 2010, p. 10.

⁵Bournoutian G. A. *A history of the Armenian people, California, 1994, p. 2.*

ongoing migration of Armenians from Syria because of the war and majority of them are still in the process of obtaining refugee status.

Nowadays non-official sources state that there are approximately 15–20.000 Armenian migrants living in the Netherlands. It is not possible to know the exact number, since the Dutch government does not provide any data source about the ethnic origins. According to the interviews Armenian migrants belong mainly to middle and high class, they are businessmen, craftsmen, engineers, professors, representatives of cultural and art sphere, etc.

Contemporary Dutch Armenian community life is shaped by different organisations situated in different regions. Armenian Community organisations are in Amsterdam, The Hague, Nijmegen, Maastricht, Almelo, Arnhem, and Utrecht. The geography of these migrant organisations in the Netherlands indicates the direction of migration waves, the places that Armenian migrants are mainly settled.

Dutch-Armenian organisations can be divided into two main types: transnational and local. Transnational organisations bring diasporic values into the Dutch context, as well as all the infrastructures that existed in pre-migration diasporic communities. The migrants who had an experience of living in diasporic communities before migration to the Netherlands brought with them traditional diasporic transnational organisations that promote properly "diasporic" values, ideologies, orientations, such as Armenian Revolutionary Federation, Armenian Apostolic Church, AGBU and more. These organisations are engaged in hierarchically organized institutional networks connecting Armenian diasporic institutions worldwide. Whereas, local organisations ("Ani", "United Armenians in the Netherlands", "Abovyan" Cultural Centre, "Gladzor" Student Union, "AJO" youth union and more) have a community-oriented character, they address local needs and do not have hierarchic structure. Each organisation is working with local or nearby residing Armenian population.

For studying the peculiarities of Armenian diaspora in the Netherlands we researched the classical and more contemporary approaches of studying diasporas and diasporic identities. The classical ones refer to diasporas as an "entity" based on taken for granted assumption that diasporas are essentialized groups with coherent and static diasporic identity. Here the diaspora was being as a separate society or quasi-society in a larger polity⁶. Most of scholars find that boundary maintenance is a core concept in diaspora studies since it enables one to speak about distinctive community held together by an active solidarity and link the members of diaspora within different states⁷.

Brubaker de-substantializes the term "diaspora" and suggests using it as a "category of practice, project, claim and stance, rather than as a bounded group"⁸. He

⁶ **Armstrong J. A.** *Mobilized and proletarian diasporas* (*The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 70, 1976, - 2).

⁷ **Safran W.** *Diasporas in modern societies: myths of homeland and return*. *Diaspora* (A Journal of Transnational Studies, 1991, 1(1), p. 9).

⁸ **Brubaker R.** *The 'diaspora' diaspora* (*Ethnic and racial studies*, 2005, 28 (1), p. 5).

suggests that diasporic identities are not static but, rather, a constant “work in progress”.

The constructivist approach of understanding identity is widely applicable in diaspora studies to highlight the dynamic and transformative aspects of identity formation⁹. Such approaches often emphasize the hybrid and the cosmopolitan and tend to embrace the partial, the syncretized, and the ever-evolving aspects of identity. As Hall describes, diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference¹⁰.

Scholars also underline the concept of localized identities. For example, Björklund studying Armenian diasporas in Athens and in Istanbul suggests that though every Armenian diasporic community has a fair degree of pan-diasporic identity elements, local communities exist under widely differing conditions, so their senses of being Armenian and of being part of a diaspora vary in character¹¹.

The research shows that the difficulties of sustaining a distinct identity in the Netherlands are similar to Tololyan’s description¹²: “(there are) strong inducements to assimilation in receptive and pluralist societies in the West, where pervasive individualism, exogamy, erosion of language, and even of religion (through the efforts of evangelical Protestantism) are all potent factors”.

“On the one side the Netherlands is a free country, so you can do propaganda, promote your culture to keep the identity strong; on the other side, it is not an Islamic country, there is no danger of Islamization, Armenians can assimilate easily, since you won’t lose much of your values. So which side will eventually win is difficult to say. (Armenian Revolutionary Federation, organisation leader).

Most of the organisation leaders refer to the objective of identity preservation as “Hayapahpanutyun”, the English translation literally means “the preservation of Armenian-ness”. This word is being used very frequently, with an assumption that an Armenian person should understand the meaning. However, they were asked to explain the grounds of “Armenianness” preservation.

The maintenance of religion, language, culture, homeland connections, and connections of Armenians in the Netherlands are the centre of organisations’ ideologies and practices, which correspond to the classical model features. However, each organisation has its own ideas about the importance of each of these elements and they construct their agendas and activities accordingly. Each of these elements

⁹ Sarup M., &Brooker, P. *Identity, culture and the postmodern world* (Vol. 15). T. Raja (Ed.), Edinburgh, 1996.

¹⁰ Hall S. *Cultural identity and diaspora*, 1990.

¹¹ Björklund U. *Armenians of Athens and Istanbul: the Armenian diaspora and the ‘transnational’ nation* [Global Networks, 2003, 3 (3)].

¹² Tölölyan K. The contemporary discourse of diaspora studies (*Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 2007, 27(3)).

has quite complex notion and functions, there are tensions relating to identity visions that affect organisational dynamics. Therefore in this article, we will discuss only religion and culture as the most important identity elements, moreover the main disagreements and discussions are connected with these.

Most of the interviewees explained the importance of the Church with the fact that it has been the most important institution which could unite Armenians even without state support. It has the missions of connecting Armenians with their history as well as transferring national/ethnic heritage to the future generations. In this regard the pastor of Armenian Church in Amsterdam stated:

"Our ancestors said that in 4th century Armenians became Christian, but in 5th century Christianity became Armenian. These are very deep words. If we want to survive, we need to keep our religion." (Armenian pastor, Amsterdam).

However, the importance of religion has different levels among Armenian sub-ethnic groups. For example the migrants who have lived in the countries other than Armenia where there were diasporic communities, are more active in participation to the Church activities than Armenians from Armenia. The representatives of the organisations explained that in Muslim countries (i.e. Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria) religion has been played unifying and defensive role for Armenians as a Christian nation. For example in Turkey, Armenians did not have opportunity to maintain their ethnic belonging by other institutions, such as political parties. Whereas, Armenians from Armenia have passed the Soviet times, i. e. atheist regime, therefore following religious rituals is not a strong tradition.

The other remarkable observation is that other religions or other Christian churches are being perceived as a danger to ethnic identity by the majority of the organisation leaders. Most of the participants referred these Armenians as *"representatives of sects"*.

"We collaborate with all the organisations, except of the religious minorities. We can speak with them, explain them everything, but we can't work with them. There are some Armenian who joined that organisations, these people do not have any idea about Armenian history and culture, moreover about the history and values of the Church" (Armenian pastor; Amsterdam).

It has to be noted that also the representatives of the organisations, that do not have religious profile, consider the existence of religious minority organisations as a serious danger for Armenian identity maintenance. The differences of religious orientation can raise a possibility of tension, because these organisations find collaboration with each other very difficult.

The participants explained their position mainly with the fact that Apostolic Church is the basis for Armenian nation preservation, *"the living memory and heritage"*, without which the nation will not survive.

The research shows that Armenian language is being considered as an inseparable part of collective identity of Armenians. The organisations' leaders always emphasized on the role of Sunday schools, language classes for children and adults as

the most important elements of their agendas. The language is perceived as a link to history, as an important ground for collective identity development.

However, there are some disagreements within the community in concerning the language preservation issues. The main issue arises from the fact that the language has two dimensions: Eastern and Western Armenian. Eastern Armenian is being spoken by Armenians from Armenia and Western Armenian is used by those from Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey. One of the issues in the communities is whether they should use Eastern or Western Armenian in the Sunday schools. The director of Sunday school in Almelo, stated:

"We have two teachers, one of them is specialized in Eastern Armenian and the other is specialized in Western Armenian. There are many people both from Turkey, Iraq and from Armenia. Depending on the group, we decide which dialect to teach, but in general two teachers simultaneously participate in the classes."(The head of Sunday school, Almelo).

The situation is different in "Ani" organisation (Maastricht). Here the children are being taught Eastern Armenian. The leader of the organisation explained it in a following way:

"We teach them Eastern Armenian; we want them to have one common language. This the language people speak in Armenia, therefore it is better if they know Eastern Armenia."(“Ani”, organisation leader, Maastricht).

The leaders of the organisations, who organize the Sunday schools, state that not only kids, but also adults are interested in joining the school. These are mainly Turkish or Iraqi Armenians:

The problem of sub-ethnic division exists concerning to the linguistic issue. Some of the respondents believe that Armenians from Armenia are passive in language preservation unlike the migrants from the countries other than Armenia. According to them, this is a threat to collective identity giving that the younger generation will not know Armenian,

"Armenians from Armenia never had a problem of language preservation, and now they do not realize that if they are here they can lose their language, whereas diasporic Armenians are aware of it. Iranian-Armenians have been fighting to protect their identities. Armenian Armenians do not have that experience, they think the language will automatically remain, but after two-three years they understand that their children do not understand the language. Why? Because they didn't make efforts to teach Armenian"(Armenian Revolutionary Federation, organisation leader).

They state that migrants put more effort in teaching the children Dutch language than Armenian:

"One of Armenians came and told me: "You know my child speaks perfect Dutch. " I told her, be happy if your child speaks perfect Armenian. If they have forgotten their language today, tomorrow they will forget even that they are Armenians"(“Ani”, organisation leader, Maastricht).

The other opinion about sub-ethnic division is that Turkish – Armenian generations are “in a danger of assimilation” since they do not know the language, they speak Turkish in their families and therefore their generations also will not be interested in learning Armenian:

“Mainly Turkish - Armenians do not know the language, they came in 60s, there wasn’t any Armenian school so their generations didn’t have chance to learn the language. Especially those who were born in the Netherlands or the second generation of Diasporic Armenians don’t know the language.” (“GareginNjdeh”, youth wing of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, organisation leader).

The interviews show that language is being sometimes connected with ethnic belonging and people who don’t know the language could be excluded from the Armenian diasporic community itself or at least by particular ‘leaders’:

“I have experienced that because I don’t speak Armenian they are like “oh, so you are not a real Armenian”. And if you speak Turkish they are like why you speak Turkish.. Sometimes you have really opinionated people and extreme: you have to speak, otherwise you are not Armenian.” (“AJO” youth organisation, board member, Amsterdam).

In case of youth organisations, Armenian language is not a central issue. For example, the representative of one of the youth organisations stated that when the organisations were established there were many Turkish Armenian members who didn’t know the language. Therefore, all the communication has been in Dutch, since majority of the members feel more comfortable when speaking Dutch, than Armenian.

It has to be noted that Armenian organisations do not foster the isolation of Armenian community from the Dutch context, moreover all the participants of the interview emphasized that they encourage the integration by organizing Dutch language classes: *“First step for the integration into this society is knowing Dutch language that’s why we organized the classes”*. (“United Armenians in the Netherlands», organisation leader, Nijmegen).

The key finding of this study is that the socio-cultural and historical circumstances of migration into the Netherlands shape the organisational bases and practices in a way that represents a ‘model’ of diaspora that reflects a hybrid of classical and more contemporary theories of diaspora. The Dutch Armenian diasporic community illustrates the fundamental “classic” notions of diasporas, whereby they are based on common transnational characteristics, such as the maintenance of the Armenian language, culture, religion and the common sense of belonging. However, at the same time there is no homogenous, united, unproblematic identity project. The key dynamic that clearly shows the hybridity of the diasporic characteristics is the problematic that surrounds identity maintenance. Though Armenian migrant organisations reproduce identity grounds based on classical diasporic values, they do not create Diaspora as a united group, which is described in the classical diasporic literature. In their actual strategizing and

activities around the issues of religion and language preservation, the organisations operate in a particularly exclusionary way. Since these two are the fundamentals of Armenian diasporic values, each disagreement about the identity elements creates tensions in the community. The representatives of these organisations are not open to collaborate with the religious minorities and any other religious orientation than Armenian Apostolic Church is being perceived as potential “danger” to collective identity by the majority of organisations’ leaders. The language issue is also debatable within the community, since some parts of sub-ethnic groups do not know Armenian; young people are not enthusiastic about using the language and migrants do not bring the children to the Sunday schools. My observations show that the Dutch language here acts as a homogenizing element for sub-ethnic groups, which clearly risks the maintenance of the Armenian language as a dominant identity ground in the community. This tendency hybridizes the identity elements and strongly questions the traditional and unproblematic notion of classical diaspora.

Dutch-Armenian diasporic model does not direct to the strong boundary maintenance between Armenian migrants and the host society, and it does not encourage isolation from Dutch society. One of the illustrations of this is the Dutch classes offered by the organisations.

The investigation of the Dutch Armenian diaspora shows, that while examining the contemporary forms of diaspora, among the criteria that are being applied, it should be also taken into the consideration the socio-cultural bases of the organisations and institutions which play an important role in the development of group identity in contemporary diaspora models. The key role played by the more traditional diaspora organisations, guarantee that the classical characteristic will not disappear. More likely they will take affordable new forms, localized practices that reflect the particularities of the Dutch context.

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ԳԱԼՍՅԱՆ Ն.Մ.

Անկողիում

*Տարբեր երկրներից դեպի Նիդերլանդներ ապաստանած հայ
միգրանտների պատմական և սոցիալ-մշակութային
առանձնահատկությունները դարձել են Նիդերլանդներում գործող հայ*

միգրանտների կազմակերպությունների ձևավորման հենքը: Այնտեղ հիմնված 12 հայկական կազմակերպությունների շրջանում իրականացված հետազոտությունները հնարավորություն են ընձեռում եզրակացնելու, որ հոլանդահայ համայնքի ինքնությունը համադրում է դասական և ժամանակակից սփյուռքին բնորոշ մի շարք գծեր: Այն իրավամբ հայկական սփյուռքի հիբրիդ մոդել է:

ОСПАРИВАНИЕ ОСНОВ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ НА ПРИМЕРЕ ОРГАНИЗАЦИЙ АРМЯНСКИХ МИГРАНТОВ В ГОЛЛАНДИИ

ГАЛСТЯН Н.М.

Резюме

Исторические и социально-культурные особенности обособившихся в Нидерландах армянских мигрантов стали основой формирования местных организаций армянских мигрантов.

Исследование особенностей идентичности действующих в Нидерландах 12-ти подобных организаций приводит к заключению, что национальная идентичность армянской общины в Нидерландах является собой синтез некоторых характерных черт, присущих классической и современной диаспоре, иначе говоря, это—модель некоего гибрида армянской диаспоры.