

REVISITING ARTIN IN BEIRUT: HOW ARMENIANS ARE VIEWED IN LEBANON

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Taking a taxi from Haigazian University to my house in Qoraytem, Ras Beirut, the taxi driver suspiciously asked me "You are not Armenian? When I answered positively, he replied, "How come? You speak Arabic well and you are not heading towards Bourj Hammoud", referring to that northern suburb of Beirut highly populated with Armenians. I believe the third unvoiced question which remained lurking in his mind was "You don't wear a distinct *basterma* fragrance."¹ For years, this has been the traditional way, truly or falsely, of categorizing and stereotyping the Armenian community of Lebanon. Is this image still true or have things changed today?

The purpose of this paper in the context of this conference on Arab Stereotyping is to analyze how modern Armenians are viewed by non-Armenians in Lebanon today. What are the causes for such stereotypes? How and why have they developed and how much do they reflect the true image of Armenians in Lebanon at the dawn of the 21st century.

Since the hero of most jokes on Armenians is personified by the figure of a certain Artin, the Armenian counterpart of the Lebanese Abou el-Abed, I have decided to name today's presentation as "Revisiting Artin in Beirut". To undertake this objective and unbiased study, I have proceeded to circulate a questionnaire to three hundred non-Armenians residing in Lebanon, belonging to both sexes with various social and educational backgrounds and age groups, the results and the interpretations of which I shall disclose hereunder.

However before I proceed further, I would like to refer first to a research that was recently conducted on the image of the Armenian as portrayed in the European and American literature from the 18th century onwards². In this article entitled "Harry Potter and the Proverbial Armenian Merchant", and published by the former Chair of the English Department at Haigazian University, Dr. Ingrid Leyer Semaan, the writer states that the traditional Western picture of the Armenian was invariably that of "the proverbial Armenian merchant especially the carpet dealer, *par excellence*. She adds that this Armenian who incidentally "bore little resemblance to her Armenian friends and students whom she had met in Lebanon" was physically distinguished by a "ponderous long and oval face, large, dark and deep eyes³, and a prominent "hawk-nose" labeled by anthropologists as Armenoid⁴. And since stereotyping attributes character and trait to physical appearances⁵, this eventually led to the hawk-nosed caricature of the Armenian villain in German fairytales.⁶ Furthermore, according to Semaan, this "Levantine" invariably wore a kalpak (astrakhan headdress) and betrayed an "exceeding love of money" to the point that the traveler's dictionary used the term Armenian as an epithet of 'greed.⁷ If we analyze these characteristics, we conclude that the image of the Armenian in Europe and America was made of three distinct categories: Professional, Physical and Behavioral/Character traits.

Now stereotypes are defined as "structured sets of beliefs about the characteristics of members of social categories. They influence how people attend to, encode, represent, and retrieve information about others, and how they judge and respond to them."⁸ But in simpler language, stereotypes are "*pictures in our heads*"⁹ and based on these pictures we act and plan our behavior with such people.

They unfortunately often lead to a faulty picture because the stereotype is often inaccurate and what is worse these become rigid pictures not easy to change.¹⁰

Now Like all ethnic entities, especially cultural minorities living in a metropolis, the Armenians of Lebanon, like their Irish brethren of Boston or the Poles of the Midwest and Hispanics of California, have been stereotyped in certain distinct “picture images”.

Historically, Most of the Armenians settled in Lebanon after the 1915 massacres of Turkey.¹¹ They either came straight to Lebanon as a primary choice or later in the 60’s through Syria. Today, eighty five years later, we find that the “Picture images “projected by the Armenian community do not correspond at all to the ones they generated in Europe or America. How are modern Armenian viewed in Lebanon today??

According to Zebrowitz¹², most stereotyped groups are differentiated first and foremost by their physical appearance, especially their distinct features. Interesting enough Armenians in Lebanon are not stereotyped by their physical appearance. This could be ascribed to the fact that while describing another culture, people usually tend to stress the differences and overlook the similarities¹³. Thus the Armenian being a “Levantine” with dark features, blends beautifully in the Lebanese multicultural mosaic which has a wide spectrum of types ranging from the blue eyed to the black bearded. So an Armenian does not physically stick out in a crowd in Beirut like he would have had in Manchester or Berlin. Furthermore, Armenians do not adhere to any dressing codes like saris or headgears, baggy trousers etc..(the kalpak has vanished too). So the stereotype which was the most prevalent in the west, namely the physical appearance, is absent in Lebanon.

Let us then proceed to analyze what the most predominant stereotypes of Armenians are today in Lebanon.

My study revealed that the categories collected could be summarized under the following headings:

1. Language 2. Territorial Space 3. Profession 4. Habit Traits.

1. LANGUAGE:

In this category we have twofold “accusations”: the first is that Armenians *cannot speak Arabic well and commit gender mistakes*” and the second is that *“the moment two Armenians are together, they revert to speaking Armenian to each other and alienate the others.”*

a- Let me start by the first accusation, or categorization, namely that Armenians make gender mistakes while speaking Arabic. This has led to jokes (and jokes are the most prolific vehicles for spreading stereotypes) such as Artin offering his father, rather than his mother, a present on Mother’s Day, or Artin reciting “Our Father” instead of ‘Hail Mary etc.... Now not only Armenians have become the object of such jokes, but in fact they themselves have capitalized on the “figure of the Armenian speaking Arabic” such as we encounter in the famous Théâtre de Dix Heures or other presentations. Like all stereotypes, it has now acquired the general trait of “speaking like an Armenian, i.e. making mistakes” referring to whoever speaks Arabic in a funny or incorrect manner. In short the specific characteristic of not speaking Arabic properly has now the stereotype Armenian attributed to it.¹⁴

It is certain that when one moves from one culture to another, one's first and foremost task is to acquire the host language.¹⁵ It is through mastering our communication skills that we can condition our perceptions, pattern of thinking and behavior and eventually assimilate. Why is it then that the Armenians have encountered difficulties in mastering the Arabic language?? Certainly many prominent American and Europeans betray still today traces of a lingering mother language accent, however the issue of the Armenians is not a matter of accent but rather that of structure and grammar.

Armenian is an Indo-European language, unlike the Semitic languages or other Latin languages, its grammatical structure and syntax does not carry any gender differences¹⁶. Neither the spelling nor the sentence changes when the subject or object is male or female. In fact, by simply reading or speaking one cannot detect the gender of the subject. For instance in Arabic, there is the feminine form ending in *t* and the masculine in *n* (Moannath and Muthakkar Salem). In French, 99 girls and one boy would conjugate the whole sentence in masculine. None of these apply in Armenian and therefore the Armenian mind does not seem to have the capacity to grasp this especially when it studies Arabic as a second language. In fact Kant¹⁷ or Chomsky¹⁸ would say that the structure of the Armenian mind linguistically does neither have a gender category¹⁹ nor the *initial stage*²⁰ for it. Now, the first generation of Armenian immigrants, spoke fluent Armenian and Turkish (and often another third language) and found speaking Turkish, English or French in an Ottoman Lebanon still possible methods of communication. There was not an urgent need of learning Arabic for survival and integration. Today Armenians learn Arabic (especially classical Arabic) side by side with their mother language, and these subtle differences are grasped at an early stage. However we should remember that for the Armenian, Arabic consists of two languages²¹, the spoken and the classical, and while the second has easily been mastered by deputies and TV speakers²², the first still remains a bone of contention and as mentioned above is the most potent stereotype against Armenians in Lebanon.

B- Armenians always speak Armenian to each other.

Another problem with Armenians is that they usually speak Armenian in the presence of non-Armenians, which creates a reverse sense of alienation rendering thus the native the Other and the outsider. I shall elaborate this point more while discussing the territorial aspect.

However let me say that this accusation should be taken on a lighter note. All ethnic groups revert to their mother languages whenever they are alone. One can hear on a French metro, Farsi, Greek, Arabic, Japanese spoken by resident citizens of France. One feels comfortable in one's language and seems pretentious when one communicates with one's own in a different language. Though, I guess that when we see nowadays all the youth of the world chatting on the computer in their unique slang, I suspect these problems will soon belong to bygone ages.

2- TERRITORIAL SPACE

The second stereotype is that Armenians are all from Bourj Hammoud and Ainjar.

When at the turn of the century, Armenians first came as refugees to Lebanon, they settled in camps in the northern suburbs of Dora and Bourj Hammoud or were installed by the French in Ainjar in the

Beqaa. This demographical grouping localized in definite geographical/territorial spaces led to two important realities:

- 1- Creating a sense of security among Armenians feeling “at peace in a land among loved ones and familiar faces” similar to ecological and natural habitats.
- 2- Creating a sense of alienation from others with a tendency of “retribalizing”²³ into clannish, ghetto-like milieus complete with exclusive church, school, shops and market place. A life style where sometimes one could spend an entire existence without being exposed to any “outsiders”. Now this was previously normal and understood for “traumatized groups to be inclined to reconnect with family, home and community for security and shelter”²⁴.

However this has changed tremendously in post-war Lebanon, for the large emigration of Armenians from Lebanon, and the establishment of Little Armenias in Hollywood and Canada has largely altered the demographic image of Bourj Hammoud and Ainjar.

Furthermore, Armenians have followed the general trend of Beirutis and moved into the suburbs leading thus the “cities to be ruralized and the countryside to become urbanized.”²⁵ So today Armenians although still a close community live everywhere in Beirut, send their children to all kinds of schools including the public schools. Yet the instinct of nestling together still prevails. Since language has always been considered by ethnic entities as the outside signs of cultural and national survival²⁶, whenever Armenians get together, they immediately revert to their mother language.

3- Professional /Skill Stereotyping

We have seen above how for centuries the Armenians were known throughout the world as the proverbial merchant, or the carpet dealer going from village to city and selling rugs.

Although many Lebanese Armenians boast of their highly prestigious carpet stores yet compared to other prominent Persian dealers, they do not seem to have the exclusivity of this profession. When asked to associate Armenians with a profession an interesting revelation was made by this study. The category of participants belonging to the age groups 40-65 attributed different professional stereotypes to Armenians than those belonging to the age groups extending between age groups 20-40.

In the first category, i.e for the older group which was more the product of the picture images of the 60's and 70's, the Armenians were either invariably associated with the Medical corps (Doctors, Nurses, Dentists, Pharmacists) or with skilled artisanship such as tailors and photographers.

Whereas the younger group categorized the Armenians in Lebanon with the following two professions: music and jewelry. Although not all Armenians were necessarily musicians and jewelers, there seemed to be a consensus however that if you were a piano teacher or a skilled goldsmith, the odds were almost certain that you were of Armenian descent.

One final category that all age groups attributed to Armenians in the professional/skills category was in sports. It was taken for granted that if an Armenian was engaged in sports then definitely he/she belonged to one of the following clubs: Antranig or Homentmen.

What were the political, social implications of these were totally unclear and it remained that these groups were simply strong opponents who challenged the local teams of Nijmeh and Hikmeh.

4. Habit/Trait Stereotyping

In 1933 Katz and Bradley attributed adjectives to students to match with ethnic groups. There was a **consensus** in most of the answers that the English were sportsman, Germans industrialists, French good lovers etc... When this survey was conducted on Armenians in Lebanon, I was curious to find whether such consensus could be reached

concerning certain Armenian characteristic traits. The results were disappointing or rather encouraging I should say. Since stereotypes are heuristics²⁷ and they allow the wetware in our heads to reduce the search, I was concerned that my results would not be true and realistic. However one fact remained clear: not one epithet scored more than 10%. Armenians were classified as hard workers, active, aggressive, boring, defensive, dedicated, educated, opiniated, organized, religious and the list went on... but no specific predominant traits could be drawn. In short, the Armenians in Lebanon were described exactly as one would describe any group in any community. Such generalizations could only indicate that either Armenians in Lebanon have stopped being different from the local Lebanese or that they themselves have so much internal variations that it is impossible to group them under one trait or epithet. In short, to describe one of “behaving as an Armenian” does neither bear any pejorative connotation nor points to specific character traits any more.

However this does not mean that there did not exist certain habits, rituals or feasts exclusively attributed to Armenians but these were also very vague and unclear. Some knew that Armenians had political parties that always voted pro-government but not one could remember their specific names or ideologies. Others remembered that Armenians commemorated something on April 24, but were not certain whether this was the Armenian Genocide or St. Vartan. One thing was clear however that they had demonstrations on this day and caused lots of traffic jam. Finally a small group thought that since Armenians were a secluded group and liked to be alone, they therefore opted to celebrate Xmas on the 6th of January to avoid being with others.

A final comment on the eating habits of Armenians were statements like “Although Armenians are supposed to eat Basterma and Sujuk, yet very few of them still eat these spiced delicacies today”.

So if some of these derogatory stereotypes²⁸ are faulty judgments leading to inaccurate thinking, why do people still maintain them? Probably because they are a feature of frustration²⁹ and aggression and someone who may not succeed or feels frustrated uses the other as a *scapegoat - especially if it is a weaker ethnic group*.³⁰ Stereotypes are also maintained if the party that holds them is more authoritarian³¹ or sees in the other as an inter group competition or a threat.³² However we have seen today that the image of the Armenian has largely altered from the 19th century Western image to that prevalent in Lebanon and even locally had developed tremendously. Cultures are continually evolving and although the current image of the Armenian in Lebanon is still that of the popular Artin who uses faulty Arabic, resides in Bourj Hammoud, works as a goldsmith, occasionally eats basterma and has the benefit of extra vacations more than the average Lebanese, I personally think that a time will come in the near future when Lebanese Armenians will only be differentiated from their non-Armenian neighbors simply by their names ending in “*ian*.” There are no strong character/trait stereotypes attached to the group and to label one as Armenian neither bears a pejorative nor any complimentary connotations. Will that eventually put an end to all stereotyping? I doubt because stereotypes are motivational and give humans a chance to maintain their prejudice.³³ and therefore, they will for better or worse continue, and based on input from their environment, they will supply and nourish the Artins and Aboul el Abeds of our communities who will continue to prosper, flourish and play havoc with our lives.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Basterma is a spicy preserved meat delicacy which leaves a pungent aroma behind.
- ² Semaan, Ingrid Leyer, "*Harry Potter and the Proverbial Armenian Merchant*", *Haigazian Armenological Review*, vol. 20, Beirut 2000, pp. 395-429
- ³ Tozer, Henry Fanshawe, *Turkish Armenia and Eastern Asia Minor* (London 1881 p. 228)
- ⁴ Earnest A. Hooton, *Up from the Ape*. N.Y, Macmillan, 1946.
- ⁵ Leslie A. Zebrowitz "*Physical Appearance as a Basis of Stereotyping*" in *Stereotypes and Stereotyping*. Purdue University, 1996, p.79-120.
- ⁶ Semaan, p. 415
- ⁷ Murray, John , *A Handbook for Travellers in Syria and Palestine* (London 1858), p. xxxix
- ⁸ Neil C. Macrae, Charles Stangor, and Miles Hewstone, *Stereotypes and Stereotyping*, Purdue University, 1996, p. 3
- ⁹ W. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, New York: Macmillan, 1922 p. 81
- ¹⁰ Perry R. Hinton, *Stereotypes, Cognition and Culture* . Taylor and Francis, 2000, p..9
- ¹¹ As early as the 12th c. Armenian princesses from the Kingdom of Cilicia are said to have wed crusader princes of Lebanon and settled in Sidon, Byblos and Tripoli. Cf. Anoushavan A. Ebeyan, *Les Princesses arméniennes du Liban (1187-1291)*, Imprimerie Chirak, Beyrouth, 1997
- ¹² Zebrowitz, pp.79-120.
- ¹³ Hinton, p.8
- ¹⁴ Hinton, pp. 8-10
- ¹⁵ Gudykunst, William B. and Young, Yun King, *Communicating with Strangers, An Approach to Intercultural Communication*. Random House, N.Y, 1984, p147
- ¹⁶ For a detailed study of this issue see, John J. Salmanian, "*The problems Armenian Students face in learning Arabic in Lebanon and ways of resolving these issues*". (Arabic) MA Thesis, AUB 1979.
- ¹⁷ Kant, Immanuel ,*Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, Liberal Arts press, 1950.
- ¹⁸ Chomsky, Naom, *Syntactic Structures*. Mouton & Co, The Hague, 1957
- ¹⁹ Kant, pp. 50-51
- ²⁰ Chomsky, p.19
- ²¹ Salmanian, p.56
- ²² The late Me. Khatchig Babigian was renowned for his excellent and fluent Arabic.
- ²³ Khalaf, S., *Beirut Reclaimed*, Dar an Nahar, Beirut, 1993
- ²⁴ Khalaf, p. 153
- ²⁵ Khalaf, p. 119
- ²⁶ Eriksen, Thomas H., *Ethnicity and Nationalism, Anthropological Perspectives*, Pluto Press, London, 1993
- ²⁷ Hinton, p.13
- ²⁸ Katz,D and Braly K.W, "*Racial prejudice and racial stereotypes*" *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 30, 1933. p. 175-193
- ²⁹ Dollard, J., Doob, L.W. , Miller , Jr., N.E, Mowrer, O.H. and Sears, R.R., *Frustration and Aggression*. New Haven,Conn.: Yale University Press, 1939.
- ³⁰ Secord, P.F. and Backman, C.W., *Social Psychology*, 2nd ed. Tokyo: McGraw-Hill. 1974,
- ³¹ Adorno T.W., Frenkel-Brunswick E, E., Levison, D.J. and Stanford, R.N., *The Authoritarian Personality* , New York: Harper & Row, 1950.
- ³² Sherif, M., *In Common Predicament: social psychology of intergroup conflict and cooperation*. Boston, Mass: Houghton Mifflin, 1966.
- ³³ Hinton, p. 14