Dreaming of the mountain, longing for the sea, living with floating roots: diasporic 'return' migration in post-Soviet Armenia

By Nanor Karageozian

Oscillating sense of belonging

For 50-year-old Sanan,[1] an ethnic Armenian born and raised in Lebanon, living in Armenia was 'a dream' since she was a teenager. She realised her aspiration in 1997. I interviewed her in March 2013 in her Yerevan apartment as part of my DPhil fieldwork on diasporic 'return' migration. Her voice was filled with immense euphoria as she described how, 16 years after having settled in this landlocked country, she still reveled every morning in the view of Mount Ararat[2] from her living room window. At the same time, Sanan missed the sea, reminiscing about the Mediterranean coast where she had grown up. 'When Ararat is covered by fog, I sometimes feel the sea is behind it', she explained – an optical illusion of which she was fully aware.

My thesis examines the self-initiated immigration to, and long-term settlement in, post-Soviet Armenia by Armenian diasporans, mostly from well-established Armenian communities in Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Canada and the US. I observed ambivalent emotions like Sanan's among many other 'returnees'.[3] This oscillating sense of belonging, is one of the significant patterns that returnees adopt to (re-)assess and/or (re)define their identities and sense of belonging in Armenia. In this pattern, *both the returnees' new environment and the old one feel like home* in one way or another – sometimes concurrently and at other times interchangeably. After having lived in Armenia for over 12 years, Ishkhan, another returnee from Lebanon, said he identified himself with both *hayastantsis* (Armenians from Armenia) and diasporan Armenians. 'But I don't feel I understand any of them 100 per cent…

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I'm actually in the middle', he added.

Such an ambivalent experience resembles that of second-generation American- and German-Greek returnees to Greece, for whom return seems 'to hover uncertainly between the closure of a definitive return "home" on the one hand, and an expression of ongoing transnational identity on the other' (King and Christou 2010). For some of my research participants, this ambivalence is an unexpected, and even discomforting, experience. While living in the diaspora as Armenians, they had often felt as strangers in a non-Armenian majority environment. By leaving their physical diasporic existence behind, they expected to find an anchor in Armenia, a place where they could feel they fully belonged. Experiencing a sense of alienation again, this time in the homeland, is thus unanticipated. This time, the feeling of being 'others' or *odars* (strangers) is in the form of a contrast to or differentiation from 'local' Armenians. At the same time, however, a certain level of disconnect from the Armenian diaspora is also manifested among many returnees.

Staying in Yerevan for fieldwork brought me face-to-face with some of these ambivalent feelings not only among my research participants but also within me. As a diasporan Armenian myself – born in Lebanon, raised in Greece, and currently living in Lebanon again – I became to a certain extent a 'returnee' myself, albeit temporarily. On the one hand, I was a resident of Yerevan who did not completely understand and was even somehow critical of the diasporan tourists who complained about dirty building entrances or the perceived unfriendly treatment of local restaurant waiters. On the other hand, I was sometimes the romantic diasporan who was trying almost daily to gaze at Mount Ararat from the window of my rented apartment – like Sanan and others – admiring its daunting beauty and sending its photographs to family and friends 'back home'. While in Armenia, I often felt an inexplicable sense of comfort, also described by several of my participants. However, a feeling of foreignness was also sometimes present, when hearing, for example, my otherwise very hospitable neighbour say that the Armenian spelling I use is 'wrong'.[4]

A more complex identity

For other returnees, identity and belonging demonstrate a more

A view of Mount Ararat from the Yerevan apartment where I stayed during fieldwork. ©Nanor Karageozian

multifarious and looser pattern than the duality felt by Sanan and others like her. Following a pattern of belonging that I call cosmopolitan floating, such returnees feel that *home is everywhere*. They embrace a cosmopolitan or globalised identity, of which Armenianness however remains a quite important part. Members of this relatively smaller group have some sort of emotional or subjective attachment both to Armenia, as a country which is an essential

element of their heritage, and to their pre-return society, as a key part of their upbringing and past. Nevertheless, they have neither a strong feeling of anchoring or grounding toward a specific place nor a sense of identity with a particular 'group'. They argue they feel comfortable living anywhere, building a home wherever they want or choose to, and changing homes, if and when needed or desired, without facing many major difficulties. Thus, they usually view positively the ability to straddle two or multiple cultural worlds and identities; rootlessness is celebrated.

This fluid and multi-local conception of home and homeland abounds especially among younger returnees who hail from culturally diverse societies in North America. It is in line with the 'hybrid identity' of diasporan Armenians from Western communities that Panossian describes. Such diasporans 'can have more than one "homeland" which can alternate between, or simultaneously be, the *host*-land, the current home-*land*, the *ancestral*-land, or the diaspora condition itself as *home*-land' (Panossian 2005). This trend is also related to the 'Armenian diaspora's shift from exilic nationalism to diasporic transnationalism' (Tölölyan 2000).

Zaven (31) and his wife Armik (29), born in California and Toronto, respectively, aptly illustrate this pattern. Before moving to Armenia, they had studied and lived in several North American and European cities. Their parents also came from different backgrounds; they had immigrated independently to North America from Syria, Lebanon and Iran in the 1960s–1970s. Zaven feels 'comfortable' wherever he goes. 'That's one of the things that as a diasporan you get used to: not really having a home, and then everywhere is your home', he told me. His wife shared the same view, elaborating it as follows:

Diasporan identity is [often] seen as a negative thing, where you don't quite belong here or there, and you're kind of in between. But in my experience, it has always been a positive thing. I have this sense of movement in me and of not feeling attached to a specific place. That's sort of engraved [in me].

Traces of diverse cultures amorphously appear in the daily lives and interactions of such returnees. For instance, while many of them are

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comfortable communicating primarily in English, their language often includes an amalgamation of Western and Eastern Armenian,[5] as well as other foreign words (such as from Arabic and Russian). Their outlook on the future is also quite flexible. Some know that their sojourn in Armenia is only temporary. Others remain undecided – a situation that they do not regard as too unsettling. Although many of them are eager to raise children in Armenia, they usually make concerted efforts to 'keep them open to the world'. They take them on frequent trips, and some even encourage their education abroad, perhaps to return to Armenia later. How will the identities of these and other returnees develop over time, whether they stay in Armenia or not? This, and what the future holds for the second generation, are topics for further research.

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Endnotes

1. Throughout this essay, pseudonyms have been used to protect the research participants' privacy.
2. This mountain, where, according to the Bible, Noah's Ark landed, has symbolic value for Armenians. Since 1920, it is in present-day Turkey, but can be seen clearly from Yerevan.
3. The use of the term 'return' in this case is to some extent problematic in the narrow, personal sense, especially because the ancestors of most of the diasporan returnees that I interviewed were not born in the territory of the present Republic of Armenia. They were from the Armenian provinces of the Ottoman Empire (now in eastern Turkey), the region of Cilicia (south-eastern coast of present-day Turkey), or, in the case of most Iranian-Armenians, the area of Nakhijevan (now an exclave of Azerbaijan). To the diasporan returnees, the present Republic of Armenia is only part of their much bigger geographical homeland, the cradle of Armenian civilisation, which is governed today by ethnic Armenians, and where the Armenian language and culture prevail. This fact, along with other characteristics, makes the Armenian case interesting to explore in its own right.
4. Like many diasporan Armenians, I use the classical Armenian orthography, and not the simplified version adopted in Armenia during an orthography reform first devised by the Soviets in 1922 and partially revised in 1940.
5. Armenians from Armenia (whether they live in the country or have emigrated) use the Eastern Armenian dialect. Western Armenian is mostly used by diasporan Armenians in long-established communities, with the exception of Iranian- and the smaller in number Indian-Armenians. The differences in the two branches of Armenian go back to the parallel development of two slightly different but mutually intelligible vernacular languages among the Armenians of the Russian and Ottoman empires in the nineteenth century.

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