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Aghasi Tadevosyan

Yerevan State University, Armenia

Alina Poghosyan

Armenian National Academy of Sciences, Armenia

Boundary, Diffusion and Transculture in the Everyday Life of Armenians in Switzerland

Abstract

In some cases transculturation is manifested in the coming together of Armenian and Swiss cultures and their smooth diffusion. Such a kind of transculturation gives birth to a new habitus – a hybrid, who adopts cultural elements of both Armenian and Swiss cultures. Hybrids are mostly represented in the Old Flow. Armenians from this flow, owing to their longer residence in Switzerland, are more capable of interpreting both Armenian and Swiss cultures and reacting in both contexts. This contributes to the mutual complementation of Armenian and Swiss cultures, rather than to their confrontation. The transculture inherent to the Old Flow more or less defines the practices whereby each cultural code (either Armenian or Swiss) should be used.

In contrast to the Old Flow, the New Flow generally demonstrates a form of transculture which does not stably grasp the cultural elements of both cultures, but is in a process of continuous change and reconsideration. It is not shaped on the boundary line of converging Armenian and Swiss cultures, but it is in-between these boundaries. The space “in-between” the cultures of the home and receiving country are in a lasting conflict. Often differences between the key interpretative codes of Armenian and Swiss cultures hamper negotiations between the two cultures, stress the boundaries between the cultures and even cause conflicts on the boundaries, rather than diffusion and mutual complementation.

Besides the dissimilarities, the transculturation practices of the Old and New Flows have similarities as well. The transcultures of both flows are quite nonsymmetrical: they do not combine Armenian and Swiss cultures in all spheres of life equally. In some cultural aspects of public life Swiss culture has been assimilated intensively, while in the religious, communal and family spheres Armenian culture dominates. Both the Old and New Flows make much effort to maintain some ethno-cultural codes of Armenian culture, most of which have a symbolic character.

Key words: transculturalism, migration, Armenian, hybridity, boundary, cultural capital

Introduction

Nearly twice more Armenians live outside of Armenia than in the country itself. The existence of a large Armenian diaspora has always kept the debates and studies on it alive. There is a number of pieces of research on the Armenian diaspora. They mainly address the historical and cultural aspects of the issue (Dyatlov, Malkonyan 2009; Barkhudaryan, Zaven 1996; Grigoryan 1980; Mirak 1983). The main scope of the studies encompasses discussions on the communal life within the diaspora (Atamian 1955; Bakalian 1993; Ananyan, Khachatryan 1993), the organization

and activities of educational, religious and other institutions, their role in ethnicity protection, etc. (Bedolyan 1979; Zakian 1998). However, the matters of everyday life within the diaspora, its transformations, manifestations of national/ethnic and transnational aspects, factors influencing either national/ethnic or transnational features are less referred to. Global changes in the last 20 years, the intensification of people movements and migration flows have changed the sights on many national and cultural issues. Questions of cultural and identity bordering, multiculturalism and transculturalism have been brought to the forefront.

The current article concerns Armenians living in Switzerland. It tries to uncover new dimensions in Armenian diaspora studies by referring to features of its everyday life, as well as raising new issues like the bordering of cultures, cultural diffusion, transculturation, the role of cultural capital in that processes, etc.

Transnationalism is another notion, which is currently in vogue within diaspora and migration studies. Though containing various interpretations, it generally refers to phenomena encompassing more than one nation/society/state, a migrant's everyday life practices and the activities of institutions running on both sides of the boundaries between two nations/societies/states (Vertovec 2009; Al-Ali, Koser 2002; Faist 2000).

The notion of transnationalism widely spread in diaspora and migration studies came with the joint publication of the article "Methodological nationalism and beyond: creation of a national state, migration and social sciences" by the social anthropologists Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (William, Schiller 2002). The article criticizes the common unspoken agreement about the fact that nations/states/societies are natural and sustainable phenomena, which are protected by clear borders and those borders condition the protectiveness, solidarity, culture of the nation/state/society and all the other planes of its existence. By criticizing methodological nationalism and the perception of the existence of clear and unbreakable boundaries between societies, the authors mention phenomena which are able to and do overpass the boundaries.

Though the idea has gathered many adherents and the notion of transnationalism obtained intensive circulation in some academic circles dealing with migration issues, it has met with some hesitation and mistrust as well (Kivisto 2001; Fitzgerald 2002; Waldinger, Fitzgerald 2004). In particular one can hardly neglect the aspects of the phenomenon related to international law, where the state boundaries are not only admitted, but their unchangeable existence is even protected through the principle of territorial integrity.

The term transnationalism is disputable and ambiguous itself. To state the possibility of crossing and passing over the national boundaries, it, however, emphasizes their existence – transNATIONALISM.

The content of the notion justifies itself only in cases where it follows the imperatives of its wordy form. The phenomenon referring to the existence of boundaries and their passing over is more unambiguously and undoubtedly accepted as manifestation of transnationalism, e.g. dual citizenship, world communication, international trade and other forms of international capital circulation, exterritor-

ial organizations, etc. Concerning all these phenomena, the notion transnationalism comes not to question the existence of boundaries, but to cross them.

The idea of transnationalism loses its unambiguousness when referring to culture and identity. These are the phenomena which can hardly have definite lined boundaries to be passed over. Culture and identity do not match with nation. So in cultural and identity dimensions the notion of transnationalism should be substituted with transculturalism to allow the discussed phenomena to receive other reflections. The idea of transculturalism and transculturation suggests new insights and new angles, raises new questions.

Transculturalism is an ambiguous term too. It is generally used in various senses. Transculturalism refers both to the culture, which originates from a mixture of cultures, and to its possessor. The latter is named differently: hybrids, cosmopolite, métissage, transnational people, etc. However, regardless of the terms used for them, they are generally described as people who possess more than one culture and whose identity is not one-dimensional, but multiple (Ortiz 1990; Marti 1980; Said 1990; Bhabha 1994). Those who identify transculturalism with culture rather than its possessor sometimes mention its universal interpretation by both of the converging societies. In that case transculturalism is identified with universalias (Nielsen 1995). However, within the frame of diaspora and migration studies, transculturalism is generally seen only to concern migrants' culture and not their practice as the locals.

In some contemporary debates transculturalism appears to delineate a new form of humanism (Cuccioletta 2002), which refutes the idea of a purity of culture, but discusses its changeability, transformations, mixings, hybridization, etc. As Homi Bhabha argues, "all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity" (Rutherford 1990, p. 211). This discourse is based on the rejection of the essentialistic perception of any culture and adoration of its purity and legitimizes and sets great store by the existence of the Other.

In this article we are not trying to dot all the "i's" and cross all the "t's", but we strive to introduce new questions and new thoughts. How is transculture formed? Is it a smooth process or is it shaped through conflicts? Do the representatives of one (nominal) nation in the same host country practice a single transculture, or do they contribute to the formation of various transcultures? What influences the negotiation of cultures and their mixed adoption by an individual?

The current article aims to discuss these issues. By the example of Armenians living in Switzerland the article strives to demonstrate how culture is transformed through diffusion and how the boundaries between Armenian and Swiss cultures are passed over.

Observations and interviews with Armenians in Switzerland (conducted in May and June 2011) have provided the evidence used for the analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of various migration inflows. Participant observation of their everyday life and some communal events helped us to come to some conclusions concerning cultural transformations, manifestations of transcultures, transcultural practices, etc.

Armenians in Switzerland: a Brief Overview

Currently nearly 3000 Armenians live in Switzerland, mostly in Bern, Zurich, Geneva, Lausanne and other cities of the country. Armenian mass migration to Switzerland started mostly in the 17th century. They were mainly traders, who arrived from the neighbouring countries – France and Germany. Inflows of Armenians to Switzerland increased at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. In 1915 the genocide of Armenians within the Ottoman Empire instigated new flows. Massacres and the deportation of the Armenian population made them flee to various countries and to Switzerland in particular. Switzerland greatly supported Armenians who managed to escape from the Ottoman Empire. In 1922 even an orphanage was established for the children who lost their parents as a result of the genocide. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century besides the survivors of the genocide Switzerland accepted a number of students for university education. The Armenian population of that period further established public organizations, unions, publishing houses, etc. (Ayvazyan 2003).

Besides those Armenians, who have lived in Switzerland for many decades, there is another group of Armenian migrants who left for Switzerland after the collapse of the Soviet Union (further conditionally called the New Flow). The Old Flow represents the second and the third generation of migrants, while the New Flow represents mostly migrants of the 1st and 1.5 generations. There are crucial differences between the Old and New Flows, which are manifested in their everyday life and transcultural practices. Some of the differences are grounded in the historical and ethno-cultural backgrounds of the groups, but there are also differences which are witnessed in post-migration practices – at the level of integration, comprehension and interpretation of the local culture, etc.

The Old Flow mostly consists of Armenians from Western Armenia, which was under Ottoman rule. The New Flow mostly consists of Armenians from Eastern Armenia, which mostly corresponds to present-day Armenia. Up to the beginning of the 19th century, Eastern Armenia was under the rule of Iran. Afterwards, as a result of Russian victory in the Russo-Persian war of 1828, it was incorporated within the Russian Empire. In 1920 East Armenia was ceded to Soviet Russia and remained under the control of the Soviet Empire for nearly 70 years. In 1991 Soviet Armenia declared its independence from the Soviet Union.

Coming from various historical and cultural regions the Old and New Flows vary in their cultural backgrounds. They speak different dialects of Armenian. If the Old Flow speaks Western Armenian, the New Flow speaks Eastern Armenian. The cultural background of the New Flow was influenced by 200 years of Russian imperialism and especially by 70-year-long Soviet traditions. The Soviet layers manifested in the culture of the New Flow are quite alien to the Old Flow. Besides, passing through other countries until finally arriving in Switzerland, the culture of the Old Flow has been enriched with various transcultures.

Another difference between the Flows concerns the reasons that made them leave their homes. The Old Flow was pushed by genocide and the loss of their homeland. This consequence influences their common ethnic consciousness up to now

and stimulates their unification in various diaspora institutions. The New Flow was pushed mainly by socio-economic reasons. After the independence in 1991 post-Soviet transition was accompanied by the Armenian-Azerbaijani war, economic crises, a blockade of major transportation routes for oil, gas and other products, which caused a lack of electricity, heating, food shortages, scarce public transport, etc. During that period nearly 1.5 million people left Armenia seeking a better life abroad. Nearly 10–15% of them left for various European countries (SMS, Return) and Switzerland in particular. European countries especially attracted asylum seekers.

The Flows vary in their post-migration practices as well. The Old Flow has traditions of communal life and the experience of self-organization in diaspora institutions. Some features of such kind of practices are quite alien to the New Flow. Representing mainly the 2nd and the 3rd generation of migrants, the Old Flow is more embedded in Swiss society than the comparably recently arrived New Flow.

The mentioned differences lead one to the conclusion that the Old and New Flows are mostly connected within the ethnic rather than the cultural community. Belief in the same homeland of the same ancestry and the same Gregorian religion are the factors conditioning the ethnic community of all Armenians in Switzerland (and in the world). However, everyday life and cultural features of the two Flows are quite different.

Both similarities and differences between the ethno-cultural backgrounds of the two flows cause quite specific ways of bordering with Swiss mainstream culture.

The Specifics of the Transcultures of the Old and New Flows

There is a big gap between the Old and New Flows. Relations between the Flows include limited aspects and are quite cold. This is witnessed both in everyday communication and during festival events. The distant relations are mostly conditioned by the differences between the Flows.

As it was mentioned above, besides historical differences there is a number of cultural varieties witnessed in everyday lives of both Flows, e.g. style of dressing, everyday and festival cuisine, family upbringing strategies, rules of etiquette, etc. Though during some community holidays both Flows organize joint events, even at such times one can witness differences and the distance between the Flows. For example, during parties they often sit at different tables. Armenians representing the Old Flows use to drink wine, while the New Flow vodka. If the New Flow prefers Soviet Armenian working-class music (as Armenian music), the Old Flow prefers folk songs and dances.

Though having quite different complexes of Armenian culture, the Old and New Flows demonstrate some similarities in cultural diffusion and transculturation practices. The transcultures of both Flows are quite nonsymmetrical: they do not combine Armenian and Swiss cultures in all spheres of life equally, but in some spheres they prefer Armenian, while in other – Swiss. In the cultural aspects of public life diffusion between Armenian and Swiss culture is more intensive. Swiss culture is being internalized and practiced easier and more frequently, while in the

religious, communal and family sphere of life mainly Armenian culture is practiced. Particularly relations between children and parents are mostly based on Armenian tradition, e.g. children are for longer period attached to their parents, they are accustomed to discuss their personal lives (for example their marriage) with parents and in some aspects to submit it for their approval, etc. Relations between spouses, the stereotypes conditioning them, gender role division, etc. are also different from those of Swiss culture.

Both Flows make much effort to maintain certain ethno-cultural codes (related especially to their origin) and transmit these to younger generations (through various events and projects organized by diaspora institutions). Most of those ethno-cultural codes are symbolic in character and are a symbolic manifestation within cultural practices. These mainly refer to the ethnic myths, traditions, narratives about “*ergir*” – the lost homeland of their ancestors, the unique Gregorian rite, language, religious songs, poetry, etc. The symbolic character of many ethno-cultural codes presents another noteworthy feature of transculturalism among Armenians in Switzerland.

Beside similarities, dissimilarities are also witnessed in the transculturation practices of the Old and New Flows.

Due to longer residence in Switzerland, a sense of being more embedded in Swiss society as well as stronger and greater links with it, the Old Flow has adopted and practices Swiss culture more ably than many representatives of the New Flow. In addition to family upbringing they have received a formal education within the academic and cultural institutions of Switzerland. They have attended Swiss pre-schools, schools, colleges, universities, theatres, museums, festivals and other institutions and events, which have crucially influenced their socialization as well as cultural and social capital accumulation. Their cultural capital involves codes significant for an interpretation of both Armenian and Swiss cultures and which enable them to react in both contexts. This is quite a new quality and form of cultural capital, which contributes to the mutual complementation of Armenian and Swiss cultures, rather than their confrontation. Transculture inherent to the Old Flow more or less defines practices where each cultural code (either Armenian or Swiss) should be used. In the street, at work, in civil life one can hardly differentiate Armenians of the Old Flow from Swiss people, however, after returning home most of them turn to Armenianness – start talking in Armenian, listening to Armenian music, or simply keep Armenian books on their shelves. Such a form of transculturation demonstrates multiculturalism at the individual level. It results in integration with Swiss society and in a simultaneous preservation of national characteristics. The Old Flow maintains and practices some ethnic characteristics, but these do not make obstacles for understanding, interpretation, involvement and participation in Swiss reality.

Transculturation among the New Flow presents another picture. The New Flow, consisting mostly of the first and 1.5 generation is still in the process of adopting Swiss culture. Having been raised and educated in another culture, they are still in the process of the cognition of cultural codes important for a sufficient understanding and interpretation of the culture, civil practices, political and economic relations

within Switzerland. Using the codes of Armenian culture for their interpretation of Swiss reality, they sometimes demonstrate unbecoming behaviour. Often differences between key interpretative codes of Armenian (especially its specifics inherent to the New Flow) and Swiss culture – e.g. group vs. individualistic, conservative vs. modern – hamper negotiations between the two cultures, stress boundaries between them, even cause conflicts, rather than diffusion and mutual complementation of cultures. In such a situation some cultural elements are not adopted, but treated as odd, negative and even threatening. For example, as one of our interlocutors stated, she would experience a huge tragedy, if her son brought his girlfriend home to be intimate. Often, especially in the initial phases of life and adaptation within the new society, many Armenians try to recreate Armenian practices in Switzerland. For example, they continue the tradition of the collective drinking of eastern coffee in the morning. Though eastern coffee is not used among Swiss people, Armenians manage to find it and every morning to drink it with neighbours, discussing some themes and sometimes taking shots in the dark: a practice which is perceived as quite odd by Swiss mainstream culture.

Another feature peculiar to the transculturation of the New Flow is its current process of formation, which is influenced by the conflicts between the first and the 1.5/second generation of migrants. The latter, being involved in the educational institutions of Switzerland, are more intensively acculturated in the new culture. Children and young people assimilate the interpretative codes of Swiss culture faster than their parents. They often introduce into the everyday life of their families new cultural practices, which are often strange for their parents. So migrants' children help Armenian and Swiss culture to converge, they negotiate between them (though often in the form of conflicts) and diffuse. In addition migrants' children contribute to their parents' cultural adaptation and integration, as well as to the extinction of bold boundary lines between Armenian and Swiss culture.

Transcultures at and in-between Boundaries

Migrants make two different cultures meet. Elements of two various cultures can coexist in a single person – a migrant. This results in the birth of quite a new habitus – a hybrid who is able to understand and experience two different worlds. However, the convergence of cultures is not always a smooth process. Before “coming closer” and coexisting in a single person, cultures maintain strong boundaries claiming their steadiness, create a gap between themselves and become conflicting. One needs to overpass the distance *in-between the boundaries* first to make cultures closer, then to help diffusion *at the boundary*.

Diffusion and transculture at a boundary give birth to hybrids. For years hybrids were referred to in negative hues both within academic and public circles. Particularly within the frame of the colonial discourse they were treated as a mixture, who have no certain culture and origin. Up to now the notion “marginal”, which literally refers to existence on the boundary, is used in some circles in a negative sense – a mixture, which is neither this (on the one side of the boundary) nor that

(on the other side of the boundary), deviation from both, deformation, odd and un-recognized by both.

The view on hybrids critically changed in postcolonial discourse. They were no longer estimated as “neither this, nor that”, but “both this and that”. Hybrids started being regarded as people who possess more abundant cultural capital, have a more flexible world view, can be involved in more social communications, since they are able to understand and act in two cultural contexts. They are familiar with the codes which are important for an interpretation of both cultures. So they do not “translate” one culture into another, but understand both of them. To “translate” would mean to identify an element of another culture to a resembling element of one’s own culture: something that results in the colonization of one culture by another. In the frame of postcolonial discourse hybrids are endowed with the role of being a mediator between two cultures, who can bridge them, transmit, reconcile and negotiate.

Among Armenians in Switzerland one can more often meet hybrids in the Old Flow rather than in the New Flow. Migrants of the New Flow generally demonstrate a cultural layer, which rises not on the boundary line of approaching Armenian and Swiss cultures and grasping the cultural elements from both of them, but is somewhere in-between the boundaries. In referring to the culture “in-between”, Homi Bhabha, one of the prominent theorists of the issue, states: “For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the «Third Space», which enables other positions to emerge” (Rutherford 1990, p. 211). However, in case of the New Flow of Armenians the space “in-between” supposes a third, new possibility, but appears in fact to be a space of changes, conflicts and hesitations.

The space in-between the boundaries is a space of permanent changes. Every moment is liable to be “filled” either with Armenian or with Swiss culture. This is a space where the cultures of home or receiving countries are in permanent conflict. Depending on various factors and circumstances the dominance of one culture is substituted by that of the other. Instability and changeableness are the most typical characteristics of this space. Because of them many aspects of everyday life of the New Flow are observed and witnessed with some difficulty. They are very disputable and ambiguous. The instability and changeableness of the space “in-between” are manifested in the ambivalent attitudes of many representatives of the New Flow towards “what is true” and “what is false”, old and new, etc. The space “in-between” continuously feeds suspicion and hesitation and provokes choice. Time yet again instigates migrants to reflect, weigh up and rethink their own personality and life. This space raises ambivalent attitudes in the New Flow towards Armenia and their homeland as well: a sense of guilt for leaving the homeland, endeavor for self-justification, home-sickness and aspiration for Armenia and a negative appraisal of it simultaneously.

Among the New Flow one can often hear talks about how life in Armenia is “unbearable”. “[...] They [generally referring to the government] made people become vagrant”. Migrants often discuss the social and economic situation in Armenia. They talk about their visits to Armenia, from where most of them return with unpleasant impressions. Migrants claim, that people in Armenia are ill-mannered and rough,

use vulgar words and phrases, are unkind towards each other, etc. On the one hand they may mention the privileges of their stay in Switzerland, on the other hand, several minutes later they complain about the diseases contracted in Switzerland as a result of permanent stress. The following statements are widely spread among them: “Everybody should live in the country she/he is originated from”, “Life is worthy in the homeland”, etc.

On the one hand they criticize some Armenian morals and manners emphasizing that “Swiss people live more calmly and happily, since they take life easier”, on the other hand they strive to bring up their children “in the Armenian manner”. Though the conflict between the maintenance and loss of “Armenianness” is always alive in almost all spheres of a migrant’s everyday life, the reappraisal of values and choices between what is Armenian and Swiss is the most conflicting within the family upbringing of children. On the one hand Swiss reality calls for the honing among children of those cultural skills important for adaptation and progress in the new cultural environment. On the other hand “repudiation” of Armenianness is interpreted as a loss of identity and breeds fear and a sense of guilt. One of our interlocutors told us that though in Switzerland young people are used to leaving their parents’ houses on coming of age and this is convenient especially if they have girl/boyfriends, she would hang herself if her son decided to do that.

There are people among the New Flow who have lived in Switzerland for years; however their lives are oriented towards Armenia. They live and work there, their children go to school and university there, however they strive to save money to buy houses in Armenia. They believe they will return, they wait for the situation in Armenia to improve in order to return. Most of them have lived in Switzerland with such visions for decades and possibly will live there in such a mindset till they die. As the saying goes, “there is nothing more permanent than temporary migration” (Amin, Mattoo 2011, p. 1).

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Streszczenie

Współistnienie kultur ormiańskiej i szwajcarskiej oraz ich płynna dyfuzja staje się w niektórych przypadkach ilustracją procesów transkultuacji. Wskutek tych procesów tworzy się nowy habitus – hybrydowy, łączący elementy obu kultur. Osoby o hybrydowej tożsamości kulturowej pochodzą najczęściej ze Starej Fali emigracji ormiańskiej. Ormianie z tej fali ze względu na dłuższe przebywanie w Szwajcarii nie tylko sprawniej interpretują zarówno ormiańską, jak i szwajcarską kulturę, ale też bardziej umiejętnie reagują w obu kontekstach. To przyczynia się raczej do wzajemnego uzupełniania się tych kultur, niż do ich konfrontacji. Transkultura Starej Fali do pewnego stopnia określa w których działaniach praktycznych należy stosować odpowiedni (ormiański czy szwajcarski) kod kulturowy. Dla odmiany, Nowa Fala demonstruje przeważnie rodzaj transkultury, która zamiast trwałego łączenia elementów obu kultur trwa w procesie ciągłej zmiany i redefinicji. Kształtuje się ona nie tyle na granicy obu kultur ulegających konwergencji, ile pomiędzy tymi granicami. W owej przestrzeni

„pomiędzy”, kultury krajów rodzinnego i przyjmującego pozostają w stałym konflikcie. Często różnice między kluczowymi kodami interpretacyjnymi kultury ormiańskiej i kultury szwajcarskiej utrudniają negocjacje pomiędzy nimi, podkreślają granice międzykulturowe i nawet przyczyniają się do konfliktów na granicach. Nie dochodzi natomiast do dyfuzji i wzajemnego uzupełnienia.

Oprócz rozbieżności praktyki transkulturowe Starej i Nowej Fali wykazują wiele cech wspólnych. Transkultury obu fal są dość niesymetryczne: nie łączą one kultury ormiańskiej i szwajcarskiej we wszystkich sferach życia w równym stopniu. W niektórych aspektach życia publicznego asymilacja do kultury szwajcarskiej odbywała się bardziej intensywnie, podczas gdy w sferze religijnej, wspólnotowej i rodzinnej dominuje kultura ormiańska. Zarówno Stara jak i Nowa Fala usiłują zachować pewne etniczno-kulturowe kody kultury ormiańskiej, z których większość ma charakter symboliczny.