

*Belonging: Argentine  
Armenians About Their  
Dual Identity*

*Vicky Nvard Melkonyan*

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# *Why Argentina?*

Argentina has one of the largest Armenian communities in the world. How come? Armenians began migrating to Argentina after the 1915 genocide from Adana, Marash, Antep, and Izmir. By 1974, though a very small minority in Argentina, Armenians controlled 'one-third of the textile industry, fifty percent of the rug industry, and ten percent of the shoe industry (Herzig & Kurkchian, 2005). Today there are more than 135,000 Armenians living in Argentina. Around 5000 Armenians live in Buenos Aires, the capital city of Argentina, in a neighborhood called Palermo Viejo (Urgun, 2016).

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## *Key Terms And Definitions*

*Imagined Community:* concept developed by Benedict Anderson which describes nations. Each nation/state is an imagined community because one cannot know every member of a given society/community face-to-face even if the nation is small (Anderson, 2016)

*Assimilation:* assimilation refers to the process through which individuals and groups of differing heritages acquire the basic habits, attitudes, and mode of life of an embracing culture (Merriam-Webster)

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*Acculturation:* acculturation is often tied to political conquest or expansion, and is applied to the process of change in beliefs or traditional practices that occurs when the cultural system of one group displaces that of another (Merriam-Webster)

*Diaspora:* diaspora is the movement, migration, or scattering of a people away from an established or ancestral homeland (its first, and principal, meaning relates to the settling of the Jewish people outside of Palestine after the Babylonian exile thousands of years ago) (Merriam-Webster)

# *Literature Review*

The issue of identity has been of great importance throughout time. Zygmunt Bauman in his article on identities outlines the history saying that through modernity the problem of identity was “how to construct one and keep it solid and stable” meanwhile today the problem is “how to avoid fixation and keep the options open” ( Bauman, 2011, p. 19). Another author, Homi Bhabha also agrees that there is something strange about the problem of identity as it is the “contaminated yet connective tissue between cultures” and at the same time appears as both the connector and the isolator of those cultures (Bhabha as cited in Du Gay & Hall, 2011, p. 54). Steven Vertovec’s article “Transnationalism and Identity” (2001) discusses the term “identity” as one inherently juxtaposed with the newer term “transnationalism” and comparing them finds them both limiting in a way. Vertovec also argues that individuals have kept their ties to the traditions, families, communities which they come from (Vertovec, 2001, p. 3). He brings forth the notion that we live in imagined communities and thus it is increasingly more difficult to identify oneself as belonging to only one culture.



# *Literature Review*

“Migration, Cultural Bereavement and Cultural Identity” outlines how moving country/culture can affect one’s mental health. Among those mental health concerns are the loss of cultural norms, religious customs, and social support systems, adjustment to a new culture and changes in identity and concept of self. According to the authors, acculturation “involves the loss of the familiar, including language (especially colloquial and dialect), attitudes, values, social structures and support networks” bringing forth the need to grief (Bhugra & Becker, 2005, para. 9).

Authors Herzig & Kurkchian argue that throughout the twentieth century “two main cleavages divided the Armenians: first was a deep socio-political divide within most of the significant diaspora communities; the second was the even more profound split between the homeland and the diaspora based on political and identity differences” (Panossian, 2005, p.235).

Numerous Armenian orphans traveled to Greece and France and from the ports there they embarked on a much longer journey to Argentina. They were welcome in the new world and worked hard in the farms or in the textile industry. Soon they built an Armenian church and were living in large communities with other fellow Armenians (Urgun, 2016).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How does having a hybrid identity affect Argentine-Armenians if at all? Perhaps, a lot of them came to be born in Argentina because their ancestors fled the genocide but perhaps there are other fascinating stories. This project aims to explore the extent to which Armenians are acculturated and assimilated within the Argentine community as well as find out why some decided to come to Armenia.



What are the relationships or connections that tie them with Armenia as perceived by themselves such as traditions, holidays, sayings, stories and fairy tales, if any? How do they feel about being Armenian in another country? In terms of identity, it is also interesting whether Argentine-Armenians feel more Armenian or Argentinian, because despite having multiple connections to Armenia the place where people grow up has an immense influence on their personality.

# *Methodology*

This research is largely based on existing theoretical articles and books which give detailed accounts on the meaning of identity. Argentine-Armenians have been contacted through the Birthright Armenia Foundation. The interviewees were given consent forms that outlined their rights and responsibilities in terms of this project. One to two hour interviews were conducted and recorded for future reference. One participant lives outside of Armenia and the interview was conducted via Zoom. There were four female and three male participants aiming for gender balance in the study. Participants' age ranged from 28 to 45 while occupations varied from opera singer to marketologist to forest engineer. Participants chose to disclose their identities, thus their names are not pseudonymous.

## *Research Findings*

*A lot of Argentine Armenians participate in the preservation of Armenian traditions. Religion plays a huge role, the church of Saint Gregory the Illuminator in Buenos Aires gathers hundreds on Sundays. There is also the “Club” which incorporates ceremonies and extracurricular activities for young people. Activities include hiking, football games, dances, theatrical plays, and etc. The Armenian language is taught in Armenian schools, however only as a second language. To be Armenian in Argentina “you have to interact a lot with other Armenians and be a ‘proud’ Armenian” which automatically excludes those who do not feel proud of their heritage and history or do not want to have anything to do with it (A. Demirchian, personal communication, March 5, 2020).*

## *Heritage and Family Influence*

*It is difficult to find a family with both Armenian parents in Argentina, according to the participants. And as in many other things, in preservation of the ancestral heritage too parents play an integral part. In cases when the family of the interviewee self-identified as Armenian and felt a strong connection to Armenia, the same was true of the participant and vice versa. However, even the fact that both parents are Armenian did not necessarily point at a strong bond to Armenianness. Participants’ identity largely depended on how Armenian their parents felt and to what extent they communicated that to their children.*

## *Duality*

*All the participants acknowledged that the duality of their identity is extremely important to them. To the question of how much they value the duality of their identity all of the participants replied more or less similarly. They would keep their dual ancestry because it taught them to “respect diversity” and feel like they belong to the world rather than to one country (M. Esayan, personal communication, March 3, 2020). The participants each interpreted their duality in different ways and each of them felt differently about Armenia. Majority felt happy to be in Armenia and said that they were raised in a way to value their Armenianness. Others, however, had not. They only moved here by chance and did not feel at home.*

## *Here and There: Differences*

*More than anything being Argentine means “being free, open-minded” in the words of Cristian Minasian, a participant who is here volunteering through Birthright Armenia. According to Cristian, Armenians living in Armenia are slightly too conservative when it comes to human interaction and relationships and especially to women. Gabriel Meghruni also mentioned that about ten years ago when he had been dating his wife (Iranian-Armenian) and they were holding hands walking in the streets “and people looked at us as if we were doing something bad” which was strange for him because it would not have happened in Argentina. (G. Meghruni, personal communication, March 10, 2020).*

# *Limitations*

## AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

One of the major limitations in this study was the fact that the majority of the interviewees had a clear commitment - they were in Armenia and they were planning to live in Armenia compared to the rest of the Argentine-Armenians who are living in Argentina. A comparative multicultural study that would include many more participants would be fascinating to conduct in the future.



# Conclusion

## IT'S NOT BLACK AND WHITE

Hybrid identities form mostly within families and can reveal themselves differently. Some people are very much into exploring their heritage on one side or the other, others are not. Hybrid identities are very common especially in our digitized world full of imagined communities. They are difficult to fathom, difficult to live with because one does not know for certain where s/he belongs and who s/he is. Only after a journey of self-reflection and living among people of both ancestries can a person truly comprehend one's identity and learn for oneself where home is.



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