

ARMENIANS IN ETHIOPIA - A VANISHING COMMUNITY

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By Marcuz Haile

✘ *Garbis Korajian, a personal friend and a reader of Keghart, brought to my attention an essay about Armenians in Ethiopia. Reportedly, the material was used for a PhD thesis by a Swedish author. Unfortunately, a search did not reveal his identity. Having personal knowledge of the community, I find the concluding remarks very relevant. To view the essay in its entirety, please click at [Scribd](#) where this and the following posting entitled **Ethiopian Armenians In their own words** are transcribed from. Sentiments of gratitude are extended to the unknown author. Anybody who is familiar with him please contact Keghart. Patapan's book and Ashot Abrahamian's monograph about the history of Armenians in Ethiopia - not utilized by the author - contain additional and important information - Dikran Abrahamian (August 2009)*

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What I find interesting in anthropology is migration in particular – how it affects culture and erases ethnic boundaries. What I find most interesting are just those groups that find themselves in the middle, the ones one never thinks of: those that live in our midst – the groups that prove to be exceptional. My interest in social anthropology has always been in those areas that concern migration, culture and contemporary ethnicity. How people move, how cultures are changed by people in motion. I myself have roots in Ethiopia, a country that is most often connected with poverty or enigmatic Rastafarian-mystique. To write about Armenians in Ethiopia can seem rather far-fetched to the uninitiated, but I realised directly that this was what I wanted to write about. I have on a number of occasions gone by the Armenian Church in Addis Ababa but never considered why it is situated there, or even thought at all why there should be Armenians in Ethiopia; shouldn't they be in Armenia? When we began reading about the Armenian diaspora in the A-course the pieces started falling into place. And the more I looked, the more information I also found about the diaspora, except those supposedly living in Ethiopia. One answer I obtained was that they had been dead for a long time. In an Armenian forum on the Internet they laughed at my question and answered that there are no black Armenians.

I decided to find out what the situation was. What came out of my search was a picture of a very little Diaspora on the verge of extinction, one which had once been very alive but will hardly survive much longer. This made me even more

interested. What had happened? Why had they suddenly become so few, and where are the remaining Armenians today? The Armenian diaspora has been documented a number of times, with the exception of the group in Ethiopia. One has most often chosen to document the Diasporas that have taken root in what we call the West. Those groups among the dispersed which choose to settle in other places are forgotten. Even for many Armenians in the diaspora, the Ethiopian group is forgotten, despite the fact that the first Armenians came to Ethiopia already in the 16th century. More followed at the end of the 19th century, and in connection with the Armenian genocide the Armenian population was reduced to just over one thousand. But today there are few Armenians in Ethiopia, and many Ethiopians have forgotten the role that the Armenians have played through the years. Ethiopia's Armenians belong to the past, though no one has investigated what happened: there is very little research on Diasporas in the Third World. The focus on Ethiopia has been on other levels: that it is a country with an extremely rich and old history influenced by many different peoples is unknown. That there exist *Swedes* with different backgrounds is for most people not particularly strange; but it is more difficult to understand that – not only in the West – there are groups of people who do not live up to the stereotype.

Conclusion

The strength of the Ethio-Armenians lies in their solidarity. Through maintaining their cultural heritage and the assets that have always belonged to them, the community has through the years created an identity that will live on as long as there exist individuals to maintain it. By constantly keeping the group's infrastructure intact, an arena for identity has continued to exist, and the infrastructure also finances that arena purely economically. It is an identity that is constantly reproduced within the group through socialisation and a common basis of values.

The community's days are numbered, since the small size of the group speak against it, and this is something that the Ethio-Armenians are well aware of. The majority of those who have remained in the country will surely stay for the simple reason that they have lived in Ethiopia their whole lives. The age of the majority is very high, and many are far too old to move and start again, as many did when the Derg came to power. Among the younger Ethio-Armenians there is no chance of reproducing within the group. Even if they marry outside the group, the Armenian identity must continue to be the dominant one in order for the group to be able to live on. This is not an impossibility, but in the long run the identity will cease existing in connection with the group's doing so.

The younger people in the group are more unsure of their future in Ethiopia, and certainly more inclined to move elsewhere. Virtually all Ethio-Armenians have more relatives outside Ethiopia than in the country itself, and with time this can be a decisive reason for leaving the country.

The club, the church and the school cannot live on without dedicated individuals – but what would be the point in keeping a church if there no longer exists anyone to visit it? An influx of new individuals from the Armenian diaspora presupposes that they are basically Ethio-Armenians in order for the group's identity to live on.

'For when two of them meet anywhere in the world, see if they will not create a New Armenia' ... presupposes that there exist individuals who are willing to work for the group and its future. It is in this way that they have up to now succeeded in maintaining their identity, and constantly reproducing it through the years no matter what has happened in their surroundings. The Derg revolution strengthened the solidarity among those remaining, but at the same time the revolution decided the Armenians' future in the country.

My conclusion is that the Armenian diaspora in Ethiopia will within 30 years be but a memory. The solidarity will live on outside of the country, but if there is no immigration the Ethio-Armenian identity in Ethiopia could never live on. The group will probably never be compensated by the Ethiopian state either, and therefore a return migration is unlikely. The Armenians' legacy in the country – businesses, buildings and perhaps even the church – will surely live on. Most of what was once founded by Armenians still remains, even if it is now owned or run by ethnic Ethiopians. The Armenian legacy will remain even if it is not referred to as Armenian, in the same way as we today in Sweden call pasta bolognese Swedish plain food. The Ethiopian telephone catalogue is full of Armenian names, though they are today borne mainly by ethnic Ethiopians. The Ethio-Armenians still living in Ethiopia are the last generation of Ethio-Armenians. When they no longer remain, the end will have come for a several hundred year Armenian presence in Ethiopia.

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