

THE ARMENIAN ISLAMIC TRIBE-PART II

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Kevork George Apelian

Translated and abridged by Vahe H. Apelian, 22 May 2011

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-'Emena, who was your father?' I ask

-'My father is there', she says, and points to picture hanging on the wall. 'My father was also Moushetsi, Yeghia Sessoyan. Later his name became Mohammad Issa Mahamed. He was two years old during the massacres.'

At that moment Emena's brother enters. He is a lawyer and his name is Abdel Rahan Mohammad Essa Mahamed. He is a middle-aged man. Sister and brother tell us about their father who passed away in 2008. The Sessoyan family numbered forty members. Yeghia or Mohammad Mahamed settled in a village named Bsis that is 30 Km from Ras al Ein. In 1948 he married an Arab woman named Abta. They have 2 boys and 5 girls. Yeghia married another woman as well. They have seven daughters and one son. Yeghia's wives are alive and live in the same village. Emena also has relatives from his father's side who speak Kurdish or Turkish. Some of her relatives do not like to tell their family stories. Emena also tells that her father Yeghia had a sister named Sosse who threw herself into river least she be taken as the wife of Turk or a Kurd. Emena repeatedly tells that she likes to associate with Armenians and that our meeting has made her very happy.

✘

Fourth Generation

Emir & his four daughters: Nanor, Nairi, Armine' and Menar

-'Mehran (Mohammad)' I ask, 'how is that your father was Kurdified while your nephew Dr. Garo has

remained Armenian?

-'His father remained within the Armenian community. However, he speaks only Kurdish. Garo studied in Armenia', explains Mohammad.

-'How is that you found each other?' I inquire.

-'In 1972 I used to work for a sheikh', says Mohammad. 'One day, while in the city, I came across a store whose sign bore the name Antranig Hekimian. I suspected that we are relatives, but I wanted to assure myself before meeting him. I inquired with the church in Ras al Ein and was able to ascertain that we are related after which I approached the owner. He was hesitant at the beginning at the site of a Kurd claiming family relation, but later he warmed towards me and became emotional. I invited him and his family to our house. We slaughtered lambs to celebrate the occasion. It was my dream to find out my father's relatives. My dream has now become a reality.'

-'How do you get along with your newly found relations?' I inquire

-'Very well', responds Mohamad. 'I am a Kurd and a Muslim. They are Armenians and Christians. However, it's the same blood that flows through our veins. You can tell that Garo feels very comfortable in our house.'

At that moment I saw Dr. Garo in the kitchen preparing a hookah for his leisurely smoking.

-'Do you have a community?' I inquire

-'Of course we do', responds Mohammad. 'We have our own tribe, ashiret. Let me show you our member list'. He produces a document and I read page after page Kurdish names with their official registration numbers, their addresses and the signatures of the family's patriarchs. There are 10 to 11 such records on each page.

-'Our ashiret has its bylaws', elaborates Mohammad. 'We are especially attentive that the members of our tribe do not marry outside the tribe. If one wants to marry outside the tribe, then he or she has to take permission from the sheikh of our tribe, Elie Hovagimian. All able bodied males between the ages of 15 to 70 pay membership dues. From this coffer the tribe attends to the needs of the members, such as if one has an accident or kills someone, the compensation comes from the tribe's coffer.'

-'Why have you organized this tribe?' I ask.

-'Very simple, explains Mohammad. In this part of the world the prevailing social order is the system of tribes-ashiret. Every one has the support of a tribe. If you do not belong to a tribe, you are no one. You cannot protect your rights.'

-'When was your tribe organized?' I inquire

-'Our tribe was organized in 1998', explains Mohammad. 'We conducted a census and we organized

the tribe. We have 25,000 members. Our tribe is known as the ARMENIAN ISLAMIC TRIBE. We are Muslims but we are Armenians. Not all Islamized Armenians in the region are members of our tribe. There is a big number of them who are not members.'

At this point Mohammad's brother-in-law intercepts and says that the lawyers of the tribe have their own organization and present themselves as Muslim Armenians.

On this May afternoon I remain dumbfounded. Here, the sons and daughters of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide not only honor and perpetuate the memory of their parents or grandparents but also have organized themselves into a distinct community of which we had not known before in spite of modern communication. They are Muslims, and they are Armenians!

Mehran arranges for his sons to take us for a sightseeing trip. We head towards Khabour River, the main tributary of the Euphrates River. There was a time when many Armenians on forced marches were drowned in the raging water of this river. We approach the river but remain standstill and astonished. The river is completely dry. The dams in Turkey threaten to starve Syria and Iraq of water. 'Khabour River' I say to myself, 'is it the curse of those who drowned in your waters that has brought you to this state?'

We enter an abandoned mansion. The canal next to the mansion runs dry. There are abandoned water pumps rusting along the riverbank. We are told that there was a time when water from here flew hundreds of kilometers for irrigation.

There is a sadness that permeates all around, rusting water pumps, an abandoned mansion and the memory of the many who walked by the riverbank or were drowned in it. We leave the area and head to Mreykez to meet the rest of Mohammad Mahmood's family in their parental house.

We arrive the village by dusk. We meet Mohammad's four brothers and one sister. All are very happy that we have paid them a visit. Momentarily Mohammad takes leave of us and enters a room to pay his respects to his mother, Hovhannes Hekimian's widow, who is on her deathbed. In the courtyard I meet two other Armenians. It is noteworthy that most of the lands of the village and its surrounding belong to five Armenian families. The chieftain of the village is named Garabed. This meeting in the twilight of the dusk in this remote area, far from the rest of the world but otherwise in an Armenian enclave of sorts fills me up with emotion.....

Just prior to our departing, Mehran wears his kafiyeh and igal and teasingly asks me if I will put a copy of his picture in Bedouin attire on the cover of my upcoming book much like I did for Salmon Drbo.

Salman Drbo, was not even in his early teens when he was forcefully separated from his mother. Over the decades he had assumed that his mother had died along with the rest of the Armenians. However, serendipitously, he discovered that his mother was alive along many of his compatriots. Mother and son met for the very first time when both had entered different phases of their lives.

Young Aram Keklikian had grown up to become Salman Dro, the chief of his tribe. His mother had remarried and raised another family and had her first grandson named after her first husband who was taken away and she never saw him again . Upon meeting they had a picture taken together sitting next to each other. That picture graces the cover of my first book.

I did not answer Mohammad but I wondered instead, 'how many book covers will we need to place the pictures of such Islamized Armenians?'

We met Mehran Hekimian or Mohammad Mahamed through his nephew Dr. Garo in Mohammad's house in Ras al Ein on May 20, 2009.

