

WHO IS ARMENIAN?

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 **Keghart.com Editorial Board**, 15 August 2012

Think of a travel poster depicting a female tourist lounging under wafting palm trees on a powder-soft, snow-white sandy beach. The sky is predictably blue, the ocean bluer. The advertising text says "ONLY \$799/wk. Santo Domingo." 

If you are a travel packager you might compare the above price with the Grenada vacations your company sells. If you are a photographer you might observe the lighting, the model's pose, the symmetry of the poster. If you are a printer you might check the clarity of the printing, the typeface. If you are in the fashion business or own a hair salon, your focus might be on the tourist's swimwear and hair style. If you are interested in North/South politics, you might condemn the "exploitation" of the Caribbean by "affluent" North Americans...

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This is a long way of saying that we view the world invariably through our prism, priorities, interests and obsessions.

Ask yourself "Who is Armenian?" Through which filter would you pore over that question? What are, according to you, the requirements that make an Armenian?

Traditionalist at one time might have said an Armenian is someone whose parents are Armenian, he or she belongs to the Armenian Apostolic Church, speaks Armenian and identifies himself/herself as Armenian. Some might add to the traditionalist's definition by adding that an Armenian is a person who contributes to the furthering of Armenianness culturally, socially, demographically, materially. But what about a person who says he is Armenian but can't speak Armenian, has one non-Armenian parent and is an atheist? What about someone who is partly Armenian but is active in the Armenian Church and community? Is he/she as Armenian as a "full-blooded" Armenian who is not interested in Armenian affairs? Is a Muslim Hamshen no less Armenian than a member of the Armenian Apostolic Church who never goes to church but can speak in Armenian?

Armenians are proud of entertainers Sylvie Vartan, Arlene Francis, Cher, former Lebanese President Emil Lahoud, World Cup soccer player Youri Djorkaeff, musician Michel Legrande, racing car champion Patrick Fiori, directors Albert and Allen Hughes, Bollywood actress Tulip Joshi ... Would they be less proud of them if they learned that they are all "half Armenians"?

For centuries the answer to the question "Who is Armenian?" was straightforward: Armenian on both sides of the family + member of the Armenian Apostolic Church. The certainty had to be modified a few centuries ago when some Armenians became Roman Catholic or Protestant. Nowadays a Bangladeshi bearing the name Fatima Montaza Sharif and wearing hijab can emigrate to Canada and three years later become Canadian, with all the rights and privileges of a native-born. And if she is involved in a news story while outside Canada, she is identified as Canadian—although she has lived most of her life in Bangladesh and is ethnically, culturally a Bengali. She is considered Canadian after a mere three years in Canada.

Once upon a time ethnicity was the universal determining identifier, but that changed in some countries such as the United States and Canada. Multi-racial states often see ethnicity as the enemy, a divisive rival which might threaten the unity of a country. According to modern states, your national identity is what your passport and citizenship declare. Thus, in the eyes of states around the world, an Armenian living outside Armenia is Brazilian, British, Canadian, French, Greek, Russian, Indian... His ethnicity is tertiary. As a result of making citizenship the only identifier we get such ridiculous headlines such as the recent "Three Russian Terrorists Arrested in Spain." The headline was misleading because the three terrorists were Chechens: they were in Spain supposedly plotting against Russia. They had Russian citizenship because Russia occupies Chechnia.

Some Western states have also dispensed with citing the passport bearer's religion. The latter was partly due to anti-Israel terrorists who identified—and sometimes killed—Jewish travelers who had their religion documented in their passports.

In most Muslim countries a prime identifier is a citizen's sect--Sunni or Shiite. In parts of Africa and Asia, the tribe is the identifier. Although Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea are black, they are considered Arab (Semites) because they speak Arabic and are Muslim. Nearly 60 years ago when President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt was promoting pan-Arabism, he said an Arab is a person who spoke Arabic. According to that definition, many Ottoman Armenians, who could not speak Armenian and many Armenians born in the Americas who can't speak Armenian, are not Armenian.

Political persuasion, on rare occasion, has also been used as an identifier. There was a time in our unfortunate recent past when certain Armenian extremists inanelly claimed "Whoever is not Tashnag is not Armenian" thus making Aram Khachaturian, Victor Hampartsumian, Charles Aznavour non-Armenians.

Ethnicity, once the main identifier of the individual, is under attack in North America. The old certainties have gone out the window in North America but in most of countries around the world

ethnicity remains a key identifier.

Religion, as a crucial identifier, is also under attack in the West, although it continues to be an important descriptor in the rest of the world. Nowadays if an Armenian mentions in North America that Armenians are the first to adopt Christianity as state religion he might encounter a "so what?" look. However, in the rest of the world, where religion matters, the statement would still receive plaudits.

We have to acknowledge that we are different from the Armenian martyrs and survivors of the Genocide. We have to admit that Armenians of Armenia are somewhat different from Armenians of Argentina, Canada, France, Lebanon, and Uruguay Some Armenians would say there's a huge difference between Egyptian, Syrian, Lebanese, Iraqi, Jordanian and Palestinian Armenians, although these are Arab countries and the Armenian communities in most of them are younger than a century.

Andrei Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian novelist and nationalist, defined Russian with these words: "Russian nationality is not about blood but about spirit. The greatness of our people is to be sought in the inner development in its breath or soul...all those who feel themselves part of this heritage in spirit are true Russians."

A few months ago an Armenian intellectual in Armenia said in an interview that we should define and present our "Armenianess" in our own private way. For example, an Armenian writer living in North America (Peter Balakyan, Chris Bohjalian) expresses his "Armenianess" by writing English-language books about Armenians. Entertainer Kim Kardashian, until recently inactive in the Armenian community, demonstrates her "Armenianess" by calling for the recognition of the Genocide.

How should Armenians define and express their Armenian identity?

In a rapidly changing world we have to enlarge the tent to include Armenians who do not meet the traditional "24-karat" requirement of ethnic "purity" and Mother Church affiliation. But while we expand the tent we should be wary of "universalist" and "secularist left" twaddle . . . the naïve, impractical and sometimes hypocritical admonishments which declare that we are "all in this boat together" and that our goals in the "Global Village" should be identical, that we are all the same and that ethnic, religious, cultural variations are destructive. Yes, as Armenians, we obviously share countless common interests and priorities with the rest of humanity, but we also have interests, heritage, characteristics and goals unique to our people. "Universalist" cant can threaten our nation, especially since we are few and are scattered all over the globe.

It's high time Armenians re-examined their identity, answered "who is Armenian?" and took steps to preserve their 4,300-year-old unique identity and heritage. Let the conversation begin.

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