

FUTUREtakes

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“Transcultural Impacts and Perspectives on the Future”

Perspectives from Armenia, Canada, France, Georgia, Germany, South Africa, Sweden, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

Armenia

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Armenia, a country within the landscapes of Western Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, is a land rich with an ancient heritage and mystical beauty. The Armenian people and culture trace back to pre-Biblical times. The nation of Armenia, however, is a rather recent birth, celebrating its independence between 1923 and 1925, and then again in 1991. Throughout their history, Armenians have rooted themselves in the Christian faith, proudly exclaiming to be the first nation to accept Christianity as a state religion in 301 AD. This connection to their church can be accredited, in part, to the Armenian survival through years of suffering, genocide, religious wars, migration, and communism. In addition to their faith, their emphasis on food, family values, language, literature, music, and icons have kept the Armenian spirit strong. This article will touch one each of these aspects, but something incredible to consider when reading is that these descriptions are not limited to those Armenians living in the modern Republic of Armenia, but rather they pertain to almost all Armenians living in the world, a community called the Armenian Diaspora. Being such a close-knit culture as Armenian is, community has helped these traditions survive, just as the Armenian people survived through times past. And while we seem to be in a state of globalization, where there is an interaction between Western and Armenian ideas through such things as building golf courses in the countryside or the recent booming of restaurants and luxury hotels in a financially struggling Armenia, there is still firm footing in the traditions and values of the Armenian people. This footing lies in preserving an appeal for traditional home cooked meals over habitually eating out, which is more western in nature. In addition, Armenians prefer customary hobbies such as playing backgammon or chess because these practices are more relevant to their heritage.

FOOD

Upon every introduction to an Armenian, food is often the first base to cover: are you hungry? Traditional Armenian cuisine is unchanged from times past, sharing roots with Mediterranean and Middle Eastern foods. Armenian menus have had cultural exchange with traditions of their neighboring peoples (e.g. Turkish, Greek, Lebanese, and Russian). Armenia has also been known for their sweet wine and famous brandy from the Ararat Cognac company that has been distributed worldwide. Aside from their wine and brandy, a large portion of Armenia's internal economy revolves around farming and livestock. A traditional Armenian meal may include foods like *dolma* (cabbage, eggplant, tomatoes, or grape leaves stuffed with ground beef, onions, rice, oil, and lemon), *lavash*, *cheese*, *khoravadz* (barbecued lamb or pork, sliced vegetables), *onions and parsley*, *tan* (yogurt drink with mint and cucumbers, sometimes with garlic if from Mediterranean traditions), and fresh fruit or baklava for dessert. With *tan*, another staple beverage at the table might be *Jermuk* which is carbonated water from the Jermuk region of Armenia, also referred to as "medicinal water." Fresh fruits of Armenia, depending on the season, may include apricots, watermelon, cherries, and tangerines. One of the unique attributes to the Armenian tradition is that similar to the ways in which cuisine draws from different regions, also varying in how food is prepared or the ingredients of certain dishes, how a meal is enjoyed remains constant. The table is like the hearth of the home for an Armenian family. For example, a guest to an Armenian home will be offered the dearest of dishes, flavors, and hospitality as he eats with the family at their table. Cooking is something Armenians do well; but they also eat well. Food is an experience, and as the elders and older children traditionally prepare the food in the day with care and delicacy, the family and guests enjoy the meal in the evening graciously and slowly, drawing out the time to be with loved ones. Following dinner, as the dish of fruit is put on the table, song and drink come in celebration of another day of blessings.

FAMILY VALUES

The concept of family goes beyond the biological relations that are most commonly thought of when referring to their *family*. In other words, beyond the father and mother, the children, and grandparents living together in a home, there are familial connections with those outside of a home as well. Within an Armenian community, neighbors or friends call each other *aghper* or *kouyro*, brother or sister respectively emphasizing the close bond between them. Friends are 'part of the family' in a sense, endearingly welcomed in with the use of the word *jan*. *Jan* is another example of something which is not solely Armenian. Shared with the cultures of Armenia's neighbors, *jan* is a beautiful way of addressing someone. As is part of their nature, Armenians' expression of hospitality and acceptance is also expressed through this term. However, the specific nuances of the Armenian language are unique to different communities of Armenians in the Diaspora and in Armenia.

LANGUAGE

There are two main dialects of the Armenian language, commonly referred to as "Western Armenian" and "Eastern Armenian." Western Armenian comes predominately from Armenian from Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) and is spoken today by the Diaspora and some northwestern regions of Armenia, and Eastern Armenian is the dialect spoken predominately in modern-day Armenia. The differences in the dialects are found in the grammar and certain word usage; Western Armenian drawing more upon Greek, Turkish, and Arabic structures or expressions, and Eastern Armenian drawing more upon Russian, due to Armenia being a member of the Soviet Union for 75 years. Today, however, the topic of language shifts from knowing its origin to creating ways of maintaining it. It is a challenge for an Armenian living in America, for example, to preserve fluency or pass on his native tongue to the next generation due to the imposing "necessity" to speak English. Does this pose a threat then to the stability and traditions of the Armenian language? As long as there is a sovereign country of Armenia, the answer is no, for the language cannot die away. The Armenian language has its own alphabet which was created by Mesrob Mashdots in the year 405 AD. He was also the same man who created the Georgian and Ethiopian alphabets. Now with the tools of a written alphabet, the Armenian people flourished in the art

of manuscripts (Biblical stories and pictures painted on animal skin), literature, and documenting their faith, transcribing the stories of the Bible.

LITERATURE

Literature of Armenia began as building a tangible collection of religious stories. As time went on, Armenians began to explore the art of writing, putting on paper the elements of struggle and oppression in their lives. And as they continued to survive and their spirits overcame the hardships of life, they wrote of their pride for their nation and aspirations of their dreams. A few well-known authors are: Khachatur Abovian (author of the first Armenian novel), Gregory of Narek (theologian, scholar, and author of prayers), Yeghishe Charenc (poet), and William Saroyan (Armenian-American poet, novelist, icon for diasporans). Having an alphabet truly kept the Armenian traditions alive, for not only was it a tool to write down centuries of oral traditions, it also offered a venue for minds to stretch out and Armenia to become “published.”

MUSIC

Like many other aspects of Armenian culture, music has played and continues to play a significant role in the daily living. Throughout history, music, like faith, helped pull Armenians through difficult times, but such mournful music is not the only melody heard from Armenia today. While that music, which is often recalled as “the songs my grandmother sang,” will forever live in the hearts and run through the blood of Armenian people, there is experimentation with a newer and Western sound in music. Perhaps in the year 2025, Armenian musicians will still be experimenting, but we must wonder about the influence such rich melodies could have on Western cultures. There is sacred music (originally sung a cappella by men in churches in order to emphasize the natural acoustics), classical music (operas, symphonies, etc.), and secular music including traditional folk tunes and modern “pop.” The classical and secular songs speak of love and patriotism, rejoicing for life and remembering the past. Though some music was westernized, adopting the scales and instruments of western music, folk music has remained true to the Armenian sounds. Such sounds are of pig-skin covered hand drums similar to an African hand drum (*dumbeg*), wooden stringed instruments either bowed, plucked, or strummed (*kamancha*, *kanoon*, and *oud* respectively), reed instruments (*duduk* and *zourna*), and if the folk music is from Anatolia, there are often zills (finger cymbals) played. To the beat of the drum, the people dance to their music often in lines connecting to one another by arms on shoulders or pinkie to pinkie. Women are traditionally expected to move more gracefully and fluidly drawing attention to their hand and arm movements, while men are expected to move with greater focus on their legs and feet taking larger jumps than women. Dancing tells the story of the song, so often the songs which are danced to are those which depict a romance. There are dances only for the women, dances only for the men, and dances for everyone! When the dance is for the women, they move gracefully like a flower; but if the dance is for the men, they clasp arms together and will display a “band of brothers.” The “band of brothers” stance has become a strong symbol of Armenian pride of standing on each others shoulders once again clasping arms signifying a victorious battle in the early 1900’s.

SYMBOLS OF ARMENIAN SPIRIT

The strong structure of the “band of brothers” stance is found not only in dance but also in facets of Armenian architecture, restating a proud success. The land of Armenia is full of mountains, but there are two mountains which are gazed upon by Armenians with hope: Ararat and Masis. These two mountains are found so often in the art, song, carpentry, and handcrafts, and are also thought to be the landing place of Noah’s Ark. The pomegranate is held to be God’s fruit in the hearts of the Armenians, holding on average four sections and almost as many seeds as there are days of the year. This is a special gift from God, in a sense, for the Armenians. The empty cross is the symbol of the Armenian faith. And

the peacock, with his colorful eye-painted feathers, is seen often in manuscripts with the eye representing a protection from evil. But all of these things, in conjunction with the food, family values, language, literature, and music help to create something deeper than words. These things form an identity which holds a spirit that unites Armenians together around the world. Perhaps this spirit is what has made it possible for such a small, close-knit culture to cover grounds in modern medicine, athletics (soccer and wrestling), media, business, and academia with great stride.

POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- *As Hovnanian and Mkrtchian point out, Armenian traditions have survived many challenges because Armenia is a close-knit culture. In this present era of rapid change, globalization, etc. – will the traditions of other close-knit peoples continue to survive? If so, which ones?*
- *Will Armenian cuisine, leisurely meals, and family time continue to survive, or will it give way to the fast-food culture – itself an infrastructure for a fast-paced life – that is becoming pervasive in various parts of the world? What will enable Armenian cuisine to withstand the challenges presented by the fast-food culture? (Also see similar question appended to Minister-Counselor Aleksandrovych’s article, this issue.)*
- *The extended family and sense of community, alive and well in Armenia, were once the norm in other societies and nations including the early US and various Native societies. However, in several nations today, fast-paced life has taken its toll on family and community life. Is the fast-paced society – with its impact on family and community life – a nearly-inevitable future for all peoples? If not, where else (in addition to Armenia) will the extended family and sense of community be found in 2025? In fast-paced societies, will increased longevity, in conjunction with a quest for identity and stability, drive a resurgence of family and community life? And – do you envision a new type of community yet to emerge? Elaborate. (Also see similar question on geographic community appended to article by Vedin, this issue.)*
- *As Hovnanian and Mkrtchian indicate, the Armenian language will live as long as Armenia itself lives as a sovereign nation. But elsewhere in the world, what other presently-spoken languages face extinction?*
- *Music – tribal, sacred, patriotic, traditional folk tunes, modern “pop” – which kinds of music will prevail in Armenia in 2025? Which kinds will migrate from Armenia to other nations and regions?*
- *What factors will ensure the continued survival of Armenian culture and identity as some of the other peoples in the world experience “deculturation”?*
- *Hovnanian and Mkrtchian refer to “Armenian survival through years of suffering...” Within the next 20 years, how will hardships influence a people’s sense of identity, their values, and their creative works – that is, the arts? (Also see similar question appended to Minister-Counselor Aleksandrovych’s article, this issue.)*