

# LIFE AND CULTURE OF ARMENIANS IN IRAN

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## **Abstract**

The designation "Iranian Armenian community" already encompasses important social and anthropological presumptions and stances. The important impact of Armenians in spreading of innovation in socio-cultural and economic sphere as a religious, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minority in Iran is discussed by examining the characterization, multiple identity, history, and economic activities. In the field of arts, the achievements of the Iranian Armenian community were also speculated. The aim of this paper is to present the role and contribution of Armenians as a displaced minority community in the modernization process of Iran under the shade of historical analysis started from Safavid era, seventeenth century up to the recent times. New conjectures, suggesting the need for major revisions in well-established historical interpretations are elaborated. The need to develop new social, cultural, and anthropological paradigms in order to account for complex historical facts and their ideological reflections is also demonstrated both from the etic and emic perspectives. It is argued that the Iranian Armenian community has played a crucial role in the modernization process, not only in Iran, but also in the international scale, that has largely been underestimated or altogether neglected due to many internal and external causes. The ability to switch between different socio-cultural standards in the domain of role balancing, a trend belonging to disadvantage groups, and the option of role compartmentalization which usually is not open to them is argued in this paper.

**Keywords:** Armenian community; Diaspora; Iranian Armenian Community; Julfa, merchantalism; Safavid dynasty

## 1. Introduction

The designation "Iranian Armenian community" already encompasses important social and anthropological presumptions and stances. Iran, the name of the country implying specific territorial sovereignty has been used for the first part of the identity marking. Unlike "Persian Armenian" or "Armenian Persian" designations, which mark a conflict between two ethnic identities, the combination of "Iranian" and "Armenian" refers to the coupling of a polity to an ethnicity. Moreover, use of the term "community" instead of "minority", "ethnicity", "nationality", etc. invites the attention to the specific organization of the Iranian Armenians in social, cultural, economic, and cognitive dimensions. Communities are social entities that have more closeknit and informally organized network structures that are based on civil rather than political formations. In contemporary Iran, as well as throughout most of the history, the Persian language and culture has played double roles: ethnicity marking, as well as provision of a common vehicle for interethnic communication and interaction. It is the second role that has been dominant most of the time. The very existence of the Persian ethnicity is a subject of debate in contemporary Iran. The term "Fars" (in contemporary Farsi- the Persian language) refers more to geographic territory (the name of the county whose center is the historical city of Shiraz, known by its world famous poets Saadi and Hafez) where only a small part of the Persian ethnicity resides, than to an ethnic designation referring to the whole of Persian ethnicities. The designation "Irani" (Iranian), on the other hand, is often confused with Persian. The terms referring to Persian ethnicity are less problematic in minority languages. For example, the term "Parsik" in Armenian is clearly understood to refer to the Persian ethnicity. It can be concluded that the "melting pot" aspect of the Iranian society is emphasized and there is very high level of consciousness of the main function of Persian culture as a common culture for interpersonal communication in a multilingual and multicultural country like Iran, especially in the minds of the majority Persians. Persian culture can boast of historical richness and having played major role in the world cultural development. This is a source of pride for Persians as well as other ethnic groups in Iran. The consciousness of the importance of Persian language and culture, coupled with the tendency to avoid intercultural conflicts that may threaten the unity in the multinational country, a unity that will also continue to guarantee the dominant position of Persian, has come to so dominate public minds, that has driven the ethnic role of Persian language and culture to a subordinate and virtually forgotten position. Persians see no reason not to share the pride of belonging to an old linguistic and cultural tradition with other ethnicities in Iran and thus do not actively maintain the boundary between Persian and

other ethnicities. Boundary making is, however, being more actively pursued by minority groups that, no matter how much they take pride in being Iranian, also wish to maintain their own identities. The linguistic aspect of this analysis has been presented in (Nercissians, 1987:623-639) and (Nercissians, 1994:127-129). It has been shown that the role of Farsi as the national literary standard language has been subordinate to the role of Farsi as the formal language of the country and the common language with which all Iranians communicate. As a result, the development of standard Farsi has been influenced by those that have mostly learned that language not as a mother tongue, but a second language in a process of formal education (because of belonging to another ethnolinguistic group). Even the mother tongue Farsi speakers have not tried to standardize their own dialects and vernaculars. In contrast, the main role of modern Armenian standard language has been identity marking through becoming a vehicle via which national culture can be expressed in a way that Armenians can feel their own. This can explain why modern Persian has been developed in the middle of the medieval period after the Islamic conquest while the development of modern Armenian had to take place after the modernization process had become very strong. It can even explain why two, rather than one, standard literary Armenians were developed. I will not present any further elaboration of this important premise here. But the argument can be more clear-cut in the political sphere. The political history of postIslamic Iran has been mostly a history of Persianization of invading dynasts from (often foreign) non-Persian nationalities. Under the influence of Persian-speaking "vazir"s and court officials, or simply out of the desire to speak and identify with the more prestigious Persian by the king and other members of upper political hierarchy, the language of the invading dynasty would soon be replaced by Farsi in Iranian courts. It has been the cultural dominance of Persian, rather than political exclusions based on national and ethnic origins, that have maintained the ruling position for the Persians. National discriminations, whenever they have existed, have played only auxiliary roles. The exact opposite situation existed in the Ottoman Empire. The social hierarchy could only be maintained through a formalized system of religious and ethnic discrimination (The "millat" system). The prestige of Farsi was so great that it was often used in preference to Turkish in Ottoman courts too (and there was also the prestige of Arabic that drew upon religion). This explains why the policy to forge an Ottoman nation especially pursued by the "Young Turks" never succeeded. It can thus be seen why social conflicts assume national form in Turkey. In Iran, however, social movements tend to assume popular or democratic rather than ethnic or national character (Nercissians, 2003:17-8).

The analysis of the Iranian Armenian community and its role in the modernization process of the country presupposes some familiarity with the history of the region. It is not our purpose

here to present the historical facts and narrations; rather, we are going to suggest interpretations and theoretical explications. This, it ought to be pointed out, has the task of presenting aspects of the Iranian Armenian history especially its impact that has largely been underestimated or neglected. There are several reasons for this failure by historiography. Studies on Iranian history, Iranian culture and art, or Iranian social and anthropological issues have too often confined their scope of study to the dominant groups and not considered minority cultures as part of their subject matter. The tendency to confuse Iranian history and culture with Persian history and culture has also contributed to the lack of attention to other ethnicities. Consideration of the Iranian Armenian community as part of the bigger Armenian nation, whose history is related to the history of Iran only inasmuch as there are mutual influences between Armenian and Persian cultures also aggravates the situation. On the other hand, studies that have problematized Armenian history and culture in general, have tended to consider the Iranian Armenian community as a small and often exterritorial section of their subject matter. Again, the role of the Iranian Armenians has been considered of interest only insofar as it has been able to influence cultural and sociopolitical developments in mainland Armenia. Finally, historical studies with an international scope have also failed to pay attention to the role of the Iranian Armenians because modernization has largely been equated to Westernization. Therefore, the only role Iranian Armenians could have played ought to have been through becoming an agent (because of their common Christian faith, their wider ties through trade and through contacts with Armenian communities in the West, etc.) for the spread of Western influence in the Orient. Even the contemporary Iranian Armenian community has little historical memory of its glorious past. The once influential Khojas that could challenge the might of Western Imperial powers are no longer present and their cosmopolitan views were not in line with the nationalistic views of contemporary community leaders. In other words, the wealthy Armenian traders, who led the community in former times, do not possess the desired qualifications for becoming the role models that contemporary elites wish to furnish to the community rank and file. So a major revision of the prevailing beliefs and ideological attitudes is called for.

## **2. Community Characterization**

Iranian Armenians form a small but still largely influential section of the larger Iranian society. Armenians are considered a religious, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minority in the

country. They are highly urbanized and relatively well off; though they suffer from diminished sense of belonging due to their urbanized life, minority status, nationalistic feelings, and sense of historical injustice to which Armenians have been collectively fell victim. The majority of the community members belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church. There is smaller number of Armenians belonging to other Christian denominations. Intermarriages between Armenians and Iranian or foreign citizens have become more common due to high levels of urbanization and integration as well as travels and migrations. But most of those intermarriages result in assimilation into other ethnicities and cutting of ties with their community of original belonging. There is also a rather high level of emigration. The community size, as a result, is declining. The relation of the community to the world Armenian population is, likewise, that of a small and insignificant section to a bigger entity. The dialects spoken by Iranian Armenians are very close to the dialects and the standard Armenian language spoken in the Republic of Armenia. But there also exists a collection of Armenian communities in other countries where the spoken Armenian dialects follow a different standard: Western Armenian. The latter had been the standard Armenian in the Ottoman Empire. The Armenian communities worldwide, with the exception of the Iranian Armenian and a few other communities the majority of whose populations are not recent immigrants have been formed as a result of the 1915 Genocide in the Ottoman country. That event has been the cause of the formation of what is now designated as the Armenian diaspora, which accounts for more than half of the total Armenian population (the total number as well as the ratio depending on how being an Armenian is defined). This fact has contributed to the collective sense of injustice and prevalence of strong nationalistic attitudes among all Armenians; independent of how directly or indirectly they were victims or descendants of the genocide. During the Cold War era, the Iranian Armenian community, notwithstanding its closer historical, cultural, linguistic, and geographical ties with mainland Armenia, came to become more closely aligned to, and known to be part of the diaspora. The fall of the Soviet Union and the formation of the independent Republic of Armenia have resulted in resumption of extensive contacts. But the consideration of the Iranian Armenian community as part of the Armenian diaspora has continued to prevail. History, however, shows that the southern part of the Iranian Armenian community: the Parish centered in Esfahan, the one time capital of the Safavid dynasty, has been formed by a similar forced migration resulting in sizeable loss of lives during the reign of Shah Abbas. Centuries of living in Iran has resulted in a strong sense of belonging; paradoxically, stronger than the rest of the Iranian Armenian community that has never experienced the horrors of being forced to migrate and live amid foreign, sometimes hostile, and completely unfamiliar land and people. But any

mention of migratory origin will surely be refuted by the northern part of the Iranian Armenian community, who will point out their aboriginal status in Iran. Although the subcommunity centered in Esfahan (mainly descendants of those that have migrated during the reign of Shah Abbas) and the subcommunity centered in Iranian Azarbeijan (the natives) constitute the two major components of the Iranian Armenian community, there are other smaller components too. Those that have immigrated from the Ottoman Empire after the massacres, those that have immigrated or expelled from Soviet Union, and the Armenian gypsies (Boshas) can, for example, be mentioned. The migration of all the segments of the Iranian Armenian community to Tehran has been another factor in the further integration of those subcommunities. Regarding the diasporical character of the Iranian Armenian community too, history cannot give its confirmation. Throughout history, mainland Armenia has been more often a part of Iran than an independent country. Changes of boundary have constantly changed the character of the Iranian Armenian community. Sometimes Iranian Armenians have constituted territorially concentrated national minority groups governed by autonomous local rulers or satraps. In other times, they have constituted an ethnic group diffused throughout the country that functions as cultural agents facilitating ties between Iran and Armenia. Such a dramatic change happened as a result of the Irano-Russian wars in early nineteenth century that resulted in final defeat for Iran and treaties that ceded the northwestern part of Iran to Russia and extraterritorial rights and population movements. This was the first step towards the cutting of the ties between the Armenians still living in Iran and those Armenians who, through reverse migration or territorial changes, ceased being Iranian citizens. The Soviet revolution and the Cold War in the twentieth century completed this process resulting in the contemporary status for the Iranian Armenian community. A status, reinforced by the movement of the capital to Tehran shortly before the Irano-Russian wars, and high rates of migration among Iranian Armenians from rural to urban areas and from provinces to the capital during the two centuries that resulted in depopulation of the Armenian villages and ethnic quarters in the provincial cities. Cordial Irano-Soviet relations were considered extremely dangerous by the West. It is clear that the capacity of the Iranian Armenian community to act as an agent for the development of such relations had to be curtailed through any means. Even the religious ties were considered too dangerous to be allowed to continue. Iran was to stay in the Western sphere of influence by all means and any cultural contact, no matter how innocent and nonpolitical had to be suppressed. Iranian Armenians should forget their cultural history, especially their role in resisting colonialism, and become integrated in the Western Armenian diaspora resenting Soviet dominance in Armenia and welcoming Western influences and

attitudes. Armenian nationalism, by contrast, after purging its anticolonial elements, was most desirable and could easily be employed against the communist internationalism.

### **3. Multiple Identities**

An important angle for understanding how being a member of a minority group is being felt and handled by an Iranian Armenian is the way possible conflicts between norms and reference models are being resolved in different situations and domains. Existence of different, mutually exclusive standards of conduct is not necessarily a problem only for ethnic minorities. For example, one is supposed to behave very differently in formal interactions than the typical modes of behavior in less formal and more intimate contacts. The ability to know what actions are deemed suitable or improper in any situation constitutes an important part of one's social consciousness. Such a situation is referred to by linguists as diglossia. Charles Ferguson is credited with first using the concept (Ferguson, 1959:325-337). Very briefly, diglossic speech communities have a High variety (H) that is very prestigious and a Low variety (L) with no official status which are in complementary distribution with each other, for instance the High variety might be used for literary discourse and the Low variety for ordinary conversation. One point that Ferguson insisted on was a distinction between diglossia and the more common dialect-standard dichotomy, the difference being that while in the latter situation there are people who actually speak the standard variety; under diglossia no one speaks H colloquially. In other words, there are two complementary standards. Domains of use are compartmentalized, so that under some circumstances the usage of H is more appropriate, while under other circumstances it is the use of L that is considered to be more proper. The varieties differ not only in grammar, phonology, and vocabulary, but also with respect to function, prestige, literary heritage, acquisition, standardization, and stability. L is typically acquired at home as a mother tongue and continues to be so used later on. Its main uses are familial and familiar. H, on the other hand, is learned through a process of formal education and never at home, and is related to institutions outside the home. The separate domains in which H and L are acquired provide them with separate systems of support. Further research on diglossia has focused on a number of important issues: function, prestige, literary heritage, acquisition, standardization, stability, grammar, lexicon, phonology, extent of distribution in space, time, and in various language families, and finally what engenders diglossia and what conditions favor its development. The sustainability of the diglossic situation remains

guaranteed as long as the compartmentalization of domains, situations, or functions that keep the L variety a vernacular mother tongue that continues to be learned at home because that is the proper variety to be spoken at home domain; and endows the H variety with higher prestige so that it will later be acquired via schooling because L is considered inappropriate for "educated" discourses, remains unchallenged. The notion that diglossia could also be used to characterize other multilingual situations where the H and L varieties were not genetically related, was developed by Fishman (Fishman, 1967:29-38). He argues that the relationship between individual bilingualism and societal diglossia is not a necessary or causal one. There is a) both, diglossia and bilingualism, b) diglossia without bilingualism, c) bilingualism without diglossia and d) neither diglossia nor bilingualism. It is widely accepted that multilingual societies having both diglossia and bilingualism are the most stable for all languages involved. The case of the Iranian Armenian community has been investigated (Nercissians, 1985:73-80), (Nercissians, 1997:47-80) and (Nercissians, 2001:59-70). It is the problematic concept of selfhood and the related technologies; however that constitute our main concern. To discuss that broader aspect for the Iranian Armenian community, it is on the one hand necessary to extend the simple diglossia model in linguistics; and on the other hand develop similar models for characterizing multiplicity of modes and norms of appropriateness in other spheres as well. It is not enough to state that as long as certain attitudes of appropriateness continue to exist diglossia will prevail. One needs to go a step further and explain how those attitudes are generated and maintained and why the less prestigious L variety continues to be considered appropriate in corresponding domains. A two dimensional approach to the scientific conceptualization of diglossia suggests that the standards are compared along different axis. The prestige or status dimension gives rise to an overt standard that is formed from above, while the solidarity or identity dimension also leads to a covert standard formed from below. The first standard is proper in domains that are more formal, and therefore does not include the intimate and family domains, and is thus superposed, that is, acquired through schooling (Nercissians, 1988: 55-69). Going another step beyond the simple unilateral model of diglossia occurs with the recognition that it is not necessarily access to the H variety that could distinguish upper and lower classes. A more important and subtle exclusion can result from differential ability to compartmentalize. It has been argued that the ability to compartmentalize the domains, and freely switch between different standards is an index of social dominance (Individuals belonging to disadvantaged groups do not find the option of role compartmentalization open to them. Instead, they must constantly engage in role balancing never fully achieving the expectation level in any of the conflicting dimension (Ritzer,



1988:437-8) and (Nercissians, 2001:59-70). This extended model can be as easily applied to the spheres of cultures, social norms, and identities (Nercissians, 1988:55-67), (Nercissians, 1992) and (Nercissians, 2001:59-70). Studies carried out for the case of Iranian Armenians confirm the existence of bilingualism, biculturalism, diglossia, dinomia, and generally multiple identities with compartmentalization along ethnically determined domain boundaries (diethnia). Identity crisis is generally a main feature of life in Iran. There has always been sizeable emigration from the country; increasing in scale during times of economic hardship, but not diminishing even in times of prosperity. One needs to constantly justify, to himself, and to others, his chosen identity. Given the importance of solidarity oriented ideologies for small ethnic communities, collective identity construction is a major engagement for which all occasions are taken and much energy is spent (Nercissians, 1999) and (Nercissians, 2003:17-8). The "outdoor" self, in the street, workplace, and generally in wider Iranian society, is characterized by its specific norms of appropriateness, which is different from the "indoor" community norms, to become the model in home and other communal domains. The extent this compartmentalization capability is available to the different social classes in Iranian Armenian community, and the detailed historical path from monolingualism and monoculturalism to asymmetric bilingualism and biculturalism; and from role balancing to advanced state of diglossia and dinomia for the Iranian Armenians is a subject for further research. But comparison with other minorities show that the small and closeknit Armenian community in Iran has already passed a long way in this direction (Nercissians 2001: 59-70).

#### **4. History**

The historical relationship between ethnicities that lived in the lands where Persians and Armenians live now, among many other ethnicities, goes back to the days of the Kingdom of Urartu and beyond; when the two ethnicities had yet not been forged. Throughout most of the ancient period, Iran had more influence on Armenia's culture than any of its other neighbours. Intermarriage among the Persian and Armenian nobility was common. The two ethnicities shared many religious, political, and linguistic elements and traditions and, at times, even shared the same dynasty. The rise of the Sasanid dynasty to power in Iran with its assimilatory policies and the Armenian conversion to Christianity, in the fourth century, however, alienated the Armenians from Zoroastrian Iran and oriented them toward the West. A broader analysis can reveal that the geopolitical situation of the Armenian homeland, bridging the Orient to the

West, entails three important consequences. Firstly, most trade routes pass through this region. Secondly, the social system will be affected both by Asiatic mode of production characterized with virtual absence of landed property, high autonomy of urban and rural communities, and political absolutism; as well as by Western succession of ancient and feudal systems. Thirdly, and most importantly, the country will always be the arena for imperial wars between Eastern and Western powers. During the Arshakid period, where a branch of the same dynasty ruled in Armenia most of the time, the Armenian ruling hierarchy favored continuous alliance with Iran and viewed the Roman power centralization tendencies the most threatening. However, the advent of medievalism, coupled with adoption of Zoroastrianism in Iran and Christianity in Armenia and Rome, reversed those sentiments. Even after the fall of the Sassanid Empire and invasion of Iran by successive non-Persian dynasts, the rivalry between Oriental and Occidental Empires continued and successive wars continued to devastate the Armenian homeland. This duality finds its reflection in all aspects of the Armenian history as well as the epic, even mythical reproductions of Armenian heroes' struggles. These narrations always have "davacans" (traitors) alongside the heroes. Every story gives rise to a discussion: who was right? The idealist hero or the pragmatist "davacan"? The epic of Vartan, the Armenian hero who stood against the assimilatory pressures of the Sassanid despot Shahpour, is a good example. So great has been the place of this story in the Armenian historical memory that Vartan has been elevated to sainthood in older times, and has become one of the most important symbols of the Armenian nationalism in modern times. The role of the traitor is played by another Armenian nobleman, Vasak; from the House of Siunik. He seems to be less concerned with preservation of Christianity or fighting against any foreign invader than taking advantage of the fall of the Arshacid dynasty in Armenia and achieving some kind of self rule. He is ready to fight against Iran if necessary, but also to assume a subordinate position with respect to the Iranian thorn and fight against his fellow Armenians if that proves to be more expedient. The epic perhaps occupies such a high position in the collective minds of the Armenians because it is such a central and recurring issue in the history of the Armenian people. It is also typical of a longer cycle of Armenian Epics, which has been designated by Abeghian as the "Persian War" epic (Abeghian, 1899). The war was also reminiscent of another major historical event: The Irano-Ottoman war fought by Shah Abbas, in late medieval era during which the forced migration of Armenians to Esfahan and other cities and villages deep inside Iran occurred. History has not registered the future fate of the migrants and whether an Armenian community has existed in interior Iranian cities or villages for any long period during the Sassanid era. However, there is ample evidence of other forced migrations during

the time span between the two events (Aprahamian, 1964:108). Besides forced migrations, there were also voluntary emigrations to different flourishing urban centers both in Iran and elsewhere by Armenians that reached very massive proportions during the middle and late medieval times. For example, emigration to Cilicia had been so massive and continued for so long as to support the formation of a very strong and long lived Armenian state outside mainland Armenia. Generally, although the contemporary Armenian diaspora has mainly been formed as a result of the Ottoman massacres in late nineteenth century and the 1915 genocide, but that has been superposed on an already existing diaspora that was fairly large and active, and had continued its existence, with periodical declines and renewals, and waves of new migrations throughout centuries. Concerning the existence of Iranian Armenian communities in areas of Iran not immediately adjacent to the Armenian homeland, recent findings in Sultanieh, the Iranian capital during the Mongul rule, attests to the prior existence of an active community long before the Safavid rule. It should be remembered that Armenians both in mainland Armenia and in Cilicia had very intensive economic and political ties with the Monguls. It can be conjectured that other Armenian communities, and especially the one centered in Sultanieh, were also involved in the promotion of East West trade made possible under the Mongol rule. To this, we may add evidence attesting to the very active presence of Armenians in virtually all important mongolian cities (Bedrosian, 1979:85). Returning to the Iranian Armenian community during those times, the importance of the Armenian community in the northwest of Iran should also be emphasized. Armenians, as already have been mentioned, have been native inhabitants in parts of Iran directly adjacent to mainland Armenia. During the times Iran has ruled the whole of Armenia, this whole area can be viewed as a continuum. In other times, the Armenians living in the northwestern part of Iran constitute a separate entity that becomes more integrated with the Iranian Armenian community in Iran's interior parts than with the mainland Armenians. But even that is not an absolute rule considering the difficulties of intercountry contacts and the extent of cross border communications. The cultural achievements of the Armenians in the northwest of Iran during the late medieval era have been considerable. Mkhitar of Her, for example, has been credited for theorizing about infectious diseases when no idea of microbial agents of infection was present in the field of medicine. In his encyclopedic work on fevers, he discussed psychotherapy, surgery, the use of silk thread to close wounds, diet and herbs to cure diseases (Hacikyan & et al., 2002:111). Even in Esfahan, there was a small Armenian community already there before the forced migration of Shah Abbas. Armenia was again an arena for interdynastic wars in the period between the fall of the Mongolian empire and the rise of the Ottoman and Safavid states. The latter Empires continued

that war even more fiercely. It was because of that devastation that some Armenian notables preferred the security of the Persian capital. In the early 15<sup>th</sup> century Armenia was still divided into many small-scale principalities. However, after the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans, most of the Armenian homeland was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire. A large number of Armenians continued to migrate from their devastated lands to Crimea, to Russia, to Poland, to India. As Constantinople became a thriving center of the Ottoman Empire, its Armenian community increased considerably. In early seventeenth century, Shah Abbas I of Persia launched an attack on Ottoman lands, conquered Tabriz, and continued the attack to seize Marand, Nakhichevan, Ordubad, Akulis and Yerevan. From Constantinople, new forces were sent to fight against the Persians. Because of this, Shah Abbas ordered the Armenians to abandon their homes to forego a long and dangerous journey so as to be resettled in distant lands. To enforce his ruling, the Shah commanded his men to burn down the Armenian homes. The entire population was forced to march towards Iran. On their way, the Armenians encountered many obstacles. They had to cross the Araks River. Only the fortunate few successfully made it to the opposite side. The rest died as their bodies floated on the waves of the Araks. It is estimated that between 1604 and 1605 some 250,000 to 300,000 Armenians were removed from the area. Most of the Armenians were eventually settled in Iranian Azerbaijan, where other Armenians had settled earlier. Some ended up in the Guilan and Mazandaran region and in the cities of Sultanieh, Qazvin, Mashhad, Hamadan, Arak, and Shiraz. The wealthy Armenians of Julfa were brought to the Safavid capital of Esfahan. The Julfa community, known for its affluent traders and support of Shah Abbas was accorded special favors and seems to have suffered during the migration. They were settled across the banks of the Zayandeh Rud and a town, called New Julfa, was constructed especially for them. Can we compare this forced migration, which, no doubt, resulted in many deaths, and was carried out, according to eyewitness testimony, most ruthlessly, to the Armenian massacres in the Ottoman lands? The Armenian collective memory seems to have decided negatively. So favorable is the personality of Shah Abbas viewed that several Armenian schools, even today, are named after him. This is paradoxical. Shah Abbas is known in Iranian history as a ruthless tyrant. Although he is credited to have set the way towards glory in Iran, his despotic ways are also said to carry the seeds of the final destruction of the Safavid Empire. Armenians certainly were major victims of his tyrannical policies. Their victimization did not stop after the forced migration waves and continued long after their settlement in foreign lands. To be sure, he did many favors to Armenians as well. Though the favors mostly benefited the upper strata of the Armenians. History is, of course, largely written from the viewpoint of the upper class. But

there may be other reasons why Armenians view him, in general, favorably. The prosperity of the country especially benefited the Armenians. That includes also native Armenians in northwestern part of Iran and in mainland Armenia. The economic boom was long and lasting. Having already settled many Armenians in the Caspian coast, where the best silk in Persia was produced, Shah Abbas decided to take advantage of their experience as traders. The ineptitude of the state appointed silk traders induced the Shah to transfer it to the Armenians, whom he correctly foresaw would have the advantage in having close ties with Armenian communities in Europe. He gave them bales of silk on credit to sell abroad, for which they had to pay on return, allowing them to keep any profit that they could make. Armenians had rights which were denied other minorities. They elected their own mayor, rang church bells, had public religious processions, established their own courts, and had no restrictions on clothing or the production of wine. A small republic was built in the Armenian quarters of the capital. The Armenian mayor was given one of the shah's royal seals in order to bypass the official bureaucracy and the medieval hindrances, and had jurisdiction over the Armenian villages around Esfahan. He collected and paid to the king a poll tax in gold. Soon, the Armenian population of New Julfa and the surrounding villages grew to some 50,000. Sources describe the fabulous houses of the affluent Armenians in New Julfa, decorated with Oriental and Western artwork, with tables set with silver and gold utensils. Ottoman profits from overseas trade fell and Iran became a center of international trade. One of the important benefits of Armenian economic power in Iran was the transformation of the Armenian self-image. After centuries of repression by foreign invaders, Armenians were granted equal and at times even greater privileges than ordinary citizens of the Empire. This increased prestige extended to the Church as well, and enabled the leaders at Etchmiadzin, The Armenian Holy See, to regain some control over outlying dioceses and communities and to establish ties with the patriarchs of Constantinople and Jerusalem. The increased prestige and granted advantages also allowed a number of Armenian secular leaders to achieve recognition and to rally support. This was particularly true of the noble landowners of Karabagh and Zangezur who, under the patronage of the shahs, the Church, and the Armenian merchants, retained and expanded their ancestral fiefdoms. The boom lasted till the fall of the Safavid dynasty. In 1722 a small body of Afghan tribesmen won a series of easy victories before entering and taking the capital itself, ending Safavid rule. A period of anarchy and a struggle for supremacy among Afshar, Qajar, Afghan, and Zand tribal chieftains devastated the economy and was made life unbearable especially for the Armenian community in New Julfa. Many emigrated to India, Russia, Europe, and many other countries especially where Armenian communities that could support continuation of

trade activities already existed. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Armenian community centered in Esfahan continued to play a leading role in the Armenian diaspora through ties with exterritorial community members who found ample grounds for sustained economic and cultural development in those other countries never weakening the contact with New Julfa. But the situation in the center itself continued to decline. Finally, the epicenter of the Armenians' economic and cultural development started shifting towards the Ottoman Empire, and later to Russia. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the Armenian community in Esfahan had completely lost its leading role and with the loss of mainland Armenia to the Russian Empire, the advent of Tehran, the new capital of Iran, as the main cultural and economic center of the country, and the isolation of Iran in the international arena, both the northern and the southern sections of the Iranian Armenian community had lost all their significance internationally, in terms of their ability to have any impact upon other Armenian communities in other countries, and even in terms of their impact in Iran. The Armenian community in Tehran, on the other hand, was continuously increasing in size, and becoming an important force in Iran's renovation. The stabilization of the political situation in Iran due to the ascent of the Quajar dynasty at the beginning of the nineteenth century and reunification of Iran put a stop to the rapid dissolution of the country's fabric. The situation started to improve for the Iranian Armenian community. Soon it regained its importance in the Iranian civil setting. However, its capability to exert strong influence on other countries and communities was irreversibly gone. This mainly reflected the fact that Iran was quickly becoming a virtual colony. Although it never became a direct colony of any Western state, its politics was clearly being manipulated by European Colonial powers especially England and Russia.

## **5. Trade**

The strategic geographical location of Armenia between Asia and Europe has predetermined, in a great degree, the character of the country's main economic activity. Armenia's involvement in the international trade since the ancient era was primarily stipulated by this factor. The constant wars and population movements leading to the establishment of thriving Armenian diaspora also facilitated the role of Armenians in the East West trade. In the post-Islamic period, the establishment of independent Armenian statehood in Armenia and later in Cilicia witnessed a renaissance in trade, art, architecture, translations, church and secular

literature, and scientific studies. The fall of the Armenian kingdoms and the defeat of the Byzantines by the Seljuks at the battle of Manzikert in Armenia brought the country under Seljuk rule. The devastating Mongol invasion soon followed. However, the Armenian elites eventually prospered under the Mongols, serving as agents and engaging in international trade via the newly secured routes through Central Asia to India and China. Moreover, friendly relations developed between the Mongols and the Armenian nobility in Cilicia as well as in mainland Armenia. This led to the establishment of Armenian communities in Iran and in other lands under Mongol rule. Sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries were the golden ages of the Armenian commercial capital. In this period Armenian merchants, in fact, did not have any competitors on caravan routes passing through lands where medieval rulers exerted local power. Meanwhile, with their own ships Armenian merchants were also involved in international maritime trade throughout the warm seas. After the establishment of the Armenian community in New Julfa, and the granting of trading privileges and a monopoly on the silk trade to the Armenian merchants, the community was transformed into a rich and influential one and the city into a main center of trade between Iran and Europe. Interest-free loans were granted to the Armenians to start businesses and light industries. Soon a major part of Iran's trade with Europe, Russia, and India was handled by the Armenians with the shah's protection. Soon they had outbid the British on the silk monopoly. The New Julfa merchants formed trading companies which competed with the Levant, East India, and Muscovy companies, and established businesses in Kabul, Herat, Qandahar, Marseilles, Venice, Genoa, Moscow, and Amsterdam, and in cities of Sweden, Poland, Germany, India, China, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The Iranian kings used to visit New Julfa and be entertained at the houses of the most successful merchants, known as *khojas*, whom the silk monopoly had made extremely rich. The exercise of the silk monopoly proved to be profitable to both parties. The Armenians acquired a reputation for diligence and thrift, and the trade provided the necessary capital for the development of a complex ethnically based network stretching from the Far East to Europe, with Julfa at the centre. There were merchants in Tonkin, Siam, Java and the Philippines, and in many towns in India, and among the commodities shipped from the East to Persia were cotton goods, musk, spices, and Chinese porcelain. Most commodities were exported from Persia overland through Tabriz, Erzerum, and Aleppo to Smyrna, where they were shipped across the Mediterranean to Venice, Leghorn, Marseilles, or other ports. In Europe they sold by the same ethnic network of merchants in Holland, France, England, Italy, Germany, Poland, and Sweden, and Armenians from Julfa are recorded as far away as Spain. An alternative overland route was developed through Russia to the North Sea, from Tabriz to

Nosava, across the Caspian Sea, to Astrakhan, Moscow, and Archangel, from whence it continued to Holland, Stockholm, and England (Carswell, 1968:73). The term "trade diaspora" was coined by Abner Cohen to refer to a nation of socially interdependent, but spatially dispersed communities (Cohen, 1971:266-281). His later theorization led to the distinction between a trade diaspora and a victim diaspora. The latter could, in time be converted to the former. Similarly, the concept of trade network was posited by Markovits to designate a trade network is that consists of a nodal center and a cluster of dispersed points around it, connected both to each other and to the center (Markovits, 2003:249). These points or stations are connected to each other and to the center through what Markovits calls the "circulation of men and things". At least five circulations, according to the theory, are involved: a) merchants, b) credit, c) goods, d) information (on market conditions, trade secrets, etc.) and e) women. The latter two circulate exclusively within the network while others circulate in other coexisting networks as well. Both definitions are true for the Armenian trade community. Their intermarriage, ethnic contacts, common cultural background, craving for education and knowledge, etc. were all important factors. Three main reasons cited for their success were the social capital characterized by very high level of mutual trust and institutions that oversaw trade ethics; the incredibly rapid propagation of information (Some of the major family firms in Julfa had their own corps of shatters: runner-messengers who delivered mail across very long distances) and command of business and general knowledge; and use of a most efficient financial credit system that was far ahead of their times (Aslanian, 2004:37-100). The expansion of trade activities in India and the Far East happened at the same time that European colonialism supported by the full military and political might of the corresponding states was increasingly being extended within the same geographic space. Not only did all attempt by the big European powers to outperform the Iranian Armenian community, even during the worst period of the decline of the latter, prove unsuccessful, but the expansion of the latter into spheres of influence of the mightiest colonial powers was taking place despite the fiercest resistance, employment of the full military power, influence of the diplomatic and religious and missionary institutions, even direct piracy and breaking their own laws by Western states and rising economic entities like the East India Company. (Bhattacharya, 2005:277) and (Aslanian, 2004:37-100). By the 17th and 18th centuries, Armenian merchant-trading communities had successfully expanded themselves from their center in Esfahan to Portuguese Goa (India), English Calcutta, pre-colonial Myanmar and the ports of Java and the Malay Peninsula (particularly Malacca), the Spanish Philippines and colonized Ceylon (Sri Lanka), among many other emerging trade centers. The mercantile European East Indian trading companies and



colonial authorities viewed The Armenian trading communities as their most formidable enemies in late 18th century. When they could not outwit and outgun their Armenian rivals, they decided to join them by concluding treaties that would gradually replace rivalry and war with mutual cooperation that would bring about mutual benefit. Not only did the Iranian Armenian notables embark on international missions and journeys as envoys and ambassadors of Iran in European courts, and conversely, as envoys representing European countries in Iranian courts, and conclude treaties of great international significance, but they also concluded treaties with the greatest Western Imperial powers, including Russia and Great Britain; not once, but on several occasions, on behalf of their own. It is, perhaps, a unique case in modern international history where a small and stateless community can deal single handedly with strong Imperial forces. To compete against their might, the community had to take full advantage of whatever alternative means of exerting power, civil societies could furnish. The Iranian Armenian community developed very efficient postal system, high social capital, most effective credit system, as well as strong institutions for dissemination of information, knowledge creation, and cultural development. Furthermore, it secured the active support of the state institutions of their host societies in defense of their transnational interests. By late nineteenth century, however, active rivalry with the West had all but ended. The economic as well as direct military wars fought by the Armenians against the French, Russians, and especially against the British in India and elsewhere had become a thing of the past. Security in Iran had once again been established. The West had found it more beneficial to utilize the Armenian nationalism in pursuance of its own interests. Armenian communities outside Iran were becoming stronger and ties with the Iranian Armenian community were breaking. The mercantile age had been replaced by the industrial era. Iran was increasingly becoming economically dependent upon the West. The glory of the Merchant community centered in Esfahan had thus come to an end.

## **6. Culture and Arts**

The Iranian Armenian community could already boast of important cultural achievements before the forced migration at the time of Shah Abbas. The return of the Armenian religious center to Eastern Armenia during the reign of Ghara Ghoyunlus, a dynasty that ruled the northwestern part of Iran after the fall of Mongols but before the advent of the Safavids, reflected the gradual shift of the epicenter of the Armenian culture to the East. As soon as the

community in Esfahan was established, a medieval university was found alongside the religious center in the city, where the next generation of the Armenian cultural elites, who were to lead not only the community in Esfahan, but also other Armenian communities in Iran and elsewhere, were educated. The establishment of a printing house not too long after its discovery by Guttemberg, by a victim community that has only recently been established, is a unique event in the history of the Middle East. As trade became the major source for the prosperity of the community, a secular school with a curriculum that could be considered the medieval equivalent of MBA was also established in New Julfa. Between the mid-seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the Perso-Indian community of Armenians had bankrolled the nascent craft of Armenian printing industry in many cities in Europe, the Middle East, and India. The books that were published in those printing houses were so numerous had so high circulation that make contemporary researchers wonder how such a high readership was obtainable in those days. The community had also patronized Catholic missionaries in Iran and other countries and assisted in the formation of a community of Armenian Catholics, known as the Mekhitarist Order, whose linguistic and literary activities left a major impact on the development of Armenian culture. This same Perso-Indian community had financed the establishment of schools of higher education in Venice, Paris, New Julfa, Moscow, and Calcutta some of which continue to function even today. In the field of arts, the achievements of the Iranian Armenian community were also spectacular. I have argued elsewhere (Nercissians, 2007:20-2) that in some domains like painting, the conceptualization of the modernization process in Iranian arts needs to be seriously revised, considering the art history of the Armenian community in Esfahan. The transitional period from manuscript illumination to canvas painting, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, has not been adequately analyzed by the Art historians. Frescoes, painted altar curtains, ceramics, and canvas paintings are still preserved in churches and the homes of the wealthy in New Julfa. A transition from conventional medieval forms to new realistic forms and means of expression was made during this period. Parallel to miniatures and murals, new forms and genres of art developed: easel painting, portraiture, life scenes from daily experiences of ordinary people, and landscape painting. Among artists we know by name are Minas, a legendary painter of New Julfa in Iran, and Ter Stepanos, also from New Julfa, responsible for both manuscript illuminations from the mid-seventeenth century as well as large paintings in the Cathedral of New Julfa. Better known among the native segment of the Iranian Armenian community, are the members of the Hovanatian family, whose frescoes grace the walls of eastern Armenia churches and whose portraits of upperclass Armenians are the pride of museums in Erevan and Tiflis. Hakob

Hovnatanian, a member of that family, created highly professional portraits of his contemporaries which are prominent for their profound psychological expressiveness. The beginning of the modernization process in Iranian painting should be dated back for more than a century, considering the works of those Artists and others like Hovannes Mrkuz and Bogdan Saltanov. The wealthy merchants, artisans, and generally, the elites in the Iranian Armenian community were the main consumers of that new type of art. No longer did the painters need the patronage of the king or the noblemen or clergy. The merchants of New Julfa and other cities in Iran eventually had to give way to newer representatives of capital. But the Iranian Armenians never stopped to be agents of modernization in Iran especially in the sphere of fine arts. From architecture to music, theatre, and other art domains, Iranian Armenians were always part of the vanguard. Their high level of urbanization, increased international contact, ethnic ties with other Armenian communities, and fine integration in larger Iranian society provided them with the prerequisites for playing that role. Their contribution is also highly appreciated by their Iranian compatriots of different ethnicity.

## **7. Concluding Remarks**

In her study of the role of Iranian Armenians in the constitutional revolution of Iran, Berberian starts with the following remarks (Berberian, 2005:279-296). "Nationalist historiography has viewed Iranian-Armenian identity as exclusively and unchangingly Armenian, with little if any multiplicity. Nationalist Armenian historiography has presented Iranian-Armenians as foremost and primarily Armenian with only secondary, and therefore, less significant, attachments to Iran. In a similar manner, nationalist Iranian historiography has dealt with the Iranian-Armenians as an ethnically and religiously different minority and has neglected to recognize their role in the formation of Iranian national identity. By placing the focus on a Perso-Muslim identity of Iran, it has for the most part failed to acknowledge minority, in this case Armenian, perspectives and identities not because they necessarily opposed Iranian nationalist ideals, but because they challenged along with other Iranians an exclusive, homogeneous concept of Iran". To this observation, I can add the dominant ideology of the industrial era: the nation-state paradigm, which has influenced also international historiography; and even the collective historical memory of the Iranian Armenian community itself. To refute the single identity view, Berberian analyzes the well documented and very active involvement of the Iranian Armenian community, and especially its intellectuals, in the

most important social movement of the country at the beginning of the twentieth century. It can be said that far from being unconcerned or alienated, the Iranian Armenians were in vanguard position in the process of forging the modern Iranian identity, actively engaged and playing leading roles not only in cultural sphere, but also in the sociopolitical sphere of revolutionary action. The examination of the role of Armenians in the constitutional revolution in Iran shows that many of the leading intellectuals went beyond diethnia in their outlooks, and were inspired by internationalistic and humanistic concerns. Although the roots of the Armenian nationalism can be traced back to eras long before the advent of the modern era, it became dominant ideology gradually from nineteenth century and especially during the twentieth century. History books examine, in great detail, the attempts by intellectual leaders like Israel Ori to instigate Armenian "national liberation movement" with the help of the West, and the actual liberation movement that took place in Gharabagh, where the Armenian landed aristocracy still existed, led by David Beg. The trading communities of Agoulis and other cross boundary cities, who opposed that movement are considered traitors (davacans) again. Nationalistic historiography laments the prevailing diversity in the Armenians' sociopolitical attitudes and stances. If only all Armenians would adhere to (their own particular brand of) nationalism! But the majority opinion in the Iranian Armenian community, even when the central power in Iran had collapsed and they were threatened with the constant harassment and repressions by different Iranian warlords, and then with occupation and possible massacres by Ottoman invaders, was less concerned with the ethnic belonging of the political power, and more interested in the extent that central power could guarantee safety for their lives and properties, and oversee economic prosperity. To be sure, medieval governments especially in the Orient were all despotic. And all pretexts, including ethnic and religious differences could become excuses for repressions. But it made no sense to be solely concerned with the ethnic factor. The ethnic element in the Ottoman Empire might have been very important, because it was the main underlying factor for sustaining the dominance of the Ottoman rulers. The situation was very different in Iran. The dominant Persian ethnicity, during the course of pre-modern and modern history, seldom enjoyed political dominance as well. Iran was ruled, most of the time, by nomadic dynasts that did not belong to the Persian ethnicity. It was the cultural dominance of the Persians that ensured the successive Persianization of the courts of foreign invaders. Like their Persian compatriots, the Iranian Armenians were not afraid of cultural competition. As long as they could rely upon their cultural knowledge and ability to engage in productive economic activity, they knew that they would eventually outwit the invading rulers. Only the triumph of Western Imperialism, and the cultural subordination of the Orient could pave the

way for the nationalistic ideology. One can contrast the profile of Israel Ori, prototypical for the nationalistic aspirations, with that of Philippe de Zagly, an Iranian Armenian known also as Emamgholi Beg. The latter is a forgotten figure in contemporary historiography. Unlike Israel Ori, he conducted his diplomatic discussions and political deals from a position of strength. He could present himself as a representative of a strong government and he was asked to act as envoy by both the Iranian government and several Western states. But he concluded treaties that challenged the collective might of the European powers, led by the French government, in the name not of a government but of the Iranian Armenian community. The treaties ensured the continued access of the community traders to European markets and defeated all efforts by the new colonial powers to leverage their political might for taking control of the international trade through concessions obtained from Oriental despots. It was the collective strength furnished by both his Iranian and Armenian identities that Emamgholi Beg could draw upon. And it was the weakness of the last king of the Safavid dynasty that undermined his efforts. Two further things might be added to these observations. Firstly, the strength of the two identities is complementary. The Iranian and Armenian sides of the communal identity should not be viewed as independent entities across which compartmentalization should take place, rather, one draws upon the other; and the demise of one undermines the other. Secondly, the two identities should collectively as well as individually draw upon other identities that the community might lay claim to. The collective strength of all ethnic communities giving rise to Iranian society, combined with all Armenian communities, in mainland as well as in diaspora, together with their commonalities with other communities in the international arena constitutes the basis upon which Iranian Armenians can draw in order to forge the ideal communal identity. These components need by no means be conflict-free. The diversity of the subidentities is itself a source of richness and vitality rather than a weakness. The Iranian Armenian community, far from being quickly assimilated by stronger colonizing identities, could not only survive, but also assume leading position especially after catastrophic events like the forced migration enforced by Shah Abbas. How could that be possible? The important role played by the Iranian Armenian community in forging modern Iranian as well as Armenian identities is not only a most interesting subject for investigation and theorization by itself, but also, the resolution of that dilemma can perhaps shed light upon sources upon which all civil societies can draw upon so as to emancipate themselves from political power. It can be argued that the very displacement of the Armenians as well as their minority Status placed them in a position allowing them to play important role in the modernization process in Iran (Rogers, 1995:3-36). Theoretical constructs like "trade diaspora" and "trade network" have

already been discussed. To these one should add Tölölyan's concept of "diasporic public sphere" to explain how stateless powers can play important national and international roles (Tölölyan's, 1996:36-8). Although it is true that the reproduction of identities in conditions of diaspora required more than informal organizations of ethnic minorities, I wish to emphasize the civil rather than political nature of the Iranian Armenian community, as well as its grounding on Iranian society. A semi-formal arbitrage institution similar to an Assembly of Merchants would certainly be useful in maintaining high levels of social capital. But it could not possibly be the key factor which enabled Julfan merchants to generate and maintain trust, trustworthiness, and uniform norms necessary for cooperation and collective action (Aslanian, 2004:37-100). The community in Julfa had no shortage of internal conflicts. Differing cosmovisions have always been a part of the Iranian Armenian cognitive structure. The most important theoretical grounding for description of how a displaced minority community can play an important role in spread of innovation and social, cultural, and economic modernization can be provided by the concept of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983:99-103). Rather than being sign of pathology, schizophrenia can be viewed as a liberation strategy. Multiplicity of identities is a process that deconstructs the totality associated with the "self", frees the subject, and creates a flux that overcomes all barriers and codes. To quote Haraway: "if we learn how to read these webs of power and social life, we might learn new couplings, new coalitions. There is no way to read the following list from a standpoint of 'identification', of a unitary self. The issue is dispersion. The task is to survive in the diaspora" (Haraway, 1991:63-81).

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