

# "WE DON'T HAVE CAPITALISM...WE HAVE KINSHIP": THE STATE, THE FAMILY, AND THE EXPRESSION OF ARMENIAN IDENTITY.

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Approaches to kinship and the extended family in the former Soviet Union sometimes have been functional, emphasizing the utility of private connections in an otherwise harsh and bureaucratic environment. The family and the home have been sometimes considered a locus of "resistance" against the Soviet state, particularly with respect to ethnic minorities; where structural, binary oppositions have characterized the relationship between the home and the state, such as public/private; formal/informal; official/unofficial; traditional/modern; national/soviet; etc. However, in the course of fieldwork in the newly independent Republic of Armenia, I observed that the relationship between the extended family and the state in the articulation of ethnic identity is dynamic, multidirectional, and often, ambivalent. Armenian kinship is authoritative not only in shaping individual identities, but also in domestic affairs and the interpretation of events. Kinship may be invoked as a symbol of national survival, or as an impediment to personal achievement, economic development, and independent statehood. Used as a symbol of national character, the extended family is polyvalent in discourse on Armenianness; sometimes being seen in opposition to, or as constitutive of the nation-state itself.

In *The Impact of Soviet Policy in Armenia*, Mary Kilbourne Matossian describes the ways in which Communist policy in the 1920s sought to "weaken the exclusive claims of family...loyalty" through the organization of social clubs among the working class and through the emancipation of women (1962: 59). Considered a "traditional foci for conservative resistance to the new Communist regime... Communists regarded the family as a 'backward institution,' and attempted to appropriate kin- or clan-based power by legislating against arranged marriages, family vendettas in the punishment of crime, and the transferal of some kinds of private property" (1962:63). By giving women equal rights in inheritance, the right to divorce, and political representation through the Women's Division of the Communist Party (*Kinbazhin*), the early Soviet government attempted to supplant patriarchal authority and to eradicate patrilineal structure in Armenian society.

Thus, the attribution of resistance to flourishing kinship networks in the Soviet Union can be traced to early Communist ideology and practice in the case of Armenia.

Yet, while kinship, as an institution, may be essentially conservative and "resistant," kinship networks may also be consciously manipulated by individuals to subvert the authority of state institutions. In her study of rural families in the neighboring Republic of Georgia, Tamara Dragadze demonstrates the latter view, by illustrating the ways in which Georgians "use" traditional values "to economic and administrative advantage" within the Soviet state (1988: 203):

Obligations towards kin are many, but they are most frequently maintained among villagers and city dwellers for the purpose of obtaining food, residence permits, recommendations, help with permissions, and so forth in the same way as is maintained among members of the same domestic unity. The same applies among kin in the villages, and therefore people maintain a lively interest in kinship ties. The difference between kin and non-kin is perceived as being manifested through one set of people whom one can trust and rely on, whose identity is dynamically linked with one's own and, on the other hand, the set of all other people who are non-kin, whose responses are unpredictable, as is the 'outside world' in which they are located (1988:105).

In this functional view, kinship provides a vehicle for "the promotion of individual...interests," and networks are valued and maintained in part because they provide an infrastructure for the circumvention of state authority and institutions (1988: 172). While no doubt these and converse manipulations (in which state institutions are manipulated for the benefit of the family) proliferate, attention to their utility and directionality obfuscates the associative and polysemic ways in which notions of kinship, nation, and state may intersect in practice.

Examination of patrilocal residence practices in Armenia today illuminates the complex interrelation of kinship with the experience and expression of ethno-national

identity. Armenian families have been traditionally patri-virilocal, meaning that a man's wife, children, and sometimes, grandchildren, reside with him in his parents' home. As a family grows in size, elder sons may begin to move away when they have younger brothers at home, but the youngest son is generally obligated to remain in and inherit the parental homestead. The compelling nature of this tradition is illustrated by the example of an only son, who moved away from his parents, to a nearby town, where he had received an apartment from the state, in connection with his employment. He explains that his father's friends and neighbors disapprove of his actions. In his words, "they think I am a bad son because I don't live with my father, and gossip that we must have fought with each other. But we have to keep the apartment that we were given in the town, so our children can inherit it. We have three children, and only our youngest will inherit his grandfather's home!" Similarly, this young man's grandmother lives with her own youngest son, (his uncle,) in relative poverty, whereas she could live with her eldest son (his father), in relative comfort. When I asked why she doesn't move to the home of her eldest son, she explained that it would be "shameful" (*amot*) for her to leave the home of her now-deceased husband and mother in law, into which she married as a teen. Sentiments such as these are prevalent in Armenia today, and consequently, the vast majority of residences are multigenerational, including three or four generations. Living arrangements provided by the state may be accepted, but are likely to be adopted, as in the case above, with reference to patrilocal customs.

Many practices associated with patrilocality, are considered by Armenians to be characteristic of their own ethno-national (*azgayin*) culture. For example, ritual elements of traditional marriage practices emphasize the transferal of a bride's membership from her natal to her nuptial home, such as the dressing of the bride by female members of the groom's family; partial, ritual enactments of bride abduction; and ritual visitation of the bride by her relatives in her new home (known *asglouxa laval*). The procession of a "traditional" wedding, may be accompanied by cars decorated with Armenian flags or papers and ribbons colored to resemble the national flag, and toasts may be made honoring Armenian soldiers fighting in Karabagh, or praising the "Armenianness" of the wedding itself. In moments such as these, symbols of patri-lineage or clan (*azg*) commingle with symbols of

nationhood and statehood in the representation of family identity.

The contemporary institution of patrilocality extends beyond its ritual representation in weddings and other transitional moments, into morality, humor, and self-definition. In a multigenerational, patrilocal household, younger men are prohibited from smoking in the presence of their fathers or grandfathers. It may be said of a young man who violates this customary signification of respect for age and authority that he "isn't Armenian" (*hay chi*), by which is meant that he does not recognize his proper place in the social world. Conversely, a young married woman may complain to her friends that her authoritative husband or father-in-law is an "authentic Armenian," meaning that he is patriarchal. Conformity to stereotypes of patriarchy and patriliney is varied, but behavior is evaluated - both positively and negatively - with reference to these concepts.

The multigenerational household itself is central to daily life (*kentsagh*), and to Armenians' descriptions of themselves, as explained by a divorced woman in her forties, who laments the loss of her husband. She says,

In civilized countries, when people get married, they move away from their parents and live free (*azad*). In Armenia, we aren't civilized, and we are children, living with our parents until we are already old. My mother died last year after being sick for ten years. Now I am alone. But we [Armenians] are a very close people. Armenians are very close to each other. When young people get married, they can't live alone, because it is too difficult for them. They have to live together because their hearts are very close. We Armenians are very close to each other, and we help each other.

In the same utterance, she reveals the necessity of kinship and the extended family for Armenians, as well as her opinion that co-residence practices are "uncivilized." Such ambivalence about the simultaneous necessity and "backwardness" of extended family living is supported by quantitative data recently gathered by an Armenian sociologist who found that 94.2% of Armenians said they needed family for happiness and success, while individuals polled ranked family as the second largest obstacle to success after the state (Poghossian 1993:7-9).

The state (*bedutyun*), like the family, is polyvalent in the Armenian context, sometimes signifying bureaucracy or

irrationality, and other times signifying quality and authority. In daily discourse, many Armenians do not distinguish between the former Soviet state, and the new, independent Armenian state when referring to the state's bureaucratic institutions. This is partly because many offices and officials have remained unchanged, but is also because the experience of a repressive, inefficient Soviet government has shaped opinion and intuition about the state as an abstraction. The term "state" (*bedutyun* or *bedagan*) may be used to encompass meanings ranging from "not private," to "official," or even "bad." Similarly, the independent categories of government, party, state, and bureaucracy are conflated by the use of the single word for state (*bedutyun*). Thus, if a food product is called "state" (*bedagan*) it is likely that the speaker implies that it is bad or of inferior quality, unless it is a dairy product, in which case "state" would indicate that it is pasteurized, and therefore, safe. "State" information might be considered reliable, as might state-made machinery, or "state" transportation, which is also cheaper. Most often, the adjectival form of the word, "state" (*bedagan*) is contrasted with the terms for "home" or "homemade" (*dnagan*) and "private" (*sepagan*). Generally, the positive or negative implications of the term must be understood from context.

The same woman who defined "uncivilized" Armenian closeness earns some income as a private seamstress. Examining an article of clothing, she exclaims "it's good...it's state-made." By this, she means that it is sturdy and well-made, and that it will be a shame to mend it with her own hand-stitching. Yet moments later, she evokes an opposing image of the state, criticizing its efficiency and its economic reforms. Since the chemical plant in which she had worked for fifteen years closed, she is unable to find employment. This, she attributes to the small size of her family, and the fact that she lacks contacts or "protection": "we don't have capitalism," she says, "we only have kinship." In one sense, she faults the family for corrupting the state: at the same time, she faults the state for corrupting the family. Her ambivalence towards the state overlaps her ambivalence towards the "uncivilized" family.

We can clearly see the practical convergence of the state and the family, again in the arena of marriage, where a standard, state ritual constitutes family membership. The registration of marriage with the state is often the only official union in Armenia, where until Glasnost, people

infrequently married in the church. An actual marriage generally consists of the bride's coming to live in the groom's home, and the wedding party. In Soviet times, couples frequently married in this way, and did not legally register their marriage until just prior to the birth of the first child. Delayed registration served the triple purpose of distancing the bureaucratic state apparatus from family affairs, preventing the birth of "illegitimate" children, and offering the option of common law divorce in case the bride did not become pregnant. In this context, registry officials are infamous for being uncooperative and bureaucratic, making obstacles for those who try to evade rules, and taking bribes in a moment which, most agree, should be sacred.

When an acquaintance of mine attempted to obtain his marriage license from the state registry office (ZAGS) shortly before the birth of his first child, he was met with stubborn refusal for days on end, regardless of his efforts. In exasperation, he enlisted his brother to plea on his behalf. After encountering the same obstinacy his brother went to the regional secretary, superseding the registry clerk. He greeted this official, and told her, he had a small but very painful problem. After he had gained the woman's sympathy, she told him to wait one week, and then return to the registry office, saying that he was "Sarkisian's relative." The next week, he returned to the registry office, representing himself thus. The clerk asked him, "why didn't you tell me you were Sarkisian's relative?" and registered his brother's marriage within the day.

This episode, presented to me as a narrative of the "Armenian way" (*haygagan tsev*), describes the subtle domination of the family over the state, the state over the family, and the state over the state, or the family over the family: however it is configured, it reveals the interpenetration of categories (or *modus operandi*) of the family and the state. Interceding on behalf of his brother and masquerading as the relative of an official with a state clerk, on the advice of a state clerk, the young man achieves his goal through a process of negotiation in which the state and the family are equal factors. In cases such as this, the state and the family are each used as metaphors, in terms of which the other can be configured. The state and the family are different tropes for styles of communication, the distinctive interaction of which is felt by actors, to be particularly Armenian.

I have not explored exhaustively the many facets of the relationship between notions of kinship and the state in Armenia. Rather, I have argued that in the Armenian case, neither the family nor the state exists in simple, functional relation to the other. Despite Soviet era efforts to eradicate patriarchy and patrilineal structure in Armenian society, elements of traditional kinship persist as characteristics by which people identify themselves as Armenians. Kinship pervades state structure, as much as the state has pervaded the family, and I suggest that *ambivalence* about the "civilization" of the family and about the familiarity of the state indicates the depth of their conjunction in the experience and expression of Armenianness.

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