

Arda Arsenian Ekmekji

An Armenian-Lebanese Academician Recounts

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Arda Ekmekji is an Armenian Lebanese scholar living in Beirut. Born in Jerusalem, Ekmekji lived in Jordan until 1968 after which she came to Lebanon to enroll in the American University of Beirut (AUB). She holds a BA in Ancient History and an MA in Archaeology from the AUB. She also has a Ph.D. in Archeology from the University of Paris I (Sorbonne). Ekmekji served as a faculty member at AUB for around two decades teaching Cultural Studies, Ancient Religions and Civilizations as well as Archaeology. She then moved to Haigazian University in 1997. She began as Director of the Faculty of Humanities and since 1998 has served as Dean of Arts and Sciences at Haigazian University.

Ekmekji recounts that her family fled to Palestine due to the ethnic cleansing of Armenians that took place at the beginning of the century in Turkey. She recounts: "Thousands of Armenians fled to Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt and Iraq." Ekmekji asserts that even though she is ethnically Armenian she feels very Lebanese and admits that culturally she is very Arab because she has been living in Lebanon for the past 35 years. She asserts: "I think I have lived in Lebanon more than I have lived any where else in my life. I feel very Lebanese and part of the system. I strongly believe that when you live

through a war and then peace in the same county that counts for something." Ekmekji admits that most Armenians living in Lebanon consider themselves Lebanese. "Lets face it, we are very much part and parcel of the local fabric. We have no anxieties regarding not knowing where we are or where we belong. We feel we belong here, that is why we never thought of leaving Lebanon during the war years. We lived the hardships of the war just like our Lebanese next-door neighbors. We were threatened by the same bombs, endured the same misfortunes."

On living in Lebanon Ekmekji continues that the Lebanese system accommodates everyone. The multi-cultural makeup of the Lebanese society is what is distinctive about Lebanon, she admits. Moreover, the fact that the system in Lebanon is based on 19 denominations with religious representation makes all the difference. Ekmekji explains: "In Lebanon you are born, you get married, get divorced, inherit, die and are buried based on your religious sect. Things happen first at the religious level unlike the West where matters are settled at the civic level. In this part of the world religion is not an option, without a religious passport you can't do much. Hence, the fact that you are an Armenian living in Lebanon does not

imply that you are an outsider. On the contrary, you are seen as belonging to one of the 19 different equally balanced and accordingly proportioned denominations that make up the Lebanese society. Therefore you are given your own little niche and you do whatever you want as long as it is permissible.”

However, Ekmekji admits that despite the fact that Armenians are well integrated in the Lebanese system and have adopted it as their own in certain aspects, they still prioritize the Armenian culture first and foremost. Armenians, in an attempt not to forget their Armenian heritage have founded their own institutions in Lebanon such as schools, universities, academic centers, churches, etc., which cater to Armenian cultural and educational needs. Given that the Armenians have lost a lot of their heritage due to the Armenian exodus, they strive to preserve what is left of their culture. She admits: “We are burdened in a sense because we are fighting a number of battles. On the one hand we want to preserve our Armenian heritage and on the other we want to fit into the Lebanese culture. Our children are expected to learn the language and familiarize themselves with Armenian culture.

Ekmekji goes on to explain that Armenians living in Lebanon do not face any restrictions. She admits: “In Lebanon no one says we can’t speak Armenian or found our own institutions or have our own church, or teach Armenian. Had we been living in a country where we are not allowed to even mention that we are Armenian, that would have been traumatic.” However she acknowledges the fact that Armenians are stereotyped by the Lebanese: “If you are an Armenian you are supposed to eat Basterma, speak broken Arabic and live in Bouj Hammoud.” Ekmekji explains that the reason why Armenians, when speaking Arabic, mix genders is because the Armenian language is gender neutral. “Our grammar has no feminine and masculine and I think that is very indicative of the way we think. Our minds fail to differentiate between masculine and feminine objects.”

Ekmekji continues: “My identity is extremely rich. Being an archeologist I think of myself as down town Beirut with all its layers, namely the Byzantine level, the Roman level, the Greek level, etc. When I think of myself I have all these levels which are extremely rich in my culture. Given that both my parents are Armenian, I feel very Armenian, I appreciate the Armenian culture and speak

the Armenian language and this is one important layer of my personality. The fact that I am Armenian is like the cherry on the cake, it never slowed me down. Another enriching layer is due to the fact that I was born in Jerusalem and lived there till the age of 17. Besides, having lived all my adult mature life in Lebanon, I have an enormous layer which is Lebanese. Also there are all the other sub-layers that come in like being exposed to the American system of education, the American and the French. Besides, being engaged in academia, in voluntary work through various NGOs, being a member of various committees, belonging to the Armenian evangelical church, etc. Ekmekji affirms that these multi-faceted layers that form her identity have added spice to her life. “Being able to shift gears between all these different layers is vital and enriching. It does not affect me negatively or make me feel schizophrenic. On the contrary, I think its very boring to hear an orchestra playing on one string. If you can play on a number of different strings you will get nicer music provided you can blend the sounds properly.”

According to Ekmekji, what unifies Armenians is the Armenian culture and language. She recounts that she once attended an International Armenian women’s gathering in which there were around 200 Armenian women from all over the world and the only common denominator between all these women was that they were Armenian. Yet culturally they differed intensely. “What is common between an Armenian women brought up in Tehran, a second brought up in Los Angeles, and a third brought up in Lebanon? When they get together there is

only the Armenian culture and heritage that binds them. However, in terms of modes of dress, mentality, and ways of thinking one is typically Iranian the other is typically American and the third typically Lebanese. How I think, vote, the way I dress are all influenced by the culture in which I live. For instance, an Armenian woman living in Tehran might be wearing the chador when she steps out of her house. On the other hand if you take me as an example, as an Armenian woman living in

Lebanon, I am no different than any Lebanese. When walking on the street I do not send out signals indicating I am Armenian. I do not have a specific mode of dress, I do not wear a sari for instance. In my private life I am different because I talk to my daughter in Armenian. Moreover, if there is an Armenian dance group performing I would like to attend the event. Besides, I attend a church service each Sunday that is in Armenian. Yet, I do

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all the other things the Lebanese way i.e.. I celebrate my independence day, labor day, I vote, etc. If I sit with my Lebanese neighbor, who is a non-Armenian, and discuss the situation of women within the family we wouldn't find much difference in our situations."

Ekmekji affirms: "We Armenians are very conservative. A single mother is an issue of great scandal, a divorced woman is still unacceptable in society, and a widow living alone is still frowned upon, but this is the case of Armenian Lebanese. An Armenian living in France will not suffer the same problems. It depends on the country you are living in and the rules of the game." She holds that the typical image that comes to one's mind when one thinks of an Armenian woman is the image of the Armenian mother. She explains: "Armenian women are expected to take care of the children and raise them properly. Hence, any woman who ventures outside the home and decides to work in the public sphere has to fulfill all the domestic requirements first." On mixed marriages Ekmekji admits that intermarriages between Armenians and non-Armenians are acceptable nowadays. Given that Armenians are dispersed all over the world they are marrying non-Armenian men. These marriages are taking place because it is hard to convince the new generation why they should marry Armenians only. However, Ekmekji asserts that getting married to an Armenian and in the Armenian way is still highly valued and essential in order to preserve the Armenian culture and heritage.

Ekmekji recounts that when the Armenians first came to Lebanon they were unable to mix with Lebanese because of the language barrier. Given that they only spoke Armenian and Turkish they felt very isolated. Moreover, the trauma of belonging to a country and nation which has experienced genocide drove them to cling to each other, haunted by the importance of survival and the need for protection and even over protection. This is where the myth, that Armenians live in ghettos, developed. Armenians are accused of living in their own cocoon, refusing to mix with others and forbidding their children to play with their non-Armenian neighbors. This was partly true, though later generations saw the situation change because Armenians gradually learned Arabic and thus the artificial barriers disappeared. Ekmekji holds: " Given that we live in Ras Beirut, my daughter is mistaken for a Ras Beirut because she has the typical accent. She is one hundred percent Lebanese despite the fact that she is Armenian and has attended an Armenian school for 14 years of her

life. Moreover, if I am to ask her where she would like to live and encouraged her to choose any country in the world she would choose Lebanon. She is a typical Armenian Lebanese.

On moving to Haigazian, Ekmekji admits that leaving AUB was not easy. The move was a big and challenging one she affirms. "Given that Haigazian is a small institution, the challenges were great and I felt there was so much I could do." Ekmekji explains that Haigazian was founded in 1955 in honor of Dr. Armenag Haigazian, a highly respected Armenian educator who was killed during the Armenian genocide. When Haigazian opened its doors in 1955 it had an enrollment of 43 students. With time student enrollment increased and the current student body is 750 students. When the university was first established it was designed to function as a Junior College, offering two years of university-level education. However, the demand for upper classes increased, pressuring the institution to develop a variety of four-year programs. The student body is 50% Armenian, the rest come from a large number of different nationalities. Ekmekji holds: "I am very happy with the move because at Haigazian I feel I am reaching out to students. Qualitative changes happen very fast at Haigazian because we are a small institution. If someone has a creative ingenious idea it is easily implemented, there is no need to go through the bureaucracy imposed by big universities. We have implemented great changes in curriculum design and programs. Given that I have worked in the field for many years I am aware of the loopholes and try to make things better for faculty members."

Ekmekji concludes that Armenian women living in Lebanon have all the advantages enjoyed by Lebanese women and suffer the same handicaps, crippling them. Women in Lebanon have made great strides in improving their status, however, discrimination still persists. Despite the fact that the Lebanese female population is the most educated in the Arab world and although women in Lebanon have a high rate of school attendance that exceeds that of males, yet, they still are absent from the political arena. Women in Lebanon could make a difference if

they were given the chance. "Mind you, Armenians are obsessed with educating their children irrespective of their gender. Actually, they would rather go hungry than not educate their children. Also it is important to note that Armenian women have made huge strides and are pushing to reach decision making and top ranking positions."

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