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Ethnicity through Religion: Russian¹ Jews in Armenia

Abstract. The major influx of immigrants from Russia in 2022 triggered another process in Armenia's new environment. It was an unprecedented influx for Armenian society in general and the Jewish community specifically. Although the number of Jews among all immigrants was not large, they began to organize and develop relations with the "old" Jewish community, revitalizing communal life. This led to a kind of "renaissance" of the Jewish community in Armenia. Jews in Armenia are officially recognized as a national minority, but at the level of public perception they are also an ethno-religious group for both local Armenians and Jews themselves. For many representatives of the new wave of immigration, this is a result of a process of identity renewal following their move. The main purpose of this article is to study the process of transformation of Jewish identity in Armenia, as well as the reconstruction of the Jewish community. To do this, I try to answer the following questions: how Jews identify themselves in Armenia; what factors influence their new identity; how their identity changes; and what are the main patterns of these changes. In order to understand the place of the Jewish community in Armenian society, it is necessary to discuss two things: on the one hand, the image of Jewish presence from historical times to the present, from identity consciousness to community organization; and on the other hand, changes in identity in the contemporary social context. This article is based on results from ethno-sociological research conducted by me in 2022–23 with financial support from the Committee for Higher Education and Science in Armenia.

Key words: religious identity, ethnic identity, immigrants, community construction, Jewish community, Russian Jews

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Этничность через религию: российские евреи в Армении

Аннотация. Большой приток иммигрантов из России в 2022 году стал толчком к началу другого процесса, связанного с новой средой в Армении. Это был беспрецедентный поток для армянского общества в целом и для еврейской общины Армении в частности. Хотя число евреев среди общего числа иммигрантов было невелико, они начали организовываться – развивать отношения со «старой» еврейской общиной и оживлять общинную жизнь. В результате этого начался своеобразный «ренессанс» еврейской общины в Армении. Евреи в Армении официально считаются национальным меньшинством, однако на уровне общественного восприятия они являются этнорелигиозной группой – как для местных армян, так и для самих евреев. Более того, для многих представителей новой иммиграционной волны это результат процесса обновления идентичности после переезда. Основная цель данной статьи – изучить процесс трансформации еврейской идентичности в Армении, а также преобразования еврейской общины. Для этого автор пытается ответить на следующие вопросы: как евреи идентифицируют себя в Армении, какие факторы влияют на новую идентичность, как их идентичность претерпевает изменения и каковы основные закономерности в результатах этих изменений. Чтобы понять место еврейской общины в армянском обществе, необходимо обсудить две вещи: с одной стороны, образ еврейского присутствия – от истории к современности, от самосознания до общинной организации, а с другой – изменения идентичности в современном социальном контексте. Статья основана на результатах этносоциологического исследования, проведённого в 2022–2023 гг. при финансовой поддержке Комитета по высшему образованию и науке Армении.

Ключевые слова: религиозная идентичность, этническая идентичность, иммигранты, построение общины, еврейская община, российские евреи

Religion, in addition to a sense of faith, provides people with a sense of meaning, identity, and belonging. This has been supported by a number of theories, from Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* [Durkheim, 1995, 208] to more recent studies [Bellah, 1970, 11–13].

Ethnicity is also an important basis for identity, meaning, and community. According to the primitive theory of ethnicity, racial and ethnic differences were meaningful and deeply rooted in the very nature of human sociality [Van den Berghe, 1990, 47]. Ethnic ties are an extension of kinship ties, and ethnic alliances form because they advance the interests of those who are believed to share a common origin [Karapetyan, 1966, 36].

When the similar functions of ethnicity and religion are combined, groups that are both ethnic and religious may have a stronger basis for meaning-making and cohesion. Ethnic religious organizations allow people to find community and form both religious and ethnic identities. Thus, particular ethnic communities may be popular in part because ethnicity and religion serve similar desirable functions and serve as a more significant source of meaning and group solidarity.

An important point is to enter into an ethnic community through religious communities. For immigrants this problem solution starts from negotiation of self-identity. It opens a way for the main question “How does religiosity affect ethnicity?”. In this case, “Does one feel more “Jewish” when practicing Judaism?”.

Methodology

The research was carried out using document analysis and semi-structured interview method. The quota method was used during the formation of the research sample. At the same time, representation of the inclusion of informants was preserved by the circumstances of their involvement in the community, their position, as well as their gender and age. Characteristic criteria of the studied group were determined as a result of the initial survey and the pilot phase.

Yet, there were limitations at the fieldwork stage. Considering the local characteristics, we avoided the snowball method, because it would lead to a “closed circle” dead-end. Instead, it was attempted to include informants from new groups every time. These informants did not know each other, and involvement process was continued till the groups started to “intersect”.

The Presence of Jews in Armenia

There is a general opinion that there were already Jews in ancient and medieval Armenia. “In the first century BC, the Armenian king Tigran the Great (95–55 BC) traveled to Palestine to attack the city of Ptolemy. The siege of the city had not taken place, but King Tigran left and brought captive Jews with him to Armenia, whom he settled in Armavir and on the banks of the river Kasakh”. This quote from Movses Khorenatsi’s book “History of Armenians” is the first mention of Jews in Armenia. [Khorenatsi, 1981, 276].

The second mass influx of Jews into Armenia, according to an Armenian historian of the Middle Ages, occurred after the Armenians decided to support the first of the two pretenders to the Jewish throne, Antigonus and Hyrcanus. Antigonus won, and King Tigran settled the Jews captured during the campaign (about 300,000) in the city of Shamiram (Van). This area later became a center for the development of the Jewish community.

The discovery and excavation of a thirteenth-century Jewish cemetery in southern Armenia also confirms historical facts [David, Stone, 2002, 66]. Drs. Stone and Topchian are collecting evidence about the Jews of Armenia from ancient times to the fourteenth century. Based on research from the Greco-Roman period, the authors draw conclusions about the migration of Jews from northern Palestine and other countries to Armenia by King Tigran the Great in the first century BC [Stone, 2022, 23].

Such is the fragmentary information about the first Jews who appeared in Armenia.

Since 1840 there were two Jewish communities in Erivan province: the Ashkenazi, who came from Europe, mainly Poland, and the Sephardim, who came from Persia. The Sephardim had a synagogue called “Sheikh Mordechai”.

By the early 1930s, however, only a few dozen people from these communities remained in Armenia. Most of the Jews now living in Armenia are Ashkenazi. They mostly came to Armenia from the republics of the former USSR. The first arrivals settled here in the early 1930s, later Jews were resettled during World War II.

The next mass influx of Jews to Armenia occurred in the early seventies – these were the so-called “otkazniki (refusers)”. In 1986, the Jewish community had approximately 3,000 members. During “Perestroika” period most of these people who came in the seventies, mostly young people, left for Israel.

The next mass exodus of Jews and Armenian members of their families occurred in 1992–93, during the blockade of Armenia as a result of the Karabakh conflict. Gersh Burstein, chief rabbi of Armenian Jews, says that most of the people who left at that time would never have left under normal circumstances: they were well-off, most of them were doctors, engineers, entrepreneurs, IT specialists.

About 800 Jews live in post-independent Armenia, and their maximum number has reached 1200 in the last twenty years. They are mostly concentrated in Yerevan, Vanadzor, before the earthquake, also in Gyumri. In Sevan there is also a community of ethnic Russians who practice Judaism. It is a small community, now consisting only of the elderly. The last wave of immigration has increased the number of Jews by about 200 people.

Recent years RA accepted a large flow of immigration from Russia to Armenia, which is also reflected in statistical data (Table 1). There were representatives of several nationalities – Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Armenians, Jews etc., who moved to Armenia for various purposes.

Table 1. Registrations of RA border first entries and exits according to Russian citizenship (2018–2023)

Entry/Exit			Balance
2018	Entry	684 014	10750
	Exit	673 264	
2019	Entry	855 612	12155
	Exit	843 457	
2020	Entry	195 385	-17608
	Exit	212 993	
2021	Entry	495,646	16120
	Exit	479,526	

Entry/Exit			Balance
2022	Entry	1 129 829	65149
	Exit	1 064 680	
2023	Entry (January–August)	1 172 381	8246
	Exit (January–August)	1 164 135	

Source: Border electronic management information system of RA.

Russian Jews are a small number in this stream – according to expert estimates, about 200 people. However, this is not a small number if we consider their ratio to the local Jewish population in Armenia. This is why they were able to make sense in the Jewish community.

Jewish Community in Armenia: History and Renewal

According to the information provided by the informants, the beginning of the formation of the Jewish community was set as follows:

“Until the 1920s, there were two Jewish communities here: one from Poland, the other from Iran. But during the Armenian genocide in 1915, Persian Jews returned to Iran” [Archive of the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of the NAS RA, N7 interview, religious figure in the community, 61 years old, male, Yerevan, 2022].

Back in the seventies, in Armenia there were few immigrant families who organized gatherings of compatriots at their homes. At the end of the eighties was created the Armenian-Jewish friendship organization “Arev”, which aimed to bring together Armenian and Jewish intellectuals. This is what the Jewish community was built on, and later officially registered in 1991, under the co-chairmanship of Hersh Burshtein and Igor Ulanovsky. Since non-governmental organizations are forbidden to engage in religious activities in Armenia, the Jewish Religious Community was registered a year later, with Rabbi Gersh Burstein as its president.

Here are the three main community organizations that worked in the Jewish community: “Menorah’ Jewish Cultural Center” NGO, “Jewish Community of Armenia” NGO, Jewish Religious Community of Armenia “Mordechai Navi”. They received state support as national minority organizations. It should be noted that the amount of financial support from the state is constant and equal for all national minorities. Later, we see only one organization in the list of providing support, which is the “Jewish Community of Armenia” NGO.

The community also operates with the support of American sponsoring organizations and individuals. The “Joint” organization implements cultural projects, food and medical assistance for adults, and programs to help children through the Jewish religious community. The “Sokhnut” organization deals with the issues of those wishing to return to Israel.

“Jews live a good life in Armenia. The main thing is that there is no anti-Semitism. It is true that our economy [ed. economy in Armenia] is not developed enough, so many Jews – scientists, doctors, journalists and others – repatriated to Israel. Today we don’t have such an active religious life, but we try to celebrate all Jewish holidays” [Archive of the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of the NAS RA, N3 interview, cultural figure in the community, 53 years old, female, Yerevan, 2022].

The changes began with the arrival of a new group of immigrants, which does not make up a large percentage of the Russian immigrants of 2022, but is perceived by the Jewish community as an unprecedentedly large wave of community replenishment in the last 100 years.

Observing, we can say that the same mechanism by which the Jews renewed their identity in Armenia also worked at the community level.

The people who initiated and made a big contribution to the so-called “renaissance” of community life form two groups. The first, people who moved from Russia with the inertia of community life and tried to restore the former life and found the “old” Jewish community as a good social space for this (they were a very small percentage). Second, people who had nothing but Jewish belonging and found the “changing” Jewish community as an opportunity to adapt to a new environment and reproduce their identity (these are the majority).

The main axis of mobilization is community reconstruction, emphasizing the religious component, revitalizing religious life.

The national character of the community now seems to have a background presence, which the members of the community achieve through religion.

“Well, like many others, we met during one of the Sabbaths, we were just trying to find new people, get to know each other, make some platform for meetings. It all ended with the fact that we visit every Sabbaths now. Note that we are not Orthodox believers and the religious services here are very close to secular life. After the services we also meet at our ‘jewish’ café” [Archive of the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of the NAS RA, N2 interview, entrepreneur, media figure in the community, 27 years old, female, Yerevan, 2022].

Thus, we see that immigrants turn to religious structures, starting with religious practices, at least for primary consolidation. Then the social area of maintenance and development of the formed connections can be changed.

This contributed to the fact that the factor of religious people in the community increased, even in relation to the community structures dealing with secular, ethno-cultural issues. Of course, the fact that a significant part of the financial support from various diaspora organizations or from Israel is transferred through religious structures also plays a big role here. For comparison, let's note that they are more than the support that the national community organization receives from the government of Armenia, sometimes it even exceeds it by several times. In any case, representatives of the Jewish community have no problem regulating their expenses at the expense of membership fees.

Identity Transformations

The biggest change that happens with a migrant is the transformation of identity. The more reasons and influencing factors there are, the more difficult it is to overcome this process. Reconstructing identity is a long-term process that requires a lot of resources. social capital, time, social space, belonging, the variety of different components of identity, the possibility of choosing them, etc.

Many of the tens of thousands of immigrants who moved to Armenia were not ready to face a number of circumstances. Their situation was aggravated by the high level of uncertainty.

However, they faced a reality that posed new questions about identity. They met that challenge in different ways. In their conversations, the participants of this study discuss issues, negotiating their own identity. It is noteworthy that their thoughts and settings are divided into before and after migration.

Below we will try to analyze the data received by the informants.

“In Russia, we tried not to talk about nationality or religion, it was a kind of personal thing that we knew but did not discuss. It was not even considered good manners. It was more important where you were from, because that determined the attitude towards you. Therefore, that origin became the most important part of our identity. For example, I am a Muscovite, that's how they know me, that's how I feel, and more specifically, I'm from the Zelenograd region near Moscow. That may not mean anything to you, but there it already explained a lot about who I was” [Archive of the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of the NAS RA, N6 interview, newcomer in the community, 28 years old, male, Yerevan, 2022].

Often, they describe that never were focused on religious or ethnic belonging matters. While asserting that it's not something that is not important for them, but it was a kind of non-discussable thing. And religion is something of attribute significance.

“You know what, we are used to be different at home, but outside we are like everyone. At home we are Jews, we professed Judaism, but outside we are citizens of Russia and speak Russian like everyone else. It does not mean that I forget my roots or am ashamed of my nature, on the contrary, I am always proud, because in the history of Russia, as well as in the present, there are many famous Jews. But it's not customary there, you know, let's say it's not customary to speak your language loudly on the street, or to dress in your national style, or to show your religiosity. That way, you will look more like a freak who will be ridiculed, or thought that you are sending some message to the public, or that you are a very conservative believer” [Archive of the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of the NAS RA, N11 interview, newcomer in the community, 24 years old, male, Yerevan, 2023].

"Many people say that here it is very similar to Russia, everyone knows Russian and so on. But it's not like that for me. I crossed the border of Armenia and everything changed. Let me explain. before entering Armenia, we were Russians, that is, citizens of Russia, Russian-speaking people, and to get to know each other, we asked 'Where are you from?', 'What do you do for living?', and that was enough for us. And after crossing the border, it turned out that this is not enough at all, moreover, these are additional information about you, but they do not describe you as a person. To get to know you here, first of all they ask 'What nationality are you?' 'What is your religion?' 'What is your language?' 'What is your homeland?'. And everyone asks: in the store, on the street, in transport. It is unusual to talk, discuss, think about these things... But this is the context of Armenia's environment. And you know, gradually I started to like it, because it's nice to feel that you belong to something unusual, which is not only unique to others, but also something equal" [Archive of the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of the NAS RA, N9 interview, newcomer in the community, 31 years old, male, Yerevan, 2023].

During the interviews, the informants admitted that they were thinking about identity and its different components for the first time. They were thinking in parallel. Of course, it is normal for newly moved people, who still experience migration shock. So, they were in the phase of re-evaluation many settings of identity.

"When I had just moved here, my Armenian friend took me to various places of interest. And I was in an Armenian apostolic church and I was listening to the liturgy, I was interested. A woman asked me a question in Armenian, I said that I don't understand the language, she asked in Russian. 'Are you Armenian?' I said no, she said. 'So, what are you?' I said. 'Is it important?' she said. 'You came to the Armenian church, shouldn't I know who you are?' I said: 'I am a Jew,' she said. 'Well, since you're Jewish, why don't you go to the synagogue? I know the place, do you want me to tell you where it is?' I asked: 'Can't I go to church if I'm not Christian?' she said, 'Of course you can, just every person has his own nation and his own church'" [Archive of the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of the NAS RA, N8 interview, newcomer in the community, 26 years old, male, Yerevan, 2022].

There is a clear religious and national context in Armenia, which the informants talk about. In their discussions, the emphasis is noticeable that, despite this context, the environment does not prevent having a social, cultural or alternative context as well. This phenomenon seems to guide immigrants who are still in search of social landmarks. The environment itself offers such a field for manifestation, for gaining belonging, but the priority of religious and national self-awareness motivates the newcomers to find their own preference. Logically, the first thing the locals point out is the immigrants' own religious and national characteristics. This phenomenon leaves a directive and isolating impression on many people. But from the point of view of structural-functional analysis, this is an attempt to provide appropriate niches in the social structure, where the criteria of appropriateness is the belongingness ascribed to each by default.

"You cannot go to a synagogue and not be a Jew. The point is that I did not identify myself as a Jew in every sense of the word. I have never observed Jewish traditions, I do not know the language, I have never even thought about it. But now I want to connect with the community, to know more people who share my status, so I go to the synagogue. I mean, I fully discovered the Jewishness in me, and now I identify myself as a Jew. I can say that the 'guilty' of all this is Judaism, it brought me on this path" [Archive of the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of the NAS RA, N1 interview, cultural figure in the community, 38 years old, male, Yerevan, 2022].

Based on the above-mentioned quotes, it can be described that the religious environment and religious structures in the Jewish community have become the window through which they look at the new reality and their new identity for a number of newcomers. They most often describe it as religious-national.

Conclusion

The main conclusion is that the religious identity of the Jews who immigrated from Russia became relevant in Armenia. First reason is because the social environment of Armenia has favorable conditions for this – it has a visible religious context, and the

other is that Jewish immigrants need to join the local Jewish community. By doing so, they solve several problems. overcoming the primary migration shock together with people with similar stories, smooth adaptation to the new social environment, as well as belonging and renewal of identity.

Here it is noteworthy that immigrants strengthen their national belonging through religious identity.

In the Jewish community of Armenia, revitalization of religious structures is observed, which leads to the change of the community image. Religious life opens a wider field for the reconstruction of identity, in a sense replacing a number of socio-cultural, ethnic functions.

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