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## The reality of gay Armenians and our collective shame

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*Kyle Khandikian wrote about the place of gay Armenians within a culture of collective shame on the Armenian Chronicles.*



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is a delicate balance the Armenian Diaspora has always had to maintain between that which we label "Armenian," and that which we do not. The struggle to console an American identity with an Armenian identity is one that I have certainly felt having gone to a private Armenian school my entire life before college, and now as a graduate student. I believe that I will perhaps always face as my progressive politics intersect with my "traditional" values. As an entire population of second-generation Americans like myself, the first in their Armenian families to be born in America, become of age and must make the decision of continuing their cultural heritage or forgoing it, we have yet to grapple a very important issue that we cannot continue to ignore. The existence of gay men and women in our community has yet to be fully acknowledged and is a reality that many of us still approach with hostility. Why have we yet to come to terms with this reality? The answer is a difficult one, but one that I believe is closely related to our shared value of shame.

I'll never forget the words uttered with remarkable incredulity by one of my peers in high school as I sat on the floor in between the shelves of our school's bookshop one afternoon. I overheard the tail end of the conversation, but it was all I needed to hear. "Gay Armenians? I'll kill them."

Violence is something not uncommon for those who identify as LGBTQ, but as the arc of morality bends toward justice for many in America, there are pockets of communities where to be openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer still means to live in constant fear for your life. The Armenian-American community is one such place where the closet door could not be shut tighter or locked up better. In the Republic of Armenia, the situation for LGBTQ people and other minority groups is deplorable to say the least, as noted in an Amnesty International report (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR54/002/2013/en>) released last year entitled, "Armenia: No Space For Difference." But what is striking to me is how a culture of shame still engrosses even the youngest and brightest minds of our communities here in America, and for those who must experience and live with that shame, how it is internalized.

The extent at which homosexuality and socio-cultural deviance is vehemently combated in our communities is exemplified by another personal experience. I had the pleasure of serving as the student body president of my private, Armenian Apostolic high school during my senior year. Every year the student council organizes a spring formal, and as per school policy, students are welcome to bring guests from other schools if they provide a signed note from the other school. When a male student brought back a note for his male cousin who attended another Armenian school and had many mutual friends at our school, homophobia reared its ugly, aggressive head. I was told repeatedly by an administrator that those things were "not natural" and that even though the students were cousins and not romantic partners, the rule was clear: boys do not bring boys to a school dance. This is the same school where "Yes On 8" flyers were distributed in 2008 in support of the California ballot proposition that successfully outlawed marriage equality in the state for five years, and where paper topics on the gay marriage debate were rejected in English language class because, to paraphrase a teacher, "it would anger the church." There is something to be said about a community that chooses a clear side in a debate it has no interest in participating in. On most things LGBTQ, this community is largely silent.

There is a very false myth surrounding Armenian identity. It is the myth that we, regardless of religious creeds, national identities, political leanings, spoken languages, etc., are all Armenians. The truth, however, is

that to deviate from the mainstream in this community means to be shunned and persecuted for not living fabricated norms and expectations. Identifying as LGBTQ is one such deviation, arguably the most shunned by our fiercely patriarchal and heteronormative culture. Armenians are a diverse people, and that diversity does not suddenly end when it comes to sexuality or gender. There is an undeniable taboo surrounding homosexuality, and that taboo is just one part of a larger system of oppression that is fueled, in my opinion, by shame.



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Shame is a very powerful psycho-social affect and phenomenon that is not unique to Armenians, but is a major aspect of what it means to be a part of our collectivistic, Eastern-oriented culture. I use both the words “affect” and “phenomenon” because shame is something that is experienced both from within the individual self and also ascribed by the communal group onto the individual. It can be imagined just as much as it can be assigned, and it can play a very conspicuous role in everyday life, as it does in our community. If you are Armenian and were raised by Armenian-speaking parents, the phrase “It’s shameful,” (ամօթ է, amot eh) is probably one deeply ingrained in your vocabulary and psyche. One Hetq writer called it the “Amot eh” complex (<http://hetq.am/eng/news/31266/armenias-amot-eh-complex---living-in-shame.html>):

“Amot eh” is single-handedly quelling creativity and freedom of thought in modern Armenian society. With its submissive waive of the hand as if to state “no more,” it discourages entrepreneurship and spurns innovation. [...] “Amot eh” strangles ingenuity and favors complacency. Just like a scouring sponge, shame completely absorbs potential for exacting progressive change then scrubs out the inspiring light. It renders its victims incapable of consciously deciding of their own free will: “I want” or “I do not want.”

To further explore our fixation with shame, I consulted the dictionary and put together a very simple graph whose nodes consist of words from the Armenian lexicon relating to the word for shame (ամօթ, amot), and whose edges are directed from one node to another based on recurring words in definitions or, synonyms. What resulted was a vocabulary network built on honor, status, respect, and fear—values that reflect our shame culture.

Recurring words associated with amot included “embarrassment,” “dishonor,” “disgrace,” “stain,” “outrage” and “offense.” The graph reveals a circular pattern of words and social constructs that all lead back to amot. But one edge leads somewhere completely different, in fact to what can be called the opposite of shame.

Amot is defined in the 1998 Granian’s «Բառգիրք Հայերէն Լեզուի» Armenian language dictionary as kheeb (խիպ), which means both shame and respect. The specific word used to define kheeb that stands out from shame is badgarank (պատկառանք), which is itself defined in Armenian as “fierce respect” (երկիւղալի յարգանք, yergyooghalee harkank). When translated into English, badgarank produces words like “reverence,” “veneration,” “regard,” and “modesty.” The root word of yergyooghalee--yergyoogh—in Armenian means “fear,” “horror,” “dread,” “panic,” or “terror.”

“Fierce respect” is something that is not difficult to grasp. To have shame in our culture is not always a bad thing, though shame is often associated negatively in the West (Tsai, Wong 215). Think of another commonly used word in our language: anamot (անամօթ), meaning without shame. It is perhaps just as important as amot, and most often used to police behavior that breaks social values or moral codes. Someone who is anamot or without shame lacks decency or manners, or to recall the definition of badgarank, modesty and

respect. In certain situations you want to have shame. It is a sign that you are self-aware and respect not only around you but yourself. It allows for dignity and self-worth. This is something anyone can understand, Armenian or not. So how can we keep the parts of shame that serve us and our social relationships, and let the parts that fuel things like homophobia?



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It pains me to say it, but we are an intolerant people. It is ironic too considering that intolerance has taken its most evil form against us: genocide. Our intolerance for things that are different or unfamiliar, I think, is closely related to the perceived shame it brings to the family and community. Emotion researchers have distinguished shame from other similar emotions like guilt by noting its external orientation; shame typically involves being negatively assessed by others and is most often felt in the presence of others, an important point for gay and lesbian Armenians which I will touch on later. Ying Wong and Jeanie Tsai, professors of psychology at Stanford University, have noted in their paper, Cultural Models of Shame and Guilt (<http://www-psych.stanford.edu/~tsailab/PDF/yw07sce.pdf>), that individuals who experience shame are more attentive to contextual cues and “pay more attention to others.” If we take a moment to think about why we say that certain things are shameful in our culture, it becomes very clear that we are doing so not in consideration for ourselves but for those around us, corroborating Lewis’s finding. This reality is confronted in the second season of the YouTube series (<http://youtu.be/dR9Ox3W9Gd4>) “Lousine: Lesbian Matchmaker To The Straights,” by New York City Armenian comedian Lousine Shamamian.

In one episode, Lousine comes out to her Armenian mother as a lesbian. Lousine is at first met with resistance from her mother, who denies that god created gay people among Armenians because, “Armenians are clean.” The honest but rosy interaction ends well for Lousine and her mother, who is able to accept her daughter for who she is. When Lousine asks her mother why, “we care so much about what someone else thinks and says,” her mother has the following to say:

Because when our parents raised us... they said don't say this, don't do that. It's shameful, it's shameful. That's why. [...] We were raised with fear also because they lived through the Genocide. So because of that they raised us very closed off from the rest of society. So we had never heard of such things [homosexuality], it never occurred to us that such things were even possible.

Lousine’s mother’s response is interesting to say the least and touches on one possible source of our shame culture. But if we are so preoccupied with what others think of us, how does the shame of being devalued by others affect those who experience it? According to Wong and Tsai, “shame-prone individuals are more likely to engage in avoidance and withdrawal, to experience inward anger, and to blame others.” And unlike guilt, shame does not lead to reparative action or adaptive behavior, and in the United States high levels of shame have been linked to mental illness. You can imagine then what it must feel like to be gay in our community.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<http://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm>), LGBTQ young adults who experience rejection are 6 times as likely to have high levels of depression, 8 times as likely to have attempted suicide, 3 times as likely to use illegal drugs and 3 times as likely to engage in unprotected sexual behaviors that put them at increased risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. At best, we are pushing members of our community out from among us. At worst, we are killing them.



I have heard many arguments against homosexuality that have been contextualized specifically for Armenians. My favorite is the one that labels homosexuality a threat to our nation's very existence—that gay Armenian men and women who identify as LGBTQ or are straight allies are contributing not only the erosion of our national values but also to the extinction of our people because gay Armenian men and women are not contributing Armenian offspring to our already dwindling population count. To this I say: listen to Lousine Shamamian's heartfelt cry: "We don't want to upset our mothers and fathers [...] We value and respect our parents too."

Lousine goes on to ask: "Everyone deserves the right to live an honest life, no?"

Ask yourself this simple question: how many gay Armenians do you know? The answer for almost all of us should be nearly none, because shame has left no space for them to exist openly. If we recall that shame is an emotion experienced in the presence of others, meaning that those of us who are prone to shame feel it most when we are with the communal group, and that in our culture shame is associated both denotatively and connotatively with words like "dirt," where else do LGBTQ Armenians have to go but far away from the community? Perhaps I am pessimistic when it comes to this subject; of course there are openly gay Armenians, but none that we hear of. They are not a part of our community or our nation, because our community and nation has singled them out and excluded them as an Other, as gyot-s (faggots). There are no openly gay Armenians in our institutions or in our schools, none that are creating a culture that is welcoming and safe, who are fighting for our youth and shouting the good news from the tops of the iron ladder of hopes: that it is not shameful to be gay and that it will get better and that you can be Armenian and gay at the same time and that those two identities are not antagonistic even though everyone around you is telling you that they are...

It is time we let go of our shame.

I most certainly recognize the unique position diasporan communities hold as culture bearers around the world, especially having attended a school whose purpose was the preservation of the Armenian language and culture. But at what costs will we cling to certain aspects of our culture that no longer serve us, aspect of our culture that curse and destroy us? As diasporans we have the luxury of being able to move in and out of our community. We should not have to, but the option exists. But let it be a sobering reminder for those who continue to force some of us out that for our brothers and sisters living in Armenia and other countries where the closet doors remain firmly shut, that option does not exist. They must live in constant fear for their lives. That is truly shameful.

I was in Turkey three years ago where I attended Istanbul Pride. To see a gay pride parade in a country that has struggled for almost all of its existence to strike a balance between Western modernity and religious tradition was remarkable in itself, but something else caught my attention, something that was so surprising that I struggled at first to make sense of it. Among the sea of pro-gay signs held by marchers were ones in Armenian! One of the signs was simple and clear: *hos enk varjuhvetssek* («Հոս ենք վարձուհետք»), meaning "We are here, get used to it." It is happening in even the most unlikely places. It is time we let go of our shame.

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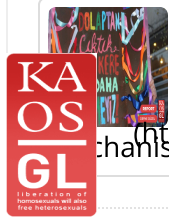
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