

Being both Non-Jewish Israelis and Non-Palestinian Muslims: Isn't it Too Much?

The Circassian Identity across Borders and Categorizations

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“Vicielitcia kouda oukajout ili perecelitcia v Tourstsiou” (“You will settle where you are told to or you will emigrate to Turkey”). These are the words Tsar Alexander II delivered to the delegation of Circassian tribes, then subjects of the Ottoman Empire, after the Russian Empire conquered the Caucasus.

Before trying to understand how cultural identity, Muslim religion, and Israeli citizenship link up in the Circassian diaspora in Israel, we should define who the Circassians are and how they have found themselves in the present plight far from their homeland.

The Circassians are a people coming originally from the Caucasus Mountain, a mountain range extending between the Black and the Caspian Seas in southern Russia. The Caucasus is a particularly sensitive region which was contended both by the Russian and the Ottoman Empires; since the beginning of the 19th century and until the Russian victory, it was the scene of violent fighting between them.

Because they were Muslims, the Circassians turned to the Ottoman Empire, the only power of the time that offered them any real help. A small minority of them accepted to reach the Kouban plains they had been assigned by the Russians, while hundreds of thousands of others gathered on the shore of the Black Sea. On May 25, 1865, after having fought for nearly eighty years, the latter set off for exile

Today the great majority (4/5 of the whole population) live outside both the Caucasus and Russia. Turkey contains the largest population, about one million of them, Jordan may have as many as 100,000, Syria has roughly 45,000, in Libya they are about 15,000, and there are two villages in Israel: Kfar Kama in Lower Galilee and Reyhaniya at the Lebanese border. Smaller diasporas also exist in the United States (1,500), in Germany (1,000), and in France (400-500).

The Circassian Diaspora in Israel

While Circassians in their majority settled in today's Turkey, Syria, and Jordan, a few thousands disembarked in 1880 in the Qisarya harbor, Palestine, after having spent about ten years at the border between Greece and Bulgaria. When they arrived, the Ottoman sultan forced them to settle in three villages: Kfar Kama, in Lower Galilee (Tiberias district), Reyhaniya at the Lebanese border (Safed district), and Khirbet-Cherkess near Hadera.

The inhabitants of Kfar Kama were 183 Circassian families belonging to the Chapsough clan. Originally, they had dwelled in the Lower Kuban region, on the banks of the Afipse, Yela, and Wubin rivers.

The 66 Circassian families who settled in Reyhaniya belonged to the Abzakh clan. In the Caucasus, they had dwelled along the Ch'xhaqgwash river. Both Kfar Kama and Reyhaniya were founded near 1880. We still don't know exactly when Khirbet-Cherkess was established but we know that the inhabitants were Circassians from different tribes. This settlement was in a marshland area and people had great difficulties fighting epidemics and contagious diseases bred in stagnant water such as malaria and typhoid. Those diseases struck down most of the settlers and the others moved to Kfar Kama and Reyhaniya. Some of them crossed the Jordan River and joined other Circassian villages there.

Today, the number of Circassians living in Israel is estimated between 4,000 and 5,000. Nearly a thousand Circassians from the Abzakh tribe still live in Reyhaniya, whose total population includes nearly 25 % of non-Circassians.

Kfar Kama, the second village, is almost entirely inhabited by a little more than 3,000 Circassians, in their great majority from the Chapsough tribe. Few Circassians also live in Haifa (most of them are

students, the University of Haifa being the nearest university in the country to both villages), Tel Aviv, and Nazareth (two families); but, as we said above, the great majority of them still live in the two villages we spoke about.

Working on a small community limited in space allows one to be a privileged witness of the mechanisms of the construction of identity, something which could be more difficult with important diasporas in Turkey, Jordan, or Syria. If we insist on the tribal aspect of their localization and their dispersion, it is because Circassians strongly define themselves as members of their tribe of origin. There are twelve Circassian tribes, all of whom have their own dialect, a major characteristic in the definition of individual identity.

In front of a “non-Circasian” they will, of course, define themselves as “Circassians,” but within the community, they will define themselves as “Chapsough” or “Abzakh.” The name of the tribe can also be added at the end of the family name, as a title.

Not Jewish, not Arab... but Israeli and Muslim, the Difficult Equation of Identity

The Circassians in Israel provide a unique example of a non-Arabic Muslim population. They distinguish themselves from the other Muslim populations of the country by their citizenship. While all the other Muslims in Israel politically define themselves as Palestinians (even more so since the first Intifada), the Circassians strongly define themselves as Israelis. As such, like the Druzes, they have served in the Israel Defense Forces more or less since the creation of the state, at the request of Local Councils' heads.

The State of Israel itself distinguishes the Circassians and the Druzes from the other Muslims and cares a lot about these two populations, always defined as “loyal” and “brave.” These populations are indeed allowed to publish and broadcast their language, which further widens the gap in the treatment of the different populations of the country, in particular between Jewish and non-Jewish populations.

For example, the Knesset adopted a specific budget for the development of the Druze and Circassian villages. From 2006 to 2009, 447 million shekels were given to the Circassian and the Druze Local Councils. In comparison, a budget of 13,5 million shekels was assigned to the development of thirty-four non-Jewish localities of the north of the country for 2007. The importance given to these two communities can also be seen on the occasion of cultural festivals or events organized in the villages. The heads of both Circassian and Druze villages invite each other, but another presence is visible: that of official Israeli political representatives such as ministers and Knesset members. The latter are invited and they would not miss one of these occasions to prove that the Israeli State attaches great importance to the two communities.

Circassians and Druzes are Israeli citizens and, as opposed to what might be expected in such a situation, they still carefully keep various traditional and predominating cultural elements. While, at times, they are still discriminated against, they are better integrated as Israeli citizens than the majority of the Muslim population, in particular the Arab-Palestinian one.

What, then, is the status of these people, who, as most Israeli citizens, serve in the army but who, far from seeking assimilation, also keep their own traditions in a pronounced way? Serving in the Israeli Defense Forces has always been a very important part of the affirmation and of the construction of Israeli citizenship; there is no doubt that the different treatment the Circassians and the Druzes receive from the State of Israel mostly comes from this serving.

On the other hand, an Israeli-Circassian soldier is a Muslim soldier and feels uncomfortable fighting against other Muslims from Lebanon, from the West Bank, or from the Gaza strip for example, all the more so since Circassians usually serve as border guards. If serving in the army of the host country is a usual and accepted part of the identity for Circassians in diasporas¹, this phenomenon is getting more and more problematic for Circassians in the Israeli diaspora: on the one hand, this population tries to preserve its tradition of loyalty; on the other hand, in a context in which religion is so important, Israeli

¹ The case of the Circassians in Jordan is particularly instructive in understanding the link between the community and the power of the State. The praetorian guard of King Abdallah II of Jordan is composed of fourteen Caucasian soldiers (Circassians and Chechens). They have sworn allegiance to the Hashemite sovereign since the creation, in 1921, of the Emirate of Transjordan by Abdallah I of Jordan, grand-father of the current King.

Circassians experience great difficulties fighting against Muslim “brothers” and suffer from being regarded as traitors to the *Ummah*.

This particular relation between the Israeli Circassians and the State of Israel has two consequences. The first one, indisputably, is the gap between the treatment of the Circassians and the Druzes on the one hand and the Palestinian population of the country on the other. While they are not fully considered as Israeli but as a kind of second-class citizens (because in Israel, citizenship is linked to the ethnic background, and because Circassians are Muslim), Circassians are undoubtedly perceived as traitors by some Palestinians.

These non-Jewish Israelis but also non-Arab-Palestinian Muslims face difficulties in finding their place at the border of the dominant identity entities in the Israeli-Palestinian space.

Secondly, this particular relation between the Israeli Circassians and the State of Israel directly influences the way the Circassians define their own identity. A survey conducted with teenagers of Kfar Kama² shows that between three choices, the teenagers first define themselves as Circassians, then as Muslims, and then as Israelis. Almost half of them would first define themselves as Muslims; Circassian came second, and Israeli came last. This result was quite surprising in view of the importance which is systemically given to religion and in the light of different surveys I conducted with Circassian members of other diasporas (especially in France, in Germany, in Jordan, and in Syria). In the other diasporas, the people I interviewed not only defined themselves as Circassian first but also defined themselves as French, German, Jordanian, or Syrian; only in third position did they mention their religion (if at all).

We will now outline (1) the different elements defining the Circassian identity in Israel and (2) the confrontation between the Circassians’ cultural Muslim identity and their Israeli citizenship. We will show how the Circassian identity in Israel is produced in a specific way, quite different from other Circassian diasporas in the Middle East.

“Homemade” Traditions or a Classic Combination of Circumstances?

Traditionally, the Circassians are moderate Sunni Muslims (from the *hanafite* school). Some of them (mostly the Egyptian Mameluks) are Muslim since the 12th century but Islam only spread throughout the majority of the Caucasus in the middle of the 16th century, brought there by the Nogais and the Tatars of Crimea.

Initially, the Circassians believed in a large pantheon of gods, mainly representing forces of nature and agriculture. The principal gods were *Hana Gusha* the god of rain, *Shagbala* the god of thunder, *Pishtzia* the god of lightning, *Miztaha* the god of the forests, *Tlafsh* the god of iron, and *Wazramas* the god of beauty. Christianity reached the Caucasus in the 3rd century with Greek and Roman clergymen, but it is only at the beginning of the 6th century that the peoples of the Caucasus, including the Circassians, converted.

The Circassians accepted monotheism without protest but did not hesitate to reject principles of Christianity that did not conform to their tradition and way of life. In the 17th century, Islam spread extensively throughout the region but most of the Circassian princes and their tribes only became Muslim at the end of the 18th century.

Today in the Caucasus, if the Circassians celebrate the main festivals such as the fast of Ramadan, only a few of them would pray five times a day. In most cities of the North Caucasus, there are very few mosques. Maikop (still the capital of the Republic of Adygea), for example, has only one mosque, built in 2001 with the help of a foreign businessman. Traditionally, in no case does religion drive the behavior of the Circassians. In the Circassian diaspora in Israel, however, we are faced with different religious conducts from the ones already studied or witnessed in other diasporas such as the French, the German, and the Jordanian ones.

Circassians in Israel practice Islam rigorously, especially in Kfar Kama, where religion tends to direct the inhabitants’ way of life. Nearly all married women wear a veil called “*shamia*” (a transparent veil usually worn in public places meaning that a woman is married), but more and more unmarried women

² For these results, I sincerely thank Gopsa Katatz from Kfar Kama, a student of Social Sciences at the University of Haifa.

and young girls wear the Islamic *hijab*; children learn the Koran at school; men very regularly attend mosque, the social place of the village and a central place to see and be seen.

Most Circassians from Jordan, from Syria, from Turkey, and even from Reyhaniya, the other Circassian village in Israel (where non-Circassians also live) consider that religion matters too much in Kfar Kama and are surprised by the evolution of these practices in the last decades.

Different factors can explain this situation, in particular the fact that for political reasons, the Circassians in Israel are isolated from the other Circassian communities living in the other countries of the Middle East.

This emphasis on religious practice must also be put in the specific Israeli socio-political context, in which religion is probably one of the best ways of expressing identity. It results that the Circassian diaspora in Israel has to legitimate its existence in a country which is mostly seen as an enemy by its neighbors and, logically, by the Circassians living in these countries.

Most of the Israeli-Circassians will tell you that they are the most authentic Circassians because they faithfully preserve the traditions (the *Adiga'Xhabza*), the language, and the folklore (such as dance and music), and that they feel they have to be "more Circassian than others." They strongly believe that religion is a part of Circassian traditions, even if, as we mentioned it before, this element is quite new.

Another element also connected to the Israeli context must be highlighted: if Circassians define themselves as Circassians, Muslims, and Israelis, they have to deal with a question which is not very clear and remains quite vague in Israel (and which goes beyond the scope of the Circassian identity question): can a non-Jew become an Israeli citizen? As we said previously, the other Muslims of the Israeli-Palestinian space define themselves as Palestinians; the Circassians are thus the first to answer the question in those terms. (The Druze, who follow Shia Islam, don't always fall under the classic "Muslim" category.)

In Circassian habits, the "*Adiga'Xhabza*" is a system of customs and rules regulating the way of life and the place of each individual in society. For thousands of years, the *Adiga'Xhabza* has been passed on from generation to generation. The *Adiga'Xhabza* places a strong emphasis on generosity and hospitality. Another important element is respect for one's elders, who in turn guide and instruct the young. Finally, in Circassian society, women supposedly enjoy full equal rights and marriage cannot be forced upon them.

Marriage also provides an interesting ground to explore these mechanisms of creation of "new" traditions. Traditionally, Circassians must find a husband or a wife far from their own village because all its inhabitants are considered as members of the same extended family: unions between relatives of the same village are not allowed in the Caucasus.

For many reasons that can easily be understood, this is not the case in Israel; even if there are lots of "exchanges" between young people from Kfar Kama and from Reyhaniya, the preferred marriage would be between people from the same village.

The interesting thing about these two examples (marriage and religion) is that all the interviewees will tell you that these are traditional habits even if they clearly are not. My aim, as an anthropologist, is not to determine what is traditional and what is not, what was in the past and what is happening now. I only focus on discourses and on observations from the fieldwork I did but these two examples are a perfect illustration of the way immigrants can create new traditions and convince themselves that these new elements are traditional ones.

So, in the case of the Circassians, should we speak of keeping traditions or are we witnessing the making of new ones?

We should also note that the Circassian diaspora in Israel is considered as a powerful referent in the Circassian world. Circassians from other countries, especially from the Caucasus, have a much greater esteem for the two Circassian villages in Israel than for the Circassian communities in Syria or in Jordan. The Presidents of both the Kabardino-Balkar Republic and the Republic of Adygea have come to visit them several times, and Councils from the two Israeli villages and major towns in the Caucasus have often organized exchanges between students or inhabitants. Such esteem could mainly be explained because the Circassians in Israel are not in an immediate danger of assimilation, as opposed to what

happens in other parts of the Middle East; it can also be explained by the fact that this community obviously makes great efforts to preserve cultural tradition (or what is considered as such).

In what way do these mechanisms of integration in a welcoming society and of preservation of identity link together? Do they link together at all?

These non-Jewish Israelis but also non-Arab-Palestinian Muslims, who are second-class citizens for some and traitors for others, face difficulties in finding their place at the borders of the dominant identity entities in the Israeli-Palestinian space. The different mechanisms by which identity is built and this minority is represented in the majority are fascinating and give the opportunity of getting out of the traditional Manichean constructions of this conflicting area. Instead of the duality and the constant opposition between Jews and Muslims, between Israelis and Palestinians, another situation could be considered: being able to be a hundred per cent Israeli without having any specific religious background; being at once fully Israeli and fully Muslim, being at once fully Palestinian and fully Jewish.

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