

CULTURAL LANDSCAPE AND NATIONAL ICONOGRAPHY: NATION AND IDENTITY IN ARMENIAN TOURISM

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Abstract: *Cultural Landscape and National Iconography: Nation and Identity in Armenian Tourism.* Armenians have always represented a Christian and Indo-European "outpost" in a mainly Islamic and Turkish speaking regional environment. That's why religious identity has always played a significant role, contributing to the survival of the cultural element in an alien and often hostile context. For centuries Armenian culture has been generating a very peculiar landscape, dominated by material evidence of religiousness (religious architecture, *khatchkars*) and completed by an impressive iconographic display. On such a base governmental institutions and private operators are starting promoting a kind of "niche" tourism, addressing a public willing to experience unusual routes of cultural tourism. This paper aims to highlight the strong interdependence that can be found in Armenia between the two domains of tourism and "nationality" when looking both at the origin of tourist flows - tourists are mainly of Armenian origin, coming from the main regions of the Diaspora (Western Europe, Americas, Middle East) - and at the iconographic display, where its constituents don't just stand for attraction features to be exploited by a *destination branding* strategy, but also for identity references of a nationalist rhetoric aiming to stress the cultural and geo-political opposition between Armenia and the hostile regional context.

Key words: Armenia, landscape, tourism, nation

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1. FOREWORD – During the 20th century Armenia went from Stalinist severity to post-communist chaos. Armenian social landscape has been going through deep changes: the rural features and traditional lifestyles still marking Armenia when it got part of USSR have been blurred, though not completely replaced, by a modernization process that produced a urban-industrial culture often disrespectful of the landscape values of the region. The industrial option has then shown all its weakness after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resulting independence of the country, which started a difficult economic, political and cultural transition not yet completed and, what's more, one that caused a silent migration, still difficult to define but surely very significant in its

extent¹. In fact, more than in other ex-Soviet republics, the joint effect of isolation, poor resources and a nationalist drift have so far hindered a genuine growth, although from 2004 onwards a reversal can be spotted considering both the fight against poverty and development perspectives.

What is striking in the Armenian “parabola” is the contrast between the universal character of its historical and cultural heritage and the demographic, economic and political borderline status of its actual State. Armenian borderline status turns into an almost “claustrophobic” isolation when looking at its borders and international relations: an inner and mountain State, lacking in energy resources, under an embargo by Azerbaijan and Turkey after the Nagorno-Karabakh war, an unsolved question heavily affecting the political and economical development of the country and of the whole region (Zarrilli, 2000), Armenia finds its main political *raison d’être* in being Russia’s transcaucasian satellite.

Invigorating the tourist industry could help to lessen international isolation. In this respect the gap between the country’s potential and its actual development is still large, and the product “Armenia”, once a famous destination of Soviet tourism, is still lacking worldwide promotion. Although for the last twenty years Armenia has been receiving some media attention, it was mainly due to the 1988 earthquake, the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Parliament slaughter in 1999. Rather a “What is Armenia?” attitude, thus, or, even worse, the image of a place of pain, trouble, tragic destinies and longing for an “elsewhere”. What the word “Armenia” calls to mind is not what the country can offer to western tourists: a maybe unique combination of “otherness” and “affinity”, historical fascinations and cultural incitements, charming landscapes, a wonderful and millennial church-architecture, a still genuine folklore expressed in music, dance, religious rituals, cuisine, craftsmanship.

This paper aims to highlight the strong interdependence that can be found in Armenia between the two domains of tourism and “nationality”, and to do so from a double point of view. First, the origin of tourists: tourists beginning a journey in the “kingdom of shouting stones”, as Mandel’stam called Armenia (Mandel’stam, 1988), are mainly, as we’ll find out later on, people of Armenian origins visiting their “motherland”, apart from a small group of *aficionados* of odd destinations. Secondly, the iconographic display in the meaning of Gottmann (Gottmann, 1952): although the features of the cultural landscape and the national iconography, that will be specified later on, are on one hand the attraction features on which a *destination branding* must be based, on the other they represent the identity references on which a nationalistic rethoric is often based, aiming to stress the cultural and geo-political opposition between Christian, Indo-European Armenia and the hostile regional context, Turkish in its language and culture, seizing it from West and East.

2. SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTS – Linguistically and religiously Armenia can be thought of as a Christian and Indo-European island «in the middle of the Turkish-Iranian-Caucasian sea» (Cori, 2000, p. 22). Linguistically, since Armenian is part of the Indo-European family, but represents a branch of its own: it has its own alphabet, designed in the IV century A.D. by the monk Mesrop Mashtots. Religion is then for Armenians a possibly more distinctive feature than the language, not just due to the contrast with the surrounding Islamic context, but also since Armenians claim a “primacy” of Christianity: brought to Armenia by Saint Gregory called the “Illuminator”, Christianity was declared state religion in the Armenian kingdom by Tiridates III in 301 A.D., (according to traditional dating), or in 314 a.D. (according to some more recent

¹ Reliable estimates (International Monetary Fund, 2002) reckon at least 800,000 people emigrated between 1991 and 2001, on a total population of about 3.8 millions.

studies). However the Armenian nation stands out for being the first “officially” Christian one in history. Which explains why the religious and ethno-linguistic peculiar features always have been a powerful identity marker for Armenians, one that while keeping Armenian culture alive in some alien when not actually hostile contexts, also often roused inflamed nationalist feelings with relevant implications in the country’s foreign policy.

The Diaspora-factor is thus a fundamental one in our discussion: Armenian Diaspora is so deeply rooted in history and stretched geographically that it cannot be done without in any analysis focussed on “Armenity”. Such a tight interdependence between the “national” and the Diaspora constituent is rooted in the above mentioned identity awareness, that is in turn a consequence of this “border-” people’s history and geography: «Such “being on the border” had at first a geographical and political meaning, when the Armenian kingdoms found themselves squeezed between very powerful imperial powers such as the Roman and Parthian, the Byzantine and Sassanid (then replaced by the Arabs), the Ottoman and Russian ones. This notion was then loaded with a strong and undeletable religious connotation after the conversion to Christianity and the need to save the country’s identity against a more and more hostile context, thus turning into an autonomous rather than a space dimension» (Ferrari, 2000, p. 10). Therefore this sense of belonging, mainly a religious belonging, has stayed maybe not so much the same but surely really alive in time and space. A space that is almost ecumenically stretched, considering the extent of Armenian Diaspora: Armenian communities can be found in all continents, in more than 50 countries. Sometimes it is rather big communities, like the U.S. (almost one million people), Russian (670,000), Georgian (500,000), French (450,000), Iranian (200,000), Turkish (140,000), Lebanese (82,000), Argentinian (80,000) and Syrian (80,000) ones². Remarkably enough, Armenian communities are very well integrated in the social systems of almost all their hosting countries, often taking part in the economic and cultural life of these countries with important public figures and developing what has been called a “multidimensional, many-sided identity”, i.e. the ability to “keep the cultural heritage of one’s own roots in the different historical contexts even while being rightfully, or almost rightfully, part of the life and structures of the hosting society” (Zekiyan, 2000, p. 170). As a result, the harmonious existence of a numerically, economically and culturally relevant Armenian component in rich and powerful countries like the United States and France also has significant economic and diplomatic implications for Armenia itself: it assures on one hand a fundamental financial support by the wealthy communities of the Diaspora, on the other it prompts an often effective *lobbying*, supporting Armenian interests. As far as our analysis here is concerned, the Diaspora is, as we will argue later on, a fundamental factor in the tourist incoming flows of the country, so that it deeply marks the whole sector with a “national” feature, acting both on motivation and on communication, promotional and *destination management* strategies.

3. THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE – As for its naturalistic qualities, Armenian territory stands out for its surprising variety, given its very small size: going from south northbound, i.e. from Iran towards Georgia, one moves from an almost desert natural environment, made up of «death and yellowish earthen plains» (Mandel’shtam, 1988, p. 144) and surrounded by rough and rocky isolated heights, to settings that can easily be depicted as alpine, given the richness of their woods and rivers, flowing there like streams forming sometimes deep gorges.

² Data from Avagian, 1994. These data, related to 1990, do not account for the migratory flows in the following ten years; in the case of Russia, for instance, we can reasonably assume a double increase. These are anyway, as the author himself admits, rough and draft figures. Different sources (see for instance Zekiyan, 2000, p. 39) do indeed, in some cases, point out to different figures.



The Monastery of Noravank



Interior of church



The Monastery of Khor Virap



Khatchkar



In such a fascinating natural context and in spite of the negative changes brought about by the Soviet “modernization”, a most peculiar cultural landscape is cut, rooted in this people’s history, culture and also in its identity, and one that seems mainly based on the special binomial developed in Armenia between architecture and nature³. We are talking about the many age-old churches of multicoloured tuff which «splinter and break up the sight’s teeth» (Mandel’shtam, 1988, p. 63), and about their perfect positioning in

³ When talking about the natural and cultural landscape of Armenia, the one who, better than any other, gave it everlasting life just has to be mentioned: the painter Martiros Saryan (1880-1972). Saryan embodies the artistic symbol of Armenia, coupling Armenian cultural peculiarity with contemporary western art expressions.

the lonely and often desert settings of rural and rocky Armenia, an area on the outskirts and thus saved from mounting modernization. Fortified churches or churches built in strategic places, in order to hold out against constant invasion attempts; with no incoming light and few openings towards the outside, in order to be able to also turn into safe shelters; almost camouflaged since they're built with the same stone of which the surrounding mountains are made up; with thick and multilayered walls, in order to stand up to the frequent earthquakes always devastating this area.

An emblematic instance is undoubtedly the monastery of Khor Virap⁴, standing out on the background of snowy Ararat, a “symbolic” mountain full of painful historical and cultural meaning. This “icon”, almost obsessively reproduced in Armenia to the point that it seems ubiquitous in daily life, can be said to represent this land's last essence and the synthesis of its dramatic historical parabola: the cradle of Armenian civilization, the source of Christian identity and the displacement, after the Genocide, from the ancestral land, the region of Ararat. So it is not by chance that it gets used as the country's “business card” in touristic advertising: one can almost inevitably find it on the cover or the first page of trade magazines whenever an article about Armenia is published.

Traditionally, when turning to Christianity, after the idols had been knocked down crosses were raised, which for Armenia meant the building of *khatchkars*. *Khatchkars* (literally: “stone crosses”), have for centuries “marked” in thousands each corner of Armenian territory, turning into a peculiar and necessary feature of its cultural landscape: carved on the old megalithic steles, sculpted on modern stones or on the walls of churches, or on the mountains' rocks, isolated or in groups, sometimes with a refined manufacturing, sometimes simple graffiti by unexperienced hands. These stone crosses were raised both as funerary monuments (sometimes in huge groups: Noraduz, Julfa and so on), and as a “memory”, permanently reminding of a happy or sad event, a wedding, a birth, a won or lost battle, a pilgrimage, a journey. It is basically a “petrified diary” telling the story of a people and tying it up to its land symbolically and even physically (through the stone driven into the land).

An impressive iconographic national display, made up of material and non-material items (alphabet, liturgy, church and popular music, dance, miniature manuscripts, craftsmanship, gastronomy, brandy and so on)⁵, builds up the peculiarity of Armenian culture, completing the landscape facts and contributing to make the perceptive-sensory experience of a journey to Armenia unique and unrepeatable. On such basis governmental institutions and private operators start promoting a kind of “niche” tourism⁶, addressing a public willing to experience unusual routes of cultural tourism, geographically concentrated in the areas of the Diaspora (Western Europe, Americas, Middle East), as the data reported in next paragraph will show.

4. TOURIST FLOWS – We have to stress straight away that tourism in Armenia strongly feeds on what we could call a “diasporic” component. Both the mostly western and middle-east tourists with remote Armenian origins, the descendants of past Diasporas, and recently emigrated Armenians (after the collapsing of the USSR), who are gone once and for all but still keep strong affection and family ties with Armenia, can be included in this category. Moreover, and more improperly so, those Armenian nationals

⁴ Built in the IV century where, according to tradition, St. Gregory was held prisoner, not far from the present border with Turkey, the monastery of Khor Virap looks more like an ancient military outpost than a worship place.

⁵ The historical and cultural significance of the *duduk* must be stressed here, a wind instrument with a slightly nasal timbre made of apricot tree wood, whose origins can be traced back to the times of king Tigranes the Great (95 – 55 B.C.). It is played in popular songs and dances of the Armenian tradition and is usually played at big events like weddings and funerals. In 2005 it was declared by UNESCO a “*masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of the humanity*”.

⁶ See for instance the commercials produced for CNN (“*Armenia. Noah's route. Your route*”), or the web page of the *Armenian Tourism Development Agency* (http://www.armeniainfo.am/virtual_tour/).

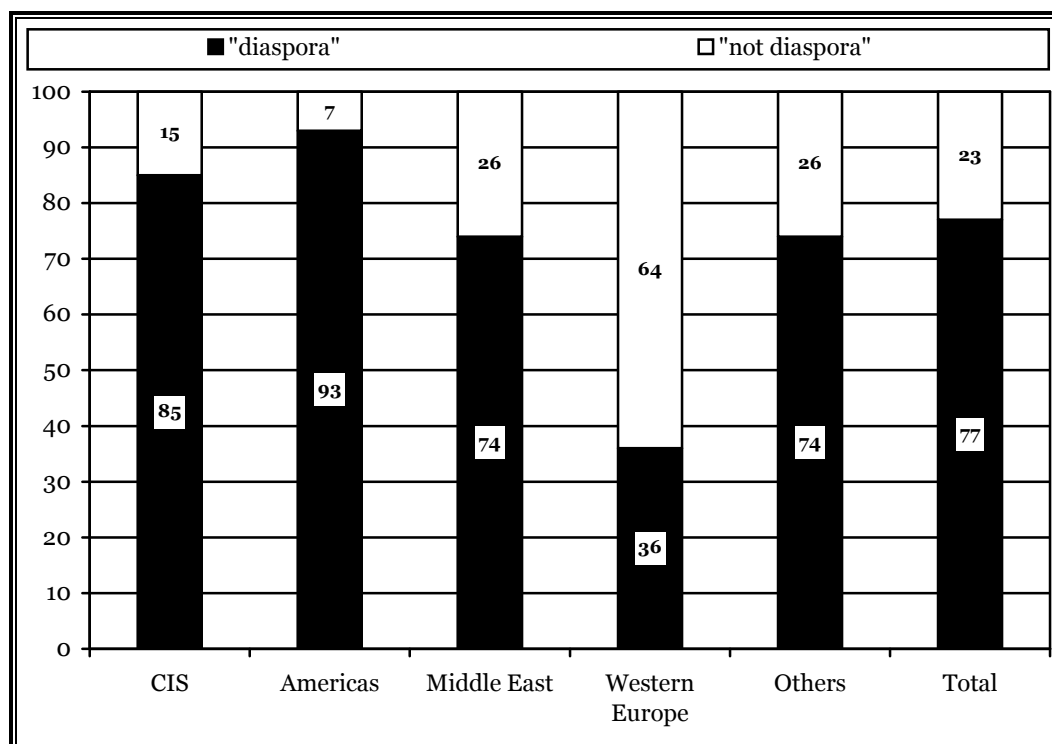
working abroad (mainly in Russia) and regularly coming back for holidays can also be considered “Diaspora-tourists”.

A study of tourist incoming flows shows that 510,000 tourists visited Armenia in 2007, about 34,2 % more than in 2006 and more than 12 times the number of tourists counted in 1999. In particular, in 2001 an upsurge in arrivals was recorded (Table 1), when the one thousand and 700th anniversary of the conversion to Christianity was celebrated: back then the figures got almost three times those of the previous year. Actually a slightly greater number of arrivals had been forecasted: it is indeed reckoned that almost 50,000 tourists canceled their journey to Armenia after 9/11, just when, in the second and third week of September, the highest figures were expected for the main celebrations (Pope John Paul II's visit, the tenth anniversary of independence from USSR, the opening of the new cathedral of Yerevan).

Table 1. International arrivals

Source: WTO, NSS

	Arrivals (ooo)	Trend (1999=100)
1999	41	100
2000	45	109
2001	123	300
2002	162	395
2003	206	502
2004	263	640
2005	300	731
2006	380	927
2007	510	1.244



Source: McKinsey Analysis; 2003

However, 2001 seems to have given Armenia an excellent occasion of promoting itself on an international level. From then on the tourists keep in fact steadily growing in their numbers, to the point that, according to an estimate of the tourist agency of Yerevan, if they keep growing as fast as in the last years, already in 2012 about 800,000 arrivals could be reckoned, a figure very close to those reported in Soviet times. As a matter of fact, up to 1991 about 900,000 tourists per year would visit Armenia, being this country part of Intourist (the USSR tourist agency), in a route including Georgia and Azerbaijan.

A study of the origin of tourist flows shows that it is mainly the Armenians of the Diaspora who go to Armenia. The following table highlights the fact that tourists mainly come from CIS and USA, i.e. the countries where the Diaspora-component is most present (respectively 1,5 million and 1 million people)⁷. Even the number of tourists coming from Argentina (where Armenians are ab. 80,000) and Canada is significant. As for Asian tourists, instead, they mainly come from Middle East (Iran, Syria and Lebanon), where Armenians have been living for ages (some of these territories were in fact once part of "historical Armenia").

Considering 2003 data in particular, it comes out that of the 206,000 tourists arrived in the country about 77 % were Diaspora-Armenians coming from all over the world. The table also shows that incoming flows mostly consist of tourists of Armenian origin, except those coming from Western Europe, where on 28,000 tourists only 36 % belongs to Diaspora. This latter phenomenon can on one hand be explained through the fact that in Western Europe, apart from France, Armenian communities are smaller than in Americas and Middle East. On the other it reflects the tendency of tourists from Western Europe to visit alternative destinations of cultural tourism.

Table 2 provides more evidence on what we have just discussed. The data come from a research on a sample of 7,627 tourists classified according to the country they came from, and they show one more time that tourists in Armenia can mostly be linked to Armenian communities abroad.

Table 2. Tourists with Armenian origins
Source: USAID, *Armenian International Visitor Survey*, Sept. 2006 – Aug. 2007, 2008

Country	Total number of tourists	Total number of tourists with Armenian origins	Percentage of tourists with Armenian origins on general total	Percentage of tourists with Armenian origins on country's total
Canada	55	38	0,8	69,1
France	270	144	3,0	53,3
Georgia	2.143	1.470	31,0	68,6
Germany	222	59	1,2	26,6
Greece	64	37	0,8	57,8
Iran	592	177	3,7	29,9
Italy	65	10	0,2	15,4
Japan	40	1	0,0	2,5
Lebanon	37	33	0,7	89,2
Russia	2.660	2.188	46,1	82,2
Syria	88	63	1,3	71,6
UK	145	36	0,8	24,8
USA	347	186	3,9	53,6
Other CIS	235	136	2,9	57,9
Other W. Eur.	231	67	1,4	29,0
Other countries	433	101	2,1	23,3
Total	7.627	4.746	100	62,2

⁷ These data, processed by McKinsey & Co., refer to 2003.

In particular from neighbouring countries like Russia and Georgia a more significant flow of arrivals is recorded plus a higher absolute value of tourists with Armenian origins. Moreover, a high percentage of interviewed people coming from these countries had an Armenian passport (for Russia this percentage is higher than 30 %). These tourists are thus Armenian nationals working abroad (mostly in CIS) and coming back to their families and homes for holidays. This data is also confirmed when considering the average daily expenditure: a study by the *United States Agency for International Development* carried out between 2006 and 2007 shows that, during their stay in Armenia, people coming from countries like Iran, Syria and Lebanon, or from CIS countries, spend an average 66.3 % less than tourists coming from the rest of the world (for Georgia the percentage rises to 86.2 %), since, precisely, they do not make use of reception facilities typically designed for tourists.

From countries like Italy or Japan, instead, flows are less or not at all marked through motivations such as family or ancestral belonging to Armenia. The main reason lies in wanting to explore destinations that are not part of mass tourism routes, though they are generally less equipped for tourism itself.

It must be stressed, though, that more and more tourists come to Armenia just for cultural reasons, which means that the country gained more visibility at international levels: tour operators offer it more and more frequently and it starts being present on the global market through “modern” promotional patterns.

To the extent that, by confronting data related to the different typologies of tourism in 2001 and 2006 (Table 3), the following holds true:

- a. figures related to “leisure and holiday” tourists, i.e. those leaving their homes just for cultural reasons or for pleasure, significantly rise; it is anyway not easy to determine how many of those tourists included in this category, which is itself difficult to measure considering the weak boundary between “leisure and holiday” tourism and different forms of tourism, do have indeed Armenian origins;
- b. the increase of “leisure and holiday” tourism is opposed to an almost corresponding decrease of the percentage related to tourists coming in for family reasons: from 50 % in 2001 to 45 % in 2006;
- c. what stays more or less the same but is nonetheless remarkable is the number of people coming in for business reasons (businessmen, officials from international organizations, diplomats);
- d. eventually, a small and essentially constant percentage of tourists is to be linked to spas and education. It is obviously people coming from neighbouring countries like Russia, Iran and Syria, visiting health centres once crowded with Soviet tourists, or students from the Middle East willing to benefit from the academic prestige reached by the University of Yerevan in such branches like medicine and dentistry.

Tab. 3 – Arrivals per tipology (%)

Source: NSS, *Survey of passengers 2001, 2002*;

USAID, *Armenian International Visitor Survey, Sept. 2006 – Aug. 2007, 2008*

	Leisure and Holiday	Relatives	Business	Education	Health
2001	13	50	31	1	5
2006	21	45	29	2	3

5. FINAL REMARKS – On 21st September 1991 the Republic of Armenia declared its independence from a collapsing Soviet Union and came (back) to the international stage. The beginnings of this re-birth can be traced back to what we can call the middle-realm of pre-collapse/pre-transition (basically between 1988-1993): it is a particularly difficult time for Armenia and Armenians (among devastations caused by earthquakes, the radicalization

of the Nagorno-Karabakh question, the energy crisis and the collapse of a centralized economic system), but also a time of strong ideological excitement, “revolutionary” in some way, aiming to independence in the name of clear identity values and marked through an iconographic load strongly felt in the streets, the squares, the media, through the free expression of national identity and the proud display of related symbols⁸. Such an impulse towards self-determination, though, would soon deteriorate into a nationalist attitude that is still branding, with ups and downs, Armenian foreign policy.

Thus, as we’ve seen, Armenian cultural landscape – meaning not just the material elements of the territory, but rather the whole system of symbols, signs and values produced by the historical sedimentation of this land - “induced” by history to stand out against the surrounding context more definitely than it could happen elsewhere – plays a double role: on one hand, it stands as the main nourishment of a common feeling of national identity, that sometimes goes beyond the weak boundary between the peaceful display of national features and their aggressive parading, particularly in an anti-turkish and anti-azeri key⁹-which is no wonder, given the historical and geographical circumstances affecting this territory; on the other hand, it serves as a rich “deposit” of touristic resources, of which significantly, if not mainly, foreign tourists of Armenian origins benefit, confirming once more the special link existing in Armenia between the touristic and national dimension.

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⁸ See for instance the movie *The Journey* (2002) by Edwin Avanesyan and Emy Hovanesyan.

⁹ Many instances can be found not so much in official contexts, where the necessary diplomatic attitude is kept, as rather in the nationalist activism that can be mainly linked to circles of the Diaspora. See for an emblematic instance: “Turkish dream....NOT”, www.youtube.com/AchiK2007.