REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING THE ARAMEAN MASSACRE

Implications for Transitional Justice and Healing
Memory is human life. There is no past without memory, and the past can even be altered with faulty memory or forgetting. This eerie lesson is demonstrated throughout time, and entire histories have been rewritten because of limited accounts of memory or storytelling. When memory and forgetting affect an entire group of people to the point where their identity is at large and where their suffering goes unhealed, problems bubble up into both domestic and global society and tensions are created and sustained. When certain memories are repressed, the future cannot be hopeful.

The Aramean\textsuperscript{1} people experienced genocide at the hands of the Ottoman Empire in the early 1900’s. Even today, Turkey denies the atrocity. They are people who do not have a homeland to call their own, but have dispersed throughout Europe and are at risk of losing their ancient culture and identity. In this paper, I will examine how some of the goals of transitional justice can be met through transgenerational memory sharing despite state and cultural denial. To do this, I will examine the goals and limits of transitional justice, as well as ideas around memory, forgetting and witnessing. Following that, I will supply a history of the Aramean massacre at the hands of the Ottoman Empire in 1915. Finally, I will examine how memory and forgetting affect the Aramean people today, and discuss how only a few of the goals of the (limited) scope of transitional justice can be met through memory.

**Transitional Justice on its Face**

Armed conflict and repressive regimes can produce negative effects that “spill over” into the society they exist in, including (but not limited to) mass atrocity, mass migrations or diasporas, and lack of

\textsuperscript{1} For the purposes of this essay, I use the term ‘Aramean’ rather than ‘Assyrian’, as the World Council or Arameans state that is the preferred name for various historical reasons.
development.\textsuperscript{2} Transitional justice seeks to remedy this, and, put broadly, is a means of restoring a country back to stability and democracy through certain measures. For the United Nations, this means:

The full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempt to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation. \textsuperscript{3}

Additionally, it attempts to help the state undergo political and social change in order to build systems that uphold the “rule of law, democracy, and human rights protection.”\textsuperscript{4} Roht-Arriza further defines transitional justice to address “concerns that arise following a period of conflict, civil strife or repression, and dealing with past violations of human rights and humanitarian law.”\textsuperscript{5}

Underlying transitional justice are four main goals. The first is the justice process, which includes bringing a perpetrator of mass atrocities to justice. Reflections of the post-war trials of Nazi Germany and “never again” weave through this notion of bringing perpetrators to justice. The second is the reparation process, which is to “redress victims of atrocities for the harm suffered.” The third is the truth process, where victims and the larger society is enabled to know what has happened during the repression and/or conflict, such as what took place, who was involved, and what has happened to the victims. The final one is the institutional reform process, which aims to ultimately prevent a similar atrocity from occurring again.\textsuperscript{6}

Unfortunately, the scope of transitional justice is interpreted narrowly, and as McEvoy argues, it is overly legalistic such that it is “over dominated by a narrow legalistic lens which impedes both

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
scholarship and praxis.” Ultimately, this distances the law from those who need it the most. If transitional justice is to help who it is designed for, than it needs to be examined differently.

Fortunately, the UN has begun to recognize how to deal with the root cause, rather than taking such an exclusionary and effect-based approach. They note that it is necessary to also take into account violations of economic, social, and cultural rights. While this is a step in the right direction, certain problems still persist. As Barahona de Brito notes: “the word transitional is problematic because experience shows these policies may originate during a transition but persist – and even be initiated – well after the transitional period is over.” Thus, the focus should not be limited on conflict that is either current or still in transit, and it should also be examined through a variety of disciplines.

**Remembering and Forgetting**

Remembering atrocity is an important aspect in transitional justice, because transitional justice and memory are intrinsically linked. The victim or victim group likely will not simply forget the systematic killing of their people, nor will all of the perpetrators or groups of perpetrators likely just forget that they partook in the killing. But what if the group who was the direct victim no longer exists? Does memory still exist?

Sofia Numansen examines the notion of transgenerational memory. This is memory that is passed down through families and societies. This can happen in the form of oral history, or written history. This is a form of collective memory, being “shared experiences, ideas, knowledge and cultural

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8 Ibid page 414.
9 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
practices through which people construct a relationship to the past.”\textsuperscript{13} Individual memory of victims and perpetrators and collective memory are intersecting because collective memory can only exist if it is capable of being transmitted, and transmission can only occur once an individual memory is shared.\textsuperscript{14}

Remembering is also a deeply politicized matter. What is remembered in a society is often influenced by who is in power. As mentioned by Barahona de Brito: “Memory defines the scope and nature of action, reorders reality and legitimates power holders,” and further “controlling which narratives children learn in school and the meaning of what they are taught to remember is a crucial aspect of establishing ‘hegemony.’”\textsuperscript{15} The history of Canada is a prime example of this, since in schools students learn that it was colonized by the British and French, and learn virtually nothing about what the land and people were like before. Following this power dynamic through the centuries is a history of cultural genocide, in which the Native people were killed and assimilated through actual systemic killing or through less direct means including horrific residential schools and the 60’s scoop.\textsuperscript{16} The product today is a country whose history is tainted in blood and constant struggle, with the issue of inequality being far from resolved.\textsuperscript{17} In other words, a system was created where “political elites, social groups and institutions reinterpret the past and the breakdown of civility and propagate new interpretive narratives about ‘what happened’ to legitimate a new political dispensation and develop a new vision of the future.”\textsuperscript{18}

In addition to the ‘politics of memory’, forgetting can also be politicized. Connerton’s ‘repressive erasure’ examines the act of destroying memory in order to suit a new memory that with a change of

\textsuperscript{13} Supra note 10, page 361.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid page 363.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid page 360.
\textsuperscript{16} Residential schools did not allow students to follow any of their cultural practices or speak their native tongue. There were allegations of sexual and physical abuse and many children died. The 60’s Scoop was a system of forced adoptions based on the assumption that Indigenous parents were not suitable to raise a child in their own way, placing Indigenous children with predominantly white Canadians, resulting in the almost complete annihilation of their culture, which is why I used the term ‘cultural genocide’.
\textsuperscript{17} As we can see through the overrepresentation of Indigenous men in Canadian prisons and the overrepresentation of Indigenous women who are murdered and missing.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
regime. It “can be used to deny the fact of a historical rupture as well as to bring about a historical break.”¹⁹ He notes the French Revolution as an example of this, where the regime change brought forth the forcible changing of certain ideas or objects linked to the former regime (like names of cities). This is actively forgetting history intentionally in order to create a new history to suit the new regime and annihilate the old.

Another form is forgetting that is ‘constitutive in the formation of a new identity’. This is where we discard memories that have no purpose anymore in managing a current identity.²⁰ This is where forgetting constructs newly shared memories because “a new set of memories are frequently accompanied by a set of tacitly shared silences.”²¹ Certain cultures may “forget” something that no longer purposes their identity.

The act of forgetting therefore is also deeply politicized, and this is especially evident with repressive erasure, or through how what we learn is tied to what the prevailing social sentiment is at the time. Forgetting may cause many foreseeable problems if there is an attempt on part of a certain group to achieve justice for past atrocities.

**History of the Aramean Genocide**

The Aramaic culture is one steeped in history. The Arameans were spread out in the Middle East, never belonging to one nation in particular, but concentrated in the western and northern Levant (modern day Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Southeast Turkey, northern Iraq). The language was the *lingua franca* of these areas, until about the seventh century when there was a large-scale Islamification. The ones who remained Christian Aramaic continued to practice their religion and language, and preserved it through the centuries. Some sources state that the historical presence of Arameans in Southeast Turkey spans

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over 3000 years.\textsuperscript{22}

Between 1914 and 1920, around 275,000 to 500,000 Arameans, Assyrians, and Chaldeans were massacred by the Ottoman Empire, which was reportedly 90\% of the original population of Eastern Turkey at the time.\textsuperscript{23} The perpetrators were the Young Turks, as well as the Kurds, Chechens, and Circassians. This occurred in conjunction with the Armenian and Greek genocides, and is often lumped into the same category.

There were differences, however, in how the Armenian massacre and the Aramean massacre took place. They both occurred around the same time and by similar perpetrators. They occurred under Ottoman Empire in the ‘demographic Islamization of the empire’.\textsuperscript{24} However, they were not seen as a threat to Turkey as the Armenians were. They had no home land of their own, and no potential international support. There were also no orders to deport this group like there was for the Armenians, and they were killed predominantly in their cities.\textsuperscript{25} Since the Arameans did not have a state of their own to flee to, they were at even greater risk when migrating.

Those who escaped migrated predominantly to Western European countries, most notably Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden. Thus community is largely diasporic now, and the culture is likely to have changed to incorporate their new cultures, as the younger generation would have mostly been born into these new countries.

Further Analysis of Memory and Forgetting

Numansen notes the importance of oral memory transmission in Aramean communities. The first generation born in Turkey had very limited legal protection, and were forbidden to speak their language

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\textsuperscript{22} World Council of Arameans (Syriacs), “Arameans as Indigenous People of Southeast Turkey” available at: http://www.wca-ngo.org/heritage/287-arameans-as-indigenous-people-of-southeast-turkey. \\
\textsuperscript{23} Supra note 12. \\
\textsuperscript{24} Bloxham at supra note 12. \\
\textsuperscript{25} Supra note 12. 
\end{flushright}
or practice their religion and culture. Thus, the earlier generations transferred the history through ‘rhapsodism’: an important form of communications in their culture, through finding often religious meanings of the events that occurred. She also notes that the consequential migration of the Arameans endangered this ancient tradition. As she notes: “language-loss, dislocation of the imagination and lack of personal experience of the homeland makes rhapsodism ineffective.” However, she notes that it still plays a major role in memory transfer amongst younger generations of Arameans, and that often, the younger generations know even more about the genocide than their older family members often did. Perhaps this is due to a rise of social media outlets and the creation of the internet where information is more easily accessed. The younger generations were able to record what happened through writing, increasing the volume of information available.

The community believes that the “performances of recitation that link the elderly to the young was important... because it may help to prevent new genocides and allay the fears of the younger generation.” Furthermore, the Aramean people believe it is important to remember what has happened for “forgetting would mean their ancestors would have suffered for nothing.” The transgenerational sharing of memory has likely created a stronger and more interconnected community, especially due to the rise of digital means of information transference, and remembering massacre perhaps also leads the cultural healing that transitional justice aims to achieve.

Remembering the Armenian Genocide and Key Differences

The fact that the international community often only remembers the Armenian genocide demonstrates certain politics of memory at play. Turkey justified the killing of the Armenian’s at the time because they

26 Ibid.
27 Ibid page 49.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
were seen as potential allies to Russia by the Ottoman Empire.\textsuperscript{31} Russia today condemns Turkey, formally criminalizing it’s denial of the Armenian genocide, perhaps in light of Turkey recently shooting down a Russian plane.\textsuperscript{32} Russia’s mention of the Armenian genocide no doubt brings international attention to Turkey as well as the genocide, and the fact that the Armenians had supposed ties to the Russians at that time could be another reason this particular tragedy garners more international attention. Further, the fact that they had a land of their own would mean that Armenia could push their memory of the event safely and without contestation in their own state.

On the other hand, the Arameans had no political ties, and no land of their own. They were not seen as a potential threat like the Armenians were. Rather than being driven out as the Armenians were, they were killed in their villages by the Young Turks and their Kurdish neighbours.\textsuperscript{33} They had no political backing then, and there is therefore no group in the international community who can specifically attend to their genocide except Turkey itself (who, as mentioned, represses the memory).

In the Netherlands, the Arameans are struggling for recognition of their genocide, especially in light of the Dutch government recognizing the Armenian genocide, while alternatively, in Sweden, many explained that they need not pursue this type or struggle for recognition because the recognition of the 1915 genocide is an umbrella acceptance of all of those who have suffered.\textsuperscript{34} These differences in ideas perhaps lend to the idea that different diasporic cultures have different goals. John Urry argues that remembering in societies has become increasingly disjointed and fractured due to the movement across borders, and this would explain why the Arameans in different communities who have adopted different

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Akkok, Raziye, Roland Oliphant, Louisa Loveluck, “Russian jet shot down by Turkey: Everything we know so far.” \textit{The Telegraph} [London], 24 Nov 2015, online, available at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/12013527/Russian-jet-shot-down-by-Turkey-Everything-we-know-so-far.html
\textsuperscript{33} Supra note 12.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid page 46.
cultures may strive for different outcomes.\textsuperscript{35} However, the consensus that can be seen through the case studies and literature put forth by Numansen, and through the World Council of Arameans (Syriacs), is that the Aramean people do not want to lose their culture and would like some form of recognition of the massacre of their people. They refuse to forget.

\textbf{The Diaspora}

The trauma suffered by the Arameans is “identified and labelled differently depending on the generation and temporal and geographical distance from the original event.”\textsuperscript{36} The shift to the term ‘genocide’ from the use of \textit{Sayfo} from first and second generations was a result of the diaspora of the communities.\textsuperscript{37} This is again suggestive of de Brito’s ‘politics of memory’, perhaps in that to make their position clear, they adopt words that are more suited to their new countries, a means of expressing what happened in a way that is easier to understand for their new culture’s politics. This could lead to the spreading of the collective memory to groups that were not part of the Aramean or Turkish community, giving rise to “bearing witness” of these international communities.\textsuperscript{38}

Thus the relay of information in diasporic communities has perhaps attributed to the increasing international attention to the issue. This testimonial practice of sharing of memory can alleviate the international indifference and ‘put a human face’ to the tragedy.\textsuperscript{39} He also notes that following deterritorialization, communities can engage in commemoration in other countries in order to “counter state-sanctioned strategies of denial and social forgetting implemented at the original state of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[36] \textit{Supra} note 12.
\item[37] \textit{Ibid}, page 46.
\item[39] \textit{Ibid}.
\end{footnotes}
disaster."  There have been certain memorials erected in countries such as Australia, Belgium, and Greece to bring awareness to the tragedy. These memorials are a reflection of the memory of the massacre, as well as perhaps a sign of acceptance from the international community. Turkey may forget, but the international community recognizes what happened, even despite the rhetoric resting largely around the Armenian genocide.

Politics of Denial

Barahona de Brito’s ‘politics of memory’ may also explain Turkey’s denial of the atrocity. The massacre at the hands of the Ottoman Empire occurred because of the goal to make Turkey free from other cultural influences. They were at risk of losing territory and became increasingly harsh in their attacks against others. The sentiments at the time were extremely hostile towards anything that was not “Turkish”, or, in other words: ‘demographic Islamization of Turkey.” Perhaps the same systems of memory transference in the Aramean community occurred in the Turkish community. In addition to the government, many of the younger generations in Turkey still deny the occurrence of the genocide. The politics of memory are evident here, in that the prevailing social and political order pushes their denial and forgetting onto their citizens.

Connerton’s types of forgetting can also be evoked here. Firstly, repressive erasure was evident at the time of the genocide through the act of killing the Armenians, Arameans, and the non-Turkish communities in order to make the state completely free of outside influences. There was one monument erected in the 1920’s in memory of the Armenians, but it was since torn down. The culture was repressed and the language forbidden. Further, another type of forgetting is that ‘constitutive in the formation of a new identity.” Memories that serve no purpose are discarded when managing a new or

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40 Ibid.
41 Supra note 24.
current identity. Perhaps forgetting that the genocide occurred increases the sense of national identity in some Turkish people in maintaining their identity. Perhaps remembering the genocide no longer had any purpose in managing the current identity of the time, and this translates to the denial today. This explains why there was a prevailing rhetoric of “protecting” Turkey from outsiders (whereby they would see the Turkish people as victims) rather than the killing innocent civilians (where they would be the perpetrators of violence). As Barahona de Brito notes:

> A political party that opts to address the issue of the past of its constituent members as by their need to make ‘strategic’ calculations in the context of an uncertain transition to democracy. Soldiers, colonels, and generals in the armed forces with different memories of their role in repression, different justificatory discourses and different psychological traumas resulting from their participation in and responsibility for atrocities.\(^{42}\)

Regardless, it is clear to see that there are many political issues at play in the memory and forgetting of the genocide by both sides.

**Conclusion**

The Aramean massacre was atrocious, and the fact that Turkey still denies this unforgettable past only furthers the racial hatred on both sides, revitalizing the conflict. Recent vandalism of a monument in Australia commemorating the Aramean genocide demonstrates continued racial hate towards the Aramean community. Written on it was “Fuck Armenians, Assyrians, and Jews,” and this occurred nine days before the centennial anniversary of the Turkish genocide of these groups, a choice that would

\(^{42}\) *Supra* note 10.
seem especially contentious.\textsuperscript{43} However, the commemoration and collective memory transfer that occurs outside of Turkey can be a positive step in achieving certain goals of transitional justice for the Aramean community. Specifically, it can help prevent future atrocities, and help allay the fear of the younger generation.\textsuperscript{44}

A core principle of transitional justice would be bring the perpetrator to justice, but there is no perpetrator alive now. Perhaps, in its place, Turkey’s potential acceptance of the massacre could act as some form of justice for the families of the victims.

Ultimately, “the suffering of the Assyrians is largely forgotten internationally and not recognized as genocide, which embitters the descendants of the victims.”\textsuperscript{45} It is important to find some sort of recognition for the crime in order to aid the tensions that still exist and in order to prevent future crimes. It is important for the Aramean people as well as the global community to remember in order to achieve this goal. It is also important to remember because this helps achieve the third and fourth goal of transitional justice, being: the truth process and institutional reform. The families of the victims deserve to know, and this could bring healing. As Guy de Montpassant said: “our memory is a more perfect world than the universe. It gives life back to those who no longer exist.”

However, the story in Turkey could be drastically differently. The denial continues to affect the Arameans and Armenians who still live there. I think that in order for institutional reform to be brought about, there needs to be an acceptance by the Turkish government that these crimes were committed. Perhaps that can be brought about through “bearing witness” by the international community, and countries like Sweden and Belgium are already pressuring Turkey to accept that it happened and to accept that it has had an overwhelming effect on the victims.


\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Supra} note 12.

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Ibid.}
Furthermore, if transitional justice were to be viewed through an intersectional lens, including (but not limited to) the legal aspects as well as psychological, sociological and scientific, the goals of transitional justice may change slightly. Rhapsodism and storytelling in the Aramean community as a form of transgenerational memory certainly help achieve these goals. If the community does not want to leave their suffering in vain, at least keeping the memory alive in the face of opposition could attempt to achieve that goal.
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