

HYPERALLERGIC

ESSAYS

Remembering an Egyptian Artist Who Was Always Looking East



Dahlia Elsayed October 30, 2018



662 Shares



The author and Chant Avedissian sharing a meal in Groppi Garden cafe, Cairo (all images courtesy the author)

I first met Chant Avedissian in Yerevan in 2002, where he was taking a hiatus from Egypt. It was summer and you could never call him before noon, or you could but would get no answer. We met up at a lahmajun place he was keen for, and he arrived dressed in all black in the summer heat. While the lahmajun was indeed excellent, the meeting seemed like a test of some kind, for him to get a read on me. Our families had similar stories, grandchildren of Armenians displaced by the genocide to Egypt, and it felt like based on my responses to particular questions, he was getting a sense of how knotted I was into the Armenian nationalist script. Being half Egyptian, I wasn't, or at least it was as complicated for me as it was for him. The conversation got deep fast, as

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I would come to learn it always does with him. If the lahmajun place meeting was to see if the introduction could go further, it did, into a 15 plus year friendship and professional relationship that I valued deeply and will profoundly miss.

“It is child abuse when parents tell their children that Paris is the center of art.”

Chant made bold statements, radical declarations, and professed ideas that you weren’t quite sure were meant to provoke argument or laughter. He was philosophical, sharp and bewilderingly intelligent, and steadfast in his disdain of the Eurocentric tendency. He could, and would, reference Ibn Arabi and McDonalds in one sentence.

He would dramatically roll out observations that were biting, critical, brilliant, frequently rooted in the reoccurring theme of rejection of the Western lens. He despised the trivialization and disregard of Eastern aesthetics and materials. He readily critiqued the region’s cultural guardians who subscribed to Western reverence as a profound rejection of self. “Look East,” he would say, “Everything is in Samarkand, in Bhukara, in Aleppo.” It was always all east for him, ‘Near’ and ‘Far East’ — he was a fan of single quotes around terms he knew evoked complicated emotions and histories.



An example of how Avedissian used source materials in his finished work

“All the objects in your home should serve three purposes.”

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A few days later came an invitation to dinner at his apartment punctuated by a guided visit to a specific market to get some black market insecticide to ward off the massive roaches in my Yerevan rental). We sat on floor mats at a low table and ate salads served on beautiful plates and talked for hours. He was working on a series of photographs of young men alongside pictorial tombstones from a military cemetery of boys who had been killed in the war with Azerbaijan. The prints were intimate and felt slightly dangerous, and related to this series was a list of names of Diasporan Armenians who donated money to support the war. I felt concerned for his safety. But then he pointed out that the giant Soviet realist statue of Mother Armenia was holding that big knife only to slice basturma, and levity filled the small room.

That apartment, like his home in Cairo, was all ritual and order. In the Cairo studio, every element was multi-functional: a table that slid away and became the back of a seat, a platform bench that flipped up and became a shelf. A flexible, moveable architecture, like a Bedouin tent, or shoji screens, the opposite of a tomb, as he would describe it. “You should move all your furniture and art around every three months,” he advised me.

The many drawers housed stacks of his works on paper and textiles. He is best known for his stencil-based paintings, which were the basis of a [solo exhibition](#) at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art in 2000–2001 and also set an auction record for work by a living Arab artist. They depict popular figures based on photographs and advertising in Cairo from the 1950s and 60s, in lush color and pattern.

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Birdcages in Avedissian's Cairo studio

Produced 40 years out from the original publications, the stencil works should not be mistaken for nostalgia for an Egypt past, but are instead a simultaneous look at the content and constructions of those images. Most sourced from state owned media, they provide a view into how Egypt was defining itself in its post-colonial era, with both genuine and aspirational notions widely disseminated. We see Om Kalthoum, and Gamel Abdel Nasser, as well as Sayyid Jamal-alDin al-Afghani, (a revolutionary who fought against colonialism) and an Arab girl firing a grenade launcher with the moon rising up behind her. The work reveals more about their intent as messaging than as popular images, and their medium, interchangeable stencils that reappear with different backgrounds or foregrounds, emphasize and point at the illusion, another layer of facsimile.

He also wants us to see the material and method. Most of the works are made on the cardboard packing materials sourced from the souks and

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the technique of printing points to the long tradition of fabric printing in Egypt and neighboring nations. He considered these materials and processes as worthy as the fetishized oil on canvas.

The relationship with “humble” material had origins in his years of work as an archivist for the architect Hassan Fathy, with whom he had a close relationship after Chant returned from study in Canada and Europe. Fathy, who had turned away from the European model he himself had been trained in, created structures highlighting local materials and techniques, with seemingly simple, repeating forms based on native building techniques for maximum cooling in the desert heat. Chant’s time with Fathy helped undo the “abuse” of the westward gaze, helped “clean” him of his European art training and encouraged him to look more closely around him. It might have also sharpened his distinctive ability to find the poetic in the overlooked, and eliminate the divide between high/low value systems, and further develop his own rich language of shape, color, and motif that he would master in his work in textile and on paper. (In 2017, Sabrina Amrani Gallery in Madrid mounted an excellent [exhibition](#) focused on his pattern based work, which included sketches and photos beginning in the 1970’s through 2016.)

His ability to hone in on the essence of a thing was evident in the way he used language as well. In between the visits we would keep in touch by email. After sending him some new work, he wrote back immediately, “They have the strength of hieroglyphs, being atemporal and international ... as for [the current US political situation] the best remedy is to work” and describing the Arab Spring as “healthy chaos.”

On my last visit to Cairo, he insisted on taking me to the “baby street” and he walked me through the crowded, bustling, tight paths of El Attaba, looking at cheap plastic flowers, paper animal masks, printed cellophanes and plastic bags with odd typos (Best Whiches.) The baby street was a long, dense row of shops that sold hand-fashioned

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decorative items for baby parties, in every conceivable form and ones you never thought could exist, like tiny plastic infants decorated with gobs of glittery crinoline. “Dahlia, look at this!” he would point, with genuine joy. He touched things and noticed the details. Around a corner he bought a rapid blinking, very colorful LED light. “It’s for my living room” he said. He bought me sheets of clear plastic with a repeated floral pattern, “You should use this in your work.” This was Chant in his element: the vibrant, volatile Cairo night, a street thick with people hustling, ecstatic pattern overload, layers of electronic and human sound. At one point a commotion arose and suddenly a young boy came barreling through the narrow street on a very large horse. The moon was glowing and full. Chant was smiling.

I am fortunate to have two of his works, one of Kalthoum, her arms up, mouth open in mid-wail, the other of Nasser, hand to chin, brooding, deep in thought. They both are semi-profile staring out beyond the frame, looking forever east.

Muslim prayer may increase alpha waves in the brain

📅 MAY 7, 2012 BY CONNOR WOOD 🗨️ 5 COMMENTS

Connor Wood

The religious brain is hot stuff right now. Publications as diverse as *Science* and *Newsweek* seem to be gaga about how meditation affects the frontal cortex, how praying soothes the amygdala, or how religious belief affects the psyche. But there's a catch to all this excitement: nearly all the research focuses on either Christian or Buddhist forms of religious practice. Where are the other religions? A team of researchers from Malaysia recently helped to answer this question by studying how Muslim prayer affects alpha waves in the brain, and their results show a profound connection between mind and body.

Neuroscientists, or at least a certain cohort of them, have developed an interest in things religious over the past decade. This surge of interest has been fueled in a large part by the increasing use of brain scanning technology, such as magnetic-resonance imaging and electroencephalograms (EEG), to study how the brain reacts to religious or spiritual practice. But so far, the research has been fairly limited when it comes to religious diversity. Christian religiousness dominates the research on religion and mental health, while Buddhism is the darling of the researchers who study meditation and the brain. Of course, the fact is that Muslims, Hindus, and members of other religions make up more than half of the world's population, so any theories about how religion affects the brain seem obligated to eventually take these other traditions into account.

Fortunately, a team led by Hazem Doufesh of the University of Malaya's Department of Biomedical Engineering is blazing the trail, at least in a small way. Doufesh and his colleagues recently **published a paper** in the journal *Applied Psychophysiology and Feedback* detailing their EEG study of a small group of Muslim volunteers in the act of

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praying.

Muslim prayer, or salat, requires the worshiper to move through several distinct bodily postures while reciting specific supplications. The series of postures is fixed, and it's repeated a number of times for each act of prayer. Worshipers start out standing, then bow at the waist until their upper bodies are parallel with the floor, with their hands pressed against the knees. They then return to a standing position (still reciting supplications, or prayers) before kneeling down to the fully prostrate position – foreheads fully touching the ground. After prostration, worshipers sit up on their knees briefly before returning to a final prostrating. The cycle then starts again. Each stage in this cycle of prayer lasts a few seconds, and the whole cycle lasts between 30 seconds and a full minute.

To study how these different postures might affect brain waves, the researchers fitted the volunteers with EEG monitors around the frontal, central, temporal, parietal, and occipital regions and asked them to complete a series of complete prayer cycles. The volunteers completed one full set of prayers (comprising several cycles) that included both body postures and verbal prayers, or supplications. Then they completed another set with all the postures, but no verbal prayers.

The researchers hypothesized that the volunteers' brains would show spikes in alpha wave activity during certain phases of the salat, since previous research has strongly suggested a connection between alpha waves – which are associated with relaxation – and religious activities like meditation or prayer. And indeed, they found significant rises in alpha activity in volunteers' parietal and occipital cortices (the regions near the top and rear of the brain) – but, surprisingly, only during the prostration phase of the salat. In contrast, alpha wave levels didn't differ much at all between resting state and prayer in the standing, bowing, or kneeling positions.

Interestingly, there was no significant difference between the “actual” salat, or prayer with both postures and supplications, and the “acted” version, which included postures but no spoken prayer. Volunteers showed increased alpha activity during prostrations whether they were actually saying the appropriate prayers or not.

Does this mean that Muslim prayer only really “works” when worshipers are fully prostrate? Or that Muslim believers don't need to worry about saying their prayers, as long as they go through the bodily motions that accompany them? Those conclusions would probably be premature. Prayer is a multidimensional action, with many different aspects and motivations. Almost nobody takes a break from work to pray so that they can

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boost their alpha brain waves – instead, people pray for many different reasons that don't necessarily show up in EEG readings.

However, the fact that a certain body posture seemed to increase alpha waves strongly suggests that performing that posture may increase relaxation, reduce tension, and indicate focus. Doufesh and colleagues suggest that part of the reason for the increased alpha waves during prostrations is the fact that volunteers' eyes were only inches from the ground, reducing the visual field. Alpha waves have often been associated with closed eyes or reduced visual input, so being forced to stare at only one small region of the floor may explain the prostration-alpha wave connection.

Like any research into neuroscience and religion, though, this doesn't mean that Muslim salat is "nothing but" the neurological effects of a restricted visual field. Bodies are ineluctably a major part of the religious experience, and the fact that motions or postures of the body can have a concrete effect on the brain that is experienced as spiritual only shows how profound the interaction of consciousness and physiology really is. Religion, for many believers, is a way of engaging with all of life – from mind to relationships to body. The technologies of religion, including prayer, differ profoundly from culture to culture, but each may have something important to tell us about our search for meaning, security, and belonging.

Ottoman Minstrels



The picture shows two Armenian men in Tokat playing “kemani” (left) and “saz” (right). Photograph: Antoine Poidebard (Source: Bibliothèque Orientale – Université Saint-Joseph, Lebanon).

Maps / Vilayet of Sivas / Sandjak of Sivas / Local characteristics / Song - Ashough Pesendi < back

Sivas/Sepasdia - Ashough Pesendi

Local characteristics

Song - Ashough Pesendi

Song - Alahaidoyan Collection1

Song - Alahaidoyan Collection2

The Last Great Western Armenian Ashough

Author: Harry A. Kezelian III, 23/05/19 (Last modified 23/05/19)



Ashough Pesendi, one of the last professional Armenian ashoughs in Asia Minor, was born in Sivas/Sepasdia in 1864. His birth name was Mardiros Kmpetian; he was the son of Mikayel Kmpetian, who was also a musician. One of his contemporaries, Partogh Indjeian, described first meeting him in the following way:



Ashough Pesendi. Photo courtesy of Ara Dinkjian.

“This renowned ashough had made a name for himself, not only in the city, but in the entire region, despite his young age.

I myself had the fortune of seeing him in person, when, in the year 1891 he came to Marsevan [Marzvan/Merzifon] to compete with some other ashoughs. He was a likeable young man, well-built, of medium height, with a twisting black mustache, and an intelligent and sparkling look in his eyes.

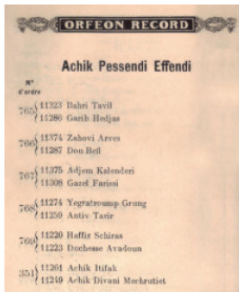
In the coffeehouse, where the competition was going to take place, hanging his muamme (riddle) on the wall, he called to the arena a few other ashoughs, who had more or less gained some fame.

The ashoughs could not solve it, wherefore he won. The muamme was ‘makok’ (weaver’s shuttle).” [1]

transformer

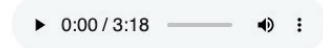


A group of craftsmen from Sivas, in the courtyard of the Anabad Monastery, during a celebration. The photograph also depicts a group of musicians. First row, sitting cross-legged, from left to right – Kemanji Drtad (holding a violin); an unknown qanoon player; Granatdji Hovsep (holding a clarinet or gurnata). Middle row, seated on chairs, left to right – Ghamsezents Khachig; Tarpin Harout; Chadrdjian (a renowned santur player, and a tinsmith by trade); Commissar Aram Effendi (wearing his military uniform and a fez); an unknown man; Zemperents Harout; Chyekhdji Vosgian (holding a saz). Third row, standing – the note accompanying the photograph provides only a few names, but we do not know the order in which the subjects are standing. The names provided are Hovhannes; Karnig Chadrdjian (drummer); Aram Chadrdjian (santur player); and Chamsezents Hovhannes (source: Arakel Badrig, Badmakirk Houshamadyan Sebastio yev Kavari Hayutyan, Volume B, New Jersey, Rokkir Printing House, 1983).



Discography of Ashough Pesendi's recordings for Orfeon Records in Constantinople, 1913. Photo courtesy of Ara Dinkjian.

Eghin Havasi (Song)



Egin Gelin Getirmek Gaydasi (Song)



Pesendi related to Indjeian how he had become an ashough:

"I was 16-17 years old. My father played the kemani. I had a great love to be an ashough. One day they said that ashoughs had come to the Soulou Khahve, and had hung a 'muamme.' I went a few times to pay attention and I left. I gave my love to ashoughoutiun but the problem was, how would I learn. I, who had heard from our 'mamigs' that our historic Sourp Nshan monastery gives the 'mouraz' (wish) to the one who desires and believes with his heart, decided to go to the monastery and ask for my 'mouraz.'

I had a school friend named Vosgian, who played the kemani; he too, like me, desired ashoughoutiun.

One day we decided to go with our parents to Sourp Nshan Monastery and to request from the primate, Bedros Srpazan, that he put a room in the monastery at our disposal, so that in

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accordance with our wish we could stay for a vow of 30 days. The primate, blessing us, gave us a room. Our parents saw to our expenses.

Three times a day we would kneel in front of the altar in the chapel and pray, saying ‘Sourp Nshan, give us our desire.’ Barely 10-15 days later, my friend, getting bored went home, but I remained a full month, without losing hope or getting bored, and I continued my prayer. One day at night, when I was sleeping in my bed, a bearded man, with a vibrant face, stood next to me and took hold of my arm. He had a kemani in his hand, he gave it to me and said that my vow had been accepted. I suddenly woke up; there was no one there and no kemani either. As soon as the dawn broke I went to the chapel, I kneeled before the altar. When the primate came, I told him my dream. He blessed me and said, ‘Go, my child, I wish you success, and continue your practicing, so that your wish may be fulfilled.’ I kissed the primate’s hand and returned home. I told my parents my dream; they greatly rejoiced.

I continued my study of the Turkish language, because all the songs in competitions were in Turkish.” [2]



The Saint Nshan Monastery of Sivas (Source: Mekhitarist Order, San Lazzaro, Venice).

In Arakel Badrig’s book, though it is not completely plain, a distinction seems to be made between “keman” or Western violin often played in Middle Eastern style, and “kemani”. The instrument “kemani” was known in Sepasdia from other sources, since one of the famous musicians of the city who would play at weddings and community events was Yeranos Herdemian, or Kemanidji Herdem. He played at times with the oud player Hadji Boghig and at times with the saz player known only as Garo. The following quatrain describes the playing of Herdem and Garo, popular with the people:

Հերտեմին չալած քեմանին,
Կակուղ, թեթեւ սեւ եւմէնին,
Կամ Կարօին չալած սազը,
Վաղէն բաղնէց դերին թասը: [3]

The *kemani* that Herdem plays
A soft, light, black *yemeni*
Or the *saz* that Garo plays
The yellow bowl of tomorrow’s bath.

The *kemani* that Herdem plays
A soft, light, black *yemeni*
Or the *saz* that Garo plays
The yellow bowl of tomorrow’s bath.

The instrument “kemani” (called in Armenia today “kamani”) is similar or identical to the instrument used in Greek folk music called “Cappadocian kemanes” and indeed in Sivas we are not far from the Cappadocian Greek communities. The first picture of this article shows two men from Tokat playing saz and kemani, just as Herdem and Garo did in nearby Sivas.

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After making his pilgrimage to Sourp Nshan, Ashough Pesendi became a student of the Turk ashough Zileli Djeihoun/Ceyhun, along with several other Armenian ashoughs named in Turkish sources: Ashik/Aşık İzani, Zileli Shermi/Şermi and Zileli Mevdji/Mevci. [4] But Pesendi soon gained a name as perhaps the most popular ashough in Sivas, Turkish or Armenian, as seen from the following story, one of the most famous episodes in his life, which has also been quoted from Partogh Indjeian:

“The Soulou-Khahve [The “Water” Coffeehouse] of Sepasdia was known to all, because in those days the ashoughs would congregate there.

One day the news arose that three ashoughs had come to the Soulou-Khahve, to compete with Ashough Pesendi on the following day. I, Injeian, being interested, went to listen to the competition. I entered the Soulou-Khahve, I saw three ashoughs seated cross-legged on the stage, their sazes in their hands. One was Persian, the other a Turk from Kars, and the third, from Yozgat, and also a Turk. They were waiting for Pesendi. Present were many Turks, Armenian merchants, government officials. The ashoughs agreed among themselves that Pesendi would prepare the muamme (riddle). The riddle board was hung on the wall, coated with beeswax. The person who entered would give a gift to the coffeehouse-owner, and he would stick it to the board. They stuck many a medjid, and all the way up to a half lira.

The answer to the riddle was sealed in an envelope, and after locking it in a box that the coffeehouse-owner had, the box was also sealed. A time period of seven days was give to solve the riddle. On the appointed day our Ashough Pesendi came, with a smiling face, the kemani that never parted from him in his hand, and took his place across from the other ashoughs.

The riddle, which was written on a piece of paper and hung from the wall, was the following:



A panorama of the city of Sivas (Source: Noël Dolens, “Ce que l’on voit en Arménie,” in *Le Tour du Monde, Journal des voyages et des voyageurs* (Paris), Nouvelle Série, 12e année, 1906, p. 485)

[In Turkish]

Bir acayib nesne gördüm;
Dokuzu bir sırada,
Dokuzında dokuz can var,
Her biri bir sefada.

[English Translation]

I saw a strange thing
Nine in one line
In the nine were nine souls
Every one of them in their comfort

The ashoughs began to play. Each one in turn began to sing the interpretation he had found for the riddle. Pesendi himself playing, answered everyone in song, refuting the explanation that each one gave.

This competition continued for seven days. The stipulation was that it would end before the midday namaz (call to prayer).

A murmur arose, that the competing ashoughs had found the secret of the riddle and at just the last minute they would answer.

To tell the truth, both Armenians and Turks became sad, that the troubadour of Sepasdia would lose at the last moment. If there was anyone rejoicing, it was Mihr Ali Bey, who for the last two days

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had come and encouraged especially the ashough from Kars, his compatriot, and at every visit gave him another gift.

The time was completed. The very same Turkish official, who was present the whole time, getting to his feet, said that after the time had been completed another hour would be given. Turning to Ashough Pesendi, he said: 'I say to you, Ashough Pesendi, if these ashoughs have discovered your secret, be pleased, by the ashough law, to place your fiddle before them; but if you have won, they must place their saz before you.'

As we have seen, Pesendi was greatly appreciated by the people of Sivas, Turk and Armenian alike, and lived up to his ashough name, which comes from the root “pesend,” meaning in Ottoman Turkish, “approved.” Pesendi married Baydzar Kurkdjian in 1894 and moved to Istanbul. He even performed in the presence of Sultan Abdul Hamid, though he had to remain behind a screen. When the Hamidian massacres took place against the Armenians, high ranking Ottoman official Kel Hasan Pasha warned Pesendi that his life was in danger, and advised him to leave the country.

Pesendi immigrated to Russia and lived in various places including Kerch (East of Crimea), Batum, Yerevan, and Echmiadzin; he made a living there as a baker and a coffeehouse owner. Probably he ran a coffeehouse featuring ashough music including his own performances. We can even imagine that he may have met with the famed ashoughs Djivani and Sheram, who were also active at this time in Russian Armenia. At the time of the 1895 massacres, he wanted to let his friends in America know what had happened. But he felt that he couldn't write anything openly, so he explained it in poetry, writing the following to make it clear as to who had been responsible for the massacres:

“The catastrophe came and went; who is to blame - we don't know, and my kemani also was saved; you are far from me, but I will sing that you may hear; it is possible that we won't see each other again, this song of mine is a testament for you.

**Վարդը բացատրելու պէտք չկայ
Ծաղիկ մըն է, մենք գիտենք
Շունը բացատրելու պէտք չկայ
-Գամկո մըն է, մենք գիտենք” [6]**

[“There is no need to explain the rose – it is a flower, we know; there is no need to explain the dog – it is a mastiff, we know.” Meaning that the “dog” who committed such a crime was the largest of all villains.]

While Pesendi was living in the Russian Empire, his wife Baydzar gave birth to their son, Ardashes Kmpetian, who was born around 1900 in Alexandropol (Gyumri). Ardashes later became well known as an actor in the Armenian theatre performances of Paris.

Pesendi moved to Bulgaria in 1905 and lived in Ruschuk and Varna. After the Constitution of 1908 was announced, he, like many other Armenians, gained hope and returned to the Ottoman Empire. We are informed of two concerts he gave at this time, in his hometown of Sivas. The first was on October 5, 1909, and organized by the local Hnchag party members. This concert was a benefit for the Tailoring Workshop for Women which the party had newly opened in Sivas. In addition to recitations, songs, and speeches, including a song by Pesendi's young son Ardashes, the concert itself consisted of pieces played by Ashough Pesendi, in this instance playing saz, together with the aforementioned Herdem, playing the kemani. The newspaper reported that as famous as Pesendi was, Herdem's playing was even more famous! [7] Following that, Pesendi himself organized a concert of the ashoughs of Sivas, both Armenian and Turk, which was held on November 15, 1909. Pesendi returned to Istanbul in 1910 and made a living from his poetry, publishing in that year his divan (collection) of both Turkish-language and Armenian-language ashough poetry. His book was called *Գուսանի Տալիքը* (the Minstrel's Harp), and it included 45 Armenian songs and 27 Turkish songs. [8]

Ashough Pesendi wrote his songs in Turkish and Armenian according to Middle Eastern rules of ashough poetry, which were also followed by Sayat-Nova and the other famed Armenian ashoughs. Poems were written in the forms known as “gazel”, “divan”, “koshma”, “semayi”, etc. Unfortunately, it was not possible to find an example of his Armenian poems, but the following two poems in Turkish were found in Arakel Badrig's “Badmakirk,” the second one being a political statement on the condition of the Armenians.

*Ey gönül, fani dünyadan göçmeye şüpen mi var?
Şol felegin neft dolusun içmeye şüpen mi var?
Erzahil göksüne çökse bülbül dilin nal olur
Gözlerinden kanlı yaşlar dökme şüpen mi var?*

Oh heart, do you have a doubt that you'll leave this transitory world?
Do you have a doubt that you'll drink the full glass of naphtha of evil fate?
If Azrael descends on your chest your nightingale voice will be silenced
Do you have a doubt that bloody tears will flow from your eyes?

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Sivas, circa 1913. Shalelengian family. Middle row, seated, left to right – Vosgehan Shalelengian, Krikor Shalelengian, Markarid Shalelengian (nee Ounanian), and an unidentified individual. Upper row, left to right – Vosgehan’s wife (name unknown), Aghadjan Shalelengian, Avedis Shalelengian, Sirma (nee Shalelengian). The man sitting in front of Sirma is her husband. The children sitting in the front row are unidentified. The vast majority of the individuals appearing in this photograph were killed or went missing during the Genocide in 1915 (Source: Paul Vartan Sookiasian Collection).

*Bu khalkın mülkünü seyr et;
Kharab abad lazımsa,
Bu mülkün khalkını söylet;
Sana feryat lazımsa.*

Pesendi’s translation [The English translation based on Pesendi’s Armenian translation]:

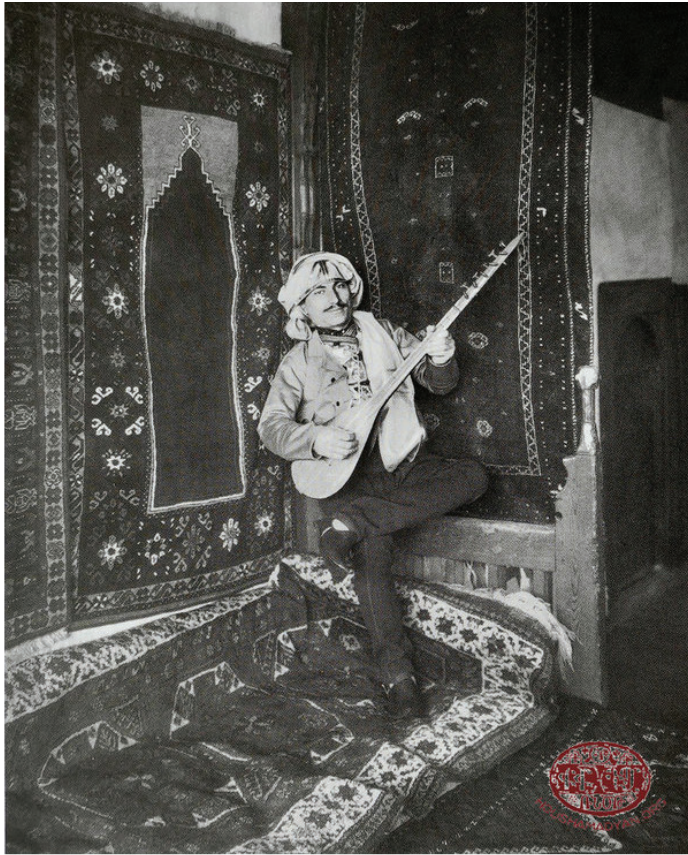
Gaze at the land of this people
If you have need of ruins
Make the people of this land speak
If you have need of lament/cry? [9]

Ashough Pesendi has left us with something even more valuable; the only known sound recordings of a Western Armenian professional ashough. These recordings were most likely made in Constantinople in 1913. We do not have information on how, when, or where Pesendi died, this recording is the last trace of him.

Though Pesendi was from Sepasdia/Sivas, these two songs originate in Agn (Eğin/Kemaliye), famed center of Western Armenian folk music and ballads, where some believe the song “Groong” itself originated, as well as the famous genre called “Andouni.”

The song Pesendi has recorded in Turkish is titled as “Egin Havasi - Mani” (Melody of Egin/Mani), though it is not at all the same as the more famous piece usually known as “Egin Havasi,” which was recorded in Armenian and Turkish by Udi Hrant and others. Instead, Pesendi’s recording is a genre of song which is usually referred to elsewhere as “maya.” Sometimes the terms “maya” and “mani” were interchangeable, and this is probably why Pesendi called his song a “mani.”

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Misak Iskenderian, with his saz, in Tokat. Photographer: Antoine Poidebard (Source: Lévon Nordiguan, May Semaan Seigneurie (ed.), Portraits photographiques d'Orient, PUJ, Beirut, 2010).

Early Armenian musicians in America, particularly from the Kharpert/Harpur region, recorded what could be considered the same song or melody as Pesendi's, but with different words. These were usually titled as "Harpur Mayasi" (Maya of Kharpert). The structure of the song includes an instrumental repetitive melody in the famous 10/8 rhythm common in the Armenian Highlands, in this case stopping to allow the vocalist to chant the lyrics of the song in a free-rhythm manner. When he is done with the first verse, the music picks up again and the song continues alternating in this way. In Pesendi's recording, some of the instrumental parts at the end of the song are also in a 4/4 meter. As far as we know, there were numerous poems or verses, always in Turkish, that could be sung to what is essentially the same melody. Though one can clearly hear Pesendi beginning with the cry "Yavri, Yavri," and also "Yandi Djanim," it was not possible to decipher all of the words. Essentially these are emotional songs expressing love or other feelings coming from the people of the provinces. Although the mayas are usually sung in Turkish, it seems that the influence of the Kurdish style of singing is felt in the staccato recitation of the beginning of the verses. That is probably why these types of songs are known in the East, rather than in Central Anatolia or Cilicia, let alone Istanbul.

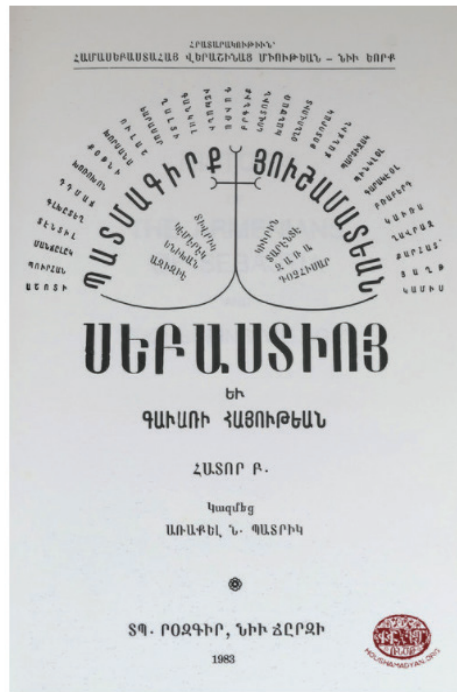


t r a n s f o r m e r

Sivas, 1904. The workshop of the Aramian School. Seated, from left to right – Elmas Dikranian, Ovsanna Dostourian, Mariam Hanem, Akabi Osadjian, and Hayganoush Gheberzian. Standing, from left to right – Satenig Khachadourian, Elbiz Baliozian, Vartanoush Gedigian, and Soghome Vartabedian (Source: Arakel Badrig, Badmakirk Houshamadyan Sebastio yev Kavari Hayutyan, Volume A, Beirut, Mshag Printing House, 1974).

The beginning of Pesendi's first verse is strikingly similar to the notation by Gomidas Vartabed of the "Andouni" song from Agn ("Aghvor mi dzarvoutenen..."), which he collected in "Shar Agna Yerkerou," and which was most likely sung to him by the Agntsi ethnographer Hovsep Djanigian. [This should certainly not be confused with the famous and often-performed piece by Gomidas also known as "Andouni" ("Sirds nman e..."), which is for the most part his own composition.] So, it would seem possible that the Andouni songs of Agn were sung in a similar way to Pesendi's "Egin Havasi." However, the collection of Andouni melodies by Avedis Mesouments, made in France, bears no resemblance to the "maya" song, and in fact Mesouments records the maya/mani as an entirely different piece. In addition, Gomidas also transcribed a second variation of the Andouni song in his Agn collection, which is also different. To clear up the confusion of these songs, a serious study needs to be done of the folk music of the Western Armenians, which unfortunately, due to the assumption that all Armenian folk music should be the same, has not yet been undertaken.

Pesendi's Armenian song, given the Turkish name "Egin Gelin Getirmek Gaydasi" or "the Egin Gayda (Bagpipe) of Bringing Forward the Bride" is known from other sources, such as Hovsep Djanigian's "Hnoutiunk Agna." [10] This is a bit confusing as there is no bagpipe in the piece, neither do any of the books on Agn tells us that the bagpipes were played there. Whatever may be the meaning of "gayda" in musical terminology, nevertheless, Djanigian attests that this song is sung in Agn at the moment the bride and groom, returning from the church ceremony, arrive at the door of the groom's family home. Pesendi sings a few of the many verses to this song. The song is usually referred to in Armenian as "Pari Louys, Aghvor, Pari Louys," (Good Morning, Beautiful One, Good Morning), which are usually the first lines of the song, because as Djanigian tells us, by the time the couple returns to the door of the groom's house, it is usually dawn. The following are the words sung by Ashough Pesendi in the recording:



The first and second volumes of Arakel Badrig's history and chronicle of the Armenian population of Sivas and the district.

Բարի լուսուն բարին վրադ
Բարի լուսուն բարին վրադ
Ուր [որ] ցաթէ արեն ի վրադ
Ուր ցաթէ արեն ի վրա

Հարսն ի պաղչան վարդ կու քաղէ
Հարսն ի պաղչան վարդ կու քաղէ
Նստեր ու շէթեր կու մաղէ
Նստեր ու շէթեր կու մաղէ

t r a n s f o r m e r

Շէքրին թողն ալ ինք կու թաղէ
Շէքրին թողն ալ ինք կու թաղէ

Քալէ ու մանտրտիկ քալէ
Քալէ ու մանտրտիկ քալէ
Վրայ խալուն վրայ քալէ
Վրայ խալուն վրայ քալէ

*May the goodness of a Good-Morning be upon you
So that the sun may shine upon you*

*The bride picks roses in the garden
She sits and sifts sugar
And she buries herself in the sugar-dust
Walk, and walk daintily
Walk upon the rug!*

In the performance of “Egin Havasi”, Pesendi appears to be accompanying himself on the violin, and in the Armenian song, he appears to use the “kemani.” Perhaps he wanted to use a more traditional instrument to present this very traditional Armenian wedding song as authentically as possible. Again, Djanigian is a source of some of the oldest material on Armenian wedding traditions and carefully noted the songs that were traditionally sung at each stage in the wedding, aside from the church ceremony which was well known by the clergy. Djanigian includes many verses to the wedding songs and “Pari Louys Aghvor” is no exception, however Pesendi only sings a few of these verses to give us an idea of the song. It is also worth noting that Pesendi’s song is played in 9/8 time, which was and is commonly used in Anatolia at times of welcoming or arriving (in this case, the arrival at the groom’s house), for which reason it is called in Turkish “*karşılama*” (welcome). It is used by the Eastern Armenian ashoughs in the same way, for example, by Ashough Djivani in the story of Ashough-Gharib, it is used at different points in the story where, for example, Ashough-Gharib arrives at a new city. This rhythm is also used by the Anatolian Greeks as a “solo dance” for two people dancing across from each other, which is another meaning of “*karşılama*.” Finally, the same rhythm is used in the Armenian folk dance *Tanzara*, though there seems to be no connection from that dance to the word *karşılama*. At any rate, we can see from all of this that Pesendi was not only schooled in the musical styles of the ashoughs, but also an expert of Armenian and Anatolian folk music.

In conclusion, the small information we have about Pesendi’s life and work, and the tantalizingly small amount of recorded music we have from him, are of much greater importance than they seem. Through this data, we have a link to a past which for the most part has been severed. Though folk and classical genres of Western Armenian music survived in different parts of the diaspora, the ashough music of the Western Armenians is so little known that most people assume all ashoughs were from Eastern Armenia. Pesendi, the great ashough of Sivas, and the last traditional Western Armenian ashough, gives us, especially through his sound recording, a link to what musical life was actually like for Armenians before the catastrophe of 1915.



- Recording of “Egin Havasi” and “Egin Gelin Getirmek Gaydasi” courtesy of Ara Dinkjian
- Clean-up of recordings done by Harry A. Kezelian III

[1] Arakel Badrig, Պատմագիրք յուշամատենն Սեբաստիոյ եւ գաւառի հայրութեան [History of the Armenians of Sepasdia/Sivas and neighboring villages], Vol. 2, New Jersey, 1983, p. 106.

[2] Ibid, pp. 106-107.

[3] S.M. Dzotsigian, Արեւմտահայ Աշխարհ [Western Armenian World], New York, 1947, p. 639.

[4] (author unknown) Türk Halk Edebiyatında Ermeni Saz Şairleri [quotations accessed online]

[5] Badrig, *History of the Armenians of Sepasdia/Sivas*, pp. 106-109.

[6] Ibid, p. 109.

[7] Երիտասարդ Հայաստան [Eridasart Hayasdan], weekly, vol. 7, no. 27. Jan. 26, 1910, New York, p. 107.

[8] Türk Halk Edebiyatında Ermeni Saz Şairleri.

[9] Badrig, pp. 109-110.

[10] Hovsep K. Djanigian, Հնութիւնք Ակնայ [Agn Relics], Tbilisi, M. D. Rotiniants Press, 1895.