

Heroines of gendercide: The religious sensemaking of rape and abduction in Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean migrant communities

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Abstract

This study seeks to understand a diaspora community narrative of rape and abduction suffered during the genocidal massacre of 1915 in the Ottoman Empire and its aftermath. Based on interviews with 50 Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean migrants in Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands, whose families are from the village of Bote, known as one of the 'killing fields' in southeast Turkey, the article explores the ways in which descendants remember the 'forgotten genocide' of Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean communities in 1915. The research reveals that the descendants of survivors make sense of the sexual violence experienced in Bote mainly through a religious narrative and that, for them, the genocide is, in spite of all the sufferings the males had to go through, a feminized event. In their gendercide narrative, the abducted and raped women are identified as the 'heroines' of the genocide.

Keywords

Armenian genocide, feminization, gendercide, migration, narrative, post-genocide, sexual violence

Introduction

For many genocide researchers, the Armenian genocide is, as Horowitz (1980: 47) puts it, 'the essential prototype of genocide in the twentieth century'. For many scholars, it is

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the first time a regime, trying to transform a multi-ethnic empire into a sovereign nation-state, employed modern technological means to deport and destroy ethnic communities as part of a modernization programme (Akçam, 2012; Bjørnlund, 2009; Derderian, 2005; Fein, 1999; Gingeras, 2009; Kaligian, 2008; Kasymov, 2013; Lemkin, 2013; Levene, 1998; Melson, 2013). The practice of destroying communities, in combination with the rape, abduction and trafficking of women has a long history in the region, which goes back to the Assyrian Empire (Bjørnlund, 2009; Derderian, 2005; Fein, 1999: 45; Klein, 2007; Peirce, 2011; Zilfi, 2010). Üngör explains that ethnic communities had enjoyed a certain degree of security in the Ottoman Empire. But when the Empire set out to reform into a sovereign nation-state along the Western model, supported by the European powers, Üngör (2008: 18) observes, 'Eastern Anatolia became a laboratory for nationalist visions of the future'. Since the 1890s, the security situation of ethnic minorities had deteriorated in Eastern Anatolia and churches, monasteries, cemeteries, schools, libraries, literature, music and language were systematically destroyed as a prelude to the activity of paramilitaries, provincial militias, human trafficking gangs and death squads in 1915 (Balakian, 2013; Gingeras, 2009; Kaligian, 2008). After 1915, and in the new Republic, nationalist Turkification, assimilation, ethnic cleansing, persecution and systematic discrimination continued (Akçam, 2012; Kaligian, 2008; Levene, 1998; Üngör, 2008; Zürcher, 2010).¹ Until recently, not only in the nationalist official narrative of the Turkish regime, but also in academic scholarship and among the general public, the Armenian genocide remained almost non-existent. In the past decade the public debate on the Armenian genocide has expanded and a new awareness that the Armenian genocide was a gendered event has developed (Altınay, 2006, 2014; Bjørnlund, 2009; Derderian, 2005; Ekmekcioglu, 2013; Herzog, 2008).

Ekmekcioglu (2013) notes that in the Armenian genocide (1915), the Ottoman regime had deliberately created 'a climate for abduction', where Ottoman Muslims were entitled to incorporate Armenians, as well as other ethnic groups, into their homes, businesses and farms. The Young Turks tolerated the integration of Armenian women into Muslim society, provided that they no longer lived in a community, but were isolated in their new Muslim environment, and certain to lose their ethnic and religious identity (Tachjian, 2009: 65). Sarafian (2001) explains that the isolation of Armenian women and children from their communities, their assimilation into Muslim households, the inclusion of Armenian children in state orphanages and the deportation and execution of Armenian males were all part of the same policy programme. Only in the past decade, following the publication of Fethiye Çetin's *Anneannem (My Grandmother)* in 2004, have memoirs emerged in Turkey of Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Circassian and other ethnic (Muslim) groups discovering that their grandparents (more often the grandmothers) were actually Armenian, assimilated into a Muslim household (Altınay, 2006, 2014).

The growing debate and scholarship on the Armenian genocide as a gendered event are certainly to be welcomed. Yet, an exclusive focus on the Armenian genocide results in the genocides of ethnic/religious communities in Ottoman Turkey other than Armenians being 'forgotten' or omitted in research and public debate (De Courtois, 2004; Hoffman et al., 2011; Travis, 2011). Next to between 600,000 and 1.5 million Armenians that were exterminated, an estimated number of 500,000 Arameans, Assyrians and Chaldeans were also massacred in 1915 (Omtzicht et al., 2012),² in what Gaunt (2006: 2) calls 'the Syriac

Sayfo', 'an incurable plague of hundreds of Jedwabnes and Srebrenicas' (Gaunt, 2006: 305). It is estimated that about 90% of the total number of Arameans, Assyrians and Chaldeans that used to live in north Mesopotamia, today's southeastern Turkey, were massacred in the period from 1890 to 1915 (Gaunt, 2006). Without a state or intellectual elite of their own, and being deprived of their means of expression in post-Ottoman Turkey, these forgotten peoples, had no means for recognition. After another wave of persecution in the 1970s, many of them managed to obtain political asylum in Western Europe, particularly in Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands.³ Then their struggle for recognition started. Generally, there have been few publications on the Syriac Sayfo, as contrasted with research on the Armenian genocide. With some notable exceptions (Gaunt, 2006; Khosoreva, 2007; Omtzicht et al., 2012; Travis, 2011), the Sayfo genocide is typically mentioned within the context of the Armenian genocide, lumped together with the mass killings of Armenians, Yezidis and Kurds in what Levene (1998) calls the 'zone of genocide'. What is more, gendered aspects of genocide – as well as gendered memory and 'post-memory' (Hirsch, 2008), the intergenerational transmission of the original recall of witnesses, describing a pattern in which next generations remember the event by means of stories, images and behaviours, among which they grew up – have not yet been addressed as a gendered event in research on the Sayfo genocide.

In this article, we analyse the ways in which the Syriac genocide and the narratives about it are gendered. We seek to understand and make sense of the narratives of groups of descendants of the survivors – a select group of Arameans, Assyrians and Chaldeans that migrated from Turkey to Western Europe in the 1970s. We draw on interviews with 50 Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean migrants in Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands, whose families had been housed in the village of Bote, a village in the tribal zone of the Midyat region, in southeast Turkey (Gaunt, 2006: 185, 211–212). For the purposes of our research, Bote functions as an illustrative village in Anatolia that was subject to extensive genocidal attacks of sexual violence – coerced undressing, sexual slavery, including forced prostitution, mass rape, kidnapping of women, forced marriage, collective sterilization and other forms of mutilation of sexual organs – during the events of 1915. The aftermath of these events saw the continuation of mass deportations, massacres and violent persecution of ethnic minorities, including sexual violence against women, particularly in eastern Turkey, for many decades (Levene, 1998; Üngör, 2008). Based on these interviews with male and female descendants of the victims, we seek to find out how, within such migrant families, the genocidal massacre of Bote is interpreted as a gendered event. Our main argument is that in Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean migrant families, the memory of the rape and abduction is organized in a religious narrative, with the victims of forced prostitution, mass rape, abduction, forced marriage and sexual mutilation being championed as heroines and martyrs.

Researching genocide in the Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean diaspora

The Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean genocide, sometimes called the Sayfo genocide, consisted mainly of massacres that took place in or near the homes of the victims, most of whom lived in villages and small towns in what is now southeastern Turkey (Gaunt,

2006: 188). The village of Bote – which included about 300 families of Arameans, Assyrians and Chaldeans – is one of the villages that experienced such a massacre in 1915 (Gaunt, 2006: 211–212).⁴ Although these communities refer to themselves today as Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean, at the turn of the century, the Mesopotamian, Babylonian and Semitic peoples that spoke various Aramaic dialectics were identified as ‘Syriac-Orthodox and Chaldean’, referring to their respective churches: the Syriac-Orthodox church and the Chaldean church. After they migrated to Western Europe in the 1970s, a debate about these categories of classification led to the Syriac-Orthodox diaspora community identifying and presenting themselves as ‘Aramean’ or ‘Assyrian’. In other words, there has been a shift from a religious (Church oriented) identification and differentiation towards a predominantly ethnic/cultural identification as Aramean, Assyrian or Chaldean.

For our research, we selected 50 Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean respondents from the diaspora communities in the Netherlands, Germany and Sweden. These people include 44 descendants of six genocide survivors and victims of sexual violence who used to live in the village of Bote in 1915. The six survivors, who had, together with their children and grandchildren, migrated to Western Europe in the 1970s, are all now dead. In Turkey, they had not been able to speak openly about the genocidal (and post-genocidal) events, but once they migrated to Western Europe, our interviewees explained, their narratives could be recorded without fear of retaliation. The six genocide survivors were interviewed in the 1980s, in the Netherlands and in Sweden, by a family member, also originally from Bote. This particular person, who wishes to remain anonymous, has allowed us to make use of the six video-recorded interviews in their private collection, which has allowed us to integrate the narratives of the six genocide survivors from Bote into our analysis. We ourselves interviewed 11 children of these genocide survivors, who constitute the second generation of interviewees, a generation born in Bote, but who left Bote in 1970 for Midyat – a larger town near Bote – and then later for Western Europe. We also interviewed 17 descendants from the third generation. This generation was either born in Bote or in Midyat, and sought political asylum in Western Europe in the 1970s, together with their parents and grandparents (the genocide survivors). Finally, 16 descendants from the fourth generation were interviewed, all of whom were born in the diaspora, in the Netherlands, Germany and Sweden.

The 44 interviews we ourselves conducted in the Netherlands, Germany and Sweden, during the summer of 2012, are semi-structured, in-depth interviews. In our attempt to retrieve the genocidal narratives of sexual abuse from the four generations, we have tried to adapt to the culture, language and traditions of the people we interviewed, for whom sexual abuse has typically been a taboo subject. The interviews were conducted in Aramaic, the original language of people from Bote, in interviewees’ homes. We deliberately opted for this to create a feeling of safety. Our assumption was that if the people we interviewed felt safe and comfortable they would be more likely to talk about taboo subjects and traumas. Our respondents, men and women of different generations, were typically quite open in expressing their fears and anxieties, and in recounting traumatic experiences. At times this turned the interviews into highly emotional exchanges. It was obvious that for several interviewees, the interview constituted a unique setting to confront the genocide-related sexual violence their ancestors had suffered. However, after

the interviews had been conducted, all 44 people we interviewed expressed appreciation of our interest in their narratives and for listening to them. Some defined the interview as 'healing' and explained that, for them, the first step of this healing process is to remember and to speak with us about the genocide and its legacies. All 44 interviews were recorded on video to enhance reliability. In what follows, we first analyse how the genocidal process experienced in Bote in 1915 is narrated by our respondents. The second part focuses on the narratives on sexual violence, while the third explores the conceptualization of abused women as heroines. Finally, we analyse these diaspora narratives regarding the continuation of the pattern of sexual violence in Republican Turkey in the aftermath of the genocide of 1915.

Narrations of the genocide

According to the elderly people interviewed, belonging to the first and second generations, there had been many massacres in the Ottoman Empire before 1915. Their security situation in the Ottoman Empire was already disastrous enough. But the events of 1915, they tell, is the biggest massacre the Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean villages had experienced in the Ottoman Empire. The rape and abduction of women for purposes of sex and forced marriage had long been practised in the region, the tribal zone of north Mesopotamia, even before the conquests of the Ottomans in the early sixteenth century (Klein, 2007). But it never took place on such a massive scale, with so many tribal gangs operating, as it did in 1915. In the tribal zone, abduction asserted power, valour, masculinity and heroic courage; it shamed the abductees, dishonoured families and tribes (Derderian, 2005). Capturing the wife and children of enemy leaders was the ultimate sexual trophy, the ultimate war booty (Bjørnlund, 2009: 23; Ekmekcioglu, 2013: 531; Peirce, 2011). In the events of 1915, however, abducted girls were often sold for less than a dollar (Derderian, 2005; Ekmekcioglu, 2013; Zilfi, 2010).

Our respondents, identifying themselves as innocent victims, narrated the events of 1915 in Bote in mainly religious terms. Rather than particular national or ethnic groups, in most of our interviewees' narratives, the Christians in the region (today's southeast Turkey), as a religious group, constituted a victimized community, having faced numerous attacks from the time of the Ottoman Empire until today. The elderly persons from the first and second generation refer to the *firman* (the edict of the Sultan), to emphasize that the decision was made by the highest Ottoman authority to exterminate all Christians in the Ottoman Empire. According to some, prior to the invasion of Ottoman forces into the village of Bote, there had been stories circulating about Ottoman forces plotting revenge against Christians, because of the military defeat they had suffered against Czarist Russia. On the other hand, almost three out of four respondents from the first three generations identify the will to exterminate Christianity as being in the nature of the Muslims of the Ottoman Empire and talk about Muslims believing that they would be rewarded in heaven for exterminating Christians.

On the other hand, all 34 interviewees belonging to the first three generations claim that the pattern of sexual violence that manifested itself in Bote during the events of 1915 was different when compared to other villages in the area; that the Ottoman forces were prepared to inflict an extreme genocidal massacre in Bote because they were

informed about the particular reputation of the Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean villagers of Bote, the Botoye, being a 'proud people'. According to them, Kurdish villagers, both from Bote and from neighbouring villages, informed the Ottoman military that Bote was unlike other villages and that the Botoye would fight to their very last breath. All Botoye had to be killed, because local Kurdish tribes rumoured, in a somewhat mythical fashion, that if there were only one survivor, this person would find the strength to revenge the dead.

So the Ottomans took extreme measures, according to our respondents, placing soldiers in Bote under the pretence of protecting the Christians from Kurdish tribesmen, but actually there to help the Kurds exterminate the Christians. As Gaunt (2006: 279) explains, unlike the Young Turk government, local Kurdish tribes in the Midyat region always saw the massacres in religious terms, as the 'general massacre of all Christians' (Gaunt, 2006: 71). Kurdish landlords, it is widely claimed, gathered their troops from the entire region to make sure the Christians in Bote were outnumbered, so that they could be effectively exterminated. When the attacks began, the Christian residents of Bote gathered in the village church, which was built as a fort with underground tunnels to protect themselves from earlier Muslim attacks. For 13 days, 1200 people stayed in that church. Forty respondents told us that for the last three days, these 1200 people were without water or food and hence were eventually forced to open the church doors and fight for their lives.

Rape and abduction

Thirty-four respondents, mostly from the first three generations, narrated how before opening the church doors parents prepared their children, explaining what sort of fate was in store for them. This was a preparation for death in what the villagers of Bote, it appeared in our interviews, clearly defined in religious terms, as a brutal attack on Christians, in which they anticipated violence, including the rape of their children. In other words, the villagers of Bote, our interviewees emphasize, were fully aware that they were going to be sexually violated and massacred. They knew that if they survived, they would be forced to serve as sexual partners for extended periods or forced to marry and bear children from their captors – an experience that was not uncommon during the events of 1915 (Sarafian, 2001; Tachjian, 2009; Wood, 2006). They defined the genocidal massacre, in front of their children, in religious terms ('we the Christians' and 'them the Muslims'), as well as in terms of the opposites of humanity (we) and bestiality (them, the perpetrators).

Rape is a word that our respondents from the first two generations did not use explicitly but implicitly. The third generation, and three out of four interviewees from the fourth, explicitly mention rape. In the following quote this mention of rape is illustrated:

My grandfather narrated: If we open the doors my child, you must understand that we will be killed. But maybe, just maybe God will open their hearts and they will spare the children. However, mark my words: if you see yourself in a situation that they want to abuse you in any kind of way, do know that to die as a Christian is more honourable than to be used by these

beasts. You should prefer death over abuse and converting to Islam. God will save us my child, always have faith. (Family D, respondent 3rd generation)

In this quote, the person does not attribute the use of terms such as 'rape' or 'sexual violence' to the villagers of Bote themselves, yet, s/he makes it clear that parents did communicate the expectation of sexual violence and death to their children. All of our respondents emphasized the sexual side of the event of 1915: only those that the perpetrator identified as beautiful were not killed.

Children with blue eyes and light hair, as well as 'beautiful' women, were spoken of as being spared. And their fate, it was explained to us, was typically worse than death: being forced into marriage, to be sexually abused and to be slaves. The 'beautiful' people who did survive – and were taken by those that the victims label as 'the Muslim perpetrators' – sometimes managed to flee. Others were bought back by relatives, for extremely high prices. These stories have survived through eyewitnesses. As one survivor from the first generation puts it in his recorded interview:

Besides rape, our people were also maimed in very cruel ways. Genitals were cut off, women's breasts and men's penises. Also pregnant women were cut in their bellies to kill them and the foetuses. I was only a little boy but I saw terrible things. Once I saw a little baby of only months old, trying to survive by drinking from his dead mother's breasts. He eventually died because he was drinking blood. There is another extreme story about a man that was tortured as an example [our respondent continues]. We children were forced to watch his suffering. His body parts were being cut off, his skin, his ears and his eyes. Eventually they cut off his penis and put it in his mouth as a cigar, to humiliate him in the most awful way. These perpetrators were our close neighbours; it is unbelievable how they had changed from friends into monsters in just a day. It is important to never forget these stories, because we have seen the hate of Muslims against Christians. They will pretend to be our best friend until the day they have the opportunity to kill us in the most inhuman ways. We should always be aware of this danger. (Family A, 1st generation)

This quote shows that besides rape, bodies, in particular the sexual organs, were heavily mutilated, which, in the respondents' religious narrative, perpetrators did in order to prevent the procreation of Christians. The quote also shows that the villagers of Bote had been aware of this danger, of what might happen to their bodies.

Next to rape and mutilation, all interviewees of the first three generations explain that women and girls who were spared after opening the church doors because of their looks were not only raped by the Kurds and Ottoman soldiers but also forced to marry their perpetrator. Almost all male villagers from Bote were killed and their wives, if identified as beautiful, were abducted and forced into marriage, mostly by the Kurds who lived in the neighbourhood of Bote. One person narrates this 'logic of genocide' – the logic of killing the husband and abducting the widow:

Our aunt Maryam was a beautiful tall woman. She was married and had two children. Her husband was killed in the genocide; however, she had survived. Her children were abducted and she felt as if she had no purpose in life anymore. Instead of being abducted, raped or forced into marriage, she chose to hide in a well between dead bodies. Nevertheless, she was found by

the Kurdish landlord, his name was Afdellako. He was a horrible killer and had killed many infants. He lured her out of the well, claiming he had her brothers and if she would not marry him, he would exterminate her entire family. She felt she had to sacrifice her life to save her family, thus she agreed to let him force her into marriage. (Family F, 2nd generation)

In our interviews, it appeared that almost all of the respondents knew this particular story. It is a typical example, most of them claim, of how women had been used by those they identified as 'the Muslims' and forced into marriage, where they suffered sexual abuse. And these people emphasized that the abducted widows faced a terrible dilemma, namely, either being forced into marriage or being responsible for the death of their brothers or entire families. In most cases families were exterminated right away: however, in some cases the perpetrators made sure that they would find the relatives of these women, and let these relatives stay alive, to make sure the abducted woman would agree to marriage.

Not shame, but martyrdom

In their religious narrative, four out of five of all respondents of all generations emphasized, not without a certain pride, that sexually abused and abducted women did not convert to Islam in their hearts, even when confronted with the most horrific types of violence and suffering. Instead, they characterized the victims of sexual abuse as 'martyrs'. One person, a male, gave voice to this perceived female martyrdom:

Our aunt sacrificed herself to save her family by agreeing to be forced into marriage with a Kurdish man. However, she never gave up her faith. She made sure that her Christian children [of her previous marriage] were raised by her brothers, so they could stay Christians. Next to that, she secretly baptized all her Islamic children, during the night so that her Islamic husband would not find out. She always kept her Catholic rosary in her pocket, secretly praying. Even on her deathbed she prayed Hail Mary in Arabic. She was surrounded by her Islamic children, during her last hours, and these children asked her if they should go find the Imam to anoint her. She falsely claimed that she was feeling very well, to make sure that she would not be anointed by Islamic traditions. During her funeral, her Kurdish daughter claimed that her mother was mumbling something in Arabic, which her children could not understand. She remembered the words, *salamliki ya maryam* [Hail Mary in Arabic]. When the Christians heard this during the funeral, they understood that she was not mumbling, she was praying. This showed that she had never forgotten her faith, despite years of marriage and eight Kurdish children. (Family D, 3rd generation)

This quote reveals that an abducted Christian woman, forcibly integrated, or held captive, in the perpetrator's household as a wife, might have refused to return to her own natal community. Our respondents said that there was only one reason for not returning to the natal community after the genocide, namely the fear that their families, those who had survived the genocidal massacre of Bote, would be murdered. Interviewees typically emphasized that the abducted women did not care about what the sexually violated women and girls themselves labelled as 'their Islamic children', born out of rape or in forced marriage, nor did they care about their own lives. Like Armenians, Aramean,

Assyrian and Chaldean women that had survived the event were not allowed to live as Christians. They were killed if they expressed their own faith and culture. Yet, our respondents tell of secret baptisms, claiming that these women sent 'their Islamic children' to their Christian family members the night they were born, to be baptized in order to have a chance to go to heaven.

Carpenter (2000) notes that through 'forced maternity' children fathered by the perpetrator are typically (but not necessarily) rejected. In Bangladesh 1971 and Rwanda 1994, for instance, raped women and their children were widely rejected, with children being identified as the creations of the father. In the Bosnian genocide, nationalist Serbs imagined children born of rape to be ethnic Serbs, carrying their blood to live as 'little Chetniks' in a Bosnian environment. Bosnian women pregnant from Serbian soldiers were often not rejected by the community (Bjørnlund, 2009: 39; Carpenter, 2000: 223, 231). Our research suggests that, at least in the case of the villagers of Bote, Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean children born of rape or forced marriage were included as family, as Muslim half-brothers, mainly out of respect for the mother and in the collective belief that all life, including the procreation via sexual violence, was a divine gift.

Respondents stated that raped and abducted women secretly carried Christian rosaries and continued to pray to Jesus in secret, never forgetting who they were, and what they had fought for. All 50 respondents, both men and women, claimed that the abducted women were not seen as shamed or dishonoured but as heroes or martyrs. As one put it:

We don't speak about rape or sexual abuse of these women, because we don't want to dishonour them. They have suffered enough and sacrificed their lives for our survival. As if we don't know that they were abused by these men, they had 8–10 Islamic children and since the only way to make children is by having intercourse, we could imagine how awful it must have been for them. But we don't speak about it; they have suffered enough, being forced to marry the murderers of their entire families. Being forced to have sex with these monsters. They are finally in peace now, so we should not speak about them in the words of sexual abuse or rape. We should let them rest in peace and honour them as heroes who gave up their lives, their bodies but never their faith, always secretly praying to Jesus. (Family E, 3rd generation)

In our interviews it appeared that there was a great silence about the details of the abuse. All 50 respondents claim to know that sexual abuse did occur, even on a massive scale, and they are sure that almost all survivors were sexually abused. Nevertheless, they refuse to speak about what they believe should not be spoken. They explicitly stated that they wish to honour these 'martyr' women by maintaining the silence around sexual abuse, and let their bones rest, as they have suffered enough during their lives. Some mention that men and children, even elders, were raped and abused. But, once again, they reiterate that it is not necessary to speak about the details of this abuse for the same reason.

The aftermath of the genocide

In their narrative on the aftermath of the genocide, all 50 respondents stressed that when the events of 1915 had come to an end, the villagers of Bote were still not free from sexual violence in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey. After almost everyone was killed,

the survivors, having no other options, returned to their homes. After returning, the next step was to find other survivors. In their view, this began the period of 'buying back' their own children or 'the relatives' children'. Even when these people returned to Bote, it appears from our interviews, the danger did not stop. After the genocide, there were still kidnappings of Christian girls by Muslim men, and the villagers of Bote were unable to protect themselves, because the government did not protect them. Therefore, the fear of persecution, sexual violence and abduction continued to shape their lives. All 50 respondents emphasized that after the genocidal massacre of 1915, Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean survivors (fewer than 10% of the original population) suffered ongoing fear, particularly girls and women fearing sexual abuse and rape, which resulted in women being kept within the walls of their homes.

In their self-constructed religious narrative, many Christian women were abducted and raped by Muslims in Turkey, even in the 1980s, and the Turkish government did nothing about it. All interviewees emphasized that this fear still lies in the heart of families, even when living in the diaspora. They stressed that, in many ways, Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean migrants continue to live in a post-genocidal condition; for them, the genocidal past is closely intertwined with the present. With numbers of Muslims increasing in Western Europe, this fear is reinforced and finds new articulation with rising Islamophobia. In the respondent's religious narrative, past and present are connected: the wounds and distrust are just as much present as they were in the church of Bote in 1915, the hours before the doors were opened.

All respondents made clear that the descendants of the genocidal massacre and its post-genocidal aftermath in Turkey were constantly being reminded about the extreme suffering of their female ancestors, and they worry about similar dangers their daughters may be facing today. Even the fourth generation of interviewees spoke extensively about the danger of abduction by Muslims their female relatives were still facing. This generation claimed they did not know fear like their (grand) parents; nevertheless, they had and have a kind of awareness of the need to protect themselves from Muslims. This awareness came from the narratives about their ancestors, according to the fourth generation of respondents. They claimed that they did not know the exact details of the genocide of 1915 but the impact it has had on their lives is more than they often realize. It is only when they are being questioned about their feelings towards Muslims, or current events such as in Syria, that this fourth generation remembers the scars that are left behind because of this great trauma, a trauma that continues across generations.

For example, young Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean men claim that they believe that their sisters or other female relatives should not marry Muslims. Not only because of the history of their ancestors, but also because of the way Muslims treat Christians even today, particularly in the Muslim world. They believe that Muslims will always try to kill Christians, because their ancestors were brutally murdered by their own friends and neighbours. Their gendered memories of the genocide, in other words, become intertwined with contemporary articulations of Islamophobia in Western Europe. Although the younger generation grows up going to school with Turkish or Muslim minorities, even sharing many cultural practices with them, Islamophobic views are commonly held. As one woman puts it:

I remember I was only 10 years old when my great-grandmother was getting old and suffering dementia. Every time I visited her, she would ask me the same questions over and over again. She would ask me: Who are you? [Since she did not recognize any of her children.] And her second question was always: Where are your ancestors from, which village? I would always answer her: my parents are from Bote. And the only thing she would say was: Hmm Bote, there were no worse monsters than the Muslims in Bote. Some Muslims in other villages and areas helped our people during the genocide, but not in Bote. In Bote there was no living Muslim that did not try to exterminate our people. (Family C, 4th generation)

This quote shows that the respondent, who was born in Western Europe, was aware of the fact that there were some Muslims elsewhere that were against the destruction of their Christian neighbours, and tried to help them. However, interviewees claimed that the (mainly Kurdish) Muslims in Bote were extremely hateful towards Christians, and this has left them with extreme scars and feelings of betrayal. Yet it is not only their memory, but also an awareness of women's rights – in combination with a general climate of Islamophobic media reports – that provide negative images of Muslims and Islam (Clycq, 2012; Haritaworn, 2012; Ossewaarde, 2014). In Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean diaspora communities, parents tend to hold the belief that their daughters cannot be happy in a marriage with a Muslim man, because those men are oppressive and restrictive towards women, a belief based on the idea that Christians and Muslims are fundamentally different. So even fourth generation Botoye – born in the diaspora, enjoying civil rights in Western Europe and no longer needing to fear for their lives in the way that their ancestors did – still nevertheless carry feelings of danger, self-protection and an acute wariness transmitted across generations. Hirsch (2008) notes that this transmission of emotions is a characteristic of 'post-memory'.

Concluding remarks

Our respondents' stories of state-sanctioned brutalization, dehumanization and collapse of moral values are similar to Armenian stories of sex-selective mass torturing, abducting and killing of women captured by scholars (Balakian, 2013; Bjørnlund, 2009; Ekmekcioglu, 2013). Also, our respondents' narrative of the physical and cultural destructions in Bote 1915 included all the features of what Jones (2004) calls a 'gendercide'. A gendercide refers to the sex-specific and sex-distinctive mass killing that manifests a certain gender dynamic in terms of beliefs about femininity and masculinity (Carpenter, 2002; Jones, 2004; Tiefenbrun and Edwards, 2009). Genocides in general tend to target females in particular, in ways intended to prevent births and destroy reproduction (Fein, 1999). Moreover, sexual violence can be partly aimed at making victims want to leave their home for good (Bjørnlund, 2009: 30) or making them wish they were dead (Russel-Brown, 2003). Several scholars have identified sexual violence as a weapon of war, a tool of domination that strategically terrorizes and traumatizes targeted groups (Diken and Laustsen, 2005; Nussbaum, 2003; Wood, 2006). A genocide becomes a feminized event when women are presented as the universal victims of man's inhumanity, because of their sex and femininity (Lentin, 1999). In spite of the recognition of the sufferings the males had to go through, including rape and the targeting of male sexual organs, our respondents identified their genocide as a feminized event: the abducted,

enslaved, raped, trafficked and sold girls and women were characterized as the heroines of the genocide.

Tachjian (2009) notes that the Armenians were not inclined to label abused Armenian women as 'heroines'. This was a largely nationalist inspired interpretation. Tachjian argues that Ottoman strategies of forced marriage and maternity proved effective as abused Armenian women and children typically faced rejection by Armenian nationalists. 'Convinced that forced marriages and prostitution had robbed these women of any sense of national identity', Tachjian (2009: 74) explains that nationalists argued that they were lost to the Armenian cause. As for children, a child fathered by a Muslim perpetrator was unworthy of integration into the Armenian community. In the nationalist narrative, then, the Armenian heroine of genocide, as Tachjian observes, is 'the woman who taught her child the Armenian alphabet in the sands of the desert; or the woman who, weapon in hand, defended Urfa against the executioner at the cost of her life; or else the one who threw herself into the River Euphrates from a high cliff so as not to fall into the hands of the Turks and be raped' (Tachjian, 2009: 76–77).

Ekmekcioglu, by contrast, points at competing narratives within the Armenian pattern of interpretation, stressing that the Armenian Patriarch and the Christian Armenian agencies also voiced a religious narrative. Ekmekcioglu (2013: 531) emphasizes that the Ottoman Empire had a longstanding tradition of sexual partnering with non-Muslim slaves, with the father being identified as the sole creator. Through 'forced maternity', targeted communities were destroyed via giving birth to children of rape, who were expected to then be rejected by the target community, as they were fathered by the perpetrator (Carpenter, 2000). Abducted women and children of rape typically find themselves in a difficult position. Abducted women, forcibly integrated or imprisoned in the perpetrator's household as a wife, have often refused to return to their natal community. Trauma, fear, stigma, loss of chastity, children that are not accepted in a natal community defined by patriarchy, forced conversion, and having no family left, are all motives for not returning (Carpenter, 2000; Ekmekcioglu, 2013). According to Ekmekcioglu (2013: 539), the Patriarchate was not always welcoming to sexually abused women and orphans born of rape. The 'pure' Armenian-ness of such children and women was questioned. Also, the Patriarchate was silent on the topic of orphans and women who preferred to stay among Muslims. Yet, overall, Ekmekcioglu (2013: 550) concludes that the Armenian Patriarch took the guardianship of 'his unprotected flock quite seriously', especially when the post-genocide nation of Armenia badly needed women to procreate. All the rescued women and children – as well as those who had been compelled to prostitute themselves for survival and faced rejection by their own natal communities – were considered by the Patriarchate as the nation's 'unfortunate sisters' (Ekmekcioglu, 2013: 550).

Our respondents exclusively invested their heroines of gendercide with religious significance, within quite different gendered structures than the Armenian nationalist or religious and patriarchal ones. In contrast with the Armenian community, there was no nationalist or ecclesiastic elite, nor any non-Church-related organization, available within the Mesopotamian Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean communities. Language and shared religious origin defined their collective identity. According to Levene (1998: 400), 'whether one can even speak of an Assyrian nationalism is perhaps a moot point'.

And, indeed, from our interviews, it appears that no nationalist narrative was present among the Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean communities in the village of Bote. The oral transmission of their religious narrative of the genocidal massacre of 1915, and the role of the female heroine, is central to how children are being brought up in Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean diaspora communities. Stories of the genocide are deeply gendered by the third and fourth generations. In particular, contemporary Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean religious diasporic identity is shaped by those who speak explicitly of rape (those who mention rape but do not talk about it in detail), and tales of abductions, bodily mutilations, women's breasts being cut off and pregnant women's bellies being cut open. Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean children, born and raised in diaspora, are continually acquainted with the horrific experiences their ancestors had to go through, which shapes their own relationship with Muslims. This is transmitted to them to remind them of where they come from and what they have to protect in Western Europe: the religion handed down to them from very early times. As we have argued in this article, while their adoption of a religious discourse of 'heroism' and 'martyrdom' has enabled them to honour and claim the sexually violated women survivors of genocide, it has also contributed to the reinforcement of Islamophobic beliefs and attitudes across generations.

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Notes

1. Üngör (2008: 32) explains that also in the Republic, 'the non-Turkish population of the eastern provinces was looked down upon as primitive and inferior' and 'inherently treacherous and anti-Turkish'.
2. Culturally and ethnically related Mesopotamian, Semitic peoples that speak Aramaic dialects whose origins are still subject to debate, especially within the communities themselves.
3. Currently, some 15,000 Arameans, Assyrians and Chaldeans live in Turkey (most of them in Istanbul) (Omtzicht et al., 2012), while about 300,000 of them live in Western Europe (Seyfocenter, 2010).
4. One family typically consisted of 50 persons.

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