

In search of a lost time. (Re) construction of identity in the Circassian diaspora in Israel

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Abstract

Circassians in Israel – whose population is estimated at 4,000 people – are divided between the two villages of Kfar Kama (Lower Galilee, district of Tiberias) and Rihanya (Lebanese border, district of Safed).

This population is a unique example of a non-Arab (but Caucasian) Muslim group which claims an active Israeli citizenship and who, contrary to such a situation might imply, retains traditional cultural elements very meaningful while enjoying an indisputable civic integration.

Israelis but not Jews, Muslims but not Arabs, how Circassians of Israel could find their right place facing the two identity entities competing, without leaving much space vacant, the legitimacy of a presence and whose stories, disasters and pains confront and compete rather than admit and understand each other? “Traitors” and “Muslims in the service of Zionism” for some, “second-class citizens” for others, categorizations at work provoke excluding mechanisms for Circassians. The concepts of nationality or religious affiliation, yet commonly applied in the Israeli-Palestinian space, are not efficient enough to define this “minority within the minority”, unable to recognize itself within any of the two dominant groups but which also seeks to distinguish from the “third way” embodied by Druzes. Circassians of Israel, at the edge of all these borders, eventually built its own ones, although fragile, between nostalgia for a lost Caucasus and identity reconfigurations.



Palestinian Jews and Israeli Arabs?

In January 2008, few months before the commemorations of the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of the State that Israel is preparing to celebrate with pomp, the Israeli-Argentinian conductor and internationally well-known pianist, Daniel Barenboim, co-founder with Edward Said of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra in 1999, was made honorary citizen in Ramallah, for his efforts to bring Israelis and Arabs closer and was given a Palestinian passport, becoming the first Israeli Jew to get both nationalities.

When he said that it was a great honor for him to be granted this passport, many hostile reactions in the political arena and in Israeli public opinion were heard¹. Yakov Margi, representing the Shas party² in the Knesset asked the Israeli government to declare obsolete the Israeli citizenship of Daniel Barenboim and said about him: “(...) it is embarrassing for the country that a person like him still has an Israeli citizenship (...) I am

¹ Daniel Barenboim already had to face a call for boycott against him from the cultural commission of the Knesset for having made play, for the first time in Israel, an opera by Richard Wagner symbolizing for many Israelis the German antisemitism horror.

² The Shas Party (acronym for *Shisha Sedarim*) is a Sephardic ultra orthodox Israeli political party created in 1984. It is chaired by a wise men council dominated by Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the political leader is Eli Yishai. From a constitutional point of view, the Shas Party defends the idea that Israel is the State of the Jewish people and is opposed to the creation of a secular state.

sure that in the eyes of Israelis, he lost the moral authority that gave him the right to be an Israeli (...). In the readers' letters to the editor of the newspaper *Haaretz*, rather left-wing, some even call the "new" Palestinian citizen to leave the Israeli national territory to settle in the West Bank or Gaza Strip.

During the following month, in March 2008, Ghaleb Majadle, a member of the Knesset, and above all the first Arab Muslim to succeed to a post of minister³, triggers a political and media storm by declaring to one of the most important Israeli newspaper that he refuses to sing the Hatikva, the national anthem⁴, at the Knesset because he believes that it is "written for Jews only" and that "the Arabs are not in mood to sing at this time."⁵ To mark the respect he must assure, as minister of State, to the Israeli law, Ghaleb Majadle stands up when the national anthem sounds but refuses to sing the words that are addressed, according to him, to a separate part of the population and which, as a Muslim Arab citizen of Israel, he can not identify with⁶.

The religious parties, the Israeli right and right wing responded immediately to cut short the revival of an old debate that the State of Israel has faced since its creation and, which from today, has not yet been decided: the distinction between citizenship and religious practice in Israel. In other words, must Israel be the Jews' state, the Jewish state or the state of all its inhabitants?

Arieh Eldad, from the Ichud Leumi-Mafdal's coalition declared then that an individual who refuses to sing the national anthem, and who does not recognize himself in it, should not be given a ministerial function. MK⁷ Zevulun Orlev, from the same party, asked for public apologies for what he considers "a clear violation of the ministerial oath which guarantees loyalty to the State of Israel and its laws."

Some even ask for his resignation outright, others go further by proposing the "transfer"⁸ to the Palestinian Authority of this citizen hitherto relatively integrated into the Israeli political public sphere.

A "right of being an Israeli" for Yakov Margi, a "breach (...) of loyalty to the State of Israel and its laws" for Zevulun Orlev: the debate remains unresolved, the boundaries are blurred and the war of words is raging.

These two events, which seem minor under the general context, but have become a real matter of state, cited in remarks illustrate how issues of citizenship, ethnicity and the link between religious and politics remains sensitive and thorny in the Israeli-Palestinian space.

Neither Jews, nor Arabs: the paradoxes of the Circassian identity definition in the Israeli-Palestinian space

Israelis but not Jews, Muslims but not Arabs, how Circassians of Israel could find their right place facing the two identity titans competing, without leaving much space vacant, the legitimacy of a presence and whose stories, disasters and pains confront and compete rather than admit and understand each other? "Traitors" for some, "second-class citizens" for others, categorizations at work provoke excluding mechanisms for the diaspora in Israel. The concepts of nationality or religious affiliation, yet commonly applied in the Israeli-Palestinian space, are not efficient enough to define this population which, at the edge of all these borders, eventually built its own ones, although fragile.

"On the one hand are the (Jews) religious who despise seculars who do not understand ultra-Orthodox Jews ... (Jews) the Ashkenazi consider the Sephardic as less good Jews that they are because they have been living for a long time with Arabs, and the Sephardic say the same about Jews from Ethiopia ... On the other hand, there are Arabs, Muslims do not mix with Christians, there are also Palestinians, those in Gaza who envy those of the West Bank ... and then there are also the Bedouins ... how could we find our right place in this country? We have no great illusions, we must do all alone, by and between ourselves"

That is what told me a resident of Rihanya during my last visit to the village⁹, highlights several elements in our thoughts.

³ Nominated on January 10th 2007 as Minister of Culture, Sciences and Sports by the Labor Party's leader Amir Peretz.

⁴ Interview given in *Yediot Aharonot* on March 9th 2007.

⁵ "Obviously, I won't sing the anthem in its actual shape. But before talking about symbols, I would like to talk about equal chances for my children. It is more important if my son was able to buy a house to live with dignity... Arabs are not in the mood for singing at the moment".

⁶ The lyrics of Hatikva are generally translated by: "As long as in the heart, within, A Jewish soul still yearns, And onward, towards the ends of the east, An eye still gazes toward Zion, Our hope is not yet lost, The hope of two thousands years, To be a free people in our land, The land of Zion and Jerusalem."

⁷ MK i.e. Knesset Member.

⁸ It will be the case, in particular, of Avigdor Liberman who's leading *Ysrael Beitenou*, Russian-speaking nationalist party he founded that can be characterized by a very strong Policy against Arabs and especially against Palestinians. He advocates the "transfer" of Israeli Arabs to Palestinian Territories, and that is considered as an openly belligerent party.

⁹ Interview done in Rihanya on May 2008.

First, that the problems of identity, borders, hierarchy and domination, are the prerogative “of others,” namely the Jews or the Arabs: the problems of defining identity do not apply to their community and discrimination has no place. Others may well tear each others, the community remains united and solidary.

Then, the indisputable fact that the Circassian diaspora of Israel is struggling to find its place in a state where the borders, both physical and symbolic, are felt at all levels. An already very limited space in which boundaries are everywhere. Geographical boundaries first of a land on which, an obstacle, a check point, a border is quickly and inevitably met. Psychological delimitations then, in a geopolitical space at war where a camp must be chosen. These Israeli citizens, apart from two major Jewish and Arab entities, feel deeply excluded.

From Caucasus to Israel: a story of the Circassian migration through the territorial reconfigurations

At the end of the war between Tsarist Russia and the Ottoman Empire, and after more than sixty years of fighting between the peoples of North Caucasus and Russia, 1864¹⁰ for Circassians sounds the hour of defeat and painful choice: agree to pay allegiance to Tsar Nicolas 1st and be evicted from their land to settle where the Russians would force them, or choose an exodus with no return and set far from the borders of the Russian Empire.

The setting of this dispersion has persisted until now since four fifths of this displaced population still lives, even today, in diaspora, mainly in Russia, Turkey, Jordan and Syria¹¹.

Because of denominational ties that united Circassians and Turks on the one hand¹², and the presence, on the other hand, of many Turks originally Circassians in Turkey¹³, they chose the path of exodus and dispersion in an Ottoman Empire whose borders are as unclear as excessive.

Most of the Circassians settled in the regions which would become Turkey, Jordan and Syria, several thousands of them landed in Palestine, through Caesarea harbor in 1880 after spending nearly ten years at the Greek-Bulgarian border.

Upon arrival, the Ottoman Sultan forced them to settle in three villages, which are called Kfar Kama, Rihanya and Cerkesz Kinneret. The latter, located in a swampy area, was hit by severe epidemics that forced the survivors to migrate to the other two villages. Circassians had, as well, to move away from big cities because their inhabitants refused to install these newcomers, and sent petitions to the Governor of Turkey, as it was the case in Nablus for example.

The Circassian diaspora of Israel quantitatively changed very little since they are estimated to be between 3000 and 4000 Circassians in the current Israeli territory, and it has remained spatially confined to the two villages where they had settled on arrival (Kfar Kama and Rihanya). Nearly one thousand Circassians from the Abzakh tribe live in Rihanya, in the district of Safed, i.e at the Lebanese border. It is a mixed village in which twenty-five percent of the total population are Arab Muslims.

Some two thousands five hundreds Circassians from the Chapsough tribe reside in Kfar Kama in Lower Galilee, about ten kilometers away from the city of Afula on the road from Nazareth to Tiberias. This village is exclusively inhabited by Circassians but, remarkably, by an overwhelming majority of Chapsough people.

In Israel, the spatial distribution of Circassians therefore primarily depends on the tribe they belong to and the expression of the tribe of origin remains the major factor of identity in the global Circassian community. This tribal assertion makes sense when a person defines himself : it is usual to add the name of the tribe of origin to the family name. In case of a marriage between two Circassians from different tribes, the tribal affiliation of the father will be used to identify an individual.

Insisting on the tribal membership and distribution in this numerically very small diaspora is necessary not only to understand the mechanisms of its identity but also to shed light on the different forms of representations of the group both within the sphere of ethnicity and outside the space community, both in Israeli and Arabic societies.

When the Druzes and the Circassians are perceived as a homogeneous whole and clearly separate from the Arabs

Today the State of Israel recognizes the existence of three nationalities (leom): Jewish, Arab and Druze.

Druzes and Circassians are the two non-Jewish communities involved in the process of national defense¹⁴, they are usually presented together, in official speeches as well as in the public opinion.

¹⁰ The first clashes between Russians and Caucasians are dated around 1785 (under the authority of Cheikh Chamil) and that the last battle was led by an Oubykh group in 1864.

¹¹ Respectively two million, one million, 60,000 and 30,000.

¹² The expansion of Islam in Northern Caucasus during the XIXth century gave the Sultan a Religious legitimacy as “Believers’ Leader”.

¹³ Due to the proslavery behaviors, a lot of Sultans’ wives and mothers were Circassian, and a lot of Circassian boys were sold for their warrior qualities during more than a century.

Under the cover of unwavering “loyalty” to the State, which is an idea mainly fed by the compulsory participation of men from both communities to the national army but, above all, by the distance consciously kept with the Palestinian cause and through the prism of an active claim of the Israeli citizenship, Druzes and Circassians are given a special treatment which is very different from the one reserved to the Arabic populations of the country, both in the political management of the villages and in the recognition of their cultural and religious specificities.

The Knesset, for example, has adopted a specific budget for the development of the substructures of these two communities, and some four hundred forty seven million shekels have been allocated to the different municipalities concerned from 2006 to 2009. In comparison, a budget from thirteen to fourteen million shekels has been voted for the development of thirty-four non-Jewish communities in the north of the country in the year 2007.

From a symbolic point of view, the special treatment given to these populations by the State of Israel also goes through the importance Israeli politicians grant the cultural days or various festivals organized by the villages. The visible and claimed presence of Israeli officials at the slightest folk festival transforms each occasion into a theater of thanks and cleverly organized performances providing a striking lightning on the relationship between the community leaders and the State of Israel.

It is also interesting to note that out of the sixty two official lobbies of the seventeenth Knesset (2006), one specifically concerns the defense of the Circassian and Druze interests, presented once more, as a coherent whole with similar interests. This lobby, chaired by the Druze Majalli Whbee, is composed of twenty-five members of the whole Israeli political spectrum, including two members of the Ysrael Beitenou party, the leader of which is Avigdor Liberman, who called in May 2006, for the execution of the Israeli Arab representatives who had either been in contact with Hamas or had celebrated the *Naqba* (the “catastrophe” commemorating the expulsion of Palestinians) instead of commemorating *Yom Ha'atsmaout* (celebrations of Israel's independence). The investment in that lobby of two members of a party advocating openly racist theories is particularly symptomatic of the very clear distinction made in Israel between Druzes and Circassians, perceived as an homogenous whole, and Arabs.

But if Druzes represent 9 % of the overall Israeli population¹⁵, estimated around 120,000 individuals, and if they have an effective representation on the political scene by members of Parliament and even a minister¹⁶, the case is significantly different for Circassians since they represent a very small community of 3,500 people spread over two villages and since they have no other representation than political leaders of their villages. There are no Circassian members of Parliament nor ministers: their political representation is exclusively local and not national. (This will play, among other things, an important part in the Israeli popular ignorance about Circassians.)

Kfar Kama officially received the designation of “Local Council” in 1950¹⁷ because the village is inhabited by more than 2,000 people. Rihanya is numerically too small to obtain its own Local Council¹⁸, the village is included with eight community villages¹⁹ (Yishouv Kehilat), one kibbutz²⁰, thirteen moshavim²¹ and one Druze village²², under the auspices of the Regional Council of Merom Ha Galil. Each one headed by a local committee which sends a number of representatives proportionally to the size of its population to the Regional Council.

The Circassians are therefore for the State of Israel, neither a major stake nor an electoral force to attract. Accordingly, Circassians, because they keep on being constantly classed as Druze, have no official recognition of their specific character.

The immediate consequence of this lack of recognition as a specific group with a culture and religious practice apart from the Druzes' ones is translated into a relative unfamiliarity of the Jewish Israeli public. The Israelis, when they know the very term “Circassians,” often after having met one of them during their military service, assimilate them – once again – to Druzes and consider them as a cult with its own lifestyle and a culture

¹⁴ Men from the two communities are to do the compulsory military service, this requirement is not asked to any other Muslim of the Israeli-Palestinian space. It was a request from the villages' leaders (as soon as 1948 for the Circassians).

¹⁵ The Central Bureau of Statistics, Jerusalem, Israel, 2007.

¹⁶ Majalli Whbee was elected Representative at the 16th Knesset in 2003 for the Likoud. In March 2005, he has been nominated VP of PM Ariel Sharon's personal staff, and therefore became Vice-Minister in charge of Education, Culture and Sports in June 2006. When Ariel Sharon leaves the Likoud, he co-founds with him Kadima and is elected Representative at the 17th Knesset in 2006. He becomes VP of the Knesset. In October 2007, he joins Ehud Olmert's personal staff as Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs.

¹⁷ Kfar Kama is the first non-Jewish locality that has been recognized as “Local Council” by the State of Israel. In 2003, there were 144 Local Councils in Israel.

¹⁸ Around 1000 inhabitants nowadays.

¹⁹ Amuka, Bar Yochai, Biryia, Inbar, Kalanit, Kfar Hananya, Livnim and Or HaGanuz.

²⁰ Parod.

²¹ Alma, Amirim, Avivim, Dalton, Dovev, Hazon, Kerem Ben Zimra, Kfar Hoshen, Kfar Shamai, Meron, Shefer, Shezor and Tefahot.

²² Ein el-Asad.

aside. An unknown world which feeds numerous fantasies, in a questionnaire distributed to about fifty Israeli Jews in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa, to the question “to which religion do the Circassians belong to?”, some, without the slightest hesitation, replied “Circassian”. Thus, it’s as if these “brave” Circassians involved in the war effort and in the state’s defense, as if this so “fair” minority in opposition to the figure of the Israeli Arab potentially seen as “dangerous” for the State of Israel²³, could not share anything, even a religion, with the enemy. The Circassians of Israel have made their own the Israeli representations, widely insisting on their difference with Israeli Arabs, refraining from publicly expressing support to the Palestinian cause. They have built their identity through the mirror of the Israeli society.

An identity built in a double distinction to otherness

The privileges granted by the state to these two populations, continue to feed a ditch from which is ensued a double effect.

This loyalty is considered as an act of betrayal by the Arabs of the country for whom Circassians are traitors to the Umma²⁴, and are therefore excluded from the community of believers, however, supposed to transcend nationalities and governments.

The inclusion in the Israeli socio-political space where the non-written constitution urges citizens to define themselves by faith, and in response to other Muslims in front of whom it was urgent to legitimize its religious identity, led Circassians of Israel to adopt a net shift in their own conception of their identity. From now on, this latter is mainly built around a traditionalist and a rigorous practice of Islam, quite different from the practices that can be observed in the other diasporas in the Middle-East.

In their daily practices in the North Caucasus²⁵, the area where they are initially from, if Circassians observe the main Muslim celebrations, as the Ramadan fast, very few of them practice the five daily prayers and few young women are veiled.

In most cities in this region, there are only very few mosques, for example, the city of Maikop, however capital of the Adygha Republic, has only one mosque, built very recently in 2001.

Traditionally, it is the “*Adygha Khabza*”, a code of honor orally transmitted, which controlled the conduct of Circassians and regulated social norms. This code of conduct revolves around respect for the elder, seen as a guide that instructs the youngest, around gender equality, sharing and mutual help, and around the art of dominating yourself and behaving in society. In any case, religion originally regulates the conduct of Circassians.

Unlike other diasporas established in the rest of the Middle East²⁶, Islam is the heart of the identity definition of the Circassians of Israel. This particularly thrust and ostentatious religious practice can be explained by two main elements. The first is, undoubtedly, the inclusion of the diaspora in the socio-political Israeli-Palestinian space strengthened by the affirmation of the religious nature of the conflict largely defended by the war propaganda both Israeli and Palestinian and the assertion of a predominance of two major religions. These religious practices can not be separated from the context of reislamisation that began in Israel in the seventies and which conducted the concerned populations to mark more clearly their religious belonging as an identity vector. The second factor is the classic pattern of identity construction in front of otherness. The originality of the Circassian diaspora of Israel is that this construction is built in a double distinction to the *Other*: the *Other* of the country of course, whether Jewish or Arab, but especially the *Other* Circassians in the Middle-East in front of whom must be legitimized its presence on a territory often considered hostile or as an enemy by its neighbors. Indeed, in 1948, when the State of Israel was created, Circassians of Palestine did not migrate to neighboring Syria or Jordan as one might have expected. They made the choice to stay within the borders of the new state and embrace full Israeli citizenship by paying allegiance to the country. The assertion of that acute religious practice was chosen by them as a proof of their good “*Circassian-ness*”. Thus, for Circassians in Israel, it seems like they have to be more Circassians than other Circassians and more Muslims

²³ The use of the terms in quotes is taken from different interlocutors I met or has been taken from questionnaires distributed, and would not –in any case- reveal my own opinion or judgment on these different populations and could not qualify the opinion of the whole Israeli population.

²⁴ Druzes – whom secret doctrine, is based, among others things, on the belief of the metempsychosis, and the incorporation of elements from Islam or from Greek philosophy – reject the *charia* and the obligations associated. They are considered as heretics, by the majority of Muslims either Sunni or Shiite. Druzes believed they are the only ones to profess rigorously the *tawhid* (that is to say the divine unit) and considered themselves *muwahiddun* (the unitarians). They don’t face the same critics than Circassians considered as traditional Sunni Muslims.

²⁵ Generic term used here to point out the three Northern-Caucasian Republics where they are spread, that is to say : the Adygha Republic, the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, the Karatchaev-Tcherkessian Republic.

²⁶ As, for instance, in Jordan and in Syria. In their great majority, Circassians from these two countries will define themselves as Circassians first before considering themselves as Muslims.

than other Muslims. Therefore, being a good Circassian in Israel is being a good Muslim, and being a good Muslim guarantees the fact of being a good Circassian.

The Circassians of Israel claim to be the guarantors of the Caucasian traditions, including by respecting this religious practice. But initially Circassians believed in a large pantheon of divinities, mainly representing the forces of nature and agriculture, such as “*Hana Gush*” the god of rain, “*Shagbala*” the one of thunder, “*Pshztia*” the one of lightning, “*Miztaha*” the one of forests, “*Tlafsh*” the one of iron as well as “*Wazramas*” the one of beauty. They were converted to Christianity, like all the peoples of Caucasus, in the sixth century²⁷, and to Islam in the late eighteenth century. This construction will be then internalized: thus was born a “new tradition”.

Identitary import-export: building a bridge between the society of origin and the one of destination

That is in reference to a land of origin made sacred, reinforced by the traumatic figure of the forced exodus that Circassians of Israel have built their identitary definition. References to the “*motherland*” are predominant in the speeches inside the community itself and outside. Trades between villages and the Caucasus (especially with Adygha Republic) are becoming more and more frequent since the fall of the Soviet Union. From 1991, Kfar Kama sent a delegation to visit the new republic, barely emancipated from the Soviet Union but which obtained a status of “autonomous republic linked to the Russian Federation”. Students go on “pilgrimages” on the land of their ancestors, villages receive official delegations from Maikop to inaugurate museums and to attend various celebrations. Circassian musicians from Caucasus are invited to perform during the annual festivals of Kfar Kama and Rihanya and are warmly welcomed, cheered and erected to the level of real international stars. Exchange platforms and community meeting websites flourish on the web and Caucasus is the popular destination for honeymoons, wedding anniversaries or can be a perfect gift to celebrate the graduation of a child of the family.

Owning an object from the Caucasus makes the head of family proud: it can be a figurine representing a jumper or a dancer, an accordion engraved on a piece of wood, an imitation of an ancient saber, a clock painted in the colors of the Circassian green flag with its twelve stars representing the twelve tribes and three arrows for the three North Caucasus republics where Circassians come from, or even a small photography or a postcard of the Caucasus’ mountains. Bought during a travel by the family itself or by a relative or friend, these very popular gifts are specifically highlighted and find their place in the reception room with the greatest exposure in terms of visitors. Some people even create small personal museums, in a cellar or in a room specially designed for the occasion, competing with the others for the newest item, “hunting” for rarities, comparing the objects in their possession, accumulating clippings and photographs: the construction of the collective memory takes the pattern of a competition between material memories.

If these objects are only stereotyped markers of a culture in representation, a mother particularly proud to own a painting of a couple in traditional clothes standing in front of a mountain confided: “It is as if there were a piece of Caucasus at home”. To import from Caucasus such an object in Israel enables its possessor to establish a symbolic bridge between “its” two lands, the origins’ one and the welcoming one.

References to the Caucasus are also prevalent in the self-presentation of the community in the Israeli society. The two villages slowly opened themselves to tourism, a “folk” tourism attracting a mainly Jewish Israeli audience living around. Conferences are organized by a retired teacher from the village, recounting a general history of Circassians, presenting Caucasus with maps and photographs. He also tells the story of dispersion which has a strong resonance among the Jewish public, the story of the settling in the Middle-East and Circassians’ integration in the Israeli society, described as totally successful. A particular emphasis is made on the loyalty of the community and the voluntary participation in compulsory service.

Insisting so much on references to Caucasus, as the land of origins and as the “homeland” forever unforgettable, also has a positive resonance among Jewish tourists: the Circassians do not claim their territory, nor a historical Palestine, their land is elsewhere and is particularly faraway.

The neighbor becomes tourist who becomes host and will be guided through the village by a local scholar, he will visit the museum where maps of the Caucasus and exile are translated into hebrew, restored houses in a “traditional” style, the Circassian restaurant in which he will be able to discover and buy Circassian food, or perceived as such, that he will be able to take home. It’s his turn to export what one considers as a “piece of the Circassian village” in the Israeli society.

However, these geographical references rarely exceed the discursive framework, while some of Israeli Circassians develop professional partnerships with the Caucasus, some are even regularly back but this practice is still very scarce. A bunch of them left Israel and settled in Caucasus, and even if the speech of returning back home remains associated with the life-project (usually not for himself but for future generations), there is no collective project to return there for the whole diaspora. When this happens, it is only the result of individual

²⁷ Islam is the main religion in Northern-Caucasus, but it’s only in the early XVIIIth century that the majority of Circassian Princes converted to Islam dragging their subjects.

paths: the majority of the Israeli Circassians say they do not want to leave the village they consider as the place of the highest expression of their “Circassian-ness”.

Living between oneself or how to get out of the geo political context symbolically

In view of a lack of recognition of their particularity and against their position of Muslims “in the service of the State of Israel”, the Circassians are, step by step, getting symbolically out of geo-political context. This “minority within the minority”, unable to recognize itself within any of the two dominant groups but which also seeks to distinguish from the “third way” embodied by Druzes, eventually began to stage its own identity construction. To this end, Circassians built, like the entire Israeli society, their own spatio-temporal borders.

Spatial borders first, marking the effective and physical demarcation of the village. The village becomes the Circassian “territory”, regarded even by some villagers as an ideal “embryo of Nation-State”, a symbol of a reassuring and protector place. The village represents the guarantee of a total expression of the Circassian identity they rebuilt inside this space, and whose legitimacy is not questioned by any external review.

In Israel, being a Circassian is above all being a Circassian in the village: “I was born in the village, I grew up in the village, I got married in the village, I raised my children in the village, I work in village and I will die in the village (...) the village is my home” often say interlocutors when asked about the importance of living in the village or coming back there after studying in Haifa, Jerusalem or Beer Sheva. The village, cut off from the world, is seen as a bulwark against the environment and the danger of assimilation, the main fear of this tiny community.

The boundaries of the village mark the material separation with the Jewish neighboring for Kfar Kama and the Arab’s one for Rihanya. “Here, I feel like a member of the clan, unlike in Nazareth where I grew up (...) there I never felt at home ... because we were not between us ... we were with the Arabs” said one of the few residents of Kfar Kama that has been raised outside the village and who felt the need to come back while her first child was born²⁸.

The village allows Circassians to assert their so desired specificity, the one that the State of Israel is so slow to recognize and formalize.

The autarkic working has eventually been internalized as a *sine qua non* condition of cultural survival: “Here we are between us, with the same education, we are all Circassians, we speak our language, we are all good Muslims (...) We are an Islamic²⁹ village, everyone understands everyone, we’re not judged by anyone ... We can keep our traditions and live as in Caucasus” said another villager.

“Here we’re not judged by anyone”, “living as in Caucasus”, the terminology used is unequivocal: the reference to the land of origin and its memory is still alive and Circassians are tired of not finding their place in the Israeli-Palestinian society, injured to be regarded as traitors to a cause which is not historically theirs, offended to be considered as second class citizens in a place they inhabit yet since 1880, a country they have seen the birth and have helped to build and protect.

Then the Circassians have stopped living in the Israeli-Palestinian space, now they contented themselves with living in the village.

An invisible minority in the minority, building an identity that only matches its particular situation, referring to the mythology of an heroic people of warriors, brave, loyal, proud and upright, as if it was the way to counterbalance the judgment of their “brothers” who reject them, and constantly try to revive an one hundred fifty years dreamt Caucasus that no longer exists than elsewhere beside handed down memories. A Caucasus which remains above all, the last remainders of a valued time, the one before the disaster, before exile and dispersion.



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²⁸ Interview done in Kfar Kama in April 2006.

²⁹ The use of “Islamic” and not of “Muslim”, by this interviewee, puts the spot on on the blur around terms used and the semantic shift in the Circassian speech in Israel.