

Cultural Trauma and its Impact on the Iraqi Assyrian Experience of Identity

ABSTRACT

This article explores the impact of a century of cultural trauma and marginalisation on the shaping of modern Iraqi Assyrians' identity and their present-day experiences, including their decisions and sense of belonging to their homeland. Using questionnaire and interview data, we explore how Assyrians who participated in this study respond to a century of persecution during and since WWI, and discuss their current situation in relation to their ethnic and cultural rights in Iraq. Based on data collected from Iraqi Assyrians who reside in various geographical places, we argue that these Assyrians still see themselves on the receiving end of ongoing marginalisation which has long precedents and has not only become part of their identity, but continues to shape their present-day experiences and decisions about where to settle. Nevertheless, we found that historical events have reinforced Assyrians' ethnic identity and their affiliation with their heritage and religion. The findings are discussed in relation to how cultural trauma shapes a group's collective identity and experiences.

KEYWORDS Assyrians; displacement; trauma; collective memory; identity; WWI

Introduction

Historical events pertaining to a group can be perceived as 'collective' or 'cultural' when people who identify themselves as part of a group (ethnic, religious etc.) feel that fearful historical events have left scars on their collective consciousness that with time become part of the group's collective memory (Schuman & Scott, 1989). Traumatic events in particular shape collective identity and memory. Collective memory subsequently shapes a group's present-day experiences and responses to the past. For instance, the collective memory of slavery has grounded the identity formation of African-Americans, Eyerman explained: 'slavery was traumatic in retrospect which could potentially unite all "African Americans" in the United States, whether or not they had themselves been slaves' (2001, p.1).

Several studies have looked into the impact of trauma on social groups like African-Americans, Armenians, Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors, Palestinians and the Holocaust survivors (El Sarraj, 2002; Schuman & Scott, 1989; Shamai, 2015; Stamm, Stamm, Hudnall, & Higson-Smith, 2004), yet little or no attention has been given to the study of cultural trauma and Assyrians in the Middle East and how trauma has shaped their identity and collective memory in the present. This article therefore, examines the implications of a century of persecution and alienation on the formation of the Assyrians' collective identity and memory. The study focuses on Iraqi Assyrians who have suffered mass atrocities, displacement, persecution and discrimination since the end of the nineteenth century. Based on data collected from more than a hundred participants, this article examines the consequences a century of traumatic events on the collective memory of Assyrians and how the past has transferred into the memory of the current generation of Assyrians. From our data, we identify how cultural trauma and collective memory have informed the group's awareness of their heritage and historical consciousness. Furthermore, while we accept that there is no monolithic way of looking at Assyrians, we highlight the significant role of the church in maintaining and allowing the continuity of the shared identity of many Assyrians, particularly based on their language and religious practices.

This research developed out of our study of archival material in the form of photographs and documents preserved in the Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University. The documentation of Assyrian communities we found in the archive from before the First World War was integral to our project *Beyond Destruction* which was funded as part of The Centre for Hidden Histories: Community, Commemoration by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK. The aim of that project was to consider the impact of the First World War on communities whose stories have traditionally not been part of the narrative of the Great War.

This archive material prompted us to explore the impact of events during the last century on Assyrians.

Cultural trauma and collective memory

Cultural trauma is a painful collective experience shared by a group of people who have been subjected to traumatic incidents (Eyerman, 2001, p. 2) such as forced migration, killing, torture and rape, often the product of cultural groups dominating another. Domination can take many forms such as depriving dominated groups the right to practice their language and religion. Such violations may perpetuate trauma and generate snowballing effects in the descendant members of the dominated groups (Stamm et al., 2004) that contribute to the shaping and reshaping of their identity. Cultural trauma can happen as a result of killing and forced removal, such as that which happened to the Native Americans (Shamai, 2015). Cultural trauma has been recognised as the experience of many groups, as for example in the cases of Palestinian refugees (El Sarraj, 2002), slavery for African-Americans (Eyerman, 2004) and human trafficking for ransom in Sinai and Eritria (Reisen & Mawere, 2017).

Through time, these traumatic experiences become part of the group's memory that affect not only the past and present identity of the subjects but also their future identity and memory (Pastor, 2004). The memory becomes, over time, part of the group's identity and their future in 'irrevocable ways' (Alexander, 2004). Cultural trauma is deeply rooted in historical occurrences and narratives (Eyerman, 2001; Stamm et al., 2004), and its legacy is maintained through 'figures of memory' such as literary texts, celebrations, monuments and other symbolic heritage (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995, p. 129) that give new meanings and interpretations to past events.

The impact of cultural trauma on the collective

Because trauma affects both groups and individuals, (Erikson, 1976) distinguishes between collective and individual trauma. He argues that individual trauma is a blow to the psyche of

the subject ‘that breaks through one’s defences so suddenly and with such brutal forces that one cannot react to effectively’, whereas collective trauma is ‘a blow to the basic tissue of societal life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality’ (pp. 153-154).

While collective trauma may impair the sense of communality, since cultural trauma can be embedded into a group’s cultural fabric and impacts their decisions and beliefs to shape their identity and the way they express themselves, it is argued that different social groups perceive trauma in a variety of ways (Shamai, 2015). In some groups, trauma may lead to changes in the groups’ cultural fabric, including religious beliefs, cultural values, morals and language; whereas other groups resist change and show more perseverance in the face of adversity. In addition, a long history of trauma and struggle can profoundly affect the collective memory of groups and leave a mark on their identities (Reisen & Mawere, 2017; Shamai, 2015; Usher, 2007). For instance, African-American identities threatened and problematised by slavery, which lasted almost three hundred years, are inherited in modern African-American culture (Eyerman, 2001). Palestinian refugees who are without a state and their own land, have been shown to have a strong sense of hopelessness built into their collective identity (El Sarraj, 2002). Likewise, this article demonstrates that for many modern Assyrians, collective memory is attached to and is shaped by the traumatic historical experiences endured by their ancestors. Our argument is informed by quotes from members of the Assyrian community who participated in this study.

The case of Assyrians

Assyrian Christians have their roots in northern Mesopotamia (modern northern Iraq, southeastern Turkey, northeastern Syria and northwestern Iran) with a heritage tracing back to the ancient Assyrians (Donabed, 2018; Yildiz, 1999). The common co-ethnic, Christian identity, language and origin of all the ethnic ecclesiastical groups descending from the ancient

Assyrians (such as Catholic Chaldeans, Syriacs, Eastern Orthodox Syrian, Nestorians, Jacobites, and Arameans) has led to grouping them all under the umbrella term, Assyrians¹. This article is concerned with all the ecclesiastical groups of Assyrian heritage because they have all undergone sovereignty changes and consequent assimilation processes of religion, language and culture.

Over the last century, Assyrians have witnessed a series of atrocities, cultural and ethnocidal processes represented by systematic policies such as the Arabisation programme that aimed to develop a homogeneous society but at the cost of denying Assyrians their ethnic rights (Büyüksaraç, 2015; Donabed, 2012). These historical events and memories of the ancestors suffering and their forced displacement became a common collective memory for Iraqi Assyrians and part of their identities.

In the last phase of the Ottoman Empire, Assyrians had to abandon their native lands in the Hakkari Mountains and relocate into northern Iraq as several Assyrian towns were destroyed and tens of thousands were expelled. During the British mandate in Iraq (1920-1932), Assyrian hopes were high and they demanded that the British government should help them attain the right to have an autonomous state within Iraq (Donabed, 2015, p. 72). They sought international support, and there were many plans to relocate the Assyrian community into Syria under the French mandate or to move them into South America (Lewis, 2003). In the end, it was decided to keep the Assyrians in Iraq (Lewis, 2003; Omissi, 1989). As a result, some Assyrians settled in northern Iraq including to Mosul (Dawood, 2017, p. 32).

In 1931, before the end of the British mandate in Iraq, many Assyrians scholars demanded that the British fulfil their demands and help them to be recognised as an

¹ For further explanation of the ecclesiastical designation of Assyrians, see Sargon Donabed's 'Rethinking nationalism and an appellative conundrum: historiography and politics in Iraq'. *National Identities*, 14(4), 407-431.

independent nation with some territories under their rule (Dawood, 2017). However, the British failed to satisfy the demands of the Assyrians, and this resulted in increased tension between Assyrians and the new independent governments in Iraq (Donabed, 2015, p. 95). In August 1933, hundreds of Assyrians were killed in the village of Simele and thousands were relocated to Syria (Donabed, 2015, pp. 413-415). The events of 1933 did not pass without leaving a grave impact on Assyrians, who felt deeply let down by the British because their ethnic, cultural and religious rights were not respected (Donabed, 2015, p. 224).

Although Assyrians enjoyed more cultural rights in the period between 1933-1970 compared to the earlier period between 1915-33, during this period Assyrian communities suffered significantly from further attempts at ethnic cleansing (Travis, 2006). In addition, in the late 1970s, Assyrians experienced attempts at ethnocide which sought to assimilate Assyrians into Iraqi Arab culture to create a homogeneous state. For instance, in 1977 the Assyrian identity was not recognised by the Iraqi state and it was omitted from the national census; hence Assyrians were forced to adopt either an Arab or Kurdish identity (Donabed & Mako, 2012). This on-going official denial of the recognition of Assyrians as a separate ethnicity has significantly impacted Assyrians who felt that this assimilation threatened their existence (Donabed, 2012). Moreover, the systematic and forced integration and relocation of Assyrians into the majority Arab populated areas, was intended to weaken their attachment to their ancient lands, cultural heritage and the 'integral components of their distinct and ancient identity' (Donabed & Mako, 2012, p. 288). For Assyrians the continuation of systematic policies of displacement and uprootedness from a century on continue to threaten their physical and cultural existence in Iraq.

Methods

This study sought to engage members of the indigenous Iraqi, Assyrians² concerning their Iraqi history before and after WWI³. The recruitment process started by approaching Assyrian members who frequented a church in the North East of England, followed by a snowballing sampling method (Creswell, 2013), to gain further participants from the community in the UK to communities in Europe, USA and Iraq.

Our initial work involved a small focus group of ten people. We used visual and textual material from the Gertrude Bell Archive including photographs of Assyrian communities, refugees and places recorded before the First World War⁴. This material was not central to our study but was used at this early stage to stimulate discussion and to explore participants' concerns about their history. In this way we used the archive material as a tool to open up conversations about how participants understand the past in the present. Stimulated by the first focus group, four of the initial ten participants explored questions of the past in the present using artefacts, art and literature which they brought to a second focus group. The conversations and topics explored in these two focus groups helped to inform questions which we incorporated into a questionnaire used subsequently in three face-to-face interviews and in electronic format. These focus groups and subsequent interviews were conducted in Arabic and English.

² While here we use the umbrella term Assyrians as discussed above, certain respondents self-identified specifically as Syriacs or Chaldeans.

³ Ethical protocols were reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee at Newcastle University. During the focus groups and the interviews, participants were briefed both in Arabic and English about the study and its purpose by the first author, a postdoctoral researcher, bilingual (in Arabic and English), with expertise in cultural studies and a qualified translator. Participant information sheets and consent forms were also provided to all the participants in English and Arabic. Participants were also informed that the information they provided would be used for academic research purposes and publication, and that anything they said would be anonymised. Participants were also informed of their rights to withdraw from the study at any time and that their notes would not be used should they have decided to leave the study.

⁴ The Gertrude Bell Archive is a UNESCO International Memory of the World and includes over 7,000 photographs taken mostly in the Middle East before 1914 by the British woman Gertrude Bell (<http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/>).

In the next stage, we began by using the questionnaire in interviews which permitted an open, semi-structured approach whereby participants could, if they chose, provide more information and stories about their ancestors. It quickly became clear that to gather enough data to make the results of the study justifiable we would need to make the questionnaire available to a larger group of people. For this reason we developed an electronic version of our questionnaire which could be used to gather data from diaspora communities and people in Iraq especially. This was achieved by existing participants snowballing contacts through social media and sharing a link to the electronic questionnaire. The bilingual (Arabic and English) electronic questionnaire contained three main sections: language proficiency; the current situation of Assyrians in Iraq; and the participants' attitudes towards their culture and the support they have had to maintain their language, culture and religious practices. The last section of the questionnaire sought to understand the repercussions of WWI and its aftermath for Assyrians. Some of the questions had multiple choices while others were rated on a four-point scale (from a- 'strongly agree' to d- 'strongly disagree'). The flexible method used in the questionnaire meant that all participants were allowed freedom of expression. Data was collected from May to December 2017.

Participants responded to the questionnaire in the language of their choice either Arabic or English. Where responses were in Arabic, the postdoctoral researcher provided a professional translation. Open-comments fields in the questionnaire enabled participants to provide more information and share stories and memories, if they chose, to clarify their answers; these answers served to enrich the research. Although this was optional in each of the three sections, we found that an average of 38 Per cent of the participants chose to add additional details and information. This shows the participants' interest in our research and in adding their voices to the project.

During the focus groups the participants reflected on their identities, which included discussions around history, belonging, fear, forced assimilation and other limitations imposed on Assyrians within Iraq. They made clear the consequences of past events for their present-day behaviour and the shaping of their identity. Furthermore, focus-group interviews were useful in collecting narratives of past events and provided a space for participants to reflect on and add to them. They were also useful for establishing common concerns and differences amongst the group as well as fostering a dialogue between generations. Face-to-face interviews were also useful in allowing for follow-up questions, which helped the researchers to gain further insights into the community. Our analysis in this paper therefore relies on the in-depth and semi-structured interview data collected from focus groups, face-to-face interviews and the electronic questionnaire.

Results and data analysis

SPSS was used to obtain a descriptive analysis of the data. A total of 106 members of the community chose to participate by answering the questionnaire. While this is a small pilot project we believe that the results are valid in themselves. 65 Per cent of respondents are based in Iraq and the rest are currently in the diaspora, 78 Per cent of the participants were male and 22 Per cent female, 50 Per cent of the participants were aged between 26-35 years, 19 Per cent aged between 18-25 years, 20 Per cent aged between 36-45 years, 9 Per cent aged between 46-55 years and the rest over 55 years. 76 Per cent of the participants identified themselves as Christian believers while 24 Per cent as non-religious.

From our data we identified 34 Per cent of the respondents who were able to speak, read and write Assyrian-Aramaic (Sūreth as it is known in the emic sense)^{5,6}; however, 35 Per cent of the respondents could only speak Assyrian while 12 Per cent of respondents were illiterate in their native language. The questionnaire data shows that only 39 Per cent of respondents were taught Assyrian in schools at some point during their education. Almost half of the respondents indicated that they learned their native language at home and that families and the home domain played important roles in preserving the mother language (Figure 1). 68 Per cent of the respondents indicated that they learned and studied their native language in their churches.

Furthermore, based on our findings, 94 Per cent of respondents expressed fear for the future and of losing their ethnic and religious identity. When we asked participants about their views on the impact of WWI on their current social life and affairs, and their attachment to their homeland, 30 Per cent of participants said that because of the historical incidents in the past, they do not feel that they have a strong sense of attachment to their country, and another 30 Per cent of participants were apathetic to their country. Furthermore, more than 70 Per cent of the participants expressed a strong desire to leave the country and settle in another country where they could feel they belonged (Figure 2).

Published literature (Donabed, 2015; Donabed & Mako, 2012; Travis, 2006) about historical events gives weight to the interpretation that Assyrian communities have experienced

⁵ ‘Assyrians use the endonym/autonym Sūrōyō/Sūrāyā to refer to themselves and their native tongue Sūrayt/Sūreth. These terms have been historically rendered by some early scholars as “Syrian people” and “Syrian language”, while more recent scholarship renders these terms as “Syriac people” and “Syriac language”, respectively. The latter translation is aimed more at distinguishing the people from the modern Arab state of Syria, while some scholars and many of the people themselves translate these terms as “Assyrian.” In either case, this naming has added further misunderstanding, especially since the creation of the modern state of Syria and the development of Syrian nationalism’ (Donabed, 2012, p.409). Also see Sargon Donabed’s ‘Persistent Perseverance: A Trajectory of Assyrian History in the Modern Age’. In P. S. Rowe (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Minorities in the Middle East* (1 ed., pp. 115-131). Oxon: Routledge, for further explanation on language.

⁶ Also see Geoffrey Khan “Remarks on the Historical Background of the Modern Assyrian Language,” *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 21(1), 4-11 for a discussion on the linguistic relationship between the modern Assyrian and the Aramaic/Syriac and Akkadian languages (Khan, 2007).

a form of cultural trauma; but this aspect has not been emphasised by previous studies of Assyrians. In the following sections, we explore the results of our data collection which inform us about aspects of the Assyrian identity, including language, and ethnic and ritual practices. Further, we discuss how contemporary Assyrians fuse their experience of suffering with that of their ancestors, and how this fusion has fostered collective memories of suffering. Beyond this, we show how memories of suffering provide an identity source for the group and inform their present-day behaviour. Further, we discuss how collective suffering has strengthened the Assyrians' bonds with their cultural heritage, using cultural trauma as the guiding framework for our discussion, and drawing selectively on notions of sense of place, 'place identity' and belonging.

Discussion

Language

Language is the carrier of accumulated knowledge which groups draw on to bring the past into the present and to stimulate some reflection on the future. Furthermore, language represents the collective cultural memory because it is a source of cultural, literary and artistic inspiration for current and future generations (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Meusburger, Heffernan, & Wunder, 2010). Therefore, this section will examine the impact of the decline in using the Assyrian language and its ramifications on the Assyrians collective memory and identity. The majority of the participants reflected their concern that Arabic has become the *lingua franca* amongst Assyrians. They indicated that the compulsion to assimilate into the Arabic language, which is the formal language in Iraq, and Arabic culture had led to a significant decline in the use of Aramaic.

The Assyrians' demands for their right to use their native language were guaranteed by most Iraqi constitutions, but the actual implementation of these rights has generally been a failure. For instance, according to decree 251 in 1972, Assyrians were granted certain cultural

rights, such as the freedom for the Syriac language to be taught in primary schools where the majority of pupils are Assyrians, the right to publish magazines in the Syriac language and to allow some special programmes to be broadcast on television channels in Syriac (Donabed, 2015). Nevertheless, TV programmes were produced with a political agenda driven by the government to fulfill the law rather than to serve the community (Donabed, 2015, p. 170); and the 251 decree has lapsed. The failure to implement decree 251 has deprived Assyrians the right to learn Syriac in schools, particularly when private Assyrian schools were turned into public schools (Donabed, 2015, p. 171), and as a result the Syriac language has suffered and Assyrians have struggled to find the means to keep the language alive in the cities. Assyrians were denied these rights due to both direct and indirect government practices of urbanisation which forced Assyrians to relocate to cities. Assyrian interaction with other cultural groups in cities, driven by compulsion to assimilate, also exerted pressure on Assyrians to conform within an Arabic-speaking majority. Moreover, in the late 1980s, the Syriac language was forbidden even in the church (Middle East, 1990). Moreover, Assyrians have dispersed to different regions in Iraq and abroad for various reasons such as finding jobs and escaping war, as well as relocating both within and across the country's borders. All of this had serious repercussions for the Syriac language because of pressures to assimilate wherever they found themselves.

This gradual loss of language poses a threat to group identity which was not only the result of collective trauma and memories of persecution, but also the continuous practices of marginalisation and assimilation into Arabisation. All these factors put together can act as a cumulative impact for perceived images of identity threat that will be stored into the collective memory of the group.

The ethnic and religious situation

Over the last century, Assyrians have struggled to attain recognition as a separate ethnic group. Although they have enjoyed some religious rights, there were always restrictions on and challenges to being an Assyrian in Iraq. Sentiments surrounding the complications associated with religious freedom were noticeable features amongst respondents who repositioned the stress points of these limitations with a heavy accent on systematic practices of Arabisation and Kurdification which aimed at the further marginalisation of Assyrians. One respondent noted that:

We never felt we are first-class citizens. The successive Iraqi governments have forced us to use Arabic names, and we continue to suffer during our religious celebrations as we try to avoid racist comments from the dominant religious groups. (Male participant (1), electronic questionnaire)

Another respondent noted that:

In Iraq, my religion and ethnicity were the reason for my oppression, intimidation and on-going fear. In regard to religious rituals, it was possible to practice it to some extent because I lived in an area where the majority of its people were from my religion and ethnicity. Yet, there were recurrent episodes of harassment every now and then. But when I travelled outside my local area, my religion and my ethnicity were a source of fear from others as well. Now even though I moved into a country that respects the individual's freedom, I often find myself haunted by fear. (Male participant (2), electronic questionnaire)

The way this respondent expressed the complications surrounding religious freedom indicates that religious intolerance was a cause of chronic trauma that has left considerable scars in Iraq. The respondent shows that they experienced clear religious and ethnic intolerance for their Assyrian ethnicity and religion. The feeling of otherness has been felt even in the most

integrated areas. Similarly, another respondent explained that the rise of extremism in Iraq has significantly endangered their religious freedom and forced them to migrate:

In my country Iraq, there are limitations on religious practices. People no longer feel they have the freedom to express themselves and their religious views. Key factors that contributed to these limitations are the Iraqi policies, the marginalisation of minorities in Iraq and extremism. All that has pushed us to leave everything behind and migrate. We left our churches, houses and the areas we grew up in, and where we learned about our great heritage and language, which we will definitely pass on to our children, for it is the only thing that is left for us now. (Male participant (3), electronic questionnaire)

This common sentiment and fear of expressing their religious and ethnic identity is a natural result of atrocities and ethnic cleansing over the long term. Furthermore, discrimination and inequalities of rights between social groups within Iraq have further exacerbated the fear felt by Assyrians and intensified their sense of not being accepted by others in Iraq. Not being accepted as Assyrians can contribute to trauma. The questionnaire results show that 85 Per cent of the respondents agreed that, as a group, they did not have equal rights in their own countries and that they were viewed as the 'other'. For Assyrians this alienation is difficult to bear since they see themselves as one of the most ancient communities of this land. This shared framework arising out of cultural trauma has enabled Assyrians to construct a collective memory and a collective narrative which has shaped their present identity and will constitute part of their future identity as well.

The impact of the past in the present

Fears of the history repeating itself were common and strong sentiments amongst the respondents who are living the experience of historical continuity in the present. One respondent noted:

When DAESH entered the city of Mosul we fled and left everything we accomplished during the years behind us immediately. We were afraid and not feeling safe. We were concerned that at any moment we could be attacked and persecuted like our ancestors. (Male participant (4), electronic questionnaire)

This is a clear assertion that Assyrians see current hostilities as a historical continuity that has contributed to how Assyrians see and identify themselves in relation to their past. All respondents showed collective understandings of past events. They all positioned themselves within a group-historical narrative and traumatic experience and shared a common interpretation of the past. For example, participants from focus-group and face-to-face interviews expressed similar views that the Simele massacre in 1933 was considered to be the main turning point in the modern history of Assyrians, and that it ended their long-awaited dream to establish an independent state. Responses collated from participants supported findings in the literature, especially when they were asked questions about the repercussions of WWI and the meanings attributed to historical events like Sayfo 1915 and how contemporary generations of Assyrians read and understand these events. The responses showed that generations of Assyrians born after these past historical events have inherited the emotional accounts of their ancestors that testify to their horrific lives during WWI:

Hundred years have passed since Sayfo massacres, as well as the massacre of Simele, but we still remember and commemorate them in all the occasions to prove to the whole world that we will strongly adhere to our faith; the faith of our ancestors. It is inherent in us and we cannot change what has happened to us from persecution to displacement, whether now or in the past or at any time. (Male participant (5), electronic questionnaire)

This statement indicates that the respondent is fervently placing himself within the Assyrian historical narrative, and this was a common sentiment among respondents. All the participants,

regardless of their geographical residence, collectively agreed that the long history of oppression that Assyrians have endured has systematically sought to undermine their autonomy and that the Sayfo massacres and the successive atrocities since WWI were attempts to jeopardise their physical and cultural existence. As one respondent noted: ‘they tried to erase my history and massacre my people’ (Male participant (6), electronic questionnaire). Here respondents confirm that it is difficult to separate present-day events and attacks against Assyrians in Iraq from those during and since WWI. Evidentially, Assyrians have strong affiliation with the past expressed through repeated narratives of historical continuity which serves as a source of identity for them in the present.

Decades of marginalisation and atrocities against Iraqi Assyrians constituted the shared framework for Assyrian collective memory and have warped their sense of belonging to Iraq. Strong emotions surrounding the repercussions of a hundred years of oppression were noticeable characteristics expressed by respondents. The historically-based, cumulative group pain rooted in forced displacement and massacres, complicated with some further present-day social and religious-based challenges and exclusionary practices, have left Assyrians feeling that they are second-class citizens, despite the fact that they are the indigenous people of the land. Respondents openly spoke of how their sense of belonging to Iraq has shifted and weakened over the last century and expressed a strong desire to leave Iraq which they no longer see as home, and that this delineated a growing sense of attachment to their ethnic identity. Thus, ‘home’ for our participants does not appear to encapsulate feelings of ‘security’ and ‘belonging’ where ‘self-expression is possible’ (Sixsmith, 1986, p. 290). One respondent from the focus groups summed this up nicely. She noted:

it is sad to leave Iraq, yet hard to feel a sense of belonging even when we are the natives of the land, happy to leave there as never happy there. Happy to return but just as a visitor, I do not feel it would be safe to stay there. (Female participant (8), focus groups)

This respondent's sentiments are pertinent to the understanding that when a 'place' is associated with certain feelings, such as 'oppression', 'rejection or 'feeling-stifled', it affects the way people relate to that places (Pascual-de-Sans, 2004, p. 354). Nevertheless, although the majority of respondents are thinking of leaving their homeland they are still attached to the culture and the place. The questionnaire showed that the past is still alive in their present and central to their identity as an ethnic group. The oppression and the struggle did not only have a physical impact, but also a living significance and an emotional hold on the respondents' collective memory and identity. It raised issues of fear for the future amongst Assyrians living in Iraq and in the diaspora. As one respondent said, 'in all honesty, being a Christian, fear has become our only obsession and since DAESH has forced us out of Mosul [a reference to the recent attack in June 2014] I feel the threat of being deported again, but where to? I don't know!' (Female participant (9), focus groups)

Yet respondents also expressed a strong sense of attachment to their collective identity and heritage through regular attempts at commemorating historical events. For instance, some respondents have expressed the need to commemorate events from the past as a way to reclaim some 'recognition for victims of genocides and massacres' and to 'explicitly draw on neglected stories and experiences' (Female participant (10), focus groups). Participants mentioned some of the rituals of commemoration and cultural symbols that have been instrumental in activating memories of the past and keeping the legacy of oppression alive, such as the Assyrian Martyr's Day, which was declared by Assyrian Universal Alliance in 1970 in memory of those lost in the massacres of 1915-20, the Simele 1933 and the Soriya massacres of 1969 (Donabed, 2015).

In addition, they cite parades, songs, dances, the Sayfo public monument, literary festivals and literary works such as that by William Saroyan, *Seventy Thousand Assyrians* written in 1934 (Saroyan, 2005), and the most recent collection of poems *Embers of Fire: Assyrian Youth Poetry Collection* (Lamassu, 2016) which focuses on atrocities against Assyrians, most recently in 2014 committed by ISIS against Assyrians in Syria and Iraq. Furthermore, writer and poet, Nineb Lamassu recently published a poem entitled ‘Tombstones and inverted crosses’ in (Travis, 2018), which he bases on a testimony of Assyrian Sayfo survivors from Georgia to communicate the ongoing pain and suffering of new generations of survivors. All of these commemorative works, symbols and rituals have created relevance and resonance for those contemporary Assyrians who see that their identity is shaped by what has occurred in the last hundred years and is rooted but is also consciously remembered and reclaimed in their collective memory. On the significance of commemorative works, Durkheim explains, commemorative works ‘revitalize the most essential elements of collective consciousness’ (Durkheim, 1995, p. 379). These heritage symbols have indeed contributed to the formation of Assyrian cultural memory and identity, as they provide space to reflect on and re-interpret the past and give it new meaning and perhaps allow for some stories to be ceremonially laid to rest, as well as allow other stories to be told. More importantly, cultural commemorations give birth to new memories that form part of the group’s collective memory, and collective memories are usually an important foundation for collective identity.

Identity maintenance

Although Assyrian communities have experienced a long history of persecution and massacres that have led to their much reduced numbers today, their survival and their testimonies in the present attest to the tenacity and perseverance they have shown in the face of adversity. Historical atrocities have ignited the Assyrians’ morale and the urge to preserve their ethnic identity. And since perseverance is contagious, strong sentiments of pride in belonging to a

unique heritage were prominent factors mentioned by the respondents. The results show that 87 Per cent of respondents strongly agreed that Assyrian heritage, both tangible and intangible, is a signifier of their 'place identity'(Lewicka, 2008) and a documentation of their existence. Furthermore, 43 Per cent of the total respondents believed that their pride in belonging to this globally influential heritage has empowered and reinforced their attachment to their identity and given them the incentive to preserve their endangered heritage, while we identified about 10 Per cent of the respondents who consider their heritage as a forgotten history and no longer relevant. The remaining 47 Per cent of those who took part in the survey did not answer this multiple-choice question. Traumatic events of persecution, displacement and marginalisation since WWI have led Assyrians to adhere to their ethnic identity and heritage. These sentiments were cited by almost 75 Per cent of the respondents (Figure 2). The strong adherence to culture and heritage indicates that Assyrians are keenly aware of the importance of preserving their heritage, especially language, as a carrier of culture for future generations. It is also important to note that language and links to places become important aspects of identity to pass on to subsequent generations in a new place. This attempt to preserve their connection with their cultural roots and distinctive heritage, provides a source of 'continuity' and 'uniqueness' for their 'place identity' (Lewicka, 2008). This supports our findings that families took on the responsibility to educate their children at home and to support their language learning.

While in our questionnaire we did not differentiate between different denominations, and while it might not be the case in all contexts, the majority of our respondents indicated that churches have acted as safe-keepers of their language and rituals. Churches as places where Assyrians come together and religious practices they share contribute to the maintenance of the mother tongue. Memorials and cultural symbols were equally significant in preserving the Assyrian heritage and culture. Literary works, artworks, and cultural monuments pertaining to

the history of Assyrians and their culture have kept the past alive in the present and constitute part of their collective memory and identity.

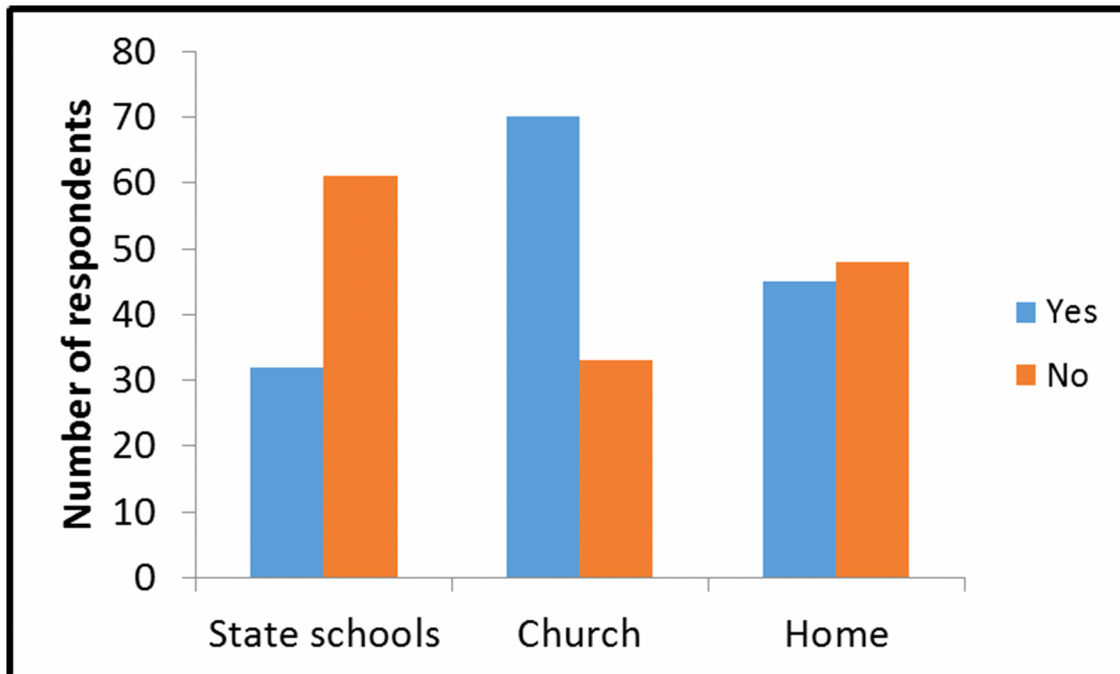


Figure 1

Figure 1. Shows where the contribution of (state schools, church and home) in teaching Syriac among Assyrians (Vertical axis represents the number of respondents)

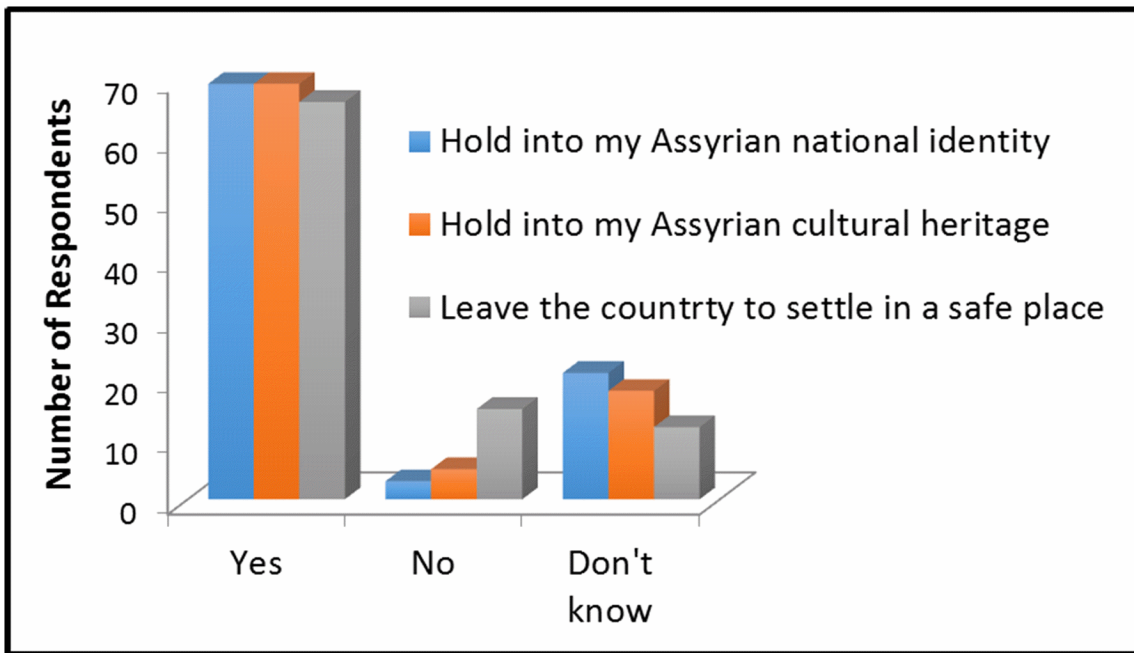


Figure 2

Figure 2. The impact of a century of historical oppression on the Assyrians' national identity, cultural heritage and sense of belonging (Vertical axis represents the number of respondents)

Conclusion

For the Assyrians, a century of oppression, mass displacement and marginalisation has created massive trauma. While other studies might focus on trauma from physical injuries to post-traumatic stress disorder, those who participated in our study referenced past events, as well as their experiences in the present. The respondents show that while they recognise the impact of a century of persecution on their community, it is inherently part of their identity and that it has become a hidden trauma shaping their experiences and decisions about where they might dwell. The questionnaire data revealed a deep-seated fear in the present that seemed to be a reflection of historical events, and more importantly the fear of being destined for the same fates as their ancestors which could further endanger their physical and cultural existence. The ongoing attacks and atrocities against Assyrians in Iraq have significantly diminished their sense of belonging to their home which no longer feels like a home. Nevertheless, it is found that persecution over the last century has become part of cultural memory for many Assyrians and

reinforced their affiliation to their ethnic identity. The increasing dominance of Arabic as a lingua franca means that the loss of Assyrian-Aramaic has contributed to cultural trauma. While, churches were found to be places where religious rituals and language were kept alive, continuous attempts to commemorate traumatic historical events create a narrative that unites and empowers in the face of ongoing marginalization and oppression.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the Assyrian community in Iraq and diaspora who participated in this study. We also thank the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of our manuscript and their many insightful comments and suggestions.

References

- Alexander, J. C. (2004). *Cultural trauma and collective identity*. Berkeley, Calif.: Berkeley, Calif. : University of California Press.
- Assmann, J., & Czaplicka, J. (1995). Collective memory and cultural identity. *New German Critique: An Interdisciplinary Journal of German Studies*, 65(65), 125-133. doi:10.2307/488538
- Büyüksaraç, G. B. (2015). Unheard voices: state-making and popular participation in post-Ottoman Iraq. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 38(14), 2551-2568. doi:10.1080/01419870.2015.1061133
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design : Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.. ed.). Los Angeles, Calif. ; London: Los Angeles, Calif. ; London : SAGE Publications.
- Dawood, F. (2017). The Ba'qubah refugee camp, 1919-22: state society relations in occupied Iraq. In Benjamin Isakhan, Shamiran Mako, & F. Dawood (Eds.), *State and society in Iraq : citizenship under occupation, dictatorship and democratisation* (pp. 31-49). London ; New York I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd.
- Donabed, S. (2012). Rethinking nationalism and an appellative conundrum: historiography and politics in Iraq. *National Identities*, 14(4), 407-431. doi:10.1080/14608944.2012.733208
- Donabed, S. (2015). *Reforging a forgotten history: Iraq and the Assyrians in the twentieth century*: Edinburgh University Press.
- Donabed, S. (2018). Persistent Perseverance: A Trajectory of Assyrian History in the Modern Age. In P. S. Rowe (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Minorities in the Middle East* (1 ed., pp. 115-131). Oxon: Routledge.
- Donabed, S., & Mako, S. (2012). Between denial and existence: situating Assyrians within the discourse on cultural genocide. In Önvér Cetrez, Sargon Donabed, & A. Makko (Eds.), *The*

- Assyrian heritage: threads of continuity and influence* (pp. 281-295). Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet.
- Durkheim, E. m. (1995). *The elementary forms of religious life*. New York: New York : Free Press.
- El Sarraj, E. (2002). Suicide Bombers: Dignity, Despair, and the need for hope. An Interview with Eyad El Sarraj. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 31(4), 71-76. doi:10.1525/jps.2002.31.4.71
- Erikson, K. T. (1976). *Everything in its path : Destruction of community in the Buffalo Creek flood* : Simon & Schuster.
- Eyerman, R. (2001). *Cultural trauma : slavery and the formation of African American identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Eyerman, R. (2004). The past in the present: culture and the transmission of memory. *Acta Sociologica*, 47(2), 159-169. doi:10.1177/0001699304043853
- Khan, G. (2007). Remarks on the historical background of the modern Assyrian language. *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies*, 21(1), 4-11.
- Lamassu, N. (Ed.) (2016). *Embers of fire: Assyrian youth poetry collection* (Syriac Edition ed.). Cambridge, UK: Enheduanna Publishing.
- Lewicka, M. (2008). Place attachment, place identity, and place memory: Restoring the forgotten city past. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 28(3), 209-231. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2008.02.001>
- Lewis, J. (2003). Iraqi Assyrians: barometer of pluralism. *Middle East quarterly*, x(3), 49-57.
- Meusburger, P., Heffernan, M. J., & Wunder, E. (2010). *Cultural memories the geographical point of view*. Dordrecht ; London: Dordrecht ; London : Springer.
- Middle East, W. (1990). *Human rights in Iraq*. New Haven: New Haven : Yale University Press.
- Omissi, D. (1989). Britain, the Assyrians and the Iraq levies, 1919–1932. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 17(3), 301-322. doi:10.1080/03086538908582795
- Pascual-de-Sans, À. (2004). Sense of Place and Migration Histories Idiotype and Idiotope. *Area*, 36(4), 348-357.
- Pastor, L. (2004). Culture as casualty: examining the causes and consequences of collective trauma *Psychiatric Annals*, 34(8), 616–622. Doi: 10.3928/0048-5713-20040801-15
- Reisen, M. v., & Mawere, M., eds. (2017). Human trafficking and trauma in the digital era: The ongoing tragedy on the trade in refugees from Eritrea. In (Vol. 2017). Beaverton: Ringgold Inc.
- Saroyan, W. (2005). *Essential Saroyan*. Berkeley, Calif.: Berkeley, Calif. : Heyday Books.
- Schuman, H., & Scott, J. (1989). Generations and Collective Memories. *American Sociological Review*, 54(3), 359-359. doi:10.2307/2095611
- Shamai, M. (2015). *Systemic interventions for collective and national trauma: Theory, practice, and evaluation*: Taylor & Francis.
- Sixsmith, J. (1986). The meaning of home: An exploratory study of environmental experience. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 6(4), 281-298. doi:[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944\(86\)80002-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944(86)80002-0)
- Stamm, B. H., Stamm, H. E., Hudnall, A. C., & Higson-Smith, C. (2004). Considering a theory of cultural trauma and loss. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 9(1), 89-111. doi:10.1080/15325020490255412
- Travis, H. (2006). "Native Christians massacred": The Ottoman genocide of the Assyrians during World War I. *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 1(3), 327-372.
- Travis, H. (Ed.) (2018). *The Assyrian genocide: cultural and political legacies*. New York: Routledge.
- Usher, C. L. (2007). Trust and well-being in the African American neighborhood. *City & Community*, 6(4), 367-387. doi:10.1111/j.1540-6040.2007.00232.x
- Yildiz, E. (1999). The Assyrians: A historical and current reality. *Journal of Academic Assyrian Studies*, 13(1), 15–30.