



Assyrian Rituals of Life-Cycle Events

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Historical Background, Conservation and Renewal

Much as a common language links all Assyrians together, Assyrian customs, even if they have been greatly modified over time, provide a cultural link between Assyrians around the world. At least to some extent, the rituals and religious rites that accompany life's milestones -- primarily birth, marriage or death -represent what it means to be Assyrian. Although their origins are often difficult to trace, the rituals practiced by contemporary Assyrians are perhaps as old as the days of ancient Assyria, and have been treasured and guarded through the centuries.

These ancestral traditions may be observed out of respect for the older generation, but they also represent wisdom and moral values, and perhaps Assyrian culture itself. Thus, many of the practices remain deeply ingrained in the lives of Assyrians, and are often regarded as intrinsic to the continued existence of the Assyrian lifestyle.

Nevertheless, some Assyrian customs have not survived over time. Certain social practices which were widespread as recently as the early 1900's have since been ignored or forgotten. At least partly this was due to the aftermath of the First World War, in which Assyrian society was largely transformed from agricultural to urban. Assyrian rituals have also been influenced by the Moslem cultures they have had to live with, whether Arab, Persian, Turkish or Kurdish.

Assyrians have acquired some of the customs of these cultures; at the same time, Moslem governments have sometimes restricted Assyrian practices.

Modern times have also substantially altered tradition among both rural and urban Assyrians. One element of this change has been modern, broad-based education, which has often conveyed to Assyrians the notion that western styles of living are more desirable than traditional ones. A second and obvious element has been the waves of emigration in recent decades, induced by hardships and security problems in former homelands, which carried thousands of Assyrians to the West.' For better or worse, consciously or otherwise, Assyrians who have breathed the cultural atmosphere of western countries and explored their possibilities have turned to the ideals and ways of life of highly industrialized societies, both good and bad, in order to fit more comfortably into host cultures. In such circumstances, customs are often at risk of falling by the wayside.

Although the influences of urban society, different cultures and the modern age have ended some Assyrian traditions, others have simply been modified and remain to this day. In this article, this writer will describe important Assyrian customs, largely drawn from his personal memories of Assyrian society in Iraq thirty years ago. These practices might look quite different today.

A. Betrothal and Marriage

Due to modern influences, social customs in betrothals and weddings now vary greatly in different localities. Generally, there is currently less formality and rigidity in marriage ceremonies, although many of the old customs still persist among the majority of Assyrians. It would be too involved to consider all the fashions individually; as mentioned above, the practices described here were common in Iraq in the

1960's. However, most of these customs have been followed for generations.

Among Assyrians, marriage is viewed very seriously. It is seen as a permanent union of both families and spouses. Until a few years ago, divorce was considered a disgrace, and its occurrence was rare. Although it is much more common today, divorce is still generally frowned upon. Ideally, only a religious divorce (*dulala* or *shraya*) can terminate the agreement. In practice, it is granted by the church only as a last resort. Even then, the divorce ritual is extremely complicated.

Because of its importance, there is no room for frivolity when it comes to marriage. Pre- and extra-marital affairs are considered dishonorable and are almost unknown practices among Assyrians. Elopement (*Jelawtha*) against parental wishes is very disreputable, and is seldom practiced. Even a public show of affection between husband and wife is frowned upon, and is considered the height of impropriety.

Since marriage is a matter of family convenience, not a private affair based on personal affection, one of the primary obligations of parents is to arrange marriages for their children. This authority lies with the head and master of the household -- the father. Church doctrine and custom give the husband (*jawra*) authority over his wife (*bakhta*), who is expected to lead a life of obedience and service; this authority often gives rise to abuses. Nevertheless, until quite recently, it has been established tradition that the father's will must be followed without question.⁶ Less traditional families are less strict about arranging marriages, but even in these instances the parents still play a major role in selecting the prospective mate and concluding the formalities.⁷ Some parents choose a girl for their son and then ask for his approval.

The social position of the family of the prospective bride (*chalu*) is carefully scrutinized before the bridegroom's family makes a final selection. In keeping with established custom, families are eager to pick the prospective daughter-in-law (*chaltha*) from the same clan or tribal division. It is even more essential to pick the intended mate from the same sect of the family's religion. However, according to the rules of the so called Nestorian Church governing marriages, union within closely related lineages (first and second cousins) is not permissible, and this restriction is rigorously enforced.

In general, Assyrians favor early marriages. Less than a generation ago, it was not uncommon for a sufficiently grown-up boy (seventeen to twenty, or older), to marry a rather young girl (twelve to fifteen, though often older). Parents married their daughters off early because they were considered to be of little future value to the family. The marriageable age has been steadily rising in recent times.

Once the parents have found a girl to their liking and have agreed to seek her betrothal (*talubutha*) the father, accompanied by a few elderly relatives, calls on the girl's family to express his interest in formally requesting the hand of their daughter. This traditional arrangement of marriage is called the *mashemetha*. The son never accompanies his father during this visit. As for the girl, who is always under the direct authority of her father, she remains secluded in a room of her parents' house, and she has no voice in choosing her mate (*tliba*). Indeed, if the boy (*yala*) and the girl (*brata*) are not from the same village, they often do not frequent one another until the marriage ceremony itself.

When the visitors arrive, the host greets them with a decorous "*paqdhu*" ("welcome; come on in"), and he ushers them into his living room, where they sit on rugs. Greetings, questions into the health of both families, and ceremonious preliminary remarks are exchanged. The parties then engage in daily conversation as though this were just an ordinary visit. Finally, the moment arrives to bring up the main reason for the visit.

Avoiding a direct approach, the boy's father tries to please the head of the household by saying, "*ithyekh*

reshan khetaya- w'aqlathan layeh." He then continues: "Perhaps you know the purpose of our visit. We have come to appeal to you to give your fair damsel to our son."

Before framing an answer, the host acts as though the purpose of the visit was a complete surprise to him. Respecting the ideals of kinship (khizmayutha), he puts this delicate matter exclusively in the hands of the close relatives sitting next to him. If they think favorably of the union, they will nod their heads, a gesture suggesting an approving reply. In this case, the host inclines his head and pronounces his agreement in a very polite manner: "We are honored to give you our daughter; for we know what a good shimma (reputation) your family has, and what a well-mannered young man your son is."

The boy's father then acknowledges his gratitude by kissing the hand of the bride's father. With these formalities completed, the guests are honored with delicious dishes, and often with a drink of araq. Both families decide upon a day for the betrothal ceremony, commonly called the matetha-d dhamanta or dewaqthad idha (betrothal contract), which is cause for celebration.

When the date for formalizing the engagement arrives, the boy's parents, together with his elder relatives (both male and female), walk together to the house of the prospective bride, where the betrothal ceremony will take place. There are always a great number of guests (arkheh) who participate in the ceremony, and they arrive in a group for more dramatic effect.

As a rule, the qasha (priest) is also invited to witness the betrothal ceremony. He performs a long, elaborate betrothal ritual, followed by a ring ceremony (matewtha-d 'issaqtha). He designates two character witnesses (bakhtatha sowyatha-"matrons") to take the engagement ring to the bride-to-be, who is in a separate room with her close female relatives during the ritual. At this stage, the boy and the girl are legally betrothed, and it is considered binding.

The most important matter now is the amount of the betrothal money (niqda - bride price), which the bridegroom's family will pay to the father of the bride. The subject is brought up openly and immediately; the consent of the parties is the first condition essential for the validity of the marriage (gewara). The sum of the niqda is arrived at by bargaining between a number of distinguished people from both families. Generally, the social status of the groom's family determines the amount of the niqda. When the matter is settled to the satisfaction of both households, the boy's father will rise and kiss the hand of the bride's father, to show his courteous regard and gratitude.

Afterwards, the groom's party will offer elaborate gifts (pernitha) for the bride, to gratify the bride's family. Usually the pernitha includes a silver waist-belt (kamarra or hayyasa), bangle (qulba), gold bracelet (shibirtha) and gold earrings (qenashyatha), and sometimes a nose pendant (khezzemtha) or silver anklet (khilkhala). Also, the boy's father must make sure that both the bride's eldest brother and her mother's brother are generously remembered by giving each a gift (diyyari or qurusha).

It is only after all these delicate matters have been settled that the betrothal ceremony is climaxed with the traditional rice feast (khalta-d rizza). As a "reward" for witnessing the betrothal contract (idhmanta), the guests and the members of the groom's party partake in this meal. Afterwards, a party is given for the night long entertainment of both families and their guests. The wide circle of khulqaneh keeps drinking araq and singing rawatha until the break of day. In the meantime, the women's retinue (barbiyyeh) sings the folk songs of lilyana.

The wedding ceremony, and its lengthy celebrations, occur soon after the betrothal. Custom suggests that the engagement must not be protracted; normally, it lasts two months. The nuptial festivities will be celebrated at the homes of both families for seven days. The groom's family goes from home to home in

the village, inviting everyone to attend the wedding. Likewise, distinguished people and relatives are also invited from the surrounding villages. Indeed, villagers always look forward to a wedding, which is a time for general merrymaking.

The rite of the groom's bathing (kheyapta-d khitna) is a ceremonious occasion, and it initiates the wedding ceremonies. Tradition demands that the groom must be spiritually ready and clean in all ways for his wedding. Close relatives and friends of the groom's family are invited to participate in the ceremony, which occurs in the late afternoon of a Saturday. The groom's best man and friends supply him with hot water, heated outdoors over a wood fire, while he sits on a small stool in a small booth (quprana), prepared for this purpose. As preparations are made for the bathing ceremony, the barbiyyeh continue serenading sweet lilyana outside the quprana. After the ritual bath, the groom's friends array him in his clean, colorful wedding apparel (julleh-d khumala), with a white conical cap (kusitha or sarkulawa) adorned with ostrich feathers, and adjusted in the manner of young men.

The groom and a large crowd of his relatives and close male friends, followed by a retinue of young barbiyyeh in elegant dresses and jewelry, proceed slowly to the bride's house in a joyous procession. Friends and relatives invited from neighboring villages also join the group. Village children crowd alongside or trail behind. And, as no wedding procession is delightful without music, a band will lead the group, playing the dawla and zurna.

For dramatic effect, upon reaching the vicinity of the bride's home (betha-d chalu), the groom's party announces the arrival of the enormous procession by shooting their guns (draya topatha) in the air. The younger members of the groom's party start dancing the vigorous style of khigga and shaikhani in the open space of the bride's house, to the excited notes of the zurna and dawla. But while the jubilant relatives and friends of the groom drink or dance, and sing at the tops of their voices, the bride's male relatives (nasheh-d chalu) sit in a stolid manner.

Custom dictates that they may not yet express any rejoicing. The bride, also, silently remains behind the scenes, flanked by a number of attendant bridesmaids and female companions, all in a great state of fuss and excitement. Close friends, including her qarEwta (maid of honor), help her wash and dress. Her hair is plaited so it will hang down her back in two large braids. A headdress (pushiyya), swathed with black material and encrusted with tinkling gold and silver coins (sarkalla), adorns her head. She wears a long elaborate gown of cinnamon velvet inwrought with gold or silver thread. A silver belt (hayyasa) of great value and beauty is tied around her waist. Then she puts on the gold and silver jewelry given to her earlier by the groom's family. Finally, a long, opaque veil of pink muslin (khippu) conceals her head and face.

When all is ready, the groom's mother, along with her close female relatives, is invited to see the beautiful chalu. The barbiyyeh greet and welcome the mother by chanting special rhymes in her honor. They also praise the beauty and extol the virtues of the bride. The proud mother comes close to the bride, who at this time is sitting, hands in lap and head inclined, as a courteous expression of esteem for her future mother-in-law (khematha). The mother lifts up the veil and kisses the head of her future chaltha.

A festive meal is now given by the bride's parents for the guests. Drinking, singing and folk dancing continue far into the night, and then, as is the custom in village communities, the procession of the bride and groom starts for the church in the early morning.

Covered with the khippu, the bride is conducted in a stately fashion to the village church by her parents and bridesmaids. The groom's party marches to the church in a large entourage, with the groom and his qartwa leading in front. The church bell (naqusha) strikes to mark the beginning of the burakha

(marriage service).

As a rule, the traditional burakha is performed on Sunday, and 4:00 a.m. is the ideal time. The Assyrian nuptial rite is long; its ceremony, which consists of a series of benedictions (burkatha) and special prayers (slawatha) assigned for this occasion, lasts about two hours.³⁸ To begin, the officiating priest descends from the altar (madhebka) in his surplice (m'apra), followed by the deacons, all dressed in vestments. The solemn bridal pair, with the best man and matron of honor standing at their sides, steps forward and stands before the priest, with the bride taking her place at the groom's left.

A silken cord twisted in red and white, which has been blessed by the priest (the so-called "crown of betrothal" -- klila), is now tied around the head of each the bride and groom. This is the emblem of the tying of the matrimonial knot and a reminder to the husband and wife to be faithful to each other. The bride and groom are each asked whether or not the marriage is of their free will.

In addition to the religious rites, there are several folk customs which are commonly observed during the wedding ceremony, and which show no inclination of dying out. Through the centuries, popular belief has held that the evil eye (ena bishta) and envious thoughts in some persons may cause great physical harm or sometimes even death. For this reason, during the ceremony the groom's male relatives (generally the most closely related) stand guard outside the church against the evil intentions of those believed to have the supernatural power of bewitching.

The influence of black magic (kharrashutha), it is believed, may cause lack of love between husband and wife, or sterility (aqrutha). It is also a common ritual for a female relative of the groom to stand behind the bridal pair

and repeatedly open and close a pair of scissors during the ceremony. It is strongly believed that the scissors act as a protection against bewitching from a jealous evil eye (ena khassamtha), whether it occurs before or after the ceremony. To further ward off evil and mischief, a cross-shaped pair of needles is usually stuck into the back of the groom's coat. The cruciform shape of this ornament, it is believed, possesses the power of protection to repel the effect of the evil eye. Not only do these needles help save the groom from misfortune, they are also capable of turning wickedness against the mischievous (bisha).

Not to be overlooked is a practice among the Baznayeh Assyrians. The backs and shoulders of the officiating priest and deacons, these Assyrians believe, may become the abodes of little demons (sataneh daqiqeh) during the ceremony. The shoulders of the churchmen are pricked sharply with pins or needles, to dispatch the harm of the devils. Needless to say, these pricks may distract the clergymen and lead to commotions that interrupt the ceremony.

As the ceremony proceeds, the priest rests his hand on the head of the groom and then that of the bride, as he recites more slawatha-w burkatha (prayers and blessings). The groom is asked to hold the right hand of his bride, while the priest holds the cross aloft and blesses the couple.

After chanting over the heads of the bridal pair, the priest explains the meaning of marriage and the duties of both husband and wife. He then asks the groom and his bride whether they undertake to love, cherish, and honor each other. When they comply, the priest administers the marriage oath.

Finally, the qasha puts the marriage rings into a bowl of wine in which an amount of sacred khnana has been sprinkled. After blessing the rings, the priest takes them out of the blessed wine and hands them to the bride and groom, who place them on their fingers. As a reminder of their common destiny, the priest lets the groom and the bride sip from the bowl of wine, swallowing the khnana with which the wine is

mixed. As she raises her heavy veil to sip the wine, the groom has the opportunity, perhaps for the first time, to see the face of his bride.

The service ends with pronouncement of the pair *gawra-w bakhta* (husband and wife). After the priest tells the couple, "*Alaha-m barikhlokhu*" ("may God bless you"), the groom's mother steps forward and throws raisins, dried figs and walnuts (and sometimes coins) over the *khitna* and *chalu*. Children immediately congregate to benefit from the pickings. The mother blesses and kisses her son then kisses the head of the veiled *chalu*. Relatives congregate to offer good wishes and congratulations: "*Hawethu brikkeh, w'alaha yawilokhu khayyeh yarikkeh-w yaleh*" ("May both of you be blessed, and may God grant you long life and many children").

Escorted by the *khulqaneh* and *barbiyyeh*, the newly-married couple is now led in a large procession to the bride's household. A reception and feast (*tamtha* - breakfast) is prepared for the newlyweds and guests. The usual blessings are recited, along with special blessings appropriate for the event. Since this is a farewell occasion, the bride's father spares no expense in making the party magnificent. Folk dancing, the singing of *raweh* and *lilyana*, drinking, eating, and gunfire are all part of the festivities. The veiled bride, though, simply sits and watches.

Toward evening, the rejoicing reaches its climax when the time comes for the bride to leave her family's household. The newlyweds, together with the groom's family and all the guests, form a procession and march toward the house of the groom's father, the new home of the bride.

Sobbing behind her veil at parting from her parents, she bids farewell to her parents and other members of her family.⁴⁴ The bride and groom, surrounded by a crowd of *khulqaneh* and *barbiyyeh*, walk slowly to join the procession. Close relatives of the bride accost the groom and ask for *diyyariyyeh* (gifts).

When the procession reaches his home, the groom climbs on top of his house and tramples down the clay roof. He then escorts his bride to his father's house amid an immense concourse of spectators (*emparjaneh*). As the bride draws nearer to the door, the mother-in-law welcomes her to the new home and again empties some raisins, walnuts and figs (*yabisheh-w teneh-wgawzeh*) from a clay jar (*pathorta*) onto the bride's head. From another container, she grabs a handful of rice and wheat, mixed with salt, and throws it on the bride. The symbolic purpose of these rites is to protect the groom from impotence, and to ensure the fertility of the bride. Before she enters the house, the bride shatters the *pathorta*; from a third jar, she takes out some butter and anoints the door.

These rituals performed, the groom leads the veiled bride to her place of honor, a special chamber in the house called *Beth Gnuna* (the Bridal Chamber). A gaily-colored blanket (*gnuna*), symbolizing the home established through marriage, hangs behind the "throne" (*kursi-d malkutha*) of the "king" and "queen". The so-called "royal tree" (*ilana-d khitna*), decked with apples, pomegranates and quinces, stands nearby. The tree and its fruit are considered a symbol of *peryutha* (prosperity).

Ordinarily, a week of festivities (nowadays only three or four days) follows at the groom's home, the great part of which is spent eating and folk dancing. During this time, the bride and the groom are not permitted to leave their "throne" or their wedding guests. When the guests have gone home late each night, the newlywed couple, together with the *qariweh* (the best man and the matron of honor), retire to the nuptial chamber, where the four sleep separately.

Custom forbids the newlyweds to sleep together until the week's festivities are completed. The morning of the second day, after the groom's mother has again lifted the bride's veil and kissed her, the newlyweds join the *raqadheh* (folk-dancing team) amid the circle of *emparjaneh* (bystanders). Waving a

colored yalikhtha (handkerchief), the groom leads the team of dancers.

His wife, still veiled and covered with her jewelry (khashlatha), holds his hand and dances next to him, at the head of the team. The drum beats more strongly and a continuous stream of chipyatha (bullets) are shot in the air. In the meantime, one of the barbiyyeh sings a couple of rhymes (zawga-d bandeh), which are chorused by other barbiyyeh and khulqaneh as they stamp in a circle. Here the "charm competition" (mattetha-d tarkha) begins. Young barbiyyeh vie for the honor of being chosen the most charming and most beautiful. The girl who displays the most charm (shupra), and the most handsome young man (jawra shiklana) are each awarded a floral garland (tarkha). The couple joins the dancing circle next to the bride as guns are fired again.

When the week-long festivities near an end, the priest appears to recite the final prayer (qetarta-d gnuna), a ritual of blessing. Friends and guests congratulate the newlyweds with the blessing of, "Alaha-m barikhlokhu-wyawilokhu yaleh-w khayyeh bassimeh" ("May God bless you and grant you children, and may your life be happy"). This ritual is locally known as "megalettha-d patha-d chalu" (the uncovering of the bride's face). Guests kiss the heads of both newlyweds after raising the veil (khippu) of the bride, and they put their (monetary) gifts on the table. Every guest is obligated to praise the chalu. At this point, the wedding is considered over.

The following Sunday, the groom takes his bride back to his father-in-law's home to acknowledge his gratitude. During this ritual, called shorela, raisins, figs, and walnuts (typical symbols of life and fruitfulness) are tossed over the heads of the bridal pair. The groom and bride then stay overnight with their in-laws. The next day, for the last time, the bride is led again in a procession to her new home.

B. Childbirth and Baptism

Just as with marriage, Assyrians follow a particular set of customs when a child is born. Historically, Assyrian fathers prefer sons to daughters. The birth of a first-born boy is a very happy occasion, especially for the father and relatives. A son is the object of much love and tender care, while a brata is not as well received. This attitude is especially characteristic of traditional families, although today the sex of the child is not as important an issue as it used to be.

Home births are usually aided by a neighbor who serves as midwife (mehaslantha). In most cases, delivery takes place on the floor, behind a blanket hung to screen the mother's bed, or in a separate quprana. Immediately after birth, the newborn baby is wiped with salt, then wrapped in qemateh (swaddling clothes). The baby is bound tightly, with his arms at his sides and his legs pulled down, to keep him from moving while sleeping. A piece of cotton cloth, folded into a triangle, is wound tightly round the head. The baby is then strapped down tightly with cloth bands (banoodeh) attached to the frame of the wooden dudiyya (cradle). Lying on his back, under a mosquito net (mistik), the child is unable to move for long hours. For the infant's bowel movements, a wide mouthed jar (qusriyya) is placed in a hole through the middle of the cradle and its mattress. In addition, a wooden tube coated with wax (bellorta) is placed between the baby's legs to carry urine into the jar. The cradle serves as the child's bed for at least twelve months.

Babies are often nursed by relatives until their mother's milk begins to flow. When the baby cries, his mother kneels upon the floor to nurse him. If he continues to cry, his mother rocks him and lulls him to sleep. If she is busy, the baby's grandmother (tota) or older sister (khatha) or brother (khona) keep rocking the cradle until he falls asleep. If the child has a stomach ache or dyspepsia (majaztha-d hanaweh), his mother will give him some very sweet tea. Weaning (qetetha m-khilya) begins gradually

when the child is a little more than one year old.

Custom requires the mother to remain in seclusion and not have a bath during the 40 days following birth. If the newborn is a girl, the seclusion period is extended to sixty days. Every day, female relatives and neighbors bring jars of nutritious food for the mother. Other relatives pay congratulatory calls upon the parents and bring gifts, usually pieces of cloth, for the baby and his mother. They offer congratulations: "Haweh brikha yalonkokhu-w 'alaha natirreh tialekhu" ("May your newborn son be blessed, and may God preserve him for you").

During her seclusion, when she is in bed, the mother keeps an iron tool under her pillow to protect against evil spirits. If she moves around the house, she must carry the sharp tool with her; and when she sits, she places the piece of iron beside her, in the hope of repelling the evil influence of the monster "Lilith" (Lilitha). At the end of this period, the mother must take a ritual bath (purificatory rites) and then go to church to be blessed.

For further protection against the evil eye, when the baby is three days old, his godmother takes him to church, where the priest prays over him. The child is not to leave home again until he is forty days old. It is also customary to burn incense (bissma) in the corners of the baby's room to ward off evil spirits. A copy of the New Testament (Syriac version) is always kept beneath the infant's pillow, as are charms such as a sharp iron tool, a turquoise or blue bead, or a tutitha (amulet) containing significant phrases from the Scriptures. Some mothers also keep their boys dirty and ill clad or dress them as girls until the age of seven, to reduce the risk of harm from the evil eye (ena bishtha).

The naming of the newborn is generally the father's decision. The paternal grandfather's or grandmother's name (shimma) is usually preferred. Babies are never named after older living relatives, nor after a brother or sister who died in childhood or early youth. Most traditional names are taken from the Bible or the saints. Today parents prefer truly Assyrian names such as Ninus, Sargon or Ashur for boys, and Ishtar, Nineveh or Nahren for girls.

Baptismal rites (Rushma-d mamuditha) are usually performed when the child is forty days old, at the beginning of the "second period" of life. Sometimes the child is baptized earlier, especially if he is expected to die. Accompanied by his parents, grandparents, and godparents, the child, is taken to church. The godparents present the child, wrapped in a white cloth, to the deacon, along with the baptismal crown (klila -- a white silk ribbon).

The priest alternates recitals of certain Psalms (mazmureh) and prayers (slawatha) with the deacon, and then consecrates the baptismal water in the gurna (font). Holding the sliwa (cross) and the iwangaliyon (gospels), the priest makes the sign of the cross three times over the water, to which he adds three drops of sacred oil. The deacon then presents the child to the

priest, who immerses him three times into the font, saying, "ebshim awa, wawra, w-rukha-d qudhsha" ("in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Ghost"). The priest then anoints the infant's entire body, and makes the sign of the cross on his forehead. The deacon takes the child and hands him back to his godparents, who dress the child in his baptismal clothes and tie the crown around his head. The ceremony is followed by a feast at the parents' home.

C. Death and Burial

Assyrians observe a prescribed ritual of mourning when a death occurs. When someone is at the point of death, the local priest is called in to administer the bukhra (holy bread) and pray for him. After the priest

gives a benediction, relatives and close neighbors accompany the person during his final moments.

The death is announced to relatives and friends by the deceased's nearest relative. This customary to first notify the village priest in order to make arrangements for the funeral service and burial. Church bells (naqusha) are tolled slowly. Immediately after the death, bereaved women stop wearing colored clothing and ornaments and dress instead in plain clothing, sometimes wearing their clothes inside out. Bereaved men in the family do not shave or comb their hair until the first days of mourning have ended. Some refrain from eating on the day of death.

It is a binding custom to bury the dead very quickly, on the day of death if possible. Wakes, or the postponement of burial for any length of time, are completely foreign concepts to Assyrians. Cremation is also alien to Assyrian tradition and is strictly forbidden. Funeral arrangements are simple, and the service is usually performed in the house of the deceased. The coffin (sanduqa) is made of plain wood and unadorned. Flowers are considered inappropriate while in mourning, for they are a symbol of joy. Today, these rituals and restrictions are less rigidly observed, particularly among those living in the West.

Relatives gather for a last farewell before the deceased is taken to church. Neighbors and friends also arrive to console the family of the deceased, offering such ritual expressions of sorrow and sympathy as, "nuhra-l mitokhu" ("may the light shine on your dead"). The bereaved sit on mats or rugs on the floor. Although they try to hold back their emotions, the men sob loudly, while the women weep, sing laments (jnanyatha -- short, rhymed chants) and wail while beating themselves on the face and breast. If a husband, son or brother dies, it is considered even a worse family tragedy. In these instances, bereaved women may sprinkle dust or ashes on their heads, pull out their hair or tear their clothes and flesh with their nails. These unusual rituals are common only to Assyrians who have borrowed them from their Moslem neighbors.

The body is carried to the church on a wooden bier (twertha) for the funeral service (tishmishtha), which is usually conducted in a church room or in the church courtyard. The body is immediately taken to the church's public washing place, where two persons (of the same sex as the dead) familiar with the rites wash the body with warm water and prepare it for burial. If the village church does not have a place for washing the dead, the funeral service is conducted in the house of mourning.

The washing of the body is performed in strict accordance with the ceremony prescribed in the Book of the Dead. The corpse is first laid on its back, feet first when lowered. Using warm water and soap, the body is washed starting from the crown of the head and the neck, proceeding to the arms (right first), the chest and entire front, and finishing with the legs and feet (right first). The body is then turned over, and the procedure is repeated on the back of the body.

Finally, the body is put in an upright, sitting position and water is poured on the head three times. While the body is being prepared, the priest and deacons (shamasheh) conduct a lengthy funeral service (lasting more than an hour) amidst the incense rising from the perma (censer) carried by one of the deacons. The assembly observes the service in respectful silence. According to the Nestorian book of the Office of the Dead, the priest sings the hymns of the three mutwehs, each consisting of five prayers, two Shurayeh (portions of Psalms), and a unitha (anthem). Each mutwa concludes with three madrasheh (hymns) and two prayers. The rhymed madrasheh, delivered dramatically, are the most striking part of the service.

When the washing ritual is completed, the hands of the deceased are crossed on his breast. He is then clothed in his typical clothes and covered in a linen shroud (kurakha). The body is enclosed in a casket and brought before the assembly of mourners. Bereaved women begin again to cry and wail. After

making the sign of the cross over the coffin and spreading incense around it, the priest and deacons sing special chants about the dead. The service concludes with a reading from the Scriptures (kethaweh qaddisheh), followed by several chants.

A funeral procession is formed and then heads for the cemetery, led by one of the deacons, who carries a censer and marches steadily ahead of the processional cross. Only men accompany the deceased to the burial ground (beth qewurwatha); female mourners, including the immediate relatives of the dead, are excluded from this ritual. According to custom, four men carry the coffin on their shoulders, although they are constantly relieved by relays of bearers. Along the procession of mourners follows. Two formations of qasheh-w shamasheh (priests and deacons) alternate singing solemn verses from the long anthem (madrasha) of "Push Bashlama" ("Abide in Peace"), which causes the mourners to sob louder. Other special hymns and anthems are sung on the way.

Interment of the dead (m-khametha-d mitha) is performed in accordance with a prescribed ritual. When the procession arrives at the graveyard, the coffin is placed by the side of the excavation, which has been dug east-west so the dead will face east. One of the deacons burns incense by the head of the deceased and solemn prayers and hymns are recited by the two formations of clergy. The coffin is then lifted and lowered into the grave.

The priest takes up a handful of uprah (earth), blesses it, and scatters it into the grave. He holds a cross over the grave and makes the sign of the cross. Mourners come forward and sprinkle earth in the same manner. While the grave is being filled, and earth piled over it to form a rounded mound, the priest recites the concluding prayers (Slawatha-d khotama).

He then blesses the grave by sprinkling blessed water (miyya-m burkheh) on it, and makes the sign of the cross three times, from top to bottom and then left to right. All the mourners also make the sign of the cross and say "amen."

At the end of the service, the priest scatters the container of holy water on the grave. Mourners approach to shake hands with the relatives of the deceased, saying, "haweh reshokhu bassima" ("may your head be healed"), or "Alaha manikhleh-w mrakhim illeh, u sanid libokhu" ("May God rest his soul and have mercy upon him, and may He comfort your heart").

Then all disperse and return to the house of the deceased's family. At the door of the house, someone with a clay water jug pours water on the hands of the men returning from the cemetery. As they enter they say, "nuhra-l mitokhu" ("may the light shine on your dead") and then sit in a room set aside for the men. Coffee or tea and cigarettes are served continuously. While the men sit and chat, the women sit in an adjoining room and continue to sing laments and sad lyric poems (jnanyatha). Everyone then eats food brought over by relatives and neighbors. Before the guests leave, they shake hands with the grieving family and express their sympathy. The family must remain at home for seven days, during which relatives and friends make visits of condolence (bassamtha-d resha).

Among the posthumous ceremonies, much importance is attached to the ceremonial rites of the "yomad itlatha" or "yoma-d bisma" (the "third day" or "day of offering incense"). Relatives and friends of the deceased commemorate the third day after burial in a Mass, after which the congregation, including women this time, accompanies the officiating priest and deacons to the

grave. Madrasheh and prayers for the peace of the soul of the deceased are offered and the priest sprinkles water that he has blessed on the grave.

Conclusion

Although the aforementioned rituals, or variations thereof, exist in most Assyrian communities, their continued practice depends greatly on the particular environment of each community. Generally, those communities that have more successfully avoided modernization are the ones who practice the rituals more strictly. This includes the older generations, rural communities, and those who have been exposed to less education. Yet even those Assyrians that live in urban communities, or have been more fully exposed to the modern age, may still believe strongly in these rituals (some go so far as to believe in incantations, spells, amulets, or divinations, and surprisingly, some priests tolerate these digressions from orthodox teachings).

Furthermore, many Assyrians who are interested in preserving their culture, whether they have been "modernized" or not, greatly desire to protect these rituals. Undoubtedly, as long as Assyrians strive to maintain their culture, these rituals will continue to exist in one form or another.