

Theater, Language and Inter-Ethnic Exchange: Assyrian Performance before World War I

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Abstract: The Assyrian “Camelot” in Iran, centered in northwest Iran around the towns of Urmia and Salamas, began with a surprise championship of their community by American missionaries and ended with ethnic cleansing between 1914 and 1918. During the eighty odd years of intellectual and material progress made in this community, Assyrians not only learned a multiplicity of European languages within a generation, but adopted western genre of entertainment on a broad scale. Among these were theater performances. Assyrian plays drew on many sources including French and Azerbaijani plots. But plays also became a means of retrieving their own historical past as it was being revived in Europe in the late nineteenth century under the influence of archeology and related classical sources on Mesopotamian and Iranian ancient history. In addition, Assyrians drew on another source of inspiration for theatrical performance, a source buried deep within their own medieval culture. To what extent does church theater performance soften attitudes toward theater in an environment where American-inspired religiosity frowned on frivolities like stage entertainment? To what extent does the Assyrian experience mirror the production of theater in Qajar culture in general? How, if at all, has the Assyrian cultural flowering, however brief, affected the encouragement of diverse entertainment in northwest Iran?

Introduction

By the time power in Iran had changed from the Qajar to the Pahlavi monarchy, four cultural shifts also had occurred that affected theater in Iran in general and Assyrian theater in particular. These four may be summarized as restrictive censorship practices, language limitations, major population shifts, and school systems that no longer supported Assyrian neo-Aramaic language instruction.²

As a result, Persian language theater surged and flourished while Assyrian theater became increasingly moribund in Iran. Outside Iran, in the rest of the Middle East and in the Soviet Union, Assyrian theater continued its popularity, largely because many of its promoters could trace their roots to the thriving pre-World War I Assyrian community of northwest Iran. Thus, it may well be posited that the golden age of modern Assyrian theater occurred during the late Qajar period—as did many aspects of modern Assyrian culture—rather than during the Pahlavi period which witnessed the rise in modern Persian culture.

Sources for Assyrian Qajar History

Surprisingly, more detailed sources for the history of Assyrians of Iran may be found for the Qajar period than for later periods. Once language and cultural restrictions became institutionalized through the

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² The language Assyrians speak falls within the Aramaic subset of Semitic languages. Syriac falls within Aramaic but is now an extinct liturgical language. Syriac is similar in position to Latin within the Roman Catholic Church prior to Vatican II (1962) when that church switched to vernacular languages for church services. Assyrian neo-Aramaic is the widest Aramaic written and spoken vernacular in the world. Iran was its intellectual center until 1918. This language will be referred to as Aramaic in the rest of this article although the term Assyrian for the language has been used in a loose sense within the community without distinguishing Aramaic from ancient Akkadian, the other language of the Assyrian Empire.

educational and censorship apparatuses, especially after 1927, a perceptible decline in materials about Assyrians began to set in. The three chief effects of this change came through reduced reading ability in Assyrian neo-Aramaic, decline in book publishing in the language of the community, the cessation entirely of the publishing of periodicals between 1918 and 1952, and the strict supervision of publishing through government and self-censorship after 1953 through to the present.³

Book publishing in Aramaic as well as some religious materials in classical Syriac has a rich history in Urmia since the American missionary introduction of a printing press in 1840. Widespread and long-term publication of newspapers began in 1849, two years before a Persian language newspaper of equal stature was initiated at Nasir al-din Shah's court.⁴

These books and the newspapers, numbering at least four titles that are available in representative or full run, provide sources unparalleled for any other minority population in Iran from such an early period of modern history. In addition to printed material in Aramaic, there are also several memoirs, some in Assyrian and some in English, written by men and women, that provide considerable information regarding the rapid development of Assyrian culture within that short span of time between 1835 and 1918.

Following the genocide, diaspora, and restrictions on Iran's Assyrians after World War I, little of note occurred in the cultural sphere until the early 1950s. Outside Iran, e'migre's like Yunathan Bet Soleiman (b. Goegtapa, 1893) published a history and newspaper, as did Joel Warda (1882?-19??), both pre-WWI e'migre's from Iran to the United States. Abraham Yohannan (1851-1925) recorded some memories of the early twentieth century in northwest Iran.⁵ Their continued contact with family and Assyrian intellectual circles allowed for some cultural exchange. But the richest details of cultural development for the Assyrian community in Iran exist for the nineteenth century.

Much of this information appears in the monumental book by Pera Sarmas (1901-1972), in three volumes in Aramaic, that later became a major source for Rudolf Macuch's widely available book.⁶

As with the destruction of Qajar period Assyrian cultural institutions during WWI, so too the pillaging of family homes robbed the community of photographs and documents for the pre-War period with two exceptions. The first exception was that if such items had been sent abroad to family in Russia or the United States (the main pre-War work locations), the materials can sometimes resurface. The other

³ For a detailed examination of how a leading Assyrian periodical during the early years of the Islamic Revolutionary period was forced to close, see Naby, "Ishtar: Documenting the Crisis in the Assyrian Iranian Community," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 10 no. 4 (December 2006): 92-102.

⁴ *Zahrira d-bahra* (Rays of Light) appeared as a ten to twelve page monthly periodical beginning in 1849. Of its sixty-nine years of publication, only about half are available due to the utter destruction of all Assyrian cultural institutions including schools, churches, presses, and of private homes. Rudolf Macuch carries a summary of the years between 1897 and 1918. Some of the earlier years are available, 1850s, 1890s (in Harvard College Library) for example. See *Geschichte der spat-und neusyrischen Literatur* (Berlin, 1976), 138-201.

⁵ Yohannan, the first Assyrian, possibly the first Iranian, to hold a university post in the United States, taught at Columbia University from where he had earned his Ph.D. with A.V. Jackson, the specialist on ancient Iran. His archives are held at Low Library, Columbia University.

⁶ *Tash'ita d-sipayuta atoreta* (Assyrian Cultural History) (Tehran, Honey, 1963).

exception had occurred during the 1920s when some few surviving families, upon their return to Urmia, were able, accidentally, to purchase an occasional family photograph from bazaar vendors.⁷

Entertainment in the Assyrian Community

Non-Muslim communities, living in Islamic states, historically functioned chiefly within religious institutions. Churches, schools, and shrines provided the locus of spiritual, intellectual, and social sustenance. All such activities were public, but only within that particular religious community: that is, outsiders (non-coreligionists) would neither be expected to enter nor would expect to enter unless they meant harm.⁸ Thus, Assyrian drama and theater, too, is recorded in the nineteenth century initially within the church context. Festivals “sha’re,” often associated with saints’ days and celebrated at shrines particular to those saints, offered entertainment as well as respite from daily labor. An entire village might make the pilgrimage to a shrine on that saint’s day and spend the time in story-telling, dancing and singing, often to the accompaniment of “zurna davula” (horn and drum). Within the Church of the East, the main church of Iran’s Assyrians until the Catholic schism of 1552 (Chaldean Church origins) and the Protestant conversions of the nineteenth century, some fifty odd plays appear to have existed. These religious dramas or dialogue hymns “soghyathe,” much like the Shi’ite ta’ziya performances, while based on religious themes and figures, came from a source other than the Holy Writ. That is, Assyrian church drama may well have had pre-Christian origins. The dramas are not directly from the New or Old Testaments, nor, it would appear, from any of the Church of the East texts preserved in the Chinese version from the period after the seventh century AD.⁹ But the extant religious dramas appear to group around the period of the Nativity to Epiphany and Holy Week. Some subjects are “The Cherub and the Thief,” “Christ and John the Baptist,” and “The Penitent Thief.” This form of drama took place within the church sanctuary and was incorporated into the church service. One of the best known, because it is preserved by a Western visitor, tells the story of redemption from sin through the cross, a familiar theme, by juxtaposing a thief and the Christian congregation.¹⁰ These religious dramas became part of the life of Catholic converts as well since the Chaldean Church retains the eastern rite as well as Syriac in its liturgy. Performances entailed acting on the part of deacons (shamashe) and the congregation.

⁷ This is how one of the oldest photographs to be found of a nineteenth-century Assyrian, Qasha (Rev.) Benyamin of Golpashan, reentered the family collection when in 1927 his great niece (Sophiya) bought it from a street vendor selling plates and such, also looted. Notes from Alphonse Odishoo to the author, a relative now living in Modesto, CA who supplied the picture for the exhibit at the Boston Public Library, *Immigration and Adjustment: Assyrian Family Records* (2005).

⁸ Armenians and Assyrians in Iran, although both the same Christians for outsiders, from within the communities belonging to opposing and non-communication sects. Armenians and Assyrians could not intermarry unless both had left the traditional eastern churches for Catholicism or Protestantism. The same pattern may be discerned in pre-Islamic Revolution Iran when marriage between a Christian and a Muslim or Jew often led to both parties converting to Baha’ism.

⁹ The comparison of the themes and narrative of Assyrian church drama with the Church of the East versions of the story of Jesus preserved in China but no longer used in the Middle East has not been made to date. The dramas are preserved in fragments.

¹⁰ See article by Stephen Bonian, SJ, “Syriac Dialogue Plays Rediscovered,” *Assyrian Star* LVII: 4, (2005): 13–16.

Drama dance, another precursor to the modern drama of the nineteenth century and still performed among the Assyrian diaspora community in Syria and Russia, takes its themes from secular topics related to the daily life of the Qajar period. Elaborately costumed dancers perform stylized dances representing a shepherd's defense of his sheep from wolves in a dance called "Dem Dema."¹¹

The theme of the drama dance is closer to the heroic tales sung and recited as part of "rawe" and "lelyani" singing/story telling genres. These also are secular.¹² The latter two forms of entertainment are directly related to story telling, the most ubiquitous form of entertainment in non-literate societies and the form used in the transmission of history.

Western Incursion

There is little question that modern theater and drama, while having popular native antecedents, arrived among the Assyrians from Western sources. These may be divided into American and European on the one hand and Russian on the other, sometimes through the intermediary of Tiflis or Baku. Before the arrival of drama however, came the presence of Western missionaries in northwest Iran who specifically focused on the Assyrians whom they labeled "Nestorians." The term Nestorian, a pejorative form attached to the Church of the East by Antiochian churches of the fifth century and used since then by all Western heirs to Christianity, denotes the disagreement of the Bishop of Constantinople, Nestorius, himself from a Syriac-speaking milieu, who held a less lofty view of Mary and of the dual nature of Jesus than some of his powerful contemporaries. As the Church of the East drew closer to Sassanian Iran, it came to be regarded as "The Church of Persia." This association gave the Church a political cast that reinforced the Byzantine Empire's wish to anathemize and demean it, mainly by naming it after a bishop accused of heresy. The Church of the East maintained its strength in Iran and across its western border in Ottoman lands, at least since the war-ravaged area emerged after Timur in the late fourteenth century. Prior to that, the Church had operated in Maragha, Baghdad and Tikrit as well as Urmia and Salamas. During the nineteenth century, it shared the Aramaic-speaking population of northwest Iran with the Chaldean Catholic Church. By 1914, the Assyrians of northwest Iran professed a variety of Christian faiths aside from the two older churches: Presbyterian, Anglican, Lutheran, and Russian Orthodox were the major new denominations. These denominations had arrived with American, British, and Russian missionaries as well as French-speaking ones who worked within the Chaldean Church institutions.

Conflict among the older churches as well as within the newly established ones created some friction within the community, but largely the community gained from the presence of Western missionaries in the nineteenth century through the introduction of a large urban and rural educational system (1836), the writing of the vernacular language, its transfer to print (1840), the introduction of the first medical school in Iran (Urmia, 1879), Western travel, and aspects of Western culture.¹³ With the introduction of musical instruments from the West—piano, organ, violin—came also the dissemination of Western plays.

¹¹ Performances of this traditional drama dance by a Russian Assyrian troupe from St Petesburgh toured in the Assyrian diaspora communities in California. *Assyrian Star* LVII: 4 (2005): 18. Petersburg toured the U.S. Assyrian communities in 1995. *Assyrian Star*, LVII: 4 (2005): 21.

¹² Nicholas al-Jeloo paper at the Middle East Studies Association (Boston, 2006).

¹³ For a study of British mission work among Assyrians in Iran and in Ottoman, Turkey see J.F. Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England: A History of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Assyrian Mission*, (Oxford, 1992).

Source of Drama

The first plays to be performed and printed in the Assyrian Iranian community appear to have been the comedies of Moliere and Shakespeare, showing the influence of French and English speaking missionaries. Moliere was popular throughout the Middle East. As late as 1948, Moliere was still being translated and printed in Aramaic.¹⁴ Next came the plays of the two Baku playwrights, Mirza Fath Ali Khan Akhundzadeh (1812–1878) and Uzeyir Hajibekov (1885–1948), the latter being the writer of perhaps the most performed play in the entire region, *Arshin Mal Alan* (1914), in all its Turkic and other languages. Finally, dramas originally written and performed in Aramaic in Urmia and abroad entered the community entertainment stage. Between 1906 and 1914, Assyrians translated and performed *Macbeth*, *Merchant of Venice* and plays by Nikolay Gogol (1809–1852). These performances took place in Urmia's rich satellite villages where most Assyrians lived (in 120 villages) as well as in the town itself. The source of this information, the periodical *Kokhva*, the prominent secular periodical that operated in Urmia from 1906 to 1918, does not state the location of performance within the village. The likeliest location would have been one of the village schools as is known in the refugee communities in Syria and Iraq.¹⁵ It would appear that men and boys played both genders. But among Assyrians from Urmia engaged in theater in Tiflis and in Krasnodar, both men and women appeared on stage.¹⁶ Among early immigrants in the United States, there also appears to have been no restriction on men and women appearing together on stage whether they were from the culturally sophisticated Urmia originally or elsewhere. Plays served as fund-raisers for community projects among Assyrians as among Armenians.¹⁷

Post Qajar Scattering of Community

The attacks on the Assyrians of the villages, though fairly continuous, began to escalate during the period of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution when the internal government struggle emboldened both the Ottoman Turks and the Kurds in the Zagros foothills to stage attacks along river systems such as the Nazlu, riding from village to village. Women and girls were abducted and homes pillaged. Despite this uncertainty, Assyrians continued to prosper due to the strong educational network in the region and, after 1911, the presence of Tsarist troops. By 1914 and the declaration of war between the Ottomans and Tsarist Russia, incursions by Ottoman troops had become commonplace. In that year, *Golpashan*, one of the richest villages of the region, was pillaged and most of its men killed.

In January 1915, a major exodus of Assyrians from Urmia and its villages took place that led to the reduction of the local Assyrian population by 15%. These refugee families settled around the Black Sea,

¹⁴ Macuch points to the work of Mirza Benyamin Kaldani (1879–1954) who translated a Moliere play, *L'Etourdi* (*The Blunderer*) and published it in 1948 in Tehran.

¹⁵ Arian Ishaya, "From Contributions to Diaspora: Assyrians in the History of Urmia, Iran," *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* XVI: 1 (2002) and online at www.Nineveh.com/ Assyrians.

¹⁶ The Tiflis theater troupe, *Shotaputa Teatroneta d'Atoraye b'Tiflis*, included women on stage and off. See Sergey Osipov, "The Tiflis Theater Talent," *Assyrian Star* LVII: 4, (2005) 27–28. Rabi Enviya Bet Givargiz (1900–1991), who was born in an Urmia satellite village (*Sopurqan*), wrote and directed several plays including *Molla Nasreddin* and *Yokhannan* that were performed in Krasnodar's *Novaya Urmia*. *Assyrian Star* LVII: 4, (2005): 17–18.

¹⁷ A play in Worcester, MA (U.S.A.), *Queen Shamiram*, was performed only in Armenian during the 1920s when most Assyrian refugees had come from areas of Turkey where they had lost their own language. *Assyrian Star*, LVII: 4 (2005): 31.

the Krasnodar region, and some are to be found as far north as the city of Vladimir. Soon those who had been involved in drama or education in the Urmia area renewed Aramaic language drama in Russian Diaspora. Tiflis, as the cultural capital of the Transcaucasus, already boasted an Assyrian theater group in 1910 that performed several comedies, including Moliere's *Me'decin Volant* (The Fleet-Footed Doctor) translated by Qasha Mushe Babilla who had lived in Urmia. A second comedy appeared from the pen of Yosip Bet Bedjan (Khamta Karubta—The Angry Maiden) while one of the most celebrated Assyrian writers and activists, Freidun (Bet Avraham) Atouraya (1886?–1926), wrote *Khisha* (Grief), performed on 2 May 1911.¹⁸ Freidun Atouraya was born near Urmia, studied medicine in Tiflis, was engaged with Assyrian affairs in Urmia, and died in Stalin's prisons. No theater appears to have reemerged in Urmia with the scattering of the Assyrian population, the loss of two thirds of the population, between 1914 and 1921, and the restrictions placed by the Pahlavi monarchy on the return of the surviving refugees to their homes. The venue for Assyrian cultural activity in Iran shifted to Tehran and Abadan.

Theater in Iran

Several recent books about the history of Iranian theater have appeared in Persian and English. Most devote much space to the Qajar period, and Hamid Amjad's *Teatr-e qarn-e sizdahom* deals mainly with the Qajar period.¹⁹ All these sources and more are incorporated into Willem Floor's *The History of Theater in Iran* (2005).²⁰ Floor's book is comprehensive: he gives considerable space to Armenian theater (Tabriz and Tehran), Jewish theater, and even Zoroastrian community theater. He makes no mention of Assyrian theater, which, with Armenian theater, may well precede that of other communities. This lacuna rises largely because Assyrian theater ended with WWI and only re-emerged in Tehran and Abadan on a small scale during the 1950s. The Armenian community of Iran, whether in Tabriz, Isfahan or Tehran, never underwent the ethnic cleansing of the Assyrians. After WWI, nearly all histories about Assyrians in Iran appeared in the Aramaic spoken by Assyrians, a language rarely learned in the twentieth century by non-Assyrians.

A quick review of Persian and minority community theater reveals that the Armenians of Tabriz staged the first performance in Iran in 1873 and that the first plays translated into Persian are by Moliere, also popular among Assyrians. English, French, and Russian were taught to Assyrians early in the Qajar period. Plays in Aramaic were direct translations, not through other languages. However, it is not clear whether these early translations appeared in print or were distributed to the cast in handwritten copies. Indigenous Assyrian playwriting appears to commence in 1908 and continued to the eve of WWI with such plays as *Shamiram* and *Sarah Tkhumneytha*, both about women.²¹

Topics of Assyrian Plays

Because most Assyrian community plays came from the pen of men (no women until the 1950s) who had received a good education in the several mission schools, and because Iranian society at the start of the twentieth century was experiencing political and social turmoil, the themes of the original plays reflect the socio-cultural revolution underway. Many such themes enter Persian literature and drama as well, but a

¹⁸ Sergey Osipov, "The Tiflis Theater Talent," *Assyrian Star* LVII: 4 (2005): 35.

¹⁹ Tehran, 1378/1999.

²⁰ Willem Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran* (Washington, DC, 2005).

²¹ Ishaya, "From Contributions to Diaspora," 34.

decade or so later. The plots of the three plays reflect the general state of agitation as well as the extensive level of information available to the Assyrian community through the network of active newspapers that were available to them. It should be noted that none of these plays have survived the genocide. A more thorough investigation of Russian-held sources and those in Georgia and Armenia may yield the scripts of plays transferred from Urmia. Until that research is completed, we know about them through the reporting on performances that is found in Kokhva. Here are three plots:

- Mock debate between eastern and western philosophers.
- Wife who nags her husband to go to Tiflis to work and elevate the economic status of family. He does, falls into bad habits (drinking and gambling) and the family becomes poorer than ever.
- A group of young men whose village is pillaged by Kurds, unite, attack the robbers and restore their village cattle and goods. (Ominous since this is how the Assyrians finally lost their foothold in northwest Iran—through Kurdish attacks.)

These topics were at the heart of Assyrian debate in northwest Iran. The theme of conflict and confusion on the religious/national question ran as follows:

- Supporting western missionaries at the expense of their Assyrian identity.
- Staying with the old churches—Chaldean Catholic and Church of the East.
- Heading for the sheltering embrace of the Russian Orthodox Church which was backed by visible armed presence.
- Submerging all denominational affiliation under a banner of Assyrian national consciousness.

The second theme, that of emigration for temporary or permanent purposes, followed along these lines:

- Seeking work opportunities outside Iran where employment for Christian minorities were less restrictive.
- Trying to improve the situation in Iran through such instruments as representation in the Majlis being formed under the new constitution.

The biggest issue, and the theme of several plays, was how to unite to defend against Kurdish marauders. As it turned out, after WWII especially, Kurds have come to replace Assyrians in most of the villages and have also entered the town of Urmia. In addition to these serious themes of survival that the community debated, comedies especially were also translated from neighboring cultures.

From the Caucasus came what is the most performed play in the Assyrian community from Iran that survived WWI—Hajibekov's Arshin Mal Alan. This play has been adapted into Aramaic and performed widely since it appeared in 1914. However, these performances did not take place in Iran; in fact, they could not take place in Iran due to the harsh and eventually genocidal political conditions. Rather, the play was performed in the Diaspora communities from Armenia and Georgia, to Armavir (Krasnodar) in Russia to New York and Connecticut. Diaspora communities also translated from Armenian and from Azari directly.

All Assyrian performances appear to have been in Assyrian except in those communities (in Turkey) where the spoken language had become Armenian. Why such early adaptation to theater performance and especially to writing of plays by one of the smallest and weakest ethnic communities in Iran? The reasons are evident in the social setting: Assyrians had become the focus of American missionary effort since the 1830s. For a variety of reasons, the missionaries raised the level of the community rapidly within a few generations. Some estimate that 80% of Assyrians, men and women, were already at least literate by

World War I.²² At this level of literacy, demands for schools, newspapers, books and sophisticated entertainment had grown rapidly.

Moreover, the American mission had chosen Aramaic as the language in which to work in Iran until 1915. When it made the decision to switch to Persian—a process that took until 1932—the decline in Aramaic language set in as Tehran too limited language instruction. Assyrians had learned to read and write their vernacular Aramaic as never before since the Timurid conquests. But at the same time, they had opportunities to study at least four foreign languages right in Urmia by the turn of the nineteenth century: English, French, Russian and German. These factors allowed them to engage in both translation into Aramaic and original composing of plays in Aramaic. A fourth factor in the rapid assimilation to the theater arts grew from the already accepted forms of native drama as represented in the traditional churches in the form *sogyathe*. There was no particular hesitation or objection to representation. Soon in the theater performances, the community adapted to women appearing on stage with men although such mixing of genders represents a clear departure from the *sogyathe* tradition. The tradition of men representing women on stage and taking all the roles in a theater piece, however, continued, perhaps from necessity, when in some instances women would play all the roles in a play.²³ Finally, audiences were accustomed to secular performance as well, through such entertainment as took place at the *sha're* festivals. The *Dem Demma* drama dance is very similar in theme to the play about preventing Kurdish pillaging of Assyrian villages.

To conclude, even in Diaspora, nearly one hundred years after the end of the Assyrian “Camelot” in Iran, skits, plays and now especially cinema, help to promote the general theater arts. But, in diaspora this is coming at the cost of the Aramaic language. English and Arabic are invading the theater space just as they are creeping into the heritage churches. The long tradition of Assyrian theater arts that culminated in the late Qajar period in a flourishing of theater performance in northwest Iran using the Aramaic language is now perhaps lost irretrievably. The rise in censorship in Iran, the restrictions on teaching and using Aramaic, and especially the forced redistribution of Assyrians from their compact location in northwest Iran all have contributed to the decline.

²² Ishaya, “From Contributions to Diaspora,” 24.

²³ At least one performance in Chicago during the 1930s by included only women, some playing patriarchal Biblical roles. *Assyrian Star*, LVII: 4 (2005), 4.