

Assyrian/Syriac Oral History as a Counter-narrative in Contemporary Turkish Historiography*

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Abstract: This paper evaluates the oral history of the Assyrian/Syriac community in Turkey as a counter-narrative in the formation of statist historiography in the Republican era. It situates local oral histories within the larger archival and historical literature on the Assyrian/Syriac community. This paper emphasizes the importance of oral history studies in the process of making a new historiographic approach and understanding towards the past of diverse communities in Turkey. It stresses the importance of life stories, family histories, memoirs, architecture and other material cultural forms, oral traditions, and many other narrative forms of this people in making a more representative history. In taking this approach, this paper explains how oral history, as a critical methodology, reveals those neglected aspects in the written sources on modern history of Assyrian/Syriac community in Turkey.

Keywords: Oral history, historiography, memory, identity, Assyrians/Syriacs, Turkey.



Çağdaş Türk Tarih yazımında Muhalif Bir Anlatı Olarak Süryani / Asuri Sözlü Tarihi

Öz: Bu çalışma, Türkiye’de Süryani sözlü tarihini Cumhuriyet dönemi devletçi tarih yazımına karşı muhalif bir anlatı olarak değerlendirmektedir. Bu çalışma, sözlü ve yerel tarihleri Süryani toplumu üzerine yazılmış olan daha geniş arşivin ve tarihsel literatürün içine yerleştirmektedir. Bu makale, Türkiye’de farklı toplumların geçmişlerini anlama ve yeni bir tarihsel yaklaşım geliştirme sürecinde sözlü tarih çalışmalarının önemini vurgulamaktadır. Bu insanların hayat hikâyelerinin, aile tarihlerinin, hatıratlarının, mimari ve diğer maddi kültür formlarının, sözlü geleneklerinin ve diğer birçok anlatı formlarının önemine vurgu yapmaktadır. Bu çalışma, eleştirel bir yöntem olarak sözlü tarihin Türkiye’de modern Süryani tarihi üzerine yazılmış olan çalışmalarda ihmal edilmiş olan birçok yönü ortaya nasıl çıkardığına işaret etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sözlü tarih, tarih yazımı, hafıza, kimlik, Süryaniler, Türkiye.

* The first version of this paper was presented at the International Syriac Studies Symposium I, organized at Mardin Artuklu University April 20-22, 2012 in Mardin, Turkey. Some parts of this article are based on my oral history project titled: “Migration and Memory: Assyrian Identity in Kerboran/Dargecit, Mardin,” (Unpublished MA thesis, Boğaziçi University, 2005).

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Introduction

When contemporary Turkish historiography is examined, the statist politics of exclusion of non-Turkish communities and the absence of their histories can be seen very clearly. Since the foundation of Turkish nation-state, modern Turkish historiography has been constructed and developed from the vantage point of Turkish history, identity, language, and culture. In the process of the state-sponsored social engineering project of creating a new Turkish nation, non-Turkish ethnic groups were considered to be assimilated and thereby Turkified in the modernization/Westernization process. This was one of the fundamental ideas in the modernist and Kemalist paradigm. As a consequence of the Kemalist modernization project that started in 1923, non-Turkish (Kurds and others) and non-Muslim subjects (Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians/Syriacs,¹ and others) were not accepted as existing cultures and communities with their own ancient and unique histories, memories, traditions, and material culture until recent years. In this violent social climate non-Turkish histories and communities coped with the danger of vanishing under the pressure and hegemony of this constructed statist narrative by struggling to exist in underground places in time and space.

It was a shared idea and expectation of many thinkers that industrialization, urbanization, and the spread of education would reduce ethnic consciousness and that universalism would replace particularism (Jalali and Lipset, 1993: 585-606). It was also believed that during the process of industrialization and modernization, the projects of assimilation of minorities would be an inevitable future and the ethnic groups would be integrated into one national identity. However, contrary to these predictions, the assimilation projects of the modern Turkish nation-state as a strategy for accommodating their ethnic minorities and subordinating their identities to the language, values, and lifestyles of dominant groups have failed. Political events of the 1970s and 1980s contradicted modernization theory's prediction. Rather than declining conflicts based on the assertion of ethnic identities and interests, ethnic based conflicts increased sharply not only in developing and modernizing societies but also in developed Western societies.

Ethnicity—which is based on a shared culture, history, language, region, religion(s), destiny, and other patterns of belief and behavior—creates group consciousness between group members, and produces a sense of belonging and unity among members. The “revival” (Smith, 1981) of ethnic consciousness and emergence of demands of ethnic groups for recognition shattered not only assimilation policies of nation-states, but also their hegemony on historiography, identity, and memory formations. Andrew Smith noted in his seminal study on

¹ There has been a discussion on naming this community among researchers in the field. In short, in this article, I am using the concept of *Assyrian* instead of *Syriac* for naming this community because the name *Assyrian* is more known and commonly used in the English literature.

ethnicity and social movements, “ethnic communities and ethnic sentiments have existed throughout recorded history, and their social and political importance has been subject to periodic fluctuations” (Smith, 1981: 8).

This revival and new turn towards ethnic roots and identities in the last decades have provoked many questions. How do we read history and historical texts? How do we assess the validity and accuracy of such historical knowledge and texts? How do we understand the absence of non-Turkish subjects (Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians and the others) in Turkish history texts —from primary schools to universities— and in the history of the Turkish Republic? Is there any way to teach an alternative history in schools and other educational public institutions? In short, why do these histories not even exist in textbooks?

Here, let me tell you a story to clarify one of my points in this paper. The story is about hegemonic power, fabricated narratives, the muteness of subaltern subjects, and the politics of silencing the “other”. I quote from contemporary thinker Slavoj Žižek:

In an old joke from the defunct German Democratic Republic, a German worker gets a job in Siberia; aware of how all mail will be read by the censors, he tells his friends: “Let’s establish a code: if a letter you get from me is written in ordinary blue ink, it’s true; if it’s written in red ink, it’s false.” After a month, his friends get the first letter, written in blue ink: “Everything is wonderful here: the shops are full, food is abundant, apartments are large and properly heated, cinemas show films from the West, there are many beautiful girls ready for an affair – the only thing you cannot get is red ink.” (Žižek, 2002: 1).

By narrating this story, Žižek points out how hegemony deprives malcontents of the means to communicate their stories, but in reality the practices that silence the voices of the margin are much more subtle. This story gives us something to think with about how Turkish historiography has extended its hegemony over histories of other ethnic and religious groups in Turkey through erasure. Furthermore, it allows us to see how this hegemony of statist historiography and discourses have shaped minds and ways of looking at different cultures, histories, and communities in Turkey. Here, I want to also ask whether it is possible to de-centralize and de-hegemonize Turkish historiography and let the “other,” or the “subaltern” subjects speak? (Spivak, 1988). For Frantz Fanon, these historically bounded cultural/imperial systems can perpetuate themselves as a state of mind (Fanon, 1968); therefore, Fanon opted for more radical interventions to open a gate in the wall.

Questions like: What is the objective truth of the other and how does one represent the other? beg to be answered. To quote post-colonial thinker Ashis Nandy from his provoking and enlightening work *“The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism”*; “How would historical primitives one day

learn to see themselves as masters of nature and as masters of their own fate?" (Nandy, 1986: 9). From a Foucauldian position, there is no production of knowledge in the human sciences that can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his/her own circumstances. This is clear regarding the production of "truth" and "knowledge". The point of Foucault is that there are no "outside" positions free of power, but there is always a chance of resistance from those positions under control.

Not only Foucault (1977), but also many post-colonial thinkers like Fanon (1968) and Nandy point to the (im)possibility of the free existence of the 'marginalized' within this hegemonic structure and they emphasize the ways in which hegemonic apparatuses construct and control the 'other' (Nandy, 1983: 9-20). Nandy explains that colonizers do not only economically and politically construct their hegemony. Colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies. It is not only an external destructive force; it is also an internal destructive force (Nandy, 1983: 29). Nandy argues that after the transformation of colonial-states into nation-states, colonialist hegemony perpetuated its power in new formations. If this is so, how is it possible to push the "other" back in time? Here, I argue that oral history studies offer us a new methodology, movement, and perspective that can provide us with new alternative epistemologies, perspectives, and voices in writing, reading, and understanding the past. It allows us to explore "who we are" in particular social and historical contexts through giving space to unheard voices and histories from the margins.

History from Below: The Urgent Need for Assyrian/Syriac Oral Histories

In the art of history writing, oral history emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a movement, new methodology, and as a new way of re-thinking the past and rewriting history. It appeared after the turn towards social history among historians in the 1930s in France, particularly with the impact of the *Annales* School (Breisach 1983, Burke 1990, Iggers 2000, Hughes-Warrington 2001). Later, oral history studies gained more importance and have become counter-narratives to state-sponsored historiography in modern nation-state projects all around the world. To situate it in its sociopolitical context, oral history research emerged as a significant methodology and approach for a deeper understanding of the contemporary history of particular communities and people who had been marginalised at the periphery of the modern states. It gives shared authority and democratizes the process of history writing. Oral history encourages a wider participation in the task of history writing through the incorporation of personal life stories, family histories, oral traditions, and hidden histories. It decentralizes hegemonic history by giving a shared place to histories from below. In effect, it democratize the dominancy of textual archives in historiography.

Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson in their work *Narrative and Genre* argued, "Though historically the canon has had little room for unwritten oral narratives recent interest from across the social sciences has emerged as a result

of wider social, cultural and political developments since the 1940s” (Chamberlain and Thompson, 1998: 4). In Turkish historiography, the canon has had little room for the histories of people who have been pushed to the margins. These marginalized people’s unwritten histories and unheard voices will be able to come to existence through the agency allowed by oral history methodology and the discipline involved in compiling these histories. Without doubt, oral history is potentially a skill for reproducing political memory, a new method accessible for the first time to silenced, unheard, and marginalized women and men who have been living on the margins of the state and main-stream community.

In the context of oral studies in Turkey, oral historian Arzu Öztürkmen points out that “...collecting Turkish narratives on the memory of past communities reveals categories of the ethnic/religious and social ‘others,’ and brings forward a necessity to move beyond the Turkish national framework.” (Öztürkmen, 2006: 98). In hegemonic state-sponsored Turkish history, the oral history of the Assyrian community moves beyond Turkish historiography. It emerges as a counter-narrative and as a new critical methodology for examining those aspects neglected in the written sources on the contemporary history of modern Turkey. Assyrian oral history and narratives contest not only Turkish history, but also Assyrian historiography which has mainly been based on textual archives. The Assyrian oral history as a neglected part of this historiography needs more attention for a better understanding of the past in Turkey. In other words, an oral historiographic approach is required to understand the recent development and cleavages in the history of Assyrian community, and its material culture in contemporary Turkey.

Oral history has the potential to empower marginalized subjects like Assyrians, Kurds and Armenians in the contemporary history of Turkey. I evaluated the oral histories and oral traditions of the Assyrian/Syriac community in Turkey as counter-narratives in the formation of historiography in the Republican era. Contrary to the hegemonic foundation of statist archive-based historiography, Assyrian oral history provides us social and political memories of silenced, inaudible, and marginalized Assyrian men and women in their particular localities and periferies.

There are crucial questions that can be answered through the labour of oral historians working in Assyrian communities. We can gain a greater understanding of the historical construction of the ethno-religious identity of Assyrians. Or, we can gain a local sense of the past with its idiosyncratic periodizations, actors, events, and their significance. Oral history can shed light on the process of ethnic, religious and demografic shifts, transformations, ruptures, and changes in the eastern and southeastern parts of the country. It also allows us to gain a more nuanced understanding of the fundamental social and political factors that played a significant role in forced transformations of

this region. It even leads to ask question how much we know about conflicts between ethno-religious communities in that region from the past to the present.

Indeed, with a particular focus on oral narratives of the events of 1915 and the post-1915 era, oral history research gives a differing reading and understanding of contemporary histories of communities and their identities in Turkey. More specifically, it allows us to answer questions like: How were relations between Muslims (Kurds) and Christians (Assyrians)? How was the memory and identity of Assyrians constructed after World War I? How did they relocate themselves in the Southeast of Turkey after 1915? Why did they give up their peaceful relations for centuries and become drawn into conflict with one another?

How were their relations with other Muslim and Christian ethnic groups? In short, what kind of reasons caused the exclusion of Christian Assyrians, which consequently resulted in their displacement and migration to the western part of the country, and then to Europe and other parts of the world?

The task of exploring answers to the questions above, and more importantly, awareness about the contemporary history of Assyrians demonstrates the urgent need for Assyrian oral histories. Most of the complexity of Assyrian culture and history will soon be irretrievably destroyed as a result of the influx of hegemonic cultures and histories that Assyrians are exposed to in their host countries around the world (Middle East, Europe, America and Australia). With the loss of elders and survivors who witnessed significant events and processes of the past, we also lose the chance to collect and archive their stories and memories. The projects required to save this valuable historical source can be defined as *urgent*. Such a task involves documenting their culture before it is too late.

The Assyrian/Syriac Oral History Studies in Turkey

The questions of history, memory, and identity among Assyrian people require an exploration and analysis of their life trajectories in historical and socio-political contexts that can provide us a better understanding of their history, memory, language, traditions, social life, and material culture over time. In order to uncover the patterns of their contemporary history, memory and identity, one must investigate socio-political relations, conflicts, forced displacement, migration processes, and other historical events that have shaped and reshaped their memory, identity, and their sense of belonging to the lands of their ancestors. The growing interest in contemporary histories of communities such as Assyrians, Armenians, Kurds, Greeks, Arabs etc. has led to an expansion of ethnographic oral history studies in Turkey. Therefore, Assyrian oral history studies will also gain more recognition and become a good repertoire in the main body of these growing literatures on people and communities whose voices have not been heard.

By situating oral and local histories within the larger archival and historical literature on Assyrians, oral history material (life stories, family histories, memoirs, testimonies, stories of places such as: churches, monasteries, etc., other forms of material cultural forms, and oral traditions such as laments, songs of grief, lullabies etc.) will play a crucial role in the process of making a new inclusive history for and by the Assyrian community. In other words, it will create a new medium through which a new understanding and approach towards the past will emerge.

What kind of oral history material can be collected during ethnographic research among Assyrians in Turkey and abroad? These oral history resources can be organized into a number of categories that I detail below.

A. Life Stories

In oral history studies, life stories are the main research data that are consulted during the analysis of a research subject. Life stories and personal narratives allow us to understand how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them. My previous research (Aras 2005) was based on the personal life stories of Assyrians and Kurds.² I documented how the events of 1915 deeply destroyed community structures and shook the whole social, political, and demographic structures of the region. In this study, it was shown through life stories that linearity of narrative form is broken into a before/after form in the life stories of Assyrians from Kerboran/Dargeçit. Time in the life stories of both Muslims and Christians from Kerboran was divided into two forms: *wexta fermana filiha çibu* (when the Christian Decree happened), and *pişti ferman-e fileha* (after the Christian Decree). Whether politicized or not, all Assyrian Christian informants started their accounts with the *ferman-e fileha*, the trouble of 1915. In the stories of their families, the “testimony” and “victimization” of their parents and grandparents are key concepts and narratives which have (re)shaped their memory about the past. They generalized these testimonies and victimizations for all Kerboranian Assyrians, and furthermore for the whole Assyrian community characterizing it as a “victimized Christian community”.

The oral history studies conducted by Sweden based researcher Jan Betsawoce also document different aspects of memory, identity, and sense of belonging among Assyrians who were forced to migrate from Turkey and are now living abroad (Bet-Sawoce, 1991, 1992). In these personal life stories it is interesting to observe the special role of women as witnesses of all these events who later convert their silence into speech by narrating the events of 1915 to the

² This oral history project was based on oral narratives and family histories of twenty-six Assyrian and Kurdish informants (eleven women and fifteen men whose ages differ between 55-100). Half of them were selected from Kerboranian Christians and the rest were Kerboranian Muslims. The interviewees were interviewed in different times and places in 2005 in Sweden and Turkey.

next generation. These narratives reshape their ethno-religious identity and remind them of their roots and family backgrounds. For those seeking a more complete understanding of Turkish history, the voices of Assyrians and their narratives invite us to enter into their family histories in order to get a broader picture of the structural transformation and reconstruction of both their families and community.

B. Family Histories

Traditionally, family history has been equated with genealogy, the reconstruction of a person's lineage through the use of written records. However, as scholars Linda Shopes and Glen H. Elder have pointed out, stories of family members who recount their past are the richest sources of information for documenting a family history (Shopes, 1984: 239; Elder, 1978: 21-57). In the history of the Assyrian family, memory and local knowledge is deeply shaped and constructed by the catastrophic events of 1915. These events represent a watershed moment in the genealogy of Assyrian families.

During my oral history project (Aras 2005) on the contemporary migration of Assyrian community in Kerboran/Dargeçit, I found many traumatic experiences among Assyrian families who were sundered during the massacres in 1915. When family histories were analyzed, I discovered how those family members who survived took part in the efforts of the reconstruction of their families in the post-1915 era. Personal life stories of family members, some Kerboranian Muslim Kurdish families, and some available written sources enabled us to learn about catastrophies that happened in the past.

In the oral accounts of 1915 from Kerboran, for instance, I uncovered how the Assyrian Iskenderko family was reconstructed as a social unit by survivor orphans from this family who were raised by neighboring Muslim families³. These orphans were hidden during the days of the massacre and brought up by some neighboring Muslim Kurdish families. In other words, the reunification of families like the Iskenderko family led to the reunification of the local Assyrian community in the region. Furthermore, the life stories and narratives of Kerboranian Assyrians and Kurdish people entangled family and community histories (Aras, 2011: 273-302).

To conclude, the histories of Assyrian families offer us not only many historical facts about the history of these families, but they also educate us about what happened in 1915 and the aftermath of these events.. These family histories document how the Assyrian community lived through traumatic events, and how Assyrian families were reconstructed in the aftermath of the tragic events of 1915 in local communities like the Kerboranian Assyrian

³ Iskender Nison was interviewed during my ethnographic research in Norköping, Sweden in February in 2005.

community. Family histories gain more importance for family members in order to answer the questions about who they are.

C. Memoirs

In oral history studies, memoirs and eyewitness accounts from the community and outside of the community also provide very valuable data about the researched community and subject. For example, the memoirs of Caleb Frank Gates are very crucial to learn about the social, political, and religious conditions and structures of the Assyrian community in Mardin in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. American missionary Gates' work entitled *An Appreciation: Dr. Caleb Frank Gates: President of Robert College 1903-1932* (Gates, 1932), and his memoirs entitled *Not to Me Only* (Gates, 1940) provide an outsider's view on Assyrian people. His thoughts and observations are based on his thirteen years of missionary work in Mardin.

In a similar vein, Bishop Ishaq Armalto in his work entitled *The Calamities of Christians (Al-Qousara fi Nakabat Annasara)*, shares the narratives of eyewitnesses of events from 1914 to 1919 in the region of Mardin (Armale, 1993). Similar to this work, resources that have been based on oral accounts and testimonies document socio-economic conditions, the demography, and the religious structures of Assyrian community (Abdalla, 1992: 87-103).

D. Architecture

As many scholars have argued, architecture (religious, civil, and national) has a great impact on memory and identity formations at both personal and collective levels (Delanty and Jones 2002; Gillis 1994; Gittus, 2002). Architectural forms –one of the fundamental components of a culture– connect the past with the present, reshaping one's sense of belonging to a particular community, place, history, and religion. Contemporary researchers have highlighted the significant contribution Assyrians have made to the development of architecture and building traditions in northern Mesopotamia. From the past to the present, their great religious architectural works have become known as one of the authentic features of their ethno-religious identity (Keser, 2002; Taşğın et al. 2005). Therefore, personal narratives and memories of Assyrian subjects enable us to know and understand diverse aspects of the relationship between Assyrian memory, identity, architecture, and other material cultural forms which have survived for centuries in spite of all kinds of destructive interventions.

During my oral history project I found interesting memories of place and the idea of "home" while listening to Kerboranian Assyrian migrants in Sweden. The explanations of the fifty-year old Kerboranian Susa Esmer who was interviewed in Linköping, Sweden in 2005, illustrate the process of place (re)membering among displaced members of this community. She said the following about living in Sweden:

“Now, we are living in Sweden. It is a good state and place for living. However, our culture is very different from their (European) culture. We are dealing with many difficulties raising our children here. We want to teach our culture to them, but it is very difficult here... We, all Kerboranian Assyrians, have better living conditions in Sweden, but it is not the same as your own homeland. You know, there is proverb which says: ‘Şam (Damascus) şirine le vatan şirintire.’ (The city of Damascus is the loveliest city but your own homeland is lovelier than it.)” (Aras, 2005: 112-113).

Their imagination of Kerboran as a place and home brought to mind philosopher Edward Casey’s notion of a matrix. Casey describes a matrix as a place or a medium in which something is bred, produced, or developed. It is a place or point of origin and growth, and an embedding or enclosing mass (Casey, 1997: 23-24). In the memory of Kerboranian Assyrians, Kerboran emerged as evidence of their existence in the world. Kerboran as a place, which includes their religious and civil architectural structures (monasteries, churches, houses, and ancient and contemporary cemeteries), demonstrates and proves their existence both in the past and the present. These structures created the stage upon which their lives were played out for generations.

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Elif Keser in her work *“The Syrian Orthodox Religious Architecture in Tur Abdin”* shows how Assyrian religious architectural works, particularly monasteries and churches, have been very strong and concrete signs of their ethnic and religious existence in the region that remind them of who they are (Keser, 2002: 7). Today, these restored monasteries and churches are open to the public and religious tourism for both local and foreign visitors. At the same time, they continue to be used for the religious ceremonies of the local Christian community in the region. These activated Assyrian architectural cultural forms are again becoming more visible signs of their identity and contribute to the empowerment of their sense of belonging to Turkey and the region.

E. Other Oral Traditions

Assyrians, as one of the ancient communities of the Middle East, have diverse cultural forms and oral traditions. These sources have gained more importance due to the fact that the contemporary history of this community has been affected by the hegemony of surrounding cultures and nation-states (Turkish, Arab, and Persian). Therefore, oral traditions and oral accounts of ordinary Assyrian men and women provide us with local knowledge about cultural forms as diverse as religious rituals, food, language, literature, music, songs of grief, jokes, and laments. They also provide us with many other details about everyday life.

Concluding Remarks

In Turkey, very little is known about how ordinary Assyrian people lived through massacres, conflicts, ruptures, and changes in the southeastern part of the country. What is known as the so-called “Assyrian Question” has been generally articulated through the meta-narratives of the “Armenian Revolt during WWI,” and the “Genocide of 1915”. These meta-narratives have been circulated with much debate and controversies surrounding them. It should come as no surprise then that the oral histories of Assyrians serve as the fundamental data in which many answers to long-standing questions are embedded. As oral historian Alessandro Portelli explained in his seminal work *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*⁴, “Oral history has been about the fact that there is more to history than presidents and generals, and there is more to culture than the literary canon” (Portelli, 1991: viii). Put differently, oral history provides us with more data, or a complementary source of data that gives us a more nuanced local understanding of events that have been rendered in a light favourable to the nation building project.

However, there is an often repeated objection about the reliability of oral histories and narratives as accurate data. The critique levelled at the oral history approach in using oral accounts as historical evidence has been discussed for many years among people working in this field. Issues of orality and narrative in historical writing, and the validity and reliability of oral history have been subjects discussed in the works of many scholars such as Ruth Finnegan (1996), Alice Hoffman (1996), and Trevor Lummis (1998). Their approach can perhaps best be summarized by Portelli’s following statement in his book: “Oral history tells us less about events than about their meaning” (Portelli, 1991: 50). Reminding us that many written documents also consist of the uncontrolled transmission of unidentified oral sources, Portelli’s focus on the actual telling of the narrative suggests that the most important historical evidence may be in the telling.

The oral history of the Assyrian community illustrates Jesse Newman’s claim that “Without doubt, oral history is potentially a skill for reproducing political memory, a method accesible for the first time to the silenced, the inaudible, the disenfranchised: women, men, working classes, ordinary people. But oral histories are not necessarily progressive, nor all the uses to which oral narratives may be put. Like any representation of history, oral history is not innocent of selection, bias, evasion and interpretation. That is to say, the representation of history, including oral history, is itself a contested historical event” (Newman, 2003: 9). Oral history provides a new approach to understanding recent developments and cleavages in the Assyrian community

⁴ “Luigi Trastulli, a 21-year-old steel worker from Terni, an industrial town in Umbria, central Italy, died in a clash with the police on March 17, 1949 as workers walked out of the factory to attend a rally against the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty by the Italian government” (Portelli, 1991: 1).

who lived and continues living in Turkey. Their histories allow us to see official state history in a different light.

From the past to the present, the oral histories and narratives of the Assyrian people have been passed on by word of mouth through diverse narrative genres like life stories, songs, laments, lullabies, jokes, family histories, etc. In other words, “throughout the ages, history has been passed on by word of mouth. Fathers to sons, mothers to daughters, grandparents to grandchildren, village elders to young generations, gossip to eager ears; all in their own way tell of past events, interpret them, give them meaning, keep the collective memory alive...” (Grele, 1991: xv; See also Hareven 1996: 248-263). Today, in historiography, the place and importance of oral historical data have become larger and bigger, respectively. Furthermore, oral accounts have become very crucial in the context of unwritten history. Besides being critical and suspicious about the hegemonic conventions of the discipline, it is also very important to develop the skills to properly collect (interview and record), and interpret the collected data in oral history research.

In oral narratives and testimonies the boundary between what is subjective/personal and what is collective becomes ambiguous in most cases due to the fact that both sides are not detached from each other. As Portelli contends, oral history produces “narratives in which the boundary between what takes place outside the narrator and what happens inside, between what concerns the individual and what concerns the group, may become more elusive than in established written genres, so that personal ‘truth’ may coincide with shared ‘imagination’” (Portelli, 1998: 66).

To conclude, Assyrian oral history studies have two positive outcomes for the Assyrian community. First, it gives interviewees an opportunity to express their own narratives for the first time to a general public, which I believe has a therapeutic effect at a subjective level. Second, Assyrian oral history offers a historical analysis where the local community not only documents their personal-communal history for the first time, but they also develop the foundation for new discussions to reevaluate the historical process at multiple levels and see it through the eyes of Kurds, Turks, the State, and the international community.

Fortunately, today in Turkish historiography, oral historical data is gaining more importance among historians. In other words, oral accounts have become very crucial in the area of unwritten history in the history of modern Turkey. As Leyla Neyzi stated in her work on different ethnic and religious groups in Turkey, the democratization of Turkey will only be possible when the Turkish state and society face the massacres, violence, traumas, and pain suffered by all of Turkish society in the 20th century (Neyzi, 2011: 10). It is only in facing the past that the stage of healing in post-conflict communities will be prepared. Assyrian oral history will open a crack from which we can enter the local history of the region in order to have a broader picture of past events and understanding of the

present. Moreover, in the process of the democratization of Turkey, Assyrian oral history has the potential to take part in the democratization of history writing. At present, there is a need for urgent oral history studies in Turkey in order to achieve the democratization of historiography (Aras et al. 2013). The oral histories of marginalized ethnic and religious groups will contribute to the formation of justice and hope in post-conflict communities and allow them to re-write their histories with their own words.

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