

ZMIRYATA-D RAWE

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Over the last few years, amongst the Aramaic-speaking minorities of the Near East and the countries of Diaspora, an impressive movement of intellectual rebirth has been making its presence felt. In Eastern Neo-Aramaic or Neo-Syriac (Sureth)—the mother tongue of both Christians and Jews of the region extending from the basin of the Botan-Su, a tributary of the Tigris in Turkish Mesopotamia, down to the western bank of lake Urmia in Iran—the literary activity of the "Assyrians" and the "Chaldeans" of Iran and of American Diaspora deserves note. However, it is above all in Iraq where the Neo-Aramaic cultural reawakening has begun to assume macroscopic dimensions.

What is disheartening is the fact that only an insignificant minority can still read and write the so-called Nestorian alphabet. However, Neo-Aramaic, as a spoken language, continues to maintain a noteworthy vitality, especially among the Assyrians.

Still in this regard, it must be observed that the intense immigration of the Aramaic-speaking population of the Persian Azerbaijan, after the tragic events of World War I extensively influenced the dialects spoken by the Kurdistan Assyrians who in turn became the victims of drastic displacement. Their descendants, in particular those living in Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk, and Basrah, have generally opted for a dialect similar to that of Urmia except for the absence of its typical "Vocal Harmony" or "Synharmonism". Conversely, the Assyrians of Urmia have willingly adopted the picturesque folklore of the Assyrians of Kurdistan in the form of some variegated festive costumes, and particular dance steps, not unlike those used by the Kurds.

Unfortunately, the disappearance of the dialects of Kurdistan Assyrians is tied up closely with the disappearance of the more authentic contents of Nestorian folklore, like the love songs, the wedding hymns, and the war songs that since time immemorial have been handed down from one generation to the next among the mountain Christians. It is a well-known

fact that only Kurdistan Nestorian population groups and above all those who enjoyed equal status with the Moslem Kurds— i.e., the ashiret or warlike tribes originally of the Turkish vilayet of Hakkari— have known how to keep their own folklore intact from Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish or Persian influences.

This heritage, on the way to extinction, merits being gathered and studied, but presently it is rather difficult to find reliable informants. The younger generation treats it all with indifference, as if it were old-fashioned, while among the old people, only a few know how to explain the sense of an old song or how to give the location of this or that place-name in an ancestral territory that no one has had access or reason to revisit since World War I.

Over thirty years ago, the well-known French Kurdologist, Thomas Bois, voiced the impression that no one among the Assyrians knew how to sing a love song in his mother tongue any more. On looking further back into the past, we can see that research conditions were even less favorable than at the present time. The insecure nature of communication routes, along with the suspicious nature of the Nestorians, made the task of gathering their oral traditions quite a risky undertaking. The few Westerners who ventured into their inaccessible mountain fastnesses either visited them hurriedly, or, as was the case with some American and English missionaries, were moved to do so almost always because of religious motives.

The fact remains that whatever meager evidence of popular Assyrian poetry that we have, has never been gathered on the spot in genuine Nestorian surroundings, but rather in marginal areas or even in far distant localities.

In 1869, in Damascus, the Semitist and Kurdologist Albert Socin chanced to meet a poverty-stricken Nestorian basket-weaver, a certain Isho by name, son of Dastu from the village of Talana, one of the villages of the Gelu tribe. Like most of his fellow tribesmen who lived in the poorest and highest territory of the inaccessible mountain Massif that extends from the high basin of the Great Zab down to the borders of Iran, the basket-weaver had left his village after 13th September, the Feast of the Cross, and would not return there until the beginning of the following May, after the springtime thaw, and after having wandered all over the Neareast. Iso, who other than the Neo-Aramaic dialect of Gelu knew only Kurdish, very willingly dictated two stories to Socin, as well as 16 extremely brief poetic pieces

each composed of a verse made up of three septenary monorhymes.

This kind of verse form was already known: it had already been noted in learned Neo-Aramaic poetry about 1600. New, instead, seemed the "literary" form of these tiny compositions with crystal-clear images of mountain life, like rapid sketches, that relayed an amorous message, or described an action born of melancholy, pride, passion, peevishness or good-willed derision.

The following year, 1870, Albert Socin visited the Chaldean villages of the plainland at the foot of the mountains to the Northwest of Mosul: Telkef, Alqos, Dehok and Qasafirr. Here, his curiosity still earnest due to his Damascus encounter, the German orientalist expressly asked if he could hear some popular poetry recited. In the mar Yaqo convent of the French Dominican fathers at Qasafirr, Socin's crave was quenched to his great surprise by the blind rhapsodist who had just finished dictating to him a penitential sermon by the poet Toma Singari. The blind cantor, believing him to be a priest, held as most unbecoming Socin's interest in the kind of poetry best regarded as somewhat immoderate. Socin, incidentally, was never to know that the old cantor was no other than Dawid Kora of Nuhadra (who died at Mosul in 1889), of whom numerous religious hymns and enchanting verse fables have been published. "Blind David" was the most famous Neo-Aramaic poet of his day.

Socin's collection of popular poetry was a rather full one, and was published under the title of *Fellihlieder*, "Songs of the Fellih", that is, of Christian villagers of the plainland, as the Moslems of the nearby city of Mosul call them. How could these songs be defined? Socin liked to call them *Schnadahupfl*, as if they had something in common with the songs Bavarian peasants sang to accompany the rhythms of group dancers. However, the German scholar did not lose sight of the fact that these verses had not originated on the plainland. Disguised by the local dialect, in fact, too many expressions and words of Kurdish derivation appeared, far more familiar to Nestorian mountain folk than to Chaldean villagers who, unlike the Assyrians, fell under the influence of Arabic. From this he deduced that they really reflected the folklore of the people of the highlands, in particular the Assyrians of high Kurdistan, "die das Hochgebirge bewohnenden Aramaer", which were reminiscent of the recitations by the basket-weaver of Gelu, whom he had met in Damascus the year before. Furthermore, this tradition must have been extremely old, for at the time of his visit it had already lost much of its original meaning, both among the Nestorians of Persia and Jacobites of Tur 'Abdin, in Turkish high Mesopotamia.

A journey, which I made at Eastertime, 1972, through the province (qada') of 'Amadiya about fifty kilometers northeast of Dehok, allowed me the opportunity of establishing that only a small part of the compositions collected by Socin more than a century ago were, in fact, destined for the dance. In the Nestorian village of Bebede, a few kilometers west of 'Amadiya, I happened to be invited to a wedding reception (xlula), at which I was able to listen to the execution of love songs, called zmiryata-d rawe, which corresponded exactly to those collected by Socin.

They belonged to a song form we can describe as amoebaeen. While on the threshing floor, the young men and the girls, linked hand in large dance circles, followed the obsessive rhythm of a drum "dahula" and a fife "zurua", the older guests, gathered together in the diwanxana around the wedding couple, formed two groups and, in turns, started to sing a verselet with a strangely archaic tune. The melodic beat was repeated three times and embraced each line as well as the first accented word of the following line, which means that each word was pronounced twice. It had a modal tune, achieved by means of using chromatics at small intervals, executed with a surprising speed. You had the impression that the width between the highest note and the lowest never exceeded the interval our major sixth would make, even if the most important part of this tune appeared to be limited within the span of a major fourth.

Once the stornello was finished, those present showed their appreciation as to the choice of the theme and its execution by singing out a series of stressed "o"s that finished up on a series of high and extremely sharp "iii"s. At this point, the second group of singers started the stornello that they considered as being more appropriate to go with the preceding one, and in the end, waited for the applause of the bystanders. This give-and-take continued for hours, with short intervals here and there for something to eat, and to drink a sort of local grappa (eau-de-vie).

In effect, in Socin's collection the zmiryata-d rawe constitute the major type document. However, besides these stornelli, one can find extracts of songs of a different nature and of wider validity: fragments of a warlike song about the brave 'Awdiso, and portions of qassiyata, verse tales, which are singable in co-ordination with dancing.

Upon my return to Baghdad, I looked about for someone who could recite me some songs like the ones I had heard at Bebede. After various fruitless attempts amongst Assyrian city-dwellers —but, unfortunately, they had been

city-dwellers for too long -- I turned to those of more recent arrival from the district of Barwari Bala, a little more to the North of 'Amadiya. It was in this way that I realized that the district (nahiya) of Barwari Bala and part of the neighboring districts represent the last strip of Kurdistan territory still populated by autochthonous Nestorians. These are the sons and grandsons of those who, abandoned the area at the end of 1914, and returned by 1920.

I finally chose as my informant one of the few survivors of the tragic exodus of 1914: Gewargis, son of Bukko, son of Muse. Born about 1897 at 'Emume/Kani Masi ("the Spring of Fish"), the main village in the Barwari Bala district, Gewargis had lived there with various interruptions until a little after the outbreak of Kurdish-Arab hostilities on 11 November 1961.

This austere and strong, venerable old man, dictated to me only these *zmiryata-d rawe* that he held becoming for a man of his age and reputation. Alas, the number we know of such *rawe* is terribly limited.

Notes:

1. Those who would like to expand their reading on this particular subject are invited to consult my original article "*Zmiryata-D Rawe: Stornelli degli Aramei Kurdistan*", published in Italian with full notes and comments in *Scritti in onore di Giuliano Bonfante*, pp. 639-663, Brescia(Italy), Paideia Editrice, 1976.
2. Concerning the word *Rawe*, which recurs several times in my original text, I had written that, unfortunately, its etymology eluded me. After further investigation, however, I have been able to determine its derivation once and for all. The word *Rawe* comes from Arabic *Rawiy*(), indicating "the letter which remains the same throughout the entire poem and binds the verses together, so as to form one whole () to bind fast", cf. W. Wright, "A Grammar of the Arabic Language", vol. II, Cambridge, At the University Press, 1967. Section 194, p. 352.

Therefore, banda-d rawe means " a monorhyme strophe and zmiryata-d rawe means "monorhyme songs".

3. As for the Italian word stornello, also found, several times in the original article, there is this to say: this kind of poem, " a short (usually three-lined) popular Italian verse form" (See Chambers' Twentieth Century Dictionary), is known by this Italian name even in English, and so I have chosen to retain it here.

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