

ROUNDTABLE

The Existential Threat of Academic Bias: The Institutionalization of Anti-Assyrian Rhetoric

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Epistemic violence, that is, violence exerted against or through knowledge, is probably one of the key elements in any process of domination. It is not only through the construction of exploitative economic links or the control of the politico-military apparatuses that domination is accomplished, but also and, I would argue, most importantly through the construction of epistemic frameworks that legitimise and enshrine those practices of domination.¹

Since the (re)discovery of Mesopotamia and Assyria by the Western world in the early-middle 19th century, there have been a variety of shifts in the demography, culture, and politics of the region. These shifts accompanied the external or etic views of peoples and communities of the region that influenced the local emic identities and perceptions of self and other. Over time, Western scholars and scholars from the region shaped narratives of history, culture, language, and heritage that often subsumed, relegated, or negated entirely the experiences and histories of marginalized and minoritized groups of the Middle East including, but not limited to, the Assyrians. Much of this is done through epistemic violence and is steeped, for the purposes of this paper, in language.

Some readers may recognize, as Edward Said once aptly noted, that this Orientalism, as he termed it, is supported by “institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles.”² Once this is done repetitively,

Knowledge no longer requires application to reality; knowledge is what gets passed on silently, without comment, from one text to another. Ideas are propagated and disseminated anonymously, they are repeated without attribution; they have literally become *Idée reçue*: what matters is that they are there, to be repeated, echoed, and re-echoed uncritically.³

Although Said suggested that this process created an accepted view of the “other,” the definition does not seem to be applied equally. In fact, the trend in Middle East studies has become to accept and promote those majoritarian narratives of the Middle East as a response to Western Orientalism. Unfortunately, this is done just as uncritically, as it assumes that the Middle East has no agency. This poses an epistemic and empirical conundrum whereby history and historiography of the region that are written to counter Western,

¹ Enrique Galván-Álvarez, “Epistemic Violence and Retaliation: The Issue of Knowledges in Mother India,” *Atlantis Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies* 32, no. 2 (2010): 11.

² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Vintage Books, 1978), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 116.

Orientalist, and often racist narratives of people and places in the Middle East also sometimes can exclude, unimagine, and minoritize other communities in the region.

Although epistemic violence has existed throughout human history, its codification, application of its practice, and propagation are issues that should be confronted and reified in exclusionary academic discourse.⁴ Recent responses to these phenomena reflect a decolonizing process that has only recently, and not without contention, gained limited traction in modern Middle East studies.⁵ The normalization and propagation in academia of such epistemic violence has led to the denigration, marginalization, minoritization, and, in some cases, an existential threat to the very existence of some communities, the Assyrians as a case in point.

Ontological Construction and Denial of Legitimacy: Problematizing Textual Accounts and Nomenclatures

Epistemic violence is manifested through a variety of forms, oral and written, from accepted nomenclature to the canonizing of definitions and the usage of textual symbols. The *diple periestigmene* (antilambda) originated in ancient Greece and was used to denote something dubious. It questions validity, relevance, and significance.⁶ Today, they are known as “scare quotes.” The usage of scare quotes, combined with standard nomenclature and definitions, can serve to denigrate or negate the existence of those written about. Examples of their usage in scholarly works on Assyrians abound, as illustrated in quotes below by European and American scholars of Syriac studies in reference to Assyrian self-identification:

I refer here to the link created between modern “Assyrians” and the ancient Assyrians of Nineveh known to readers of the Old Testament. In modern times, Syrian children have been named “Sargon,” “Nebuchadnezzar,” etc.; the winged lions of Nineveh have appeared as national symbols; and, in short, the name is now inseparable from a whole bogus ethnology.⁷

My immediate response to many of these claims of continuity is: *hogwash*. As others have pointed out, Western missionaries to the region in the nineteenth century introduced the idea that the indigenous Christians were an ancient race, or the remains of Nineveh, to steal from the title of A. H. Layard’s book on the archeology of the region which also makes such suggestions.⁸

“Bogus” and “hogwash” are loaded terms and apparatuses meant to illicit a sense of skepticism regarding Assyrians’ sense of self and community. Such strategies of violence adopted and reiterated across generations by scholars have become epistemological and ontological methods for studying the Assyrians and their respective communities. They also reflect deep-seated and racialized power hierarchies that shift the sense of identity and belonging from that of

⁴ Concerning appropriation of Mesopotamian heritage by Iraq see Mariam Georgis, “Nation and Identity Construction in Modern Iraq: (Re)inserting the Assyrians,” in *Unsettling Colonial Modernity in Islamicate Contexts*, ed. Siavash Saffari et al. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2017), 82, referring to the seminal work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan Education UK, 1988): 24–28.

⁵ See Sargon Donabed and Daniel Tower, “Reframing Indigeneity: The Case of Assyrians in Northern Mesopotamia,” *Perspectives on History*, 56, no. 1 (2018):18–20.

⁶ Megan Garber, “The Scare Quote,” *Atlantic*, 23 December 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/12/the-scare-quote-2016-in-a-punctuation-mark/511319>.

⁷ J. F. Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1992), 366n12. The italics are my addition.

⁸ Adam H. Becker, “The Ancient Near East in the Late Antique Near East: Syriac Christian Appropriation of the Biblical Past,” in *Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Pasts in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Gregg Gardner and Kevin Osterloh (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 393.

members of the community to a Eurocentric view, held by white scholars, on telling the community who they are or are not. Such rhetoric is then recycled in almost robotic fashion.

In Syriac communities today, one encounters various cultural identity markers that are derived ultimately from ancient Assyria. Syriac children are named Sennacherib, Sargon, and Nebuchadnezzar. The winged lions of Nineveh fly proudly on the Assyrian Christian flag. Christians have dedicated a bronze statue of Assurbanipal to the city of San Francisco.⁹

Such accepted academic parlance has been likewise adopted by scholars from the Middle East in their works on the Assyrian community. In 1974, this very same journal, the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, published an article by Iraqi Arab writer Khaldun Husry. The text dealt with the Simele massacre of 1933. This event, despite being the first military campaign of the independent Kingdom of Iraq that saw three to six thousand innocent and unarmed Assyrians massacred and over one hundred villages razed and looted, was and is still today in academic contexts, referred to as “the Assyrian affair.” The Simele massacre shaped state-society relations in Iraq principally by cementing the power of the military in Iraqi politics as an instrument of repression.¹⁰ The US ambassador to Iraq at the time conveyed the jubilant response to the massacre, noting:

One section of the victorious Iraqi army returning from the front is now quartered at Mosul, and another section is arriving at Baghdad today. Mosul gave an enthusiastic welcome to its allotment. Triumphal arches were erected, decorated with watermelons shaped as [Assyrian] skulls into which daggers were thrust and with red streamers suspended, intended, it is assumed, to represent blood.¹¹

It was the violent actions of the nascent Iraqi state, led by army officer Bakr Sidqi in the Simele massacre, as well as the genocide of the Assyrian, Greek, and Armenian Christian populations, that led Raphael Lemkin to Madrid in 1933 to present on the nature of the crimes of barbarism and vandalism that were eventually codified in the Genocide Convention of 1948. Recalling the event in a two-part article for *IJMES*, Husry was critical of “the propaganda of the victims.”¹² In no uncertain terms he questioned the number of murdered Assyrians as “greatly exaggerated.”¹³ Husry detailed the celebrations in honor of the army’s return from the massacre, noting,

On 26 August practically the entire city turned out to welcome the army units returning after completion of their operations against the Assyrians. Thousands upon thousands of men, women, and children filled the streets, the squares, and rooftops of the city, bringing everything to standstill for hours. The immense crowds cheered deliriously as the troops marched through the capital. Men, women, and children showered flowers and rose water on them from roof tops. The writer well remembers that on that day he and his sister were allowed to pick all the roses and flowers of their garden, filling every available basket and container at home, then scattering their contents on the heads of the marching troops from the balcony of a doctor’s clinic overlooking Rashid Street.

⁹ Aaron Michael Butts, “Assyrian Christians,” in *A Companion to Assyria*, ed. Eckart in E. Frahm (Malden: Wiley, 2017), 605–6.

¹⁰ Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 62–63.

¹¹ Paul Knabenshue, US ambassador to Iraq, to Secretary of State, “Suppression of Assyrian Revolt,” 23 August 1933, no. 165, 890g.4016 Assyrians/82, General Records of the Department of State, Division of Near Eastern Affairs, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹² Khaldun Husry, “The Assyrian Affair of 1933 (I),” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5, no. 2 (1974): 170.

¹³ Khaldun Husry, “The Assyrian Affair of 1933 (II),” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5, no. 3 (1974): 353.

He illustrates his own predisposition in this *IJMES* article, “The writer met Bakr Sidqi for the first time a few days after his return from Mosul. When he patted me on the shoulder and asked me what I wanted to be when I finished school I said: an army officer.”¹⁴

By way of background, Khaldun Husry was the son of Sati’ al-Husri. Born in Yemen to a prominent and wealthy family from Aleppo, the elder al-Husri went on to become the director of general education in Iraq from 1922 to 1927. An ardent Arab nationalist, he was the architect of the then newly established Iraqi educational system that advocated the forceful propagation of Arab nationalism as a process for controlling and ultimately eradicating Iraq’s multiethnic mosaic, lamenting that “Only by removing the child from the family and the village and subjugating him to a nationalist education and military training could his loyalty be reoriented toward the nation.”¹⁵ Such orientations reflected the institutionalization of Arab Iraqi nationalism in an era of regional diffusion of Arab nationalism in response to colonialism. These nationalist ideological manifestations of what and who the people of Iraq were imagined to be became cemented rubrics—a stark contrast to the ethnic, cultural, and religious prism through which many Iraqis view their society.

Biases in the academy and scholarship produced on minoritized or marginalized and indigenous peoples in the Middle East have impeded the acceptance of alternative non-majoritarian narratives. In addition to “state-sponsored xenophobia that attempts to codify a largely heterogeneous region under a simple handful of identities based on politically driven nation-states,” these engrained and persistent majoritarian narratives reproduce generations of scholars forged in a crucible of exclusionary ontological worldviews as accepted vocabulary. The diffusion of this process across the academy and generations of scholars has “indoctrinated minoritized communities over time, usually through an educational system, causing division, loss of self,” etc.¹⁶ With Assyrians, this is most often seen through sectarian divisions that have come to equal a type of self-Balkanization that is then further entrenched by scholarship.¹⁷ Moreover, their very identification attracts a more active denial, as being “too politically charged.” The irony of dismissive attitudes to minoritized histories oddly mirrors the very act of research in state and colonial archives, which, by definition, is political knowledge production.¹⁸

Accepted Sectarian Nomenclature: Orientalizing Assyrians

Below, I offer firsthand accounts as vignettes of encounters and interactions of my lived experience as an Assyrian scholar amid the continuity of epistemic violence. This experiential perspective treats personal interactions as constitutive of field sites and so applicable to research.¹⁹ While researching my dissertation, it became apparent that certain terms and phrases concerning Assyrians were extant. This was explained as a set of academically “accepted truisms” that essentialized Assyrians without recognition of emic perspectives:

1. *Assyrians are Nestorians* from the Hakkari mountains in Turkey.
2. Only *Nestorians* (who are not native to Iraq) are Assyrians.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 352.

¹⁵ Sati’ al-Husri, “al-Khidma al-‘Askariyya wa-l-Tarbiya al-‘Amma,” a speech delivered in Baghdad in 1934, in *Mudhakkirati fi al-‘Iraq*, (Beirut: Dar al-Tali’a, 1967–68), vol. 2, 312–13.

¹⁶ Sargon Donabed, “Persistent Perseverance: A Trajectory of Assyrian History in the Modern Age,” in *Routledge Handbook on Minorities in the Middle East*, ed. Paul Rowe (New York: Routledge, 2018), 115–17.

¹⁷ See Sargon Donabed and Shamiran Mako, “Ethno-Cultural and Religious Identity of Syrian Orthodox Christians,” *Chronos* 19 (2009): 69–111; and Mardaeen Isaac, “The Assyrian Identity, the Assyrian ‘Nation,’ and their Representation in Syriac Studies,” *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 27, no. 1–2 (2013): 5–35.

¹⁸ Portions of the last two paragraphs are drawn from Donabed, “Persistent Perseverance,” 115–17.

¹⁹ Melding these two paths draws inspiration from stories shared in the collection of essays by Peter Krause and Ora Szekeley, *Notes from the Field: A Guide to Navigating Fieldwork in Political Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

3. They are *better referred* to under more neutral and less political terms like *Iraqi Christians* (or by ecclesiastical grouping).
4. Their own experiences and self-histories are *fantastical tales, nationalist polemics* and cannot be objective.²⁰

The dissertation, and later monograph, was a work of deep ethnography that relied on community sources for interviews, personal memoirs, and the utilization of Assyrian language sources both in modern Assyrian and classical (ecclesiastical) texts, as well as colonial archives, alongside Arabic and Kurdish sources.²¹ The monograph was published in 2015 and reviewed in 2016 in the *American Historical Review* by a scholar of colonial Iraq:

The account of Assyrian identity politics is ambitious and intriguing. Yet it is at times patchy and unclear. Part of this is the result of the somewhat ambiguous and politically contentious meaning attached to the term “Assyrian,” which the author does not always qualify. This term has been used to indicate the followers of the Nestorian Church, one of the Christian denominations represented in Iraq, as well as more generally Eastern Christians as members of an ethnic group united by their ancient liturgical language. As a racial marker “Assyrian” is central to the semantic toolkit of Christian ethno-nationalism that started to develop after the First World War.²²

Scare quotes (antilambda) around the word Assyrian connote the dubious nature of the term in the writer’s mind, who chooses to sectarianize Assyrians to solely “Nestorians,” a pejorative term given to members of the Assyrian Church of the East, which they do not accept. Likewise, Christian ethno-nationalism serves to denigrate and disengage with the history of violence, dispossession, displacement, and genocide in the Middle East. This delegitimizes community sources and non-colonial, nondominant scholarship on marginalized communities and populations. On page 3 of *Reforging*, contrary to the description in the aforementioned review of the book, I define Assyrians as follows:

Geographically, Assyrians are a transnational population indigenous to northern Mesopotamia (effectively ancient Assyria and its environs), part of today’s northern Iraq, southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran and northeastern Syria. They speak Assyrian, sometimes referred to as a modern form of Mesopotamian Aramaic (also more commonly in scholarly parlance as Neo-Aramaic and Neo-Syriac), with a heavy Akkadian influence (both Akkadian and Aramaic were official languages in the ancient Neo-Assyrian Empire, which flourished from 934 bc to approximately 600 bc) as well as utilizing classical Syriac as an ecclesiastical tongue. Today many continue to affiliate with one of the following Christian religious communities: the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Assyrian Church of the East (referred to as Nestorian), the Syrian Orthodox Church (referred to as Jacobite and originally in English as Assyrian Apostolic) and the Syrian Catholic Church. In the past two millennia, the Assyrians have been more widely known by their ecclesiastical designations, increasingly balkanised, mostly due to their incorporation into Muslim-dominated states.²³

Furthermore, footnote 9 on page 22 reads,

²⁰ Sargon Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History: Iraq and the Assyrians in the Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 39. The italics have been inserted for this article.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Nelida Fuccaro, review of *Reforging a Forgotten History: Iraq and the Assyrians in the Twentieth Century*, by Sargon George Donabed, *American Historical Review* 121, no. 4 (2016), 1395.

²³ Donabed, *Reforging*, 3.

The most common endonym or autonym used cross-denominationally by Assyrian commoners and elites alike in the twenty-first century is Sūrōyō/Sūrāyā (western/eastern dialects) to refer to themselves and Sūrayt/Sūreth to denote their native tongue. Both are derived directly from the Neo-Assyrian word (going back to at least the seventh century bc) [Assūrāyu], which “had a shorter variant [Sūrāyu] in the seventh century.”²⁴

The book also details a discussion of Western misconstruction of Assyrians as a homogenous group. At the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, one group of Assyrians put forth a list of claims that defined the Assyrians not only being of various eastern Christian communities, but also comprised of certain Muslim tribes and Yezidis.²⁵

The issues illuminated here are structural. They harken back to Said and the act of “re-echoing uncritically.” To borrow a supposition from the Maori indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, “If there is no scope for storying our own truth, then there is little hope for reimagining Indigenous self-determination beyond racist institutional rhetoric.”²⁶ Hormuzd Rassam, a native Assyrian archaeologist, expressed this in English to the Western world: “This is the more so, as the doctrinal misnomer of Nestorians has been fastened on them, though they have never had any connection with that harshly-used prelate, either in his nationality or spiritual charge.”²⁷ Rassam, who worked alongside Austin Henry Layard to excavate many regions of ancient Assyria, attempted to express to the West that these people were Assyrian, and were far more diverse than most peoples of the region; “the whole of the Christian community now inhabiting the country above alluded to are divided into four different sects, having, in my opinion, the same Chaldean or Assyrian origin; but they are now styled Chaldean Nestorians, Chaldean Catholics, Syrian Jacobites, and Syrian Catholics.”²⁸

On 23 February 2015, in the governorate of Hasakah in Syria, over 253 Assyrians from thirty-five different villages along the Khabur River were kidnapped by Islamic State (IS/Da'esh) fighters who overran their villages, destroying their houses and churches. As IS expelled Assyrians from their ancestral lands, they also destroyed ancient Assyrian sites and artifacts in the process. In response to this, on March 25, 2015 a panel on “Ancient Christian Communities and Current Events” was organized at the Center for Middle East Studies at Harvard University. Four scholars (I among them) discussed the situation of IS growth and its path of destruction. During the discussion, one of the panelists held up a copy of a recent book, randomly citing ways in which Western Protestants affected the emic identity of Assyrians.²⁹ A local scholar commented on how profound the Western missionary influence on “these Christians” was, and how this helped them construct their identity. When uneasiness broke out in the audience and two attendees questioned the remark, the initial commenter hastily corrected himself, “What I meant was that missionaries gave them [Assyrians] critical thinking.”

This sense of superiority has been around since the early missions, as reflected in Thomas Laurie’s work when describing missionary encounters with native Assyrians whom he refers to solely as Nestorians of Persia: “It set them to thinking. It woke up faculties previously dormant.”³⁰ Yet what is more problematic is the way in which such denigrating perspectives are echoed and reproduced in contemporary academic settings. Recall here the bogus/hog-wash comments at the onset of this article that “others have pointed out”

²⁴ Ibid., 22.

²⁵ Ibid., 69.

²⁶ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 3rd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2021), xx.

²⁷ Hormuzd Rassam, *Asshur and the Land of Nimrod* (London: Curts and Jennings, 1897), 167.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ The book was Adam Becker’s *Revival and Awakening: American Evangelical Missionaries in Iran and the Origins of Assyrian Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

³⁰ Thomas Laurie, *Woman and Her Saviour in Persia* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1865), 83.

continuing uncritical scholarship steeped in orientalism and thus engaging in epistemic violence.

These encounters, both past and present, beg the question: Were local populations not aware of who and what they were prior to Western encounters? Certainly, the missionaries had a profound impact, partly positive, but overwhelmingly negative, in that their presence was to further divide the community between those who followed the “true path” and those that were unenlightened. The mere suggestion that some peoples and communities of the colonized other had lesser faculties that only formed following contact with “the West,” which ignited their self-awareness, reflects engrained racism within the academic parlance with regard to marginalized and minoritized communities of the Middle East—and the Assyrians in this case—especially as it links to other indigenous cases.

Just knowing that someone measured our “faculties” by filling the skulls of our ancestors with millet seeds and compared the amount of millet seed to the capacity for mental thought offends our sense of who and what we are. It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us. It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations.³¹

Conclusion

“To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture.”³² Frantz Fanon understood that such a system, steeped in epistemic violence, created a hierarchy. Sometimes that is the language of the majority, be it Arabic or Kurdish or Turkish, or English. There also is the language of the academy. Recall here Sati‘ al-Husri and his son Khaldun.

The aspiration to argue the neglect (or demonization) of the Assyrians in academic space through the language of academia would make sense to a community attempting to assert some semblance of agency. Fanon knew this to be futile. Audrey Lorde famously remarked that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.³³ Utilizing the tools of an academy that has, through epistemic violence, made Assyrians negligible, cannot legitimize Assyrians. Linda Tuhiwai Smith ponders, “It is because of these issues that I ask the question, ‘Is history in its modernist construction important or not important for Indigenous peoples?’”³⁴ Smith as a Maori, and I as an Assyrian, answer identically: No. “History is not about *right* but about *power*.”³⁵

³¹ Smith, *Decolonizing*, 1.

³² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (London: Pluto, 1986), 38.

³³ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Random House, 2012), 112.

³⁴ Smith, *Decolonizing*, 37.

³⁵ *Ibid.*