

Patterns of migrant post-memory: the politics of remembering the Sayfo

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Abstract

The Sayfo (or genocide) is remembered in Western Europe by diasporic communities of Arameans, Assyrians and Chaldeans in a variety of ways. Descendants of victims of systematic massacre of Christians by Turks and Kurds in 1915 have developed identities in the context of diaspora post-memory and reflection on a shared history of persecution and violence. A significant problem for diasporic communities is the danger of forgetting the Sayfo and the manipulation of post-memory. The intergenerational transmission of the Sayfo is subject to revision in the context of the changing political and cultural environments of migrant communities, and the migration from Eastern Turkey to Western Europe in the 1970s has had a profound effect on the culture, communication and politics of remembering the Sayfo.

Keywords: diaspora, migration, oral tradition, politics of remembering, post-memory, Sayfo

Introduction

It is 100 years since the Sayfo,¹ or genocide, of Arameans, Assyrians and Chaldeans in Eastern Turkey. Generations of descendants of the victims of the violence now living in the diaspora must keep alive the memory of the brutal massacres and religious hatreds. In this article we are interested in the intergenerational transmission of memory of the Sayfo within Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean diaspora communities in Western Europe. We want to understand how memory of the Sayfo is transmitted within such communities to those family members whose ancestors were survivors of the event, but who were not themselves survivors of or witnesses to the Sayfo. Such community members have access to the recall of witnesses of the Sayfo through what Hirsch calls 'post-memory' that involves the intergenerational act of memory transfer and the resonant after-effects of a trauma experienced by other generations (Hirsch 2008, p. 106). We are interested in a politics of remembering trauma by diaspora communities that is organised by current generations for keeping the memory of the history of their own communities alive. Post-memory and intergenerational remembrance are factors in the formation and development of a diaspora identity, but there is a danger that history may be forgotten, avoided or manipulated for the sake of community-based politics.

In this article we provide an overview of the historical conditions of the Sayfo; following that we examine questions of the phenomenon of post-memory and identity in the diaspora. In our interviews with four generations of families affected by the massacres, we discovered two key issues in diasporic community politics of remembering the Sayfo. The first issue concerns collective memory and rituals of remembrance in the Aramean/Assyrian/Chaldean communities in Western Europe. These have been affected by the act of migration and relocation in an alien culture. The second issue is rhapsodism. We found that, in the diasporic communities, the remembering of the Sayfo is predominantly transmitted orally in the form of

a performance by the communities' rhapsodists. These findings are the subject of the final two sections of the article.

The historical conditions of the Sayfo

The Sayfo, the original trauma of 1915, is an event in the late Ottoman Empire that resulted in the extermination of around 500,000 Arameans, Assyrians and Chaldeans, amounting to more than 90 per cent of the total number that previously lived in Eastern Turkey (Gaunt 2006; Schaller and Zimmerer 2008; Lemarchand 2011). The Sayfo is sometimes called the 'Aramean/Assyrian Genocide' or wrongly defined as the Armenian genocide (Gaunt 2006). The Sayfo goes beyond the Aramean/Assyrian genocide to also include the extermination of the Chaldeans—a related yet distinct Mesopotamian people. It is also different from the Armenian genocide, not only because it targeted and attempted to annihilate a different set of communities and identities but also because the background and structure of the events were different. Some similarities need to be acknowledged, however. The two genocides took place in similar contexts in an overlapping timespan. Both occurred during World War One around Turkey, and were carried out by similar groups of perpetrators. Both involved mass, sustained and indiscriminate killing and often periods of escalating numbers of murders of individuals and whole communities. Both genocides occurred under Ottoman rule and followed what Bloxham calls 'the demographic Islamization of the empire' (2003, p. 146) after Muslim refugees flooded into their traditional homelands from the Balkans and the Caucasus. A significant factor was radical Turkish nationalism, an ideology of ethnic exclusivity that ultimately resulted in the near-annihilation or forced assimilation of non-Turkish communities.

The Armenian genocide and the Sayfo are, however, different in the sense that the Arameans, Assyrians and Chaldeans did not, and do not, have a state or nation of their own. They were not constituted by a nationalist movement, nor were they a potential ally of Russia as the Armenians were. The Young Turks movement—a group of young military officers that, after the defeat in the first Balkan War, had come seize Ottoman power via a coup—sought to eliminate ethnic minorities in the name of Turkish nationalism (Horowitz 1980, p. 46; Ekmekcioglu 2013, p. 525). In the Armenian genocide, the Young Turks, disturbed by the decline of Ottoman power, typically justified their violence against the Armenians as an issue of national security and fear of the potential loss of strategic territory. In contrast to their attitude to the Armenians, who had a state and battled for territory, the Young Turks did not perceive the Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean communities as dangerous, since they lacked the support of an international lobby and could not be called a nation or state (Schaller and Zimmerer 2008). The massacre, therefore, should more properly be seen in terms of 'ethnic cleansing' or religious hatreds, as well as in terms of local, often Kurdish, perpetrators seizing fertile land and women—therein encouraged, in 1915, by the Ottoman regime. Schaller and Zimmerer note that today, 'the suffering of the Assyrians is largely forgotten internationally and not recognised as genocide, which embitters the descendants of the victims' (2008, p. 11). This bitterness is an important factor in the need to remember and in the modes of remembering.

In contrast with the Armenian genocide, the Sayfo is not characterised by expulsions, deportations, resettlements and death marches (Bloxham 2003, p. 181). Instead, the Arameans, Assyrians and Chaldeans were massacred as civilians in or near their homes, in their villages, by both military forces and their Kurdish neighbours, typically as the result of initiatives by local governments and party officials (Schaller and Zimmerer 2008, p. 11). Although Kurdish communities themselves were often forcibly removed by the Young Turks regime during the events of 1915, the Kurdish chiefs and their gangs of perpetrators were willing participants in genocidal massacres and the beneficiaries of extensive plundering of the property of Arameans, Assyrians and Chaldeans. In the aftermath of the Sayfo, survivors,

without a state or nation or ‘memory associations’ (Ibreck 2010, p. 333) of their own, were persecuted peoples in an authoritarian Turkey that ‘silenced the facts’ and ‘induced forgetting’ (Ricoeur 2004, p. 471; Viejo-Rose 2011, p. 427; Stone and Hirst 2014). Only when survivors and their descendants managed to obtain political asylum in Western Europe after another wave of Turkish persecution in the 1970s, were they enabled to publicly come to terms with the Sayfo. It was their new status as immigrants in Western Europe that facilitated open expressions of grief and mourning and the creation of memorials to the Sayfo, more than five decades after the original catastrophe

The relocation from Eastern Turkey to Western Europe in the 1970s and the transition from one political and cultural context to another has transformed post-memory and the culture, communication and politics of remembering the Sayfo. Hirsch points out that even the most intimate familial knowledge of the original trauma is mediated by broadly available public images, metaphors and narratives (Hirsch 2008, p. 112). In Western Europe, Arameans, Assyrians and Chaldeans came to enjoy the legal rights of European states. They were able to assert their cultural rights and, through their struggle for recognition of the Sayfo, generated ‘the growth of memory culture’ (Hirsch 2008, p. 111). The Western European context and the rise of global media also made possible the frequent reporting of the persecution and terrorising of Aramean/Assyrian/Chaldean minorities, as well as other Christian minorities such as the Copts in Egypt, and other minority groups in the Middle East and in former Mesopotamian regions. This has had a significant impact on diaspora politics and modes of remembering the Sayfo. In diaspora communities today, there is a strong collective anxiety that in the same tribal region of their homeland, Christian communities are once again under attack and a new genocide is looming. Post-memory and a diaspora communal politics of remembering, and a struggle for recognition of the Sayfo in Western Europe, functions, among other issues, as a reminder of ongoing strategies of extermination in the homeland. It is not only a reminder of past atrocities, but also of a continuing threat. Post-memory of the Sayfo may be transformed into action and resistance in Western Europe. Media coverage about atrocities committed by the so-called Islamic State in the Middle East has, for instance, inspired actions in support of Aramean/Assyrian/Chaldean solidarity that have translated into hunger strikes in the Netherlands.

Post-memory and identity in the diaspora

Post-memory, as Hirsch (2008, p. 106) explains it, is memory transmitted to those who were not actually there to live the event. It forms a pattern of intergenerational and trans-generational transmission of the original recall of witnesses, through which subsequent generations remember the event by means of stories, images, and behaviours that they encountered as they grew up. The communication of post-memory through fragmented flashes of imagery establishes a living connection between generations (Hirsch 2008, p. 110). The remembrance, recording, commemoration and forgetting of events in general, and of traumatic violence in particular, must be understood as practical activities motivated by an interest in influencing collective memory as a way of organising an identity through conscious acceptance of a community’s moral attitudes and political sensibilities (Ricoeur 2004; Connerton 2008). Activities of remembering through processes of post-memory create ambivalence and generate ambiguities in the sense of belonging (Donskis 2012, p. 34). Post-memory of a genocide in particular, Hirsch (2008, p. 112) points out, often has practical implications. The next generation—not only the children of survivors, but also the following generation—typically want to assert their own victimhood alongside that of their parents in an ongoing struggle of recognition, a battle against forgetting, and, in the case of migrants, the risk of alienation from the homeland and its culture.

Migration from an authoritarian state that enforces its own politics of remembering and forgetting and denies the right to remember, to a state that grants freedom of expression has important implications for the intergenerational and trans-generational transfer of knowledge and experience of the original catastrophe. The influx of diaspora communities in Western societies implies a return of the ‘tribe’, or ‘closed community’, as an actor that had once been negated and transcended by the ancient city-state (Cohen and Wertheimer 2006; Ossewaarde 2013). Diaspora communities are typically closed communities, characterised by myths of tribal origin and foundational narratives that celebrate extended family and religion, and affirm shared history, common fate, cultural continuity and survival in a hostile world (Wertheimer 2006; Chamberlain 2009). A diaspora politics of remembering within migrant communities transforms post-memory and instils in it the myths and community narratives that generate a sense of belonging far away from the original homeland. This takes place in a social context in which diaspora migrants have typically been uprooted and face language-loss and relocation of identity in their new country (Stepnisky 2005). The diaspora community risks losing an important layer of its identity when it starts forgetting the world—the myths, beliefs, values, imagination, consciousness, symbolism, in sum, the mind—of its ancestors who had suffered the original traumatic circumstances of the genocide. The construction of post-memory may contribute to the avoidance and disintegration or loss of integrity of a closed community.

In diaspora communities, particularly in the more tribal or clannish examples, post-memory is typically produced via oral traditions. Remembering the original trauma in such communities has a highly personal character, grounded in strong, primary bonds, often blood relationships. The elderly are typically endowed with the duty of transmitting memory, performing the role of a rhapsodist. The rhapsodist is the storyteller who keeps memories alive, as if (s)he is an original witness of the events, and instils a sense of moral duty in the diaspora community to pass on such witness recollections to future generations. Rhapsodists invite their listeners to discover the meaning of the events commemorated for themselves, so that community members internalise the narratives (McLeod 1999). Migration and relocation to a new world may force the rhapsodist to reconstruct post-memory to fit the actual wording of their memorising to the imagination, language and consciousness of generations who have no personal experience of the homeland and who have lost the bond with the native language and symbolism. Translating testimonies into literary forms and other languages, along with active use of (new) media, may replace the original rhapsodist act of (re-)constructing post-memory, similar to the ways in which rhapsodists were replaced by literature in the post-tribal West (Bagchi 2010). In Plato’s *Ion*, the rhapsodist is ridiculed by Socrates as a most anti-reflective, closed-minded figure who recites words (as a master of memorisation) rather than thinking. From a rhapsodist’s point of view, post-memory should not be organised in literary form because it risks diminishing the cultural vitality and peculiarity of the memories. It might also banalise the original trauma and may be thought of as a betrayal of victims’ memories (McLeod 1999). For the younger generation of diaspora migrants, however, forgetting recited details of the events may well work as a strategy for creating a new identity that enables them to break with the heavy weight of their past and allows them to survive, co-exist, or become socially mobile in a new world (Carsten 1995; Yong-Sook and Yeoh 2004).

Methods

Our study is based on inter-related Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean communities that have a family history of migration from Turkey to Western Europe in the 1970s. All these communities express a diaspora identity and enforce a sense of internal group belonging in a conscious and reflective way through a community-based politics of remembering the Sayfo. For these communities, the original homeland is the village of Bote, South-East Turkey. This

village—which included about 300 families of Arameans, Assyrians and Chaldeans that typically consisted of between 30 and 50 family members—is one of the villages that experienced the Sayfo because of its members’ ethnicity and their religious affiliations (Gaunt 2006, p. 211-212). Arameans, Assyrians and Chaldeans are inter-connected Mesopotamian, Semitic peoples. These peoples originally spoke different Aramaic dialects and called themselves Syriac-Orthodox and Chaldean. The identifications, Syriac-Orthodox and Chaldean, were based on their membership in the Syriac-Orthodox church and the Chaldean-Catholic church, which, in the Ottoman Empire, were both recognised as different milieux. Arameans, Assyrians and Chaldeans typically identified themselves as the descendants of the ancient Christian community of Antioch, but, after migrating to Western Europe following another wave of persecution in Turkey, they began questioning their own identity constructs that had been shaped in the context of the Ottoman Empire. As migrants in Western Europe, most of the Syriac-Orthodox people reported that they identified and presented themselves as ‘Aramean’ or ‘Assyrian’, while the Chaldeans continued to define themselves as Chaldeans.

We carried out semi-structured interviews with 50 respondents from transnational Aramean/Assyrian and Chaldean communities in the Netherlands, Germany and Sweden. The respondents were from four generations; the three oldest generations were born in Turkey, the youngest was born into diaspora communities. The respondents are all offspring from six original survivors of the Sayfo from the village of Bote. The six survivors had come to Western Europe with their adult sons and had by then already reached old age. They were only able to speak openly, without fear of persecution and on record for the first time about the massacres they had personally experienced in their youth in Bote when they were interviewed by an anonymous family member during the 1980s. We were permitted access to the video-recorded interviews of the original six survivors, all of whom died in the 1980s and 1990s, and treated them as respondents. Besides these six video-recorded interviews, we interviewed 11 second-generation children of these six survivors. These respondents were also born in Bote, in the aftermath of the massacre. The third-generation respondents were either born in Bote or in Midyat, a larger village not far from Bote, also in Turkey, where some families had moved to after 1915. This third generation had been granted political asylum in Western European countries and migrated with their parents and grandparents in the 1990s. The fourth generation consists of 16 respondents, all born in diasporic communities such as the Netherlands, Germany and Sweden.

During the summer of 2012 we interviewed 44 respondents in the second, third and fourth generations living in the Netherlands, Germany and Sweden. As part of the engagement, we tried to retrieve and reconstruct the narrative structure of the original recollections of survivors as they were transmitted to younger generations, and as articulated by the respondents themselves. We also opted to adapt our in-depth interview style to the particular culture, language and traditions of the diaspora communities. We conducted 44 interviews in Aramaic, since this is the native language of the original six families we selected. The fourth generation, born in diaspora, doesn’t speak Aramaic so the fourth-generation respondents were interviewed in a mix of Aramaic, Dutch, German or English (depending on the respondent). All 44 interviews were recorded on video so as to also record, in addition to speech, the emotions, the laughter and the tears of respondents, as well as more subtle expressions such as intonations. All interviews were conducted in the homes of the respondents. It was important that they felt safe, given the intensity of the emotions associated with the catastrophe they were invited to speak about. The length of the interviews differed. Second-generation respondents, whose parents had personally suffered the Sayfo, were the most outspoken; such interviews typically lasted between two and four hours. Fourth-generation respondents were the least outspoken. We opted for an open coding of the

interviews and have organised our interpretation around topics of diasporic memory, rhapsodists, parental memory and transmission of emotions.

Diasporic memory: remembering and forgetting

Our interviews revealed that successive generations of survivors and their descendants found different modes of both remembering and forgetting. The original trauma in Bote in 1915 is identified and labelled differently depending on the generation and temporal and geographical distance from both the original event. It also takes on a different meaning in a different cultural and historical context. Respondents from the first and second generations all refer to the massacre as *firman* (the sultan's order) or *sayfo* (the Islamic sword). The third- and fourth-generation respondents typically use the word 'genocide'. We argue that the use of the term 'genocide' by younger generations is a consequence of diaspora and migration. It was only after migrating from Turkey to Western Europe that those who had survived the events of 1915 had learned the word 'genocide'. Even into the 1970s, village circles in Eastern Turkey had no vocabulary appropriate for articulating the scale of the atrocities.

The community-based politics of remembering the Sayfo are not only visible in the terms and labels (*firman*, *sayfo* and genocide) the respondents themselves use to define the moral failure and catastrophic destruction of communities, but are also evident in how Arameans, Assyrians and Chaldeans, as migrants in Western Europe, define their relation to the political leadership of their new countries. The respondents living in the Netherlands mentioned that they were currently struggling for recognition of the events of 1915 as genocide. The Dutch government has recognised the Armenian genocide but has failed thus far to recognise the Sayfo. Swedish respondents, on the other hand, explained that they did not need to pursue this particular type of recognition struggle. The Swedish government, they explained, had recognised the genocide of 1915, not only for the Armenians but for all peoples who have suffered from it.

Despite the differences in forms of Western European recognition of the Sayfo, all respondents clearly felt connected to people elsewhere in the diaspora mainly because of the common foundational narrative of the original trauma their ancestors had suffered together, in the same homeland, and even the same village. Chamberlain (2009) claims that collective memory of diasporic migrants celebrates family bonds and affirms community survival. This aspect of remembering the original trauma is indeed very much in accordance with what respondents have told us. One 50-year-old male respondent living in the Netherlands illustrates the diaspora's connectedness in its relationship to the host country:

We will never forget the genocide of our people in 1915, because the fact that we live in diaspora reminds us every day. When our little children start at school in Western countries and notice that they are a minority and look different from the native children, the first questions arise. Mommy, why are we different, where are we from? Why don't we have our own country like other people? It is only a matter of time before our children receive the exact answer to these questions, meaning that we narrate the genocide of our grandparents.

(Family B, third generation).

This foundational narrative of the transnational diasporic communities signifies, as the citation illustrates, the symbolic substitute for the homeland. The Sayfo post-memory connects the communities in diaspora, either living in Sweden, the Netherlands or Germany, in a shared homeland legacy they know from recalling sometimes idyllic or romantic pictures of the village. When we asked questions about the reason for migration, respondents always

referred to the 1915 massacres in Bote, rather than, say, to poverty, unemployment or persecution in Turkey, or to other massacres and persecutions that their ancestors experienced in the Ottoman Empire prior to 1915.

Respondents claimed that international politics was a major influence on their collective memory. They claim that, although they no longer lived in Bote or Midyat, Turkey, or the Turkish regime, continued to exercise influence on their memory, if only because some Western states continued to refuse recognition of the genocide because of their political relations with the Turkish state. Many third- and fourth-generation respondents declared that they fear that, in the end, *their* genocide will eventually be completely forgotten by the world and that history will repeat itself in another genocide on Christian peoples in the region. This feeling, and the feeling of connectedness with those Christians still living in the Middle East and in former Mesopotamian regions, has grown stronger in recent years, particularly with the rise of Islamic State and their hostility to Christians and other groups in the area. Respondents believed, or at least expressed concern, that such violence towards Christians could expand and spread to the West to the point that they felt that even in diaspora they were still under attack. This feeling of being threatened—a deeply rooted feeling of lack of security or being unprotected, even in their new homeland—appears to have triggered a communal politics of forgetting in order to avoid developing awkward relationships with Turkish and Kurdish guest workers (rather than asylum seekers) who have migrated to Western Europe, and who may also be the descendants of perpetrators. One respondent expresses ambivalence about living with Turks and Kurds in Western Europe today in the following quote:

Our genocidal narratives are about rape and extreme sexual violence, forced marriages to Muslims, and the massacres of many children and even small babies. These narratives of genocide are not narratives that one can easily tell a child. You don't want your child to be scared and traumatised. As a mother you want to protect your child from the outside world and dangers. I try to make my children understand that they should not get close to Muslims without telling them all the horror stories. I hope they understand me without my having to explain. Children feel their parents' emotions, so they will notice that in the outside world we get along fine with our Muslim neighbours. But inside our homes, we repeat simple narratives to make sure that our children know they should stay away from Muslims.

(Family A, third generation)

Historical memory can be experienced as a burden in diaspora communities—a burden that may generate a strategy of forgetting certain traumatic historical details. Such selective forgetting, as the quotation above reveals, may well go hand in hand with an Islamophobic manipulation of post-memory that is grounded in the fear of the offspring of perpetrators. In the communal politics of forgetting and remembering, these alleged perpetrators are broadly labelled as 'Muslims'. In this Islamophobic politics of remembering the Sayfo, mothers appear to be the key agents of transmission of the community's feelings of fear, danger and distrust to their children, who learn at a very young age that Muslims cannot be trusted. The respondents mentioned that when they were themselves children, their mothers discouraged them from playing with Muslim classmates while at the same time encouraging them to play with Western European children who could be trusted.

This is not to say that such mothers themselves would refuse to include Muslims in their own circles. In fact, they typically do include Turks with Muslim backgrounds as acquaintances and often live in neighbourhoods in European cities that include Muslims. Despite this level of integration, respondents emphasised that Muslims are never fully to be

trusted. An important aspect of the diaspora politics of remembering the Sayfo, as we found, is self-blame in the form of attribution of imprudence to the victims of the massacres of 1915, who had not anticipated the coming of the violence and had wrongly trusted their Muslim friends and Kurdish neighbours. The belief that Muslims wanted, *and still want*, to exterminate Christians is a powerful Islamophobic, somewhat tribalistic, current in the diasporic politics of remembering Bote 1915. For Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean children growing up in Western Europe, the contradiction of their parents having Muslim acquaintances while they themselves are discouraged from intermingling with Muslim classmates is, respondents reveal, a confusing experience. Yet, this contradiction is an element of the diasporic politics of remembering the Sayfo. As one respondent born in the Netherlands puts it:

I never quite understood this negative feeling that my parents had towards Muslims, because I always saw my parents acting very friendly towards Muslims until one day when I was in a car with my Islamic friend. Her father was driving us to our basketball game. Once we were in the car, the man started asking me why I was a Christian and told me that I had to convert to Islam. I was only 10 years old, so all the feelings my parents had transmitted started emerging, I suddenly understood that when they would have the chance, the Muslims would still want to convert us, and even in a country such as the Netherlands, they will try. I tried to defend myself, and my religion, remembering that my ancestors had died for the protection of our religion and that I should not forget their sacrifice. But then again, I was only 10 years old, so I was very relieved when I had the chance to get out of that car and on the way back I chose to drive with a Dutch woman. I immediately felt safe again.

(Family F, fourth generation)

Descendants of the victims of the Sayfo, it seems, are somehow trained to cope with the alleged violence of Muslims—a violence that, in the construction of post-memory, constitutes a repetitive pattern of which the massacre of 1915 was only the most violent episode. Through the Sayfo narrative, children are made ready to identify the danger and to defend their religion and identity, just as their heroic ancestors who had suffered so much horrific violence had done in 1915.

Finding themselves in Western Europe, members of the diaspora were forced once again to live alongside their former tormentors. Although the construction of post-memory has a powerful Islamophobic, tribalistic current of inclusion of members accompanied by the exclusion of anti-Christian strangers, respondents did emphasise that they had all been taught to treat others, including Muslims, with due respect. They also emphasised the importance of the Christian ethos of forgiveness, even though the perpetrators continued to refuse to confess political and moral guilt. Ricoeur (2004), as Badiou (2006, p. 271) explains, argues that such forgiveness is grounded in the belief that the traumatised victim's powers of judgement are nothing in the face of the infinity of sacrifice to which Christ consented for the sins of humanity. Our respondents, who without exception insisted on their religious identity (even though they belonged to different churches, both Orthodox and Catholic), tended to confirm that they shared this belief. They also emphasised, however, that such forgiveness towards the perpetrators goes hand in hand with a realistic strategy of self-protection that their ancestors may have lacked. The respondents stressed that successive generations had a duty to remember what happened and to struggle against the forces of forgetfulness, to claim recognition and acknowledgement of the horrors of the Sayfo, and to demand a confession of guilt from the perpetrators, even a century after the event.

Rhapsodists and the performance of memory in the global era

The first generation of respondents was born and bred in the closed, somewhat tribal or clannish, community of Bote (and later also in Midyat). In the village, the memory of the Sayfo was orally transmitted through the families' rhapsodists. Listeners were invited to discover the particular (typically religious) meaning of the commemorated details of the massacre of Bote and the suffering it had involved. Migration put the ancient tradition of rhapsodism, so important for closed community bonding, in danger. Language-loss, dislocation of the imagination and lack of personal experience of the homeland makes rhapsodism ineffective. Global media, literary productions and new media, however, may replace the old rhapsodists. Bagchi (2010) argues that this may erase some of the unique and highly significant details that the rhapsodists managed, memorised and recalled with great skill. We expected that rhapsodists would be phased out after the migration, but we were wrong. It appeared that rhapsodists continue to play a role in the migrant communities. Many respondents claimed that there were still a few highly respected people identified as old rhapsodists who were known for being able to memorise and narrate the massacre of Bote in detail. Respondents explained that these rhapsodists felt obliged to memorise and continually reclaim the history, since forgetting would mean their ancestors would have suffered for nothing. Respondents agreed that the oral transmission of post-memory to the next generations—in communicative performances of recitation that link the elderly to the young—was important, not least because it might help to prevent new genocides and allay the fears of the younger generation. In practice this means that these rhapsodists narrate the genocide during family get-togethers and commemoration activities that have been organised by the church or appear in the media.

Our interviews revealed that in the midst of a global modernity dominated by digital new media, young rhapsodists in the diaspora emerged. Respondents seemed to be able to identify these new rhapsodists in their midst, and grant them a particular status based on the skills of their performative practices and the quality and detail of their memorialising. As one respondent explained:

My brother is the youngest, he was born in the Netherlands, we were all born in the Netherlands. It is strange to see that my brother has a better memory about the genocide than my own parents, who were born in Turkey and have suffered from violence and oppression themselves. We were born in freedom; we don't know what it feels like to have suffered from these traumas. Still my brother can remember these narratives in so many details as if he was there during the events. He remembers the names of the Kurdish landlords that have murdered babies and raped women. He doesn't even speak Kurdish. He also remembers details about tortured people and when he narrates it is as if I listen to a 100-year-old man that has seen this violence through his own eyes, however my brother is just 22 years old and he lives happy and in freedom in the Netherlands. I think when we have children, and my children want to know more about the genocide. I will send them to him, because he remembers the entire narrative.

(Family E, fourth generation)

It seems that the new rhapsodists may come to memorise more than their parents or members of the older generations; they memorise details in languages they themselves do not even speak. Even those who have not memorised the details of the Bote massacre still feel the need to transmit the narrative to their children. When we asked respondents why they wished to transmit the details of the events of 1915, they all emphasised their obligation to their ancestors to remember so that the extreme cruelty and injustice would not be forgotten. The

extraordinarily traumatic suffering and the struggle to keep their faith alive in the face of the humiliation and brutality used in attempts to convert them was uppermost in their minds. Forgetting, they asserted, is not an option.

Our research shows that, far from fading away in post-tribal and modernised European societies, rhapsodists, and rhapsodism as a performative mode of remembering, are still alive in some communities, despite the prevalence of global connections and digital technologies. Respondents claimed that these rhapsodists did not only memorise and recite all the details of the Bote massacre, but also knew much more. They also memorised family histories and the details of Bote traditions. Other tribal and mythical elements, such as the role of community pride, commitment to religious beliefs, strength, and epic heroism as core constituents of the character of people from Bote, were also mentioned in the interviews. Respondents stressed that because of this identification of Bote as a village of mythical heroes, Ottoman forces and local Kurds—typically labelled by respondents as ‘the Muslims’—were intent on total extermination of the villagers of Bote because they feared revenge by the mythologised heroes of Bote on them and punishments that could be inflicted even from beyond the grave. As one respondent put it:

They made sure they outnumbered us because they were aware that if they let one person survive, even a small child, this person would avenge the villagers. For this reason, the Muslims slaughtered everyone. Even small babies were killed in cruel ways, like throwing them from rooftops or using one bullet to kill as many infants or babies as possible.

(Family D, third generation)

Even today, the offspring of the survivors of the massacre of Bote still see their history as an epic battle. In every house where we interviewed people, a picture of the village of Bote was on the wall, remembered as the lost original homeland. It appeared that most respondents, even in the fourth generation, had married within their own diasporic community. Fourth-generation respondents believed that marrying someone with ancestors from Bote would make their parents happy and would be a sign of respect for their heroic legacy. Tribal and mythical elements continue to play a role in communal politics of memory through the generations, even if these younger generations are educated in the West and fully participate in late or postmodern, globalising European societies.

Concluding remarks

Migration from a despotic state that denies freedom of expression to a democratic state has had a significant influence on the Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean politics of remembering the Sayfo. The first generation of Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean migrants in Western Europe, born in Turkey, experienced limited (if any) legal protection in the Atatürk state. Since they were persecuted for their adherence to their religion and their culture (their language was forbidden), they could only transmit their narratives of the original trauma of Bote orally. Younger generations, born in diaspora, were able to record the narratives in writing; hence, several publications about the Sayfo have appeared in recent decades, decades after the event itself. Migration has, on the one hand, shaped a pattern of forgetting, in the sense that language-loss and relocation of the imagination has created more superficial understandings of the original trauma. Yet, the foundational narrative of the transnational diaspora communities remains intact as a source of collective identity. A collective identity is necessary for their sense of belonging even while living in the diaspora, and for organising political actions in support of recognition of the genocide. It is also imperative for the

preservation of their culture, language and the historical truths of the Sayfo in the face of ongoing attacks on their culture in the homelands. Contemporary violence against Arameans, Assyrians and Chaldeans in the Middle East has revitalised awareness among the younger generations of the duty to remember. During the time of our interviews, the persecution of Christians was mainly associated with events in Syria, Egypt and Iraq, but today it is increasingly associated with Islamic State and its practice of marking Christian homes with the Arabic word *nasrani*.² In addition to marking homes, IS has forced Christians to choose to convert to Islam, to pay excessive taxes, or face death, rape and other forms of violence that had been so common in the massacres of 1915.

We found that, for the Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean diaspora communities in Western Europe, cultural rootedness and attachment to a past catastrophe and a past, but now conquered, homeland (for the families we interviewed, the homeland is their lost village, with its churches and its fields) is a crucial aspect of diaspora existence. Writers like George Orwell, in his *1984* (1984, p. 309), and Ismail Kadare (see Morgan 2010, p. 272) hold that such rootedness and attachment is an existential need that is more important than the future. The diasporic politics of remembering the Sayfo confirms this. The continuation of rhapsodist memorisation in the fourth generation of respondents expresses this rootedness and attachment, which is to say that the communal politics of remembering centres on the organising of identity and belonging around the transmission of tribal culture, traditions, norms and values in a European and global setting.

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Notes

¹Sayfo (sword) is an abbreviation of Shatod‘Sayfo (Year of the Sword) in the Syriac Aramaic language spoken in parts of the Middle East.

²Nasrani (Christian), from the word Nazareth.