

Folklore

Importance and role in spreading national and nationalist awareness

The turning over the history pages of the Syriacs (also known as Chaldo Assyrians), hence, Chaldo-Assyrian Syriacs) since the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC and then of Babylon in 539, will reveal the shaking events and plights that befell this people and that expelled them out from their homeland and have ever since successively caused them to scatter about all over the world.

The hardest of those deadly blows was and has been the ongoing inexorable immigration of this people for about a century that has rooted out a sizeable number of its members and implanting them in alien lands away from the eastern world, and even away from the whole ancient world.

Those shaking blows throughout the ages however, and despite their violence, harshness, killing, displacement, looting and persecution that amounted to virtual dismembering from the personal nationalistic links and the components that used to make them into a nation with its own distinctive entity and that used to preserve its social fabric based on a number of popular heritage items - related to man's life cycle since conception until death and rebirth- are different from the last violent quake that befell our people like a deadly plague and that has been rooting out the sons and daughters of the Chaldo-Assyrian Syriacs hurling them away into alien land whereby they are cut off from any thing

that relates them to their eastern world and from any link they may have with the components of their natural, social and spiritual environment from which all the distinctive characteristics of any human community get nourishment.

The first violent attacks used to scatter our people about but always within their surrounding areas and oriental environment that were not completely alien. However, those enormous waves of suffering by this people throughout its long ancient history, in general, hit against hard rocks of the marvelous ability and power of this people to resist and maintain its social characteristics inherited from its forefathers and ancestors, and safeguard the distinctive characteristics of its nationalist identity.

The intimate and spontaneous feeling, especially with the Chaldo-Assyrian Syriac layman, is different from that of any other member of any other component of other people who were not deprived of their land, nor did they suffer the way the chaldo – Assyrian Syriacs did in terms of various acts of persecution, displacement and

genocide; for those inhuman acts perpetrated against this people sought to implant in his innermost character a bitter feeling of alienation in its own homeland made them feel if they were strangers to their fellow citizens despite of their authentic citizenship and deep historical roots in the soil of their homeland.

However, the Chaldo - Assyrian Syriacs have resisted and never broke away from their fellow citizens and strived to preserve their national identity. And in a transparent, human, pure and spontaneous manner this people remained loyal to all that links them to their nation and to the heritage of their fathers and ancestors - birth, reproduction, death- as well as to all that is practiced in terms of liturgy, ceremony, taboos, norms, customs and traditions in every stage of life including hymns, songs and lamentations, all the crafts with their tools and equipment. In a nut shell, it is the whole life with its ups and downs. And due to our deep and honorable history, it may not be an exaggeration to say that we are one the richest people in this respect.

With all its practiced inherited characteristics, the popular heritage shapes and has been shaping the identity of any people or human community of certain characteristics and features. It represents the deep roots that reach the cultural depths of man's civilization. It is a name that surpasses all other names, and by which everything in life is named and characterized.

A people, any people, without a heritage is but like some one who have lost their ID, a nameless creature, a plant cut off from its roots and cast away on the shores of other people only to wither away and die sooner or later. The popular heritage with all its folkloric components helps us be acquainted with our people and community in a clearer and more authentic way. It facilitates the task of finding ways and means for its progress and elevation, for it is in light of the past that makes up the life experience of our forefathers that we are able to make a sketch of an bright and developed present.

In the same manner in which man has managed to control

nature, environment, land and space and has been able to harness its power for his interests and serve humanity by studying it carefully, comprehensively, deeply and closely with an aim to uncover its secrets and mysteries, so does the cognizance of any nation or any people entail the study of its heritage in all its characteristics so as to help promote it and carry it to higher and better levels and welfare.

The attempt to explore the spread of our popular heritage often entails going back to what our ancestors have left behind in Babylon, Nineveh and elsewhere in our ancient cities in terms of the inscriptions on clay tablets, to those documents that recount details of their daily life, practices rituals, ceremonies, customs, traditions, celebrations and festivals during religious and public occasions, as well as the tools, equipment, furniture and costumes.

Doing this would let us come to know many similar and dissimilar aspects of their life styles and intercommunication. This would strengthen our relation and loyalty to them and gradually establish each one of

the historical links that some people allegedly claim to have been lost between us the descendants of those ancestors.

The revival of the authentic cultural heritage of our people and nation and spreading it as well as the development of a spirit of pride in the heart and soul of each and everyone of its members will have a far reaching self-confidence. It will make them feel the solid ground where they stand and strengthen the bonds that link them together. They may then be able to draw the required energy from their history and legacy, especially the informative and humane aspects of that legacy and carry on with their role in the human civilization.

The role that a popular folkloric item may play in provoking and boosting nationalist feeling is like the one it plays in strengthening and boosting national feelings and in reviving the spirit of genuine and loyal citizenship in the hearts of the people. When uttered, practiced, seen and heard, a popular folkloric item, whether oral or material, may provoke in the minds and hearts of individuals feelings and

sensations that deeply affect them.

If the folkloric items were boosting the bonds an individual may have toward his fellow members of his community, they may as well sustain their ties with their homeland and fellow citizens in such a way as to bring about a unified people and entity in spite of all their distinctive features. This is true because everyone's historical roots are nourished by the same homeland soil that everyone hold sacred.

A folkloric dance, song, costume or any traditional genuine costume, or else a discourse between two or more people using an inherited national language or any other inherited item, may have a greater impact and a deeper effect on the self than the most eloquent speech and deepest survey on the components and elements of any nationality that are handled in a philosophical way. A folkloric item may embrace a vast popular area of our people unlike the speeches, sermons, lectures, researches and surveys in this respect, that are exclusively meant for a limited and exclusive milieu who

may agree or disagree among themselves, or else come up with dissenting views and arguments that further get into the philosophy of things rendering them very complicated,

No doubt, the sole reliance on written history in an attempt to understand the past is something that is not approved by logic or scientific research methods. In his book *Man in the Mirror*, the sociologist Clyde Clockhon writes, “To look into the history of man on the basis of people who left behind a written history, is like an attempt at understanding a whole book by just reading the last chapter of it.”

It is that inherited and authentic and characteristic legacy that gathers us as Chaldo-Assyrian Syriacs together and keeps us as one nation and gives us our identity rather than the books of history on the shelves. What acknowledges our ID and maintains our existence as one nation is dependent on the sustainability and survival of those inherited and authentic legacy handed down to us by our forefathers and the ability to keep them alive and in

practice; our nation is only as much alive as our linguistic legacy is in our discourse and as long as our doctrines remain in practice in their authentic eastern characteristics, and as long as the items of our heritage are maintained, classified, documented and studied.

The task of the Chaldo-Assyrian Syriac researcher, documentarist and investigator of his people’s heritage may not be an easy one due to the difficult circumstances in which this people has been through, especially in the aftermath of the last violent attacks that aimed at its virtual extermination from its soil and dispersing it across elsewhere where its roots find no nourishment in that alien soil. However, we all have to shoulder together the responsibility of seriously and systematically handling the heritage that is still left behind in the memory of our people, particularly the elderly, and take them up as informants to document our ancient popular heritage and preserve its features, characteristics and monuments as long as we believe that it is the people’s

legacy that is of such an effective power as to help preserve its entity, existence and personality.

We face today two serious challenges in this respect, first to work seriously to document and preserve our popular heritage, second and most important, is to strongly refuse to give in to the impact of the factors that aim at the extermination of this authentic human legacy, as well as resist the plots made to detach it from the its owners, steal it, adopt it and then claim its property. To speed up documenting our popular heritage, collecting it in a field work is a task that cannot be delayed or postponed. Rather it should be urgently carried out; for the sweeping and swift progress of modern civilization (globalization) in all aspects of man's life will soon destroy almost all our popular heritage that represents the creative work of the layman's heart and mind.

World nations have addressed this phenomenon and managed to record and document the legacies of their people and preserve them for reference, study and research into the norms and traditions of

people, and turn them into a nucleus for social, economic and spiritual studies. States and nations have dedicated gigantic efforts and huge potentials to investigate there popular heritage in its various aspects, preserving, maintaining and studying even its negative items. Scholars, sociologists and researchers were employed and institutions for field work were established for this purpose. Museums and fairs were likewise established along with workshops to preserve and maintain the leftover material items such as tools and equipment and classify them with an aim to preserve anything that has to do with the popular heritage.

Moreover, special libraries were established containing various books, pictures, recorded tapes and films and other folkloric materials. However, this does not mean in any way retreating to the past and worshipping it, and to use it as the only means to establish an entity or nation.

Evans Burgard, a moderate functional anthropologist writes : “ I don not maintain that it is possible to understand social life

in light of information about its past, I rather say that such an information enables us to understand the social life in a deeper way than if its past were not known to us.”

The analysis and study of a folkloric item is the highlighting of a creative work of humanity that was created and grew as a result of the development of human reasoning throughout history. It also brings to light the sources of those popular heritages that represent in themselves the depth of the creative mind that is the architect of the history of humanity. Fortunately, field work, site survey and analytical study have made big strands in this respect in various countries of the world.

But unfortunately, however, such studies in our countries are still preliminary. A large amount of our popular heritage is still unknown and its details have not yet been documented in a scientific way. The majority of such studies are superficial and do not follow a clear scientific methodology, especially in terms of inaccuracy and absence of a historical reliability in collecting the

folkloric items (material samples and oral texts). Such materials are often collected in a primitive, spontaneous, superficial and inefficient way. This is because those who work in this field often lack a scientific methodology in the collection, classification, documentation and scientific study of the hereditary items.

Besides, researches of heritage also do not have a guide to facilitate their work and help them lay down a scientific method for their work. Those interested in the first stage of documenting the items of popular heritage should not be only satisfied with the preliminary stage of collecting, preserving, writing down and recording those items; this would eventually mean paying attention only to the formal aspects of the folkloric item that have throughout time become useless in modern times. Rather, those interested in folklore have to focus their attention on the meanings and corroborating evidence, the semantic implications and inspiration that those items provide, the individual and communal feelings related to various

aspects of the individuals and community they enclose as well as the meanings and lessons they carry that merit study and required attention. These detailed accounts given here are the result of the scientific, social, psychological, economic and spiritual analysis of those folkloric items. They provide an opportunity, at the same time, to get acquainted with the suffering of our ancestors and the heavy prices paid to preserve this heritage, practice it and hand it down to us in all fidelity. An example that is worth mentioning here is a pioneer experience in this respect, i.e. the attempt made by the religious Fr. Ibraim Isaac, the former general head of of the Hermezian Antonite Religious Institute, who collected hundreds and thousands of our people's folkloric items in the Plain of Nineveh and kept them in a special museum at the Monastery of al-Saidah Hafidhat al-Zuroo' (The Lady Patron of Plantation [the translator]) in in Alqush. The items preserved are the material ones that were used by farmers, labourers and craftsmen until

the late decades of the last century in the above area. This experience however was restricted to the first stage of the task of documenting a popular heritage. They are until today in need of study and analysis. Besides, they have not been distributed and displayed in this small museum according to a scientific way, for they are merely piled on top of each other. Moreover, this experience has been the only one to be carried out although a similar idea was developed by some of those interested in this field in the same town of Alqush, but was unfortunately abandoned in the its first stage. Based on this we urge all those interested in following such a step and setting up such museums as a first necessary stage, to document our popular heritage, especially the material one before it is left to decay and disintegration, particularly those items that our ancestors used for sustaining their lives. It is hoped that such an initiative be accompanied by a clear scientific methodology in collecting and displaying this popular heritage item.

In a speech that I wrote exactly a quarter of a century

ago I said, “ we the coming generation are the only ones – and I reiterate this with a warning tone- that are able to embark on the task of collecting and classifying and then studying our popular heritage, both oral, written and material. This is a task that has to be shouldered by us for we are also the only ones to be held accountable by our future generations should we fail to do this sacred mission.

The generations that preceded us remained away from the the then relatively big development and new civilized trends. And all of a sudden there came the surging sweeping waves of globalization causing a big gap between us and the generation of our fathers. It was a big civilization leap that took us far away from the social life that was marked by the practices, features and special characteristics of the generations that preceded us. It hurled us amid the new coming social aspects and life styles. For today we are quite different from our fathers and hardly related to them socially. And because we are the only witnesses to the pattern of life

of our fathers and forefathers who still managed to preserve their inherited traditional heritage, so let us be the ones who bear the serious and big responsibility in collecting and studying our heritage and folklore, doing all we can to save it before it is forgotten for ever and swept away by the tides of modern times and drowned in the sea of time for us to be in the end without an ID and roots...??

Specialized researchers assert that the popular heritage supports and even fulfils the national character. This is clearly manifested and developed through the integration of the popular heritage items and the educational philosophy of the people, especially the small popular communities that suffer from the impact of some social pressures. Such a philosophy, that is integrated into the essence of the popular folkloric heritage, is based on the notion that the human individual is part of the people to which he/she belongs. Such notions depend upon the community spirit and the love for the fellow citizens and building confidence

in them, as well as on the loyalty to the homeland soil and priding in it.

It is also possible to employ the items of the folkloric items to instill human principles and values in peoples hearts and souls, and to disseminate the spirit of liberation and openness and to get rid of the tendency of fanaticism and negative individual selfish values. And through the study of the popular heritage that is derived from the original sources of the people that are yet untouched by the hand of modern civilization, it is possible to consecrate a spirit of tolerance, hope and a better future in the souls of the generations that disdainfully refuse to surrender and coerce, melt down and disintegrate, generations that strongly oppose all factors of time and place that conceal and burry their character and identity and all the features and characteristics of their entity.

The authentic items of the inherited popular heritage, pruned by the mould of the previous generations, tested, selected and finally handed down to the descendants, work to consecrate and implant the

spirit of bravery, confrontation and adventure, and the spirit of challenge within the framework of group work. They establish a confidence in facing the future and the rejection of the spirit of dependency. They also strongly condemn the idea of subjection and subordination in all its forms.

Added to this is a very serious issue i.e. we have got our popular heritage from its very virgin sources and have spread or used its items in light of the positive human ideals which our heritage abound in. We can thereby boost a genuine feeling for such a heritage, and augment the organic and ethnic link to the homeland soil in the souls of the new generation that were born and brought up in the diasporah with an aim to remind them thereby of the soil of their fathers and of a land they have never seen. It also rouses and inflames their imagination to draw a picture that inspires them with the values and aspects of the heritage items inherited by their fathers growing in them thus a pure yarning towards those items. Their characters will then be marked by the features of

their national identity. They will thus remain linked over time to those who live on the mother land by strong ties represented by their relatives and tribes. It also strongly reminds them of their bright past and look forward to pave the way to their future guided by the illuminating, human and positive symbols found in their

heritage. Thus a deep feeling is created in them of the existence of a common ground that links them with their fellow people and provides them with a powerful immunity against disintegration and melting down in the oceans of other nations, thus they will feel of being an indivisible oneness rather than parts which they strive to unite.

editor in chief

