

THE ASSYRIAN ORAL HERITAGE TREASURES: RAWE AS AN ORAL SINGING

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines the early beginnings of unwritten Assyrian literature, which originally emerged as temple prayers and hymns expressing worship and supplication to the gods. This heritage was transmitted orally across generations, preserving its folkloric character outside the realm of formal written culture, and later developed into songs that were performed during celebrations and social gatherings. The traditional singing known as Rawe represents the most prominent examples of this heritage, and it remains preserved among Assyrians in the regions of Tkhuma, Tiyari, and Barwar. This singing offers important insights into the social and emotional life of Assyrians in the mountains of Ashur, reflecting linguistic and experiential dimensions deeply rooted in their identity and history. Although Rawe is often narrowly viewed as purely emotional singing, it fundamentally encompasses deeper literary significance. It addresses themes such as courage and manhood, the relationship with nature, longing for a lost homeland, and the experiences of exile and nostalgia. Through concise, rhymed couplets, villagers were able to express profound thoughts and emotions with clarity and brevity. Rawe continues to represent an essential artistic and cultural form, and its preservation and transmission remain vital. It is also noteworthy that Rawe shares similarities with the folk singing traditions of other peoples, such as the south of Iraq singing called ‘Darmi’ and the Japanese ‘Hiko’ alongside the interest shown by foreign researchers in studying it and making comparison between their own cultural singing and Rawe. This study aims to shed light on this traditional form of singing and to help protect this unique heritage from disappearance through its documentation and analysis, ensuring that it remains a shining symbol within Assyrian cultural heritage. Using a qualitative method, this research analyzed a large number of Rawe verses recited by ten individuals aged between 50 and 70 who live in Duhok and the Kurdistan Region. Approximately 700 Assyrian verses were collected from these participants. The findings indicate that Rawe verses are not merely love poems; rather, they vary in their themes and contexts, extending to expressions of nostalgia for the homeland, courage, and the description of the beauty of nature.

KEY WORDS: Rawe, oral tradition, heritage, oral singing, Assyrian literature, and verses.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is well known that Assur was the original homeland of the Assyrians of the mountain regions, evidenced by the discovery of ancient Mesopotamian human remains dating back approximately 600,000 years ago in the caves of Bards Balaca in Northern Iraq as stated by Roux (1984, p. 664). These early humans gradually migrated from the northern mountains to southern Mesopotamia, where they domesticated animals, cultivated crops, and built villages and cities. They also established sacred sites and offered prayers to deities such as Assur, Shamash, Ishtar, and Enlil. Over time, the Assyrians distinguished themselves by adopting two names: (1) *Athoraia* (“sons of the country”), a designation tied to place, and (2) *Asshuraia* (“those belonging to the god Assur”), a designation tied to divinity.

The Assyrians’ prayers and supplications to the supreme power developed into poetic forms characterized by metrical patterns. Depending on the response to their

pleas—whether favorable or unfavorable—these prayers transformed into melodies alternating between joy and sorrow. Over thousands of years, through continuous prayer, victories over enemies, bountiful harvests, and encounters with natural disasters such as fire, floods, snow, and death, Assyrian poetic meter and melody evolved into a fully developed art form. This artistic tradition ultimately produced the great epics of Akkad, Assur, and Babylon, along with ancient tablets describing cosmic upheavals and early conceptions of creation and immortality. These traditions persisted into the Christian era, where they found a place of honor in the manuscripts of the Eastern Churches.

With the Assyrians’ conversion to Christianity and the adoption of the Gospel and the cross in their temples throughout Assyria, the ancient deities were replaced. Syriac became the official liturgical language, displacing the older forms of the Assyrian tongue in monasteries, churches, and schools. Like many medieval societies, the

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Assyrians shifted toward a worldview emphasizing spirituality and the impermanence of earthly life—perceiving the world as a temporary passage toward eternal existence. Under this influence, many came to view natural beauty as deceptive, and believed that mountains, rivers, and wilderness were inhabited by malevolent spirits. Consequently, attitudes of pessimism, self-denial, and detachment overshadowed intellectual and cultural development.

Despite this, a small number of individuals resisted this trend. Considered rebellious or even “satanic” by some contemporaries, these individuals celebrated nature’s beauty, admired the grace of women, valued physical activity and hunting, and pursued social and cultural progress. They discussed human freedom, including freedom of opinion and will, and criticized unjust gender segregation and harmful forms of religious discrimination that prevailed in the East. Their perspective resonated with the novelist Mina’s (1982) sentiment: “Life is something beautiful and worth living despite the unhappiness that overwhelms it” (p. 156).

The increasing illiteracy in the Syriac language, accompanied by the Church restrictions placed on intellectual, literary, and scientific expression, narrowed the intellectual horizons of society. What made matters worse was the near impossibility of publishing or preserving writings, ideas, oral epics, and melodies. In some Assyrian regions, for religious and political reasons, and due to the influence of certain neighboring peoples, they were unable in recent centuries to preserve their heritage. and their Assyrian culture, even if only partially. Except in the Hakkari regions, represented by Tyari, Jilu, Baz, and Barwar... where they preserved the Assyrian epics, narratives, and songs from being lost. and they transmitted them orally, memorizing them by heart from one generation to another. They would recite them at weddings, gatherings, and festive occasions. On days that commemorated heroic deeds and victories over the enemy, whether from neighbors or strangers. Among the old songs that were sung by the Tyari, Tkhuma, and Brwar clans is this distinctive music, unique in its poems, melody, meaning, and even in its name. This singing, called **Rawe**, was widely spread among these clans in their regions and is still performed by them to this day (Ashitha & Kasrayta, 1998, p. 4).

1.1 Aims of the Study:

This study aims to explore the richness of Assyrian oral literature, particularly Rawe, and to further investigate the unknown historical background of Rawe through analyzing its verses.

1.2 Research Questions:

- Does Rawe deal with emotional topics only?
- Is it sung by men?

1.3 Significance of the Study:

The results of this research can have significant implications for students who are interested in Assyrian literature and for lexicographers. It also, raise to Assyrian literature instructors’ awareness about the richness of this genre of Assyrian literature.

2. Literature Review:

The following sections present a theoretical background which explains Rawe, and a review of previous studies that tackle the same issues.

2.1 What is Rawe?

It is a form of folkloric folk singing practiced by the Assyrian rural community, predominantly in mountainous regions. The word *Rawe* is commonly associated with gatherings where men drink, talk, and eventually sing. However, this description does not fully capture its meaning. Rawe compositions are unique to the Assyrian people and focus on themes of love, admiration, and longing. Their authors are typically folk poets who derive inspiration from nature and daily life. From this, we can say that Rawe singing represents an ideal case for studying the lived reality of the Assyrians as it existed centuries ago—not only from an emotional perspective, but also in its social, economic, and even political dimensions.

From this standpoint, some of those interested in Assyrian heritage and literature took the initiative to study this oral literary heritage in order to understand its contents as well as the nature of its linguistic and social structures simultaneously.

One of those who was concerned and interested is Professor Fabrizio Pennacchietti, who proposed that *Rawe* is derived from the Arabic word *rawī* (الرَّوِيّ), meaning “rhyme.” However, this explanation is questionable, as Rawe was composed and transmitted primarily by Assyrian villagers with limited or no exposure to Arabic grammatical systems. As Johann Gottfried Herder observed, “*The best culture of a nation cannot be forced by a foreign language.*” Every nation speaks as it thinks and thinks as it speaks.

Rawe poetry is created in simple, spontaneous Assyrian language, shaped by the natural environment—water, agriculture, forests, and even mosquitoes. One poetic example evokes a mosquito sworn by the cross not to bite the beloved’s neck, which is reminiscent of John Donne’s metaphysical poem *The Flea*.

Mosquito in solitude he called	طَبَا لَفِيَا قَرِيَا لِي
With a cross let it be sworn	وَبَوْلَنَّا مَوْلَا مِعْيَا لِي
Lest it bites the neck of his beloved	دَلَا يَمْتَا لَعْدَلَا دِيَا زِي

Professor Pennacchietti, after visiting northern Iraq in 1972, noted that many compositions recorded by the German Orientalist Socin in 1882 were not dance songs, rather Rawe love songs. He described their melodic structure as “amoebae,” characterized by chromatic intervals and rapid execution.

“What distinguishes this type of singing is also its unique style and performance method, as each poetic segment consists of three lines, with each line composed of seven syllabic units, and the singing is performed in a state of euphoria and joy; the performer begins singing by raising the pitch on the first line, and may split the last word of that line into two parts to repeat them at the beginning of the second segment in a softer tone. The third segment ends with an extended, chant-like tone, concluding with a softer voice to indicate the end of the passage. For this reason and because of this singing style, Socin called it amoebic singing!

It is worth noting that Rawe singing is not limited to men as performers of this genre. There are women whose names have been recorded as performers and preservers of this type of singing. Despite the fact that Assyrian society

at that time (in past centuries) was a conservative society, this practice was considered customary and was not viewed as forbidden or prohibited for women. This serves as evidence of the social maturity of Assyrian thought. Many examples and segments recited by women can be cited, including:

It would be nice to know where he is	لەدەنگە دەنگە بەرگە لێ
Send a pigeon so they may see him	هەفتێ ئەمە ئەنبار لێ
And let my greetings be delivered	ئەلێم ئەمە جێم بچێتێ لێ

2.2 Assyrian Oral Singing Heritage:

Fortunately, a large body of Assyrian folklore songs—particularly love and flirtation songs—has survived through oral transmission. These are especially popular in the villages of Tyare, Tkhuma, and Lower Barwar, and are collectively known as Rawe. Assyrian inherited singing can be classified as follows:

1. Rawe singing.
2. Marriage songs (e.g., *liliana*).
3. Collective dance songs.
4. Lullabies.
5. Songs recounting heroic, historical, or national events.
6. Work or professional songs.

These songs reflect the lived experiences and customs of the Assyrian population. While their exact origins are unclear, some documented texts date back at least 200 years.

2.3 Cultural Significance of Rawe :

Despite claims that Rawe contains indecent expressions, its vocabulary reflects universal themes of love, beauty, and longing common across cultures. The participation of village elders, clergy, and women in Rawe gatherings demonstrates its cultural acceptability. Rawe is deeply rooted in nature. The beloved's footsteps make flowers bloom; the poet's yearning defies physical limits. Yet this tradition faces decline due to performance difficulty, linguistic erosion, and misunderstandings about its content. Mislabeling Rawe as “cheap” or “immoral” is a serious misjudgment of this rich literary heritage.

2.4 The Written Assyrian Sung Epics:

Folklore represents the living memory of a people. Just as a person suffering from memory loss cannot fully express their humanity, a nation that loses, denies, or abandons its heritage cannot express its identity. This understanding underscores the importance of collecting, preserving, and studying folklore, as it enriches both historical knowledge and contemporary cultural development.

Like all living nations, the Assyrians possess a distinctive national heritage shaped by their historical experiences and spiritual values. The richness of this heritage provides a foundation for literary and artistic studies. Heritage, in this context, encompasses everything produced by a nation across its history—reflecting social, cultural, and intellectual realities of specific times and places.

Scholars generally emphasize several reasons for preserving folklore:

1. Continuity of National Identity: Heritage ensures the continuity of a nation's identity across past, present, and future.

2. Cumulative Knowledge: Heritage embodies the experiences and accumulated wisdom of generations.
3. Inspiration: Engaging with heritage revives the values, symbols, and moral examples of historical figures.
4. Cultural Confidence: Connection to the past strengthens confidence in contemporary cultural expressions.

5. Foundation for Arts: Rich heritage serves as the root of modern national culture and the arts.

6. Balanced Global Engagement: Heritage enables meaningful engagement with global culture without losing national distinctiveness.

Daniel. W, (1961) in his book *Katina Gabara*, emphasizes that folk stories represent early stages of literary culture. They reveal ancient life, suffering, traditions, and hopes, allowing modern researchers to understand their ancestors more clearly. These stories, songs, and artistic memories elevate the human beings above mere biological existence. However, he laments that many Assyrians today abandon their traditional customs in favor of Western culture, whereas Western scholars often cherish folk traditions as invaluable cultural treasures. (p. 3 ‘٣’).

2.5 Previous Studies:

To the best of the researcher's knowledge of the researcher, no study has yet been conducted about the Assyrian oral heritage treasures such as Rawe as a literary masterpiece of an oral poetry. The current study is, therefore, an attempt to address this gap in the oral Assyrian literature.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study outlines the Meth steps and choices taken to address the aims and research questions of this study.

3.1 Research Design:

The current research was carried out using a qualitative method of analysis to analyze a large number of Rawe verses.

3.2 Participants:

The current research involved ten of Assyrian Rawe reciters, aged between 50-70 and live in Duhok- The Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

3.3 Instruments:

The current research analyzed 700 Assyrian Rawe verses recited by those participants.

3.4 Validity and reliability:

To ensure research validity and reliability, the verses were analyzed according to the four analytical characteristics analyses of Ashitha and Kasrayta (1998). Moreover, the interviews were audio – recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure that the data were accurately captured.

3.5 Data Analysis Procedures:

The qualitative data from 700 Assyrian Rawe verses were analyzed thematically following the four characteristic analyses of Ashitha and Kasrayta (1998), which involved analyzing verses based on emotional feelings towards the beauty of woman, nature - based issues, courage, and nostalgia.

Beauty is a quality attributed to things, through which we feel a sense of psychological comfort whenever it is mentioned. It is also primarily a factor of attraction. In fact, beauty is not merely a physical appearance; it extends to the beauty of character, morals, and actions.

In this regard, the Palestinian poet; *Abdul Raheem Omar* said about the feminine beauty: “

woman is that beauty which draws the poet’s attention, and she is the center of heartfelt meanings. She may also be the hidden secret that brings joy to the human spirit. It is not logical to perceive a woman’s beauty solely through the beauty of her face or the color of her Eyes, but rather, we must perceive her with clarity as a refined state and a beautiful secret”.

Her eyes by own are black خربت حفرتي كحجر نيس
 Have two lines of eye lashes هبطت ابرصتي كالحلقة
 Who would be their owner. من يملك من ابرصتي

Human interaction with nature is something deeply rooted in us since creation. All the creatures of the world are inherently beautiful, and when they are harmoniously blended together, their beauty becomes even more pronounced, with each element enhancing the other. If we take a small sprig of mint, for example, it will naturally wither shortly after being picked. However, out of love, the poet here wishes to give hope that its fragrance will remain fresh and strong. By placing this small sprig behind her beloved’s ear, and as his facial movements brush against it, its scent will overflow with even deeper fragrance and aroma.

The mint at the nape of his ear في اذنك نعنع نعنع
 Moving forth and backwards of his malls تتحرك وتتراجع
 The more it shrinks, the more its fragrance spreads كلما انكمش كلما انتشر

Ancient Assyrian history is rich with epics and the heroic deeds of great men. Such greatness is embodied in physical strength, courage, and keen wisdom. This is evidenced by the ancient epics, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh and *Enuma Elish*, among others. It is possible that the qualities of strength and heroism for which they were known are the very reason these epics spread both in ancient times and in the modern era”. In this passage, this type of masculinity is illustrated, showing that men of that era—whether farmers or shepherds—demonstrated heroism in all circumstances, both during times of hardship and celebration, in peace or in fear. Without a doubt, they were true heroic men, as this passage clearly depicts.

My time passed as a shepherd زمر حبيبي كراعي
 With mourns, sadness and fear مع حزن و حزن و خوف
 I’m a man with no doubt. انا رجل بلا شك

After the Assyrian siege in Hakkari (now in Turkey), they had no choice but to break the blockade imposed on them by the Ottomans. Their only option was to flee toward the Persian border, hoping that this displacement would be temporary and that they could return once the war—the First World War—ended and normalcy was restored. Despite this forced exile, the Assyrians continued to live with memories and nostalgia, nurtured by the strong human bonds between the people, their villages, and the mountains. This connection helps us understand the deep link between humans and the mountains, as if they owned them, evident when they refer to them as the ‘mountains of my ancestors.’ When they were separated from these mountains, they felt alienated, and nostalgia drew them

back—if only in memory and imagination—to return once again to the mountains.

salutations to the mountains of my ancestors علكر لالهاتي كجبل اجد
 I’ll ask to come and take me back ho انا انا انا انا انا
 I felt alienated شعرت بالبعيد

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research demonstrates that Assyrian oral heritage—including epics and Rawe singing—is far richer and older than often assumed, potentially extending back to pre-Christian Assyrian civilization. It predates and differs significantly from the Arabic rhyme tradition (*rawī*), making Professor Fabrizio Pennacchietti’s linguistic explanation insufficient. This unique cultural legacy is of immense historical and artistic value, and its preservation is essential to prevent its disappearance. In addition, this study fills a gap left by previous writers on this topic, specifically regarding Rawe singing. Previous studies were largely limited to collecting excerpts and explaining selected aspects. They focused on the artistic aspects of the singing style and the analysis of some poetic excerpts; however, those studies did not explore the deep emotional and psychological dimensions of the Assyrian people, nor the reasons that gave rise to this type of singing

5. CONCLUSION

In this study, we attempted to shed light on some hidden literary aspects that have not been adequately studied or analyzed from a literary and linguistic perspective, in order to highlight the literary and cultural role through folk singing known as “Rawe.” The Assyrian community, like other living communities, takes pride in its heritage, which has extended from the earliest civilizations to the present day. It also strives to preserve this legacy from disappearing, as it is orally transmitted within a specific segment of the community. It clearly shows the richness of the Assyrian heritage involves a lot more than expected. This heritage is unique, perhaps the continuation of a tradition going on for centuries.

Rawe can be considered far beyond merely singing or songs. Moreover, it is a treasure of linguistics and vocabularies, and a picturing of Assyrian life style. In addition, this type of singing does not necessarily deal with love verses only, yet it predicts the relation of human - being with Nature, as well as, it shows the inner feelings of exiled people from their rooted area i.e. Hakkari. Besides, as we have shown, it gives us a picture of the courage and chivalry of men which they possessed and which was born in them from the harshness of mountain life.

Adding to that, However, the Assyrian community in Hakkari was preserved religiously and culturally, but we find women who sing such kind of songs which perhaps used to give the impression of obscene singing. Based on these findings, it is recommended that future research and through this one particularly, we have focused on the importance of this literary and linguistic heritage, and clarified the significance of contributing to its collection by raising awareness among the Assyrian people in particular and other peoples in general, in order

to preserve what remains of the Assyrian heritage in all its forms—especially the singing of the *rāwī* (narrator), which is on the verge of fading away and disappearing. This form of singing is capable of providing a comprehensive portrayal of Assyrian life and society.

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