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Stateless Rhythms, Transnational Steps: Embodying the Assyrian Nation through *Sheikhani* Song and Dance

Nadia Younan[1]

> "On a quiet side street between 45th and 46th Avenue in San Francisco, leading to the Great Highway, lies a little pinkish, non-descript building. Upon closer inspection one can see a rather rare site in the city: a Syriac inscription identifying the building as the parish of Saint Narsai of the Assyrian Church of the East. Home to a fairly small congregation compared to elsewhere in California, the church basement was a sold-out venue on October 21, 2017, for the 3rd Annual Dolma Night, an event which brought Assyrians together from around the Bay area. Predominantly meant as a dinner, entertainment was provided on a small stage by Assyrian singer Ogin Bet Samo. Although there was a small, open area in the middle of the room, it was not obviously a dance floor. Ogin eventually left his ambient dinner music and began singing Assyrian line-dance songs. As guests joined the dance — standing shoulder to shoulder, holding hands, and moving in synchronized steps to the beat — the line began to weave in and around the tables, chairs were moved to the side, and the space became a dance floor anyway. I was told by a friend shortly thereafter in San Jose: 'where there's Assyrians, there's sheikhani… the end of the party always finished with Assyrian sheikhani. This is part of life'."

The Assyrian nation is imagined and performed through cultural practices such as the *sheikhani* song and dance. The term *sheikhani* refers to both a song style and an associated line dance.[2]

Dance, as materialized through its performing subjects, is a critical tool for articulating Assyrian identity. Such an expressive embodiment is an integral part of the Assyrian worldview that serves to unite and consolidate this ethnic and religious minority that is indigenous to the converging borders of northeastern Syria, northern Iraq, southwestern Turkey, and northwestern Iran. While there is significant research and documentation of issues pertaining to dance and identity (Buckland, 2013; Dunin, 2006; Mahdavian, 2018; Panopoulou, 2009) and such identities in diasporic and transnational contexts (Ekmanis, 2016; Foley,

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2 In discussion with members of the Assyrian community, there are two common definitions for the word *sheikhani*. First, from the Neo-Aramaic verb *shkhan* meaning "to become warm" or "to warm oneself." Secondly, in relation to the Shekhan district, in Duhok, Iraq, which had a sizable Assyrian population.

2011; MacLachlan, 2014; Wong, 2010), there is limited scholarship on Assyrian expressive culture, particularly dance. Through this research on Assyrian *sheikhani* song and dance practice, I aim to contribute a new case study within the literary bodies of dance anthropology, ethnomusicology, and diaspora and migration studies; moreover, this study may provide new insights into a relatively unknown minority community that, although predominantly living in diaspora, is part of a vibrant and complex multicultural history of the Middle East.

The Assyrians stress an identity that hinges upon their Christian faith and is distinct from the region's majority Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab populations. Language is foundational to this identity where the mother tongue of the community continues to be various dialects of Neo-Aramaic. There are several Christian denominations to which the Assyrian ethno-linguistic populations adhere, the most prominent being the Assyrian Church of the East, the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, and the Chaldean Catholic Church. Taking into consideration that these sectarian divisions have been problematic for constructing a unified Assyrian identity — this is very much a community with internal identity disputes[3] — for the purposes of my research, "Assyrian" refers to adherents of any of the church denominations who express an understanding of a shared identity.[4]

With the fall of the Ottoman Empire, a number of what were once individual Assyrian tribes sought political unity and autonomy as a nation state, however such aspirations were not to come to fruition (Aboona, 2008; Donabed, 2015; Travis, 2017). As a result of religious and ethnic persecution, most recently by the Islamic State — a crisis which Amnesty International has referred to as "ethnic cleansing on a historic scale" (Amnesty International, 2014) — the majority of Assyrians have fled their homeland and live in a global diaspora. However, a stateless national identity is very much a part of the present discourse among this predominantly diasporic community. Though a small fraction of Assyrians remain in the homeland, there is a general understanding that due to the volatility of the region, mass return is not forthcoming. As diaspora and transnationalism scholars Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist write, emphasis on return to the homeland in diaspora discourse may become replaced by processes of circular exchange, transnational mobility, and dense, continuous linkages across borders (Bauböck and Faist, 2010). To what extent is *sheikhani* part of such processes of exchange and transnational mobility in the Assyrian diaspora? What are the narratives and collective memories embodied in this practice that construct sentiments of national belonging for a stateless nation? Interrogating

3 Various studies in the social sciences, and in relation to expressive culture more specifically, have considered disputes which arise in the construction of identities. See, for example, Nicholas Rowe's (2011) analysis of the appropriation of *dabke* dance in the construction of Zionism, Pan-Arabism, and Palestinian nationalism; and Hyunjung Lee's (2016) case study on the tensions between South Korean nationalism and returnees of the Korean diaspora such as the *Koryoin*.

4 Although fragmented from within, the Assyrians have often been and continue to be amalgamated by their persecutors largely as a result of their shared Christian faith. It is also fair to mention that there are Assyrians for whom faith supersedes any other expression of identity. Their commitment is first, and possibly only, to the church whereby being Assyrian is synonymous with being Christian, independent of any secular affiliations.

the close connection between expressive culture and identity, this article examines the practice and polysemy of the traditional Assyrian line dance and song genre *sheikhani* in the performance context of a community twice made transnational — first in the homeland, second in diaspora.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Assyrians throughout the diaspora participate in *sheikhani* at events such as weddings and various public occasions. Social anthropologist Jane Cowan theorizes dance as a heightened aesthetic and sensuous state that reinforces particular social meanings (Cowan, 1990). Drawing from Cowan's theory, I argue that *sheikhani* is a topographical and historical articulation of a multi-faceted Assyrian identity that is materialized through the body politic. I have chosen to analyze *sheikhani* rather than any other particular Assyrian-line dance as I found it to be most commonly discussed as a marker of identity for which my interlocutors seemed to have strong affective sentiments. This article explores how the performance of *sheikhani* engenders a national consciousness as it temporarily demarcates the space of performance as an imagined Assyria and serves as a vehicle for the migration of a collective memory (Bryant, 2005; Connerton, 1989; van Dijck, 2006) from which the past informs the present. How this act fosters embodied sentiments of belonging (Castells, 2004; Cohen, 1985; Delanty, 2003), as expressed by participants in this research, is further investigated.

Sheikhani practice illustrates how traditional dance acts as an "instant embodied communal reference" (Shay, 2006: 19) or an emblem of identity that is instrumental in conveying cultural representation. A main component of *sheikhani* is joining hands with the person dancing to your left and to your right, forming a line in which each individual becomes a link in the dancing collective. I consider embodiment as a kinetic medium for cultural knowledge transmission through song and dance practice. Embodiment is a "kinaesthetic and symbolic process that occurs in a specific place and time and through which an individual or group can experience or re-experience emotions, feelings, ideas, lived experience, and memories" (Singer, 2014: 135). In the context of diasporic cultural production, literary scholar Ananya Kabir describes embodiment as part of a process of negative-to-positive memory-making through movement, and the body's ability to transform traumatic memories of diaspora into commemoration through music and dance practices (Kabir, 2018). Embodied performance also has the potential to construct corporeal and emotional experiences of identity and place in the somatic expression of collective memories (Buckland, 2013; Foley, 2011).

The majority of the Assyrian community resides in the Global North with significant concentrations in Germany, Sweden, Australia, Canada, and the United States.[5] The data for this research was collected through multi-sited

5 This is partially evident through the establishment of community organizations in these regions, such as the Assyrian American National Federation and the Assyrian Universal Alliance Foundation (United States); the Centre for Canadian Assyrian Relations and the Assyrian Chaldean Syriac Student Union of Canada (Canada); the Assyrian Confederation of Europe (Germany, Sweden, Netherlands, Belgium); and the Assyrian Australian Association (Australia).

ethnographic fieldwork in Hamilton, and the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), Ontario; Scottsdale, Arizona; and San Francisco and San Jose, California. I spent approximately four weeks in each Arizona and California (autumn 2017), and I conducted intermittent fieldwork in Hamilton and the GTA from September 2015 to August 2018. Having personal and kinship connections through my Assyrian heritage and membership in the community, I was able to access opportunities for participant observation and semi-formal interviews in relatively short time periods.

Embodied ethnography and a centrality of bodily experience and knowledge (Dankworth and David, 2014) have been part of the fieldwork process where my own experience in previously learning *sheikhani* as a young adult has been a tool in developing my understanding of this dance practice. Such an embodied aspect of ethnographic research facilitates reflexivity when one becomes aware of their physical and emotional relationship to the field, allowing the researcher to distinguish between "the meaning they may be imposing on a situation and the meaning given to the situation by the informants" (Singer, 2014: 137). As a "researcher-as-member" with a strong background in group dynamics (Ekmanis, 2016), I have participated in dancing *sheikhani* at weddings and community events prior to conferring any research process upon this practice. Although I had been aware of and watched *sheikhani* danced as a young child, learning the steps and participating in *sheikhani* at community events as a young adult later impacted my own feelings of connection to and perceptions of potential cultural meanings, and capital, in this dance practice. While the shift in my participation has provided the stimulus for examining the polysemy of *sheikhani*, I reflexively attempt to navigate through any meanings I may impose on various situations of *sheihkani* practice in order to put the voices and actions of my interlocutors at the fore of this research.

My observation of *sheikhani* is that of a song and dance practice with a duple meter rhythm accompanied by dance movements divisible into sets of two steps. Dancers are grouped in a line and may be unlimited in number. For the entire duration of a *sheikhani* dance, participants hold hands by interlocking their fingers with the dancer to their right and left. The reciprocal body orientation within a set of steps begins with dancers face-to-back, right arm held forward against the back of the dancer in front, left arm behind oneself, and moving in a forward direction. Partway through a set, dancers turn so that they are oriented side-to-side, fingers remain interlocked but hands are dropped down to a "V" formation, and dancers take several steps forward before a turnaround step brings them back to their original position.[6] *Sheikhani* music has traditionally been performed by the double-reed *zoorna* and *dawoola* bass drum, but has now been adapted by popular Assyrian artists to include lyrics and electronic instruments such as the synthesizer.

6 This description is based upon my own experience of dancing *sheikhani*, though some phrasing on the spatial arrangement of *sheikhani* is borrowed from a document entitled "Thirty Assyrian Folk Dances," by Peter Pnuel BetBassoo, available through the Assyrian International News Agency, http://www.aina.org/articles/tafd.pdf. This document provides little information about the history and social context of the dances but I suggest it is a noteworthy document as it is one of the only Assyrian dance-step manuals that is currently, to the best of this author's knowledge, in circulation.

The Assyrian Struggle: A History of Persecution

In 2007, the International Association of Genocide Scholars recognized the Assyrian Genocide of 1915, in which it is estimated that more than half of the Assyrian population was exterminated (Atto, 2011; Gaunt, 2006; Travis, 2017).[7] The drawing of borders upon a fallen Ottoman Empire divided the ancestral region of the Assyrians into several states, marking the first transnational separation of the community. Many Assyrians were displaced and resettled in refugee camps, from which time unyielding waves of forced migration began. Following the genocide, Assyrians began to advocate for an independent Assyrian nation state within present-day Iraq. Their quest for national independence led to the 1933 Simele Massacre, which was perpetrated by the burgeoning Iraqi government who saw the Assyrians as a threat to Iraqi national unity (Dawood, 2015; Jacobs, 2012; Al-Marashi, 2017). Later caught in the crossfire of Iraqi-Kurdish conflicts, and the Iran-Iraq and Gulf Wars, from the 1960s-1990s, Assyrians lost much of their ancestral land and were again targeted as an ethnic and religious minority (Donabed, 2015). The 2003-2011 American occupation of Iraq increased instability in an already volatile region. According to a 2008 report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, while up to one million Christians lived in Iraq before the US led occupation of 2003, around 400,000 Assyrians had, by 2008, fled the country, disproportionately making up as much as 20% of all Iraqi refugees (Abdulahad, 2014).

It was under these conditions of forced migration that in spring 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) began their reign of terror. Christian homes in Mosul were marked with an Arabic letter "n" for "nasrani" (i.e. the Nazarenes, in reference to Jesus of Nazareth) and the Assyrians were told by ISIS that they had three options: to pay a *jizya* (tax), convert to Islam, or be killed.[8] With the onslaught of ISIS, the refugee crisis became centrefold in Western media. However, for the Assyrians, this was a novel iteration of a process which they had been subject to for over a century. Many villages and towns, particularly in Iraq and Syria, remain empty. It is estimated that prior to 2011, approximately 10,000 Assyrians lived in the Khabur region of Syria. Today they number 900, if not less.[9] In Iraq, many Assyrians remain internally displaced or continue to leave. Mass Christian graves of ISIS victims have recently been uncovered.[10] In the wake of such destructive forces, Assyrians continue their cultural practices.

7 Sometimes referred to as the "Forgotten Genocide," it was part of the same campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Armenian and Greek populations of Asia Minor.

8 Shlama Foundation — a federal, non-profit organization based in the United States which provides aid to Assyrians in Iraq — recently reported that the current number of Christians in Mosul is estimated to be eighteen, while in 1987 it was 280,000, and 35,000 in 2014, prior to the ISIS stranglehold (Shlama Foundation Instagram Post, @shlama-foundation, September 17, 2018).

9 Hubbard Ben (2018) 'There Are No Girls Left': Syria's Christian Villages Hollowed Out by ISIS, *New York Times*, August 15, [online]. URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/15/world/middleeast/syria-isis-assyrian-christians.html

10 Mostafa Nehal (2018) Mass grave with remains of 40 Christians found in west of Mosul, *Iraqi News*, March 2, [online]. URL: https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/mass-grave-remains-40-christians-found-west-mosul/

Sheikhani in Context: The Assyrian Party

Sheikhani is a folk dance performed and danced in a variety of contexts (Figure 1). I frame events such as weddings and "parties" as ritualistic practice. Rites are held to be meaningful because "they have significance with respect to a set of further non-ritual actions, to the whole life of a community" (Connerton, 1989: 45). Weddings and parties share similar social functions and characteristics, particularly in their gathering of community members, and musical consumption of and dance to Assyrian popular songs. I differentiate between the two based on purpose and intent.

Weddings are ritualistic, life-cycle events that celebrate the individuals being espoused, and may be considered obligatory based on the extent of one's connection to the bride or groom. Parties, on the other hand, are public, social events that are organized around various holidays, such as Easter or Valentine's day,[11] and which may be considered less obligatory than a wedding. Parties are ritualistic practice through certain repetitive characteristics: (1) a public social event intended for the gathering of Assyrian community members (2) centered on the live performance of Assyrian music by a local or international artist (3) a site where guests usually participate in traditional line dances such as *khigga* and *sheikhani*.[12] Parties are temporary sites of performance in which community identity, home-making, and nation-building is enacted. Meaning may be produced, or reproduced, by the capacity of an event to index the past; expressive performances can geographically "place" exiled performers and audiences by reminding them that they are not at home, yet they are participating in a moment in which sounds, images, and feelings fleetingly coalesce to create a place that feels like home (Diehl, 2002: 14).

Drawing from anthropologist Jane Cowan's approach to dance and the body politic (Cowan, 1990), the practice of *sheikhani* may itself be framed as a "dance-event." Cowan defines the "dance-event" as a temporally, spatially, and conceptually "bounded" sphere of interaction that occurs within a non-ordinary context. In the dance-event, "individuals publicly present themselves in and through celebratory practices — eating, drinking, singing, and talking as well as dancing — and are evaluated by others" (Cowan, 1990: 4). The dance-event is conceptually set apart from the activities of everyday life: it is "framed" (*Ibid.*: 18). Thus the practice of *sheikhani* may be situated as a frame within a frame. It is a moment of particularly intensified, embodied, experience that occurs within the ritualistic practice of the Assyrian party. Such parties occur throughout the various nodes of the Assyrian diaspora. Assyrian singers, whose performances are central to the party, travel within this transnational network. It is therefore possible for partygoers to not only dance *sheikhani* similarly to their compatriots in other diasporic locations, but to also have the opportunity, at different points

11 I have also observed, at least in Hamilton and the Greater Toronto Area, that "picnics" (the same concept as a "party," yet held outdoors) take place in the summer with less reference to a particular holiday, perhaps related to better weather.

12 Based on my observations, *khigga* and *sheikhani* are arguably the most commonly practiced dances at any type of event where dancing takes place. *Khigga* is considered to have more simple steps, but the hand-holding and shoulder shaking involved is similar to *sheikhani*.

Figure 1: Assyrian line-dancing in traditional clothes (*jooleh d'khomala*) at a wedding

Credit: N. Younan, Toronto, Ontario, September 2016.

in time, to listen and dance to live performances of the same singers.[13]

I emphasize the significance of the Assyrian party partially because in discussions with my interlocutors in various parts of the diaspora, the subject of the party frequently occurred when I asked general questions about dance, or conversely dance became central to discussion if I asked about parties. In a casual get together with several of my Assyrian acquaintances from Hamilton, Ontario, I had the opportunity to ask for their opinions about parties and party-like events. We had attended a number of parties together in the past, such as *Akitu* (Assyrian-Babylonian new year) celebrations. Nenos is a member of the Canadian-Assyrian community with family roots in Iraq, and Rami has ancestral ties to Iran. Both grew up in Kuwait and later emigrated to Canada. They commented:

> Nenos: "It's [the party] a place for Assyrians to gather. Right now, it's become one of the predominant ways that Assyrians get to meet other Assyrians, other than church and what not."
> Rami: "…it's part of preserving your culture. If we don't have parties, we're not gonna see Assyrian dancing…you can listen to Assyrian music, but if you don't know what sheikhani is, you're still missing out on it, 'cause it's big picture. It's the music. It's the steps. It's everything."
> Nenos: "Our dance is important. Our dance allows us to participate."
> Rami: "If you don't have those parties, you don't have the dances, and there's no avenue for people to learn these dances […] So on days like Valentine's day, and Christmas and stuff like that, it's basically a platform for them to hold a party, where it's gonna accomplish so many different goals. It's a place where people go to have fun, it's a place where you go to preserve your culture, your dancing, your languages, your foods, people interacting together." (Interview, March 5, 2017)

Rami and Nenos both suggest that the party is a specific platform through which a sense of Assyrian collectivity may be experienced. The centrality of dance to these functions is addressed, and Rami specifically refers to *sheikhani*, which is one of the most commonly known folk dances. Nenos' statement about participation is of particular interest, as he did not specify that he was solely referring to participation in the party. Based on the overall conversation and recurring reference to "participation," I interpret Nenos' comment as an implicit understanding of how the kinetic transmission of expressive culture has the potential to assert and express feelings of Assyrian identity and belonging.

I suggest that participation in dance, whether through the physical act of dancing oneself or as an observer, serves as a communicative bond for the ways in which people interact, discuss, and negotiate what is necessary for belonging in a particular group. Community is that entity to which one belongs, "greater than kinship but more immediate than the abstraction we call 'society;' it is the arena in which people acquire their most fundamental and most substantial

13 For example, throughout the fieldwork process, I participated and observed dancing to the live music of Assyrian singer Sargon Youkhanna at a Valentine's Day party in Woodbridge, Ontario (February 11, 2017); at a wedding in Chicago, Illinois (May 13, 2017); and at a party celebrating the Assyrian American Cultural Organization of Arizona in Scottsdale, Arizona (November 18, 2017). Sargon Youkhanna emigrated from Syria in the late 2000s and is currently based in the United States.

experience of social life" (Cohen, 1985: 15). In the absence of an independent state, continued instability in their ancestral regions of origin, and the separation of community across transnational borders, the Assyrian party and associated dance practices become bounded frames of reference for collective expressions of community.

"Participation" does not necessarily exclude those who do not know or prefer not to engage in the physical act of dancing. Faith, a Canadian-Assyrian I interviewed from Hamilton, Ontario, explained to me that she does not like to participate in dancing, but enjoys attending events where dancing takes place. When asked about *sheikhani* specifically, she replied:

> "I really love the feeling of having something in common with people I don't even know. Like a common ground. You feel a connection and you don't feel out of place. It makes you proud in a way too, that you've been able to preserve this skill…so that you can use it to meet up randomly with other [Assyrians] and use it to interact." (Interview via Facebook, October 6, 2015)

Similarly, in a discussion with Peter, a member of the Assyrian community in San Jose, I was told:

> "It's one of those things that even if you don't participate, the pleasure is really seeing all these men and women honestly pouring their heart out, enjoying every moment…I love it honestly. Especially when I see well-organized group together, very nicely, coordinating things, I mean really it has its own pleasure." (Interview, October 20, 2017)

Faith and Peter, of two different generations and from different parts of the diaspora, shared a common appreciation for Assyrian dance practice despite their preference to remain observers. Their observation, however, is itself a form of participation in the feeling of collective belonging. Cowan writes of dance as a metaphor for collective participation, whereby "to be a participant in the dance is to be in (and with) the group; it is also to be in the thick of the meanings created… The dance, graphically suggesting a collectivity bounded by shared knowledge, skill, and physical connection, is considered an apt metaphor for the community itself" (Cowan, 1990: 20). As observers, Assyrians such as Faith and Peter actively contribute to and experience the meanings generated in Assyrian dances such as *sheikhani*. Their participation is not at stake but rather a different form of embodiment than that suggested by Cowan. Even if one does not consider themselves to be a performers, opting not to engage in the act of dancing, their participation can still be considered performative, because their presence and actions both embody and construct status, identities, and relationships (Seye, 2014: 59). Spectators of *sheikhani* engage with the dance through "kinetic empathy," seeing themselves reflected in the actions of the dancers, "as we see a dancer interacting with and moving in and around a site, we can extrapolate that movement to our own experience and *imagine* the sensory effects of that interaction if not literally feel parallel sensations" (Baines, 2016: 5). The meanings generated through *sheikhani* in context of the Assyrian [stateless] nationalism include feelings of belonging within an emotionally bounded frame of reference; a conduit to (re)live and (re)claim one's history; and to politically and affectively spatialize the area of the dance experience regardless of one's mode — spectator or performer — of participation in the dance.

Warriors and Resistance: Oral Histories and *Sheikhani* Tropes

Sheikhani is framed in the national imaginary of the Assyrians as having derived from the pre-battle warm-up of the Assyrian mountain warriors of Hâkkari, archetypal figures transmitted in their oral, nationalist history.[14] The notion of the Assyrian "warrior" often refers specifically to the Assyrians of the mountainous Hakkâri region, who are known as the "highlanders." Although not a central focus of this article, the Assyrians as a "warrior race" may be problematized as a colonial construct imposed top-down from foreign powers. In my research thus far, I have found that archival documentation pertaining to the warrior trope is most often authored by colonial British officers and missionaries from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries as part of a racially essentialist approach to categorizing and exploiting colonial subjects.[15] The narrative of the Assyrian mountain warriors has been referenced by several Assyrian scholars. According to Middle East historian Fadi Dawood, British officials designated the Assyrian population as a "warrior race" to strengthen ties between the Assyrians and the colonial government (Dawood, 2015). In his work on inserting the Assyrian experience into the narrative of Iraqi historiography, Sargon Donabed similarly cites British archival documentation that identifies the "martial spirit" of the Assyrian highlanders, whose skills were commodified by the British to advance their colonial interest in the region (Donabed, 2015).

Though the Assyrians were removed from the Hakkâri region through either massacre or forced expulsion, and not permitted to return *en masse*, an awareness of the Assyrian mountain warriors persists in the collective memory of the Assyrian peoples. I posit that although historical documentation positions the Assyrian mountain warrior as a colonially constructed character — although there may be some truth in this link between the mountaineers and the Assyrian warriors of Empire obscured by lack of local archival material — the current imaginings of such figures are a re-appropriation of subjugated bodies. Postcolonial philosopher Frantz Fanon writes, "when a story flourishes in the heart of a folklore, it is because in one way or another it expresses an aspect of 'the spirit of the group'" (Fanon, 1952: 46). It is possible that the notion of the "warrior" has become symbolic in representing the "spirit" of the Assyrian nation in several regards. It denotes the might of the ancient Assyrian Empire from which the community claims ancestry. It may also be a coping mechanism from which to remember with pride, rather than injury, the injustices endured during episodes of more extreme persecution. Nardin, a first-generation Assyrian American reflected:

14 Although a particular time period has never been specified to me, it seems through my discussions with the community — I have spoken with both younger and older generations — that these "mountain warriors" are considered part of the lineage that stems from soldiers of the Assyrian Empire and is parcel to a continuity between an ancient and present-day Assyrian identity. Thus far, it is unclear through my research at what time this became a social dance that includes both men and women, or if it had always been so.

15 For example, Brigadier General H. H. Austin published, in 1920, an account of his experience at the Baqubah Refugee Camp thirty-three miles NNE of Baghdad where many Assyrians displaced during the genocide had been residing. Austin writes: "The Assyrians of the mountains are a hardy and warlike people… The Assyrians of the plains in Persian territory, on the other hand, do not possess the martial marauding instincts of their mountain brethren" (Austin, 1920: 5).

> "Assyrians literally protest through dance. In every country we're in, it was not our country, foreign people were in power, and they told us how to talk. We had to speak in Farsi, in Arabic, outside of our homes…to a certain extent we had to assimilate forcefully, now we're forced to assimilate partially to Canadian, American [culture]…but our one protest consistently is dance. We're not giving this up, like we are hand in hand, we've been doing sheikhani for a thousand years, and we're gonna do it again, and my kid is gonna do it and my grandpa is gonna do it…you know, [with] what trick in the book have they not tried to get rid of us? And we're not going anywhere because we're so stubborn. We're just like, this is our way of life, this is our language, this is our dance, you can kill me but I'm still gonna do it." (Interview, November 5, 2017)

Nardin's comment suggests that *sheikhani* dance practice is a form a resistance to several issues the community has had to contend with including assimilation. For Nardin, to engage with the dance is to resist. Although Nardin explicitly marks *sheikhani* as a mode of resistance, music and dance more generally have been referenced similarly in other interviews and informal discussion. For example, an Assyrian woman from the GTA expressed embodied warrior sentiments while listening to the popular Assyrian nationalistic song "Beth Nahrain Atreewat"[16] by Ashur Bet Sargis, saying:

> "I envision myself, like every time I hear it since I was young girl, like I'm riding a horse in jooleh d'khomala,[17] and I'm like in, you know, the mountains of Hakkâri… and there's [an enemy] I'm shooting at."(Interview, March 26, 2017[18])

For Peter from San Jose, listening to singer Sargon Gabriel:

> "Reminds you of being up on the hills, singing sheikhani until the morning, comradery, come together, fight together." (Interview, October 20, 2017)

For these individuals, and many others who are far removed from Hakkâri and the days of the Assyrian mountain warrior, embodiment of the warrior trope becomes accessible through music and dance.

Historian Alda Benjamen draws a connection between Ashur Bet Sargis, *sheikhani*, and the idea of resistance that figures in the comments above. In her study on negotiating the place of Assyrians in the state of Iraq (2015), Benjamen notes that Assyrian musicians, including Ashur Bet Sargis, began to create "songs of defiance" in challenge to Ba'athist propaganda that glorified a cult of martyrdom for fallen Iraqi soldiers.[19] One of the first songs associated with this facet of the Assyrian struggle is Ashur Bet Sargis' 1984 song "Riqda d'Ghabiloota" (The Dance of Victory). The song is in a duple meter that *sheikhani* may

16 "Beth Nahrain, You are my country;" Beth Nahrain, meaning "home between the rivers" refers to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the Assyrian homeland. Assyrians identify this region as the heart of their ancestral homeland.

17 This literally translates as "clothes of celebration" but is the term used to refer to traditional Assyrian garments (as noted in Figure 1).

18. This interviewee is an Assyrian who emigrated from Syria to Canada. No name by request of interlocutor.

19 There were many Assyrians who were soldiers in the Iraqi army. This part of Benjamen's discussion is part of a more complex issue concerning the negotiation of Assyrian and Iraqi identity.

be danced to. More telling, however, are the opening lines "*tehmoon raqdan sheikhani/riqda d'jwanqeh tdannaneh/op khamateh shitdraneh/qad sargiddee tdoraneh*" (Come all to our dance, *sheikhani*/the dance of the vigilant young men/and of the beautiful young women/as numerous as the mountains).[20] While the opening of the song immediately references *sheikhani* and a connection to "the mountains," the song later develops a more direct martial narrative, "*di riqdonla sheikhani/min askar l zarbaneh/min qam saleewa l'plasha/min bar deereh qalbaneh*" (Come on, dance *sheikhani*/with the strong army/before they went down to fight/[and] after they return victorious). As a "song of defiance," "Riqda d'Ghaleeboota" refers to three elements consistent with this discussion: it is a *sheikhani* song about *sheikhani* dance; it makes reference to "the mountains" (i.e. the Hakkâri region); and it directly connects *sheikhani* with a warrior trope. Moreover, it is inclusive, calling upon the listener/dancer to "come on" and dance with the victorious army, thus embodying a resisting force.

Envisaging the Assyrian mountain warriors through cultural expressions such as music and dance is also a form of remembrance for both another time and place. The erasure of Assyrian villages in the Hakkâri region in contemporary cartography[21] adds representational import to its documentation as both a reminder of the historical presence of Assyrians in Hakkâri and as resistance to the systematic persecution which has attempted to erase their long-standing ties to the region.[22] The origin myth of *sheikhani* has been expressed to me in numerous formal and informal interviews. In speaking with Ashor, a Canadian-Assyrian and one of my interlocutors from Toronto, I asked how he came to acquire this knowledge, to which he replied:

> "I don't know, I heard it from somewhere. They told me that back in the old days, in the mountains of Hakkâri, it would get pretty cold, and the way they would warm-up is dancing sheikhani." (Interview, October 16, 2015)

Similarly, in a discussion with Stella, a Toronto-based Assyrian musician, I was told:

> "I know that our ancestors… would warm up before they go to a war, to fight, they would dance this dance with drums and zoorna… That was really like the warrior's dance." (Interview, September 25, 2015)

Although neither Stella nor Ashor have been to Hakkâri, they have a shared association of *sheikhani* with the region and more specifically with the Assyrian highland warriors who once roamed its crevices and plateaus.

The martial spirit of *sheikhani* has been a repetitive theme in many interviews but has not been exclusive of various other meanings. In an interview with Maryam, an Assyrian-American media host whom I met in San Jose, California, I asked for her thoughts about the significance of dance in general for the Assyrian diaspora, to which she replied:

20 Full lyrics available at http://www.assyrianlyrics.com/lyrics/615/riqda-d-ghaliboota. Translation by the author, with assistance from Umta Shino.

21 Hakkâri is now a province in present-day Turkey.

22 As mentioned earlier in this paper, the Hakkâri region was emptied of Assyrians through various genocidal campaigns, particularly during the period of World War I.

> "*Regardless where we are, we listen to almost the same songs. Regardless where we live, we dance the same dances. So regardless of the distance, we are connected by similar songs, the same songs, the same dances, similar dances. Also, I think as in community, this is what I've heard from the history, that dance was introduced in our culture as a warm-up for our soldiers before going to war. So that's why we hold hands and we dance very close to each other, because we want to feel strong, we want to feel one, and go and defeat the enemy. That's why I think, to this day, after thousands of years, it still connects us the way it connected our soldiers, our people…*"
> (Interview, October 25, 2017)

I quote Maryam at length as her comments touch upon key segments of this article. Maryam identifies the feeling of belonging and transnational community formation as regardless of distance, Assyrians are connected by "the same songs, the same dances." Her knowledge of the correlation between dance and the "Assyrian warriors" stems from a collective memory that continues to relay a history that connects the Assyrians with ancestors of a more distant Mesopotamian past, and which is foundational to the national consciousness of the Assyrian peoples.

Sheikhani Beyond Borders: Transnational Connections

The boundaries of the Assyrian nation may be understood as an elastic form in that they are drawn across transnational borders and subject to change depending on the migratory movement of the Assyrian diaspora. Anthropologist Michel Laguerre, in his work on diasporas, homelands, and hostlands, discusses a shift in thought from diaspora-homeland connections, to the linkages between diasporic sites in the formation of a "transglobal network nation." This reconfiguration results in a "shared citizenship" that is taken from a national basis and reinserted into the transnational, global arena (Laguerre, 2009). Ashor spoke about how he thought *sheikhani* brings Assyrians together as a nation, pointing toward the idea that the iconicity of *sheikhani* is part of what constructs Assyrian national boundaries:

> "*It brings us together because regardless of what party I go to I will dance the same dance as all the other Assyrians as soon as the* sheikhani *beat comes on. I have gone to other weddings, like Serbian and Arab, and I don't know the dances. This is not used to separate us, because I try to learn their dances, but it shows me that I have something in common with Assyrians, actually* a lot *in common.*"

Ashor's comments echo a similar sentiment to Faith's reference of dance as "common ground." I suggest that this "common ground," which is located in a transnational, global arena as a result of their geographic dispersal, contributes to a sense of emplacement through which Assyrians engage in the concept of "shared citizenship."

One of the largest assemblies of Assyrians occurs at the annual Assyrian National Convention (ANC), which I attended on the 2017 Labour Day weekend

in Scottsdale, Arizona.[23] A motive for this location is its proximity to Phoenix, Arizona, which is home to a sizable Assyrian community.[24] On the final day of the convention, a dance workshop was taught by the director of Domara Dance Group (DDG), a dance group that is based out of San Jose, California. When I later met with the director, Domarina, she graciously gave me a tour of the local Assyrian church and we discussed her work with DDG. She specifically began to talk about *sheikhani*:

> "Sheikhani *is not Armenian,* sheikhani *is not Kurdish, not Turkish, is Assyrian, because when they go to the war, they start with the* sheikhani *because first of all the unity, they hold hands, and they get energy with the dance. Dance is energy, dance is, I could tell, is a fruit and food for your soul too… I tell you this so important. With my experience with the youth that I teach them, the first thing they have their confidence. And if they don't dance they don't have confidence. And if they don't know the Assyrian dances, they don't come to the Assyrian parties… You know, dance is a fun part. Peoples always go for the fun part. When is a dance, everybody are there.*" (Interview, October 26, 2017)

Domarina further mentioned that to her knowledge, *sheikhani* is the historical basis for all Assyrian dances. Her comments further accentuate conceptualizations of Assyrian nationalism and the Assyrian party tradition. She establishes boundaries by claiming what *sheikhani* is *not*, or rather who it *does not* belong to. She furthermore identifies the importance of dance for participation in the Assyrian party.

It is important to note that *sheikhani* and other Assyrian dances share similar traits to folk dances that are common in the cultural milieu of neighboring communities. For example, there are various Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, and Arab folk dances that share common kinetic elements such as dancers being spatially organized into lines and connected through the holding of hands. My concern here is not to argue the origins of *sheikhani*, but to present the meanings which become inherent and the boundaries which are constructed in the Assyrian context. *Sheikhani* becomes more than "cultural stuff" (Barth, 1969) that defines an Assyrian identity. Instead, the discourse surrounding *sheikhani* highlights, as Fredrik Barth writes, the "social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained *despite* changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories" *(Ibid.*: 9). Boundaries are created not through unchanging cultural matter, but through a "sharing of criteria for evaluation and judgment" (*Ibid.*: 15). For my analysis of *sheikhani*, I consider Barth's conceptualization of ethnic boundaries because it allows for more consideration on the discourse surrounding *sheikhani* rather than only the dance itself. It may be argued that the steps of any folk dance may be subject to change and various influences throughout time. In this case, it is the evaluation and judgement of *sheikhani* by its performing and observing subjects, such as Domarina and others quoted, that highlights the significance of the dance as it pertains to Assyrian identity construction.

23 The Assyrian National Convention is an annual event which consists of entertainment and educational programs. For more information, visit www.aanf.org

24 One of the main Assyrian organizations in the area is the Assyrian American Cultural Organization of Arizona.

The frame of the Assyrian party provides a space for the articulation of Assyrian nationalism and community belonging. Anthropologists Solrun Williksen and Nigel Rapport claim that identity is not sacrificed with places as homes exist in time and in moments of collective or individual performance whereby such acts of home-making achieve a sense of emplacement (Williksen and Rapport, 2010). In a similar vein, ethnomusicologist Louise Wrazen, in her discussion on relocating the Polish Tatra mountain region among Górale immigrants in Canada, asks how it is possible to be *of* a place when you are no longer *in* that place. Wrazen suggests that music performance — and I would add associated activities such as dancing — has the potential to create a performative space through which a variety of place-bound experiences and possible identities may be accessed as a means of spatial transformation (Wrazen, 2007).

I asked a number of my interlocutors whether they felt that listening or dancing to *sheikhani* might transform the space of its performance. I questioned Stella, in more specific terms, how dancing *sheikhani* makes her "feel Assyrian." In her response, she made a connection between a conceptual feeling of Assyrian unity and the material, physical contact involved with *sheikhani*:

> "*You know how Assyrian dances are group dances, like most of them, right? So you hold hands, and there's a long, long line — a circle — of people holding hands and dancing the same dance altogether. I think it kind of unites everyone together and in that moment they all feel one. This is my feel, like I feel intact with everybody, I feel part of this nation.*"

Stella's description suggests an affective embodiment of Assyrian national identity that specifically takes place in the space of dancing *sheikhani*. Similarly, Ashor referred to *sheikhani* performance as an opportunity for social embodiment and emplacement of a collective identity. He explained:

> "*Whenever I'm [dancing sheikhani] at Assyrian gatherings it just feels like we're all one, we all know what to do, there's a connection between us where it transcends the distance between us…" [At the pinnacle of our discussion, Ashor concluded:] "We're building Assyria, Beth Nahrain, it's wherever we [Assyrians] are, wherever we maintain culture, the language, the dances, the feel, the family, atmosphere, everything like that. That's wherever we are, maintaining that, that's where Assyria is.*"

Assyria Online: *Sheikhani* Transmission on the World Wide Web

In the "maintenance" of Assyria, the Internet has become an integral site for transnational communication between Assyrians in the diaspora. In the context of weddings and similar social gatherings, *sheikhani* is often performed by a live band, or as a recording played by a DJ specializing in Assyrian music. Outside of these events, *sheikhani* is also consumed via the Internet on websites such as Facebook or YouTube, where artists will frequently post videos of their music. A consideration of how *sheikhani* is consumed via an online platform is warranted in that it is an alternate location from which to engage with *sheikhani* practice that is not limited to a particular time or place. Unlike a wedding or party that occurs on a particular day, in a specific location, videos of *sheikhani* songs and dance are readily available online. Ethnomusicologist René Lysloff writes that

the idea of community is predicated on a collective sense of common interests and/or purpose, and that such communities may be formed in online contexts (Lysloff, 2003). The Internet, as Lysloff explains, is freed from the constraints of real time and space allowing a community to cohere through common interests rather than physical proximity; "Thus it is the *context* of on-line communities that might be virtual… not the sets of social relationships such collectivities engender" (*Ibid.*: 257). This coherence may be associated with the types of media, such as music, that are shared via online platforms. In a case study looking at the online musical activities of Assyrians based in Sweden, ethnomusicologist Dan Lundberg suggests that because Assyrians lack nation-state institutions (such as a centralized government), the building of international networks via the Internet is a significant opportunity to build "'national' information banks" (Lundberg *et al.*, 2003: 300). These "'national' information banks" may be sites where Assyrian history is documented through a variety of sources including music.

The *sheikhani* song "Goreh d'Tyareh" ("The Leaders of Tyari"), released in 2008 by Toronto-based Assyrian artist Talal Graish, describes several heroic Assyrian figures from the villages of Tyari — an area within Hakkâri — in and around World War I.[25] I present this song example as part of this article's analysis of *sheikhani* because it is a form of oral history that directly correlates to the "warrior" trope and "martial" spirit that has been thus far presented as integral to understanding the significance of *sheikhani* song and dance in the context of Assyrian identity. It also seems that, while most Assyrians I have spoken with know and highly regard this song, it is not generally performed at weddings and parties, suggesting alternative modes of consumption such as the internet.[26] A number of videos of "Goreh d'Tyareh" are available for viewing on YouTube. In its availability online, and the stories of the historical Assyrian figures which it communicates, this song may be an example of an archival document which contributes to the aforementioned "'national' information bank." The comments section on the YouTube pages of "Goreh d'Tyareh" is also a resource from which to gauge sentiments of belonging from throughout the Assyrian diaspora. These sections are forums where Assyrians from throughout the global diaspora have the opportunity to communicate with each other and to express their feelings of Assyrian nationalism that the song evokes. For example, the following comments were posted, "Khayya ATUR! Khayya OUMTA!" meaning "Assyria is life! Our nation is life!" In the martial spirit of the song, and perhaps *sheikhani* more generally, one viewer commented, "I feel like going to war for Assyria after listening to this motivational *zmarta* [song]." [27]

25 Available for listening online https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YQ1tZ1B5WA; Translation of verse 2: "My cousin, Sorro Karra (Soro the Deaf)/ of Asheetha, how mighty he is/ Stories of his manhood remain until this day/ We have honour and pride in him/ He put in the hearts of his enemies/ fear that has no end./ Until this day we remember his name with pride/ Sorro Karra, with pride." Tiyari is a historical district in Hakkâri.

26 I do not suppose a definitive reason for "Goreh d'Tyareh" not being a popular song at weddings and parties. I speculate that this may be related to the specificity of Tyari, which may be exclusionary to Assyrians not from this region.

27 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfHcaf81hc0 "Assyrian — Talal Graish — Goreh d'Tyareh (music video)" accessed November 1, 2015.

"Goreh d'Tyareh" has been described to me on numerous occasions by Assyrians as a "nationalistic song." Several elements, beyond the lyrical content, may contribute to this understanding. Firstly, the lyrics are in a dialect of the Neo-Aramaic language. As noted by sociolinguists Carmen Llamas and Dominic Watt, language users are not passive, but "are agents capable of deploying language variation for identity-making and -marking purposes" (Llamas and Watt, 2010: 2). Speaking a dialect standardly referred to as Assyrian Neo-Aramaic is a crux of Assyrian identity, particularly in discussions of their continuity from the ancient Mesopotamian civilizations, where Aramaic was adopted as a *lingua franca* during the Neo-Assyrian Empire. This is also a point of pride amongst the community, as they were able to maintain this language despite the increasingly common use of Turkish, Arabic, and Kurdish in the homeland.

Secondly, the sampling of *raweh*, being the abrasive, shouting vocal lines that occur periodically in the song, alludes to the historic village life of Assyrians which figures prominently in their national imaginary. In speaking with Assyrians during my fieldwork, *raweh* has been described as a vocal tradition that would be performed spontaneously in villages at weddings and various other communal gatherings, particularly in the Hakkâri mountains. According to linguist Nineb Lamassu, the term is derived from the semitic verbal root "rw," meaning to drink water until one is satiated or to drink wine until one is inebriated (Lamassu, 2009 and 2012). As I have generally heard it discussed in the community, *raweh* is said to have been performed by men who would gather around a table after a night of drinking and then sing these songs which may feature themes of love or historical events.[28] Lamassu suggests that part of *raweh*'s significance lies in its longevity as the only vernacular form of music and poetry of its kind that has survived outside of the church since Assyrians converted to Christianity in the first-third centuries AD.

Although *raweh* is not an extinct practice, it is rarely performed and little is known about the extent to which it is still transmitted. Lamassu has noted that the further Assyrians are removed from the region in which this tradition developed, the more difficult it is becoming to maintain and transmit *raweh* and to understand certain aspects of its social context. The sampling of *raweh* in "Goreh d'Tyareh" allows for a reading that moves beyond its original context of drunken revelry. In this song, *raweh* becomes a marker of Assyrian national identity in its relation to a nostalgic and rural way of life in their ancestral homeland, prior to the mass waves of Assyrian emigration and ensuing physical separations from kith and kin. Although a total assembly reminiscent of the Assyrian past may no longer be possible, the transnational performance of *sheikhani*, and the dissemination of songs such as "Goreh D'Tyareh" through online platforms such as YouTube, engenders a collective national identity for the Assyrian peoples.

28 Lamassu notes that Assyrians generally believe *raweh* is sung by Assyrians of the Tyari, Tkhoma, and Barwar tribes (Assyrian groups of the Hakkâri region), probably because its survival in modern times is restricted to these communities, but may have existed previously in others. He also mentions that raweh could be sung by both men and women. For further discussion on *raweh* and gender, see Lamassu (2009: 5-9).

Conclusion

Various practices beyond music and dance — particularly, for example, the religious — occupy social spaces in the Assyrian diaspora. This article, however, has focused on *sheikhani* song and dance. It has been my general observation that while music and dance may be an arena for the performance of historical and political discourse, compared to other practices they are more fluid, less polarizing, and accessible through both in-person and online contexts. On Saturday, April 7, 2018, I attended *Akitu* celebrations in Warren, Michigan. The Assyrian American Association of Michigan hosted a party with three of the most well-known Assyrian singers headlining the engagement: Ashur Bet Sargis, Linda George, and Sargon Gabriel. The evening opened with the re-enactment of a royal Assyrian parade. A number of youth dressed in the costumes of ancient Assyrian imperial soldiers led a procession for the chariot arrival of, presumably, the legendary King Ashurbanipal and Queen Shamiram. Throughout the night, the singers performed music for various line dances, including *sheikhani*. In speaking with one of the organizers, I was told that there were one thousand attendees. Based on the size of the banquet facility, and the crowd that filled the room, this seemed plausible.

As Ashur Bet Sargis was singing several of his slower songs that evening, and the volume of the room was slightly dimmed, I spoke with Hiba, an acquaintance sitting beside me at the table. She told me that she liked his songs because they evoke strong emotions within her that "paint pictures" as a means of story-telling. Without any particular comment from myself, she proceeded to tell me one of her personal stories that came to mind: the entire male family of her grandmother, who was in fact Armenian from Mardin, was killed in the 1915 genocide. Her grandmother married an Assyrian man she later met in Syria, who was himself originally from Iraq but was displaced due to war. Her grandparents eventually returned to Iraq, although due to circumstances highlighted earlier, this would prove to not be permanent either. We spoke more about her lost family, repercussions of the genocide, and how Ashur's songs reflect and communicate many people's personal stories. Amidst this rather fraught conversation she pointed around to the party and said, "this is why we need *this*."

The present condition of the Assyrian peoples is one of mass exile and displacement. Hiba's family story is not an exception, but rather the norm. Many of the Assyrians I interviewed, including those whom I have referenced earlier, shared similar stories about their families and, in some cases, themselves. Although we did not discuss her personal history in much detail, Hiba shared a migration experience similar to her grandparents, highlighting an instability that this community has experienced intergenerationally. Under such circumstances, the Assyrians have had to persistently rebuild and reclaim an identity in a transnational context. What did Hiba mean exactly by "*this*"? In the moment, it did not seem prudent to ask, but upon further reflection, perhaps she was referring to the music and the dancing as a framework for rebuilding and reclaiming an Assyrian identity in a new homeland. It could also be that she was referring to the party-event as a space for a sizable number of Assyrians, who might not all personally know each other, to gather, and to compensate for the many separations that they have borne witness to prior to arriving at that time and place. Recalling Nardin's statement about the dance and resistance, music and dance

at events such as the Akitu party are expressive testaments that claim, self-validate, and perpetuate an Assyrian identity despite persecution and opposing narratives. For Hiba, however, no further explanation seemed necessary. It was enough to be there.

Waves of forced migration have come to constitute a normal pattern for the Assyrians, a minority from historic Upper Mesopotamia. However, their story is not one without celebrations. Song and dance practices, especially *sheikhani*, continue to engender a collective belonging that is not spatially nor temporally limited. The Assyrian party tradition continues to provide a platform for the enactment of Assyrian identity. The practice of *sheikhani* at such events may be understood as a living embodiment of the Assyrian peoples history and demonstrates an effort at perseverance through the cultural and individual trauma that has repeatedly threatened the physical and social fabrics of the community.

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Nadia Younan

Stateless Rhythms, Transnational Steps: Embodying the Assyrian Nation through *Sheikhani* Song and Dance

Interrogating the close connection between expressive culture and ethnic identity, this article examines the practice and polysemy of the traditional Assyrian line dance and song genre *sheikhani* in the performance context of a community twice made transnational — first in the homeland, second in diaspora. Such an expressive embodiment is integral to the articulation of a stateless national identity of the modern Assyrian peoples — an ethnic and religious minority that is indigenous to the border nexus of Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran. As a result of violence and conflict, the majority of Assyrians have fled their homeland through processes of forced migration and refugee flight, resulting in a transnational diaspora with significant populations in the global north. This article considers *sheikhani* as a topographical and historical articulation of both Assyrian ethnic and national identity that is composed through the body politic.

Rythmes apatrides, cadences transnationales : personnification de la nation assyrienne à travers le chant et la danse *sheikhani*

En questionnant le lien étroit qui existe entre l'expression d'une culture et l'identité ethnique, cet article examine la pratique et la polysémie de la danse en ligne traditionnelle assyrienne et du chant *sheikhani* dans le contexte de la performance d'une communauté devenue transnationale à deux reprises — dans sa terre natale, puis en tant que diaspora. Cette personnification éloquente est cruciale pour exprimer l'identité nationale apatride des peuples assyriens d'aujourd'hui — une minorité ethnique et religieuse indigène aux régions frontalières de la Syrie, l'Irak, la Turquie, et l'Iran. Suite aux conflits et à la violence, la majorité des Assyriens ont fui leur terre natale par des migrations et un exode forcés, créant une diaspora transnationale avec des populations importantes dans l'hémisphère nord. Cet article considère le *sheikhani* comme une articulation topographique et historique de l'identité assyrienne ethnique et nationale à travers le corps politique.

Ritmos apátridos, pasos transnacionales: materializando la nación asiria a través del canto y baile *sheikhani*

Este artículo interroga el estrecho vínculo entre cultura expresiva e identidad étnica, examinando la práctica y la polisémica del estilo *sheikhani* de danza y canción tradicional asirio en el contexto de una comunidad dos veces transnacional: primero en la tierra natal, segundo en la diáspora. Dicha expresiva representación forma parte integral de la articulación de una identidad nacional sin estado de los pueblos asirios modernos, una minoría étnica y religiosa originaria del nexo fronterizo de Siria, Irak, Turquía e Irán. Como resultado de la violencia y el conflicto, la mayor parte de la población asiria ha huido de su tierra natal mediante procesos de migración forzada y de huida como refugiados, lo que resulta en una diáspora transnacional con una presencia importante en el norte global. Este artículo considera al *sheikhani* como una articulación topográfica e histórica de la identidad asiria tanto étnica como nacional que se compone a través del cuerpo político.