

TITLE: “IN ORDER NOT TO FORGET” – A Critical Study of the Iraqi-Kurdish Museum of *Amna Suraka*

AIMS, QUESTIONS, METHODOLOGY

This thesis is driven by the aim to extend the growing academic interest in memory-culture to a non-Western context. This is done by exploring the role that collective memory plays in the constitution of an Iraqi-Kurdish identity. The author thereby focuses on a disruptive point in Iraqi-Kurdish history: the uprising against Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath regime in 1991, which is called *Raparin* in Kurdish. This historical event is important to Kurds, since it is understood as the beginning of the semi-autonomous status of present-day Iraqi Kurdistan.

The thesis is constructed from a bottom-up perspective and develops a critical interpretation of the way in which *Raparin* is represented in the museum of *Amna Suraka*, located in a former prison and torture complex constructed under Saddam’s regime in the Iraqi-Kurdish city of Sulaymaniyah. This museum is the only place in this area that commemorates this traumatic period in Kurdish history.

The main questions driving this research are: What does *Amna Suraka* tell us about Iraqi-Kurdish memory culture? How does the museum represent Iraqi-Kurdish suffering? What political and social factors shape the representation of this suffering? Could the museum be used to help former victims of the Ba’ath Party to work through their traumas? And could the museum also play a role in constituting social cohesion in this fragmented society?

These questions are explored by using a combination of methodologies. The author first constructs a theoretical framework with help of analyses of academic texts on collective memory, memory culture and the representation of traumatic cultural and individual experiences. Within this framework, the author then analyzes interviews that she conducted during four months of fieldwork in the museum of *Amna Suraka*.

STRUCTURE

This research consists of three parts. In the *first part* an introduction to the museum of *Amna Suraka* is developed, in which the author argues that Iraqi Kurdistan is currently undergoing a memory boom for the following two reasons. *First*, the fragmenting influence of processes of modernization in this area have triggered the drive to develop a collective consciousness and to find a common past. *Second*, the fragmenting influence of the wars that took place in this area has resulted in the question of how to rebuild the country, think about its traumatic past and contribute to a culture in which Kurdish autonomy and progress play central roles.

This latter phenomenon is then described as playing an important role in the programs of *Truth and Reconciliation Politics* that were introduced to Iraq after the fall of Saddam. It is concluded, however, that the approaches and values that characterize these programs lose their power in the specific complex society of Iraq. At the same time, the author observes that the current rise of sectarian violence— mainly because of *Islamic State* – shows that the country *is* in dire need of truth and reconciliation processes. It is then argued that an alternative way to stimulate these processes is formed by explorations of local practices and rituals.

In the *second part*, the author shows that a particularly interesting ritualistic performance that may stimulate these processes is formed by museums, which leads to a discussion of the museum of *Amna Suraka*. This museum is characterized as a ritual site and the author argues that its ritual performativity constitutes a Kurdish so-called *counter-narrative* that challenges the formerly hegemonic discourse of Saddam's regime and revolves around the representation of a 'them' ('the Arab oppressors') against an 'us' ('the Kurds'), which eventually ends with a victory of the 'us'.

By way of a deconstructive reading and analyses of the author's own fieldwork conducted in Sulaymaniyah, the critical conclusion is drawn that *Amna Suraka* plays a role in the working through of the traumatic past of the Iraqi Kurds, but that this role is not entirely positive: the museum's counter-narrative mainly tells an official story about the eventual victory of the Kurds,

influenced by hegemonic political ideologies, and thereby overshadows particular suffering and individual stories of victims.

In the *third part* of the thesis, it is argued that, *in spite of the hegemony of this counter-narrative*, the museum does in fact provide ways for former prisoners to work through their traumas. Based on analyses of interviews that the author conducted with people who were tortured in the building, she argues that those who visit the museum constitute a 'counter-counter-narrative' that is triggered by the sculptures of tortured people that are exposed in the museum. These sculptures create an opportunity to constitute social cohesion and to encourage people to share stories that are excluded by the official counter-narrative presented by the museum.

ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL RELEVANCE

The academic relevance of this research is twofold: *First*, the author shows that in post-conflict societies, characterized by a lack of agreement on the cause and meaning of the past, places of remembrance do not *only* affirm hegemonic discourses, as is often argued in academic analyses. Instead, this research shows that they can also constitute opportunities for individuals to work through their traumas.

Second, this research enriches our understanding of the complex Iraqi-Kurdish society and culture, especially since most analyses of Iraq only focus on its political structures.

The social relevance of this research is threefold: *First*, the author emphasizes the crucial role that ritual sites like museums can play in the formation of truth and reconciliation politics.

Second, the author's field research shows that aesthetic representations, like the sculptures of tortured people exposed in *Amna Suraka*, can function as psychological triggers that help traumatized individuals work through their traumas.

Third, the author emphasizes that this conclusion is culture-specific and that ritual sites that enable people to work through their traumas should therefore always be constructed in a specific cultural and historic context:

whereas these statues could be experienced as sentimental kitsch by Western audiences, they are interpreted as biographical narratives in an Iraqi-Kurdish context.