

Iraq: Cultural Dynamics since the British Mandate

Every year the soil grows into leaf

Yet we're hungry

In Iraq not a year has passed without famine

—From “The Song of the Rain”

Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb (d. 1964)

More than ever before, there is a need to understand Iraqi culture in its complexity, tension, and promise. Writers on Iraq have been preoccupied only with its history. When there is emphasis on its politics, there has been a general tendency to see this as something that belongs to non-Iraqis. Mostly manipulated by occupation powers Iraq is spoken for or at, but there is little to tell us of how the Iraqis respond. Thus, writing on the relation between culture and power in Iraq is a challenge, not only because of its complexity, but also because of the underlying cultural amalgam of antiquity and modernity, ethnic multiplicity and Arabo-Islamic centrality. The subject involves a number of things, including religion, temperament, ethnicity, social classes, history, ideology, literature, art, folklore, political movements, and statecraft. Yet all these work in convergence/disparity dialectic in a society of such antiquity and modernity as Iraq. The cradle of ancient civilization was also the center for the Islamic empire at its zenith. Its ancient legacy, its impact on every other civilization, including the Greek, should unsettle every complacent statesman and politician, and invite meticulous consideration of every step and notion. “On, and beneath the surface of modern Iraq,” writes Jeremy Black, “are the remains of the successive cultures of ancient Mesopotamia. The Assyrians and the Babylonians were the inheritors of an even more ancient civilization, Sumer, whose origins can be traced back onto the fourth millennium BC, if not earlier.” He adds, “Sumer was the first literate history of the world.”¹ The past is never alien to the

¹ Jeremy Black, *Reading Sumerian Poetry*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998, p. 3. On the impact of other civilizations, see M.L. West, *The East Face of Helicon. West Asiatic influences on*

present, not only because of archaeological excavations, museums, scholarship and trafficking in times of chaos and war, but also because of its presence in modern culture and power. “Don’t you believe in your ancestors’ tales?” asks the old man in another story by Jalīl al-Qaysī. “To me cursed is the one who does not believe in them.”² While of great bearing on lifestyles and collective memory, the past can be manipulated, reinvented, monumentalized and given voice toward the goal of reconstituting a civilization and a culture. Local regimes and global powers are also engaged in the fight for this past for present manipulation, and it would be an oversight and even a misrepresentation to think of the current situation in Iraq since April 2003 only in terms of material and immediate political gain. The fight for Iraq is a fight for a past, too. It is not the past which Saddam Hussein claimed to build up his image as the ultimate flowering of a grand and heroic tradition, as will be explained in part three. Global politics is also after other inventions of tradition, depending on ascending agendas and platforms, not only to suit some Biblical reinvention, to accrue to an apocalyptic vision, but also to superimpose a value-system in a continued imperial effort to master space and time, which will also be shown in due course. The apocalyptic is not confined to an outside ultra-conservative vision, however, for it works in convergence with local mythology, Babylonian or Shi‘ī. In sum, Iraq has become a discursive space, inscribed with variegated registers to camouflage or advance agendas. It is a body, scarred with repression and war, and spoken of since 1980 as a commodity, or as a battleground, to serve another purpose. Hence writes the poet ‘Abd al-Laḥīf Ataymish from the south of Iraq in “A Homeland without Friends”:

Fates have wronged you
When you were born, oh my homeland
In the age of calamities

Greek Poetry and Myth (Oxford, 1997). The standard work is Samuel N. Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer* (English translation, 1959, rev. 1961).

² Jalīl al-Qaysī, “Nidāba,” in his collection *Mamlakat al-in’kāsāt al-èaw’iyyah* (The kingdom of the reflections of light), p. 52. The title refers to the Babylonian goddess of vegetation.

Oh land of fertility and water
(Between two rivers or two swords)
You suffer thirst
You suffer hunger
As your Euphrates and Tigris
Turned into blood.³

Both imperial powers and Saddam Hussein had their agendas, and each thought that manipulation of the other would lead to the right outcome. The Reagan administration viewed Saddam as “our son of a bitch,”⁴ but he was also the man who took it for granted that Iraq was part of him, “if you say Saddam, you mean Iraq,” says the young poet Lu’ayy î aqqī.⁵ In both cases, Iraq was relegated to a part, a portion in an enormous active politic. Its wealth and educated people were allocated to a background, as if they were not the targets, before and after. Such a space and history have a lot to entice and challenge imperial dreams, fanatical historical-mythical reconstructions, and paranoid nationalisms. No wonder Iraq is approached and addressed in historical terms, once as “Turkish Arabia” and “Mesopotamia” even as late as 1914, and later under its own historic name.⁶ While all speak of it as deserving that glorious past, there is always the underlying romantic suggestion of a lady in distress, a fettered entity in need of release and liberation.

In nationalist and in imperial discourses, Iraq is spoken for and at as one in need of rejuvenation. Totalitarianism at home and imperial interests abroad had their loaded registers and codifications. As totalitarian and neo-imperialist discourses are usually foiled with a value-laden

³ Translated by Salih Altoma, see “Iraqi Poets in Western Exile,” p. 39.

⁴ That was Richard Murphy’s phrase as Under Secretary of State in the 1980s. Noam Chomsky uses “our kind of guy” in paraphrasing Murphy’s phrase in the 1980s. See “Rogue States,” *The Saddam Reader*, edited by Turi Munthe (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002), p. 392.

⁵ The young poet, who was very close to the Iraqi President in the early 1980s, coined this to fit into Saddam’s own view of things. This phrase also sums up what Charles Tripp argues at length in respect to Saddam’s autocracy, his attempt to show “unique qualifications” as representative of all Iraqis. See “The Iran-Iraq War and the Iraqi State,” in *The Saddam Reader*, p. 109.

⁶ See Peter Sluglett, “British Archival Sources for the History of the Middle Eastern Mandates,” in *The British and the French Mandates*, pp. 55-56.

language, in the case of Iraq they ironically exposed their pitfalls and contradictions against the rich Iraqi cultural background. The Iraqis were aware of Saddam's rhetoric and the process of co-option, as much as they are aware now that along with the promise of democratization there is an intentional plan to perpetuate chaos that will lead to further fragmentation and disorder. Beneath the seemingly predictable reality, there are many unpredictable occasions. War rhetoric and politics of violence forebodingly indicate that humanity passes through an acute stage in its life. Predictions and perditions accumulate in a momentous encounter where power, in every form, produces in Foucault's terms, "effects at the level of desire;" and also "at the level of knowledge."⁷

Hence there is more than one reason to prioritize culture in this reading of Iraq despite the increasing emphasis of politicians and social scientists on the state of Iraq, its natural resources and its place and performance in a world order led and envisioned by the United States. The Iraqi poet and activist in the 1920 revolution, Mu'ammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr looked on moral and cultural factors as more important than material ones. In *Tārīkh al-qaḍiyyah al-'Irāqiyyah* (Baghdad, 1923), he expressed surprise at the sudden change in the British Acting Commissioner's discourse, for, in his farewell speech of September 1920, Arnold Wilson asserted cultural factors as largely informing consciousness, an assertion that runs counter to his notorious emphasis on force;⁸ but instead of condescending to Eastern and Muslim culture whose value he recognized, he highlighted the current idea of nationhood as a newly emerging Western concept that reached the East only recently,⁹ and drove the *Sharifian* (Sherīfī) family in ḥijāz (the King Hussein's Hashemite house in Mecca) to coordinate its pan-Arabism with the British, esp. T. E. Lawrence, against the Ottomans. In other words, if there was a worthwhile endeavor among Arabs and Iraqis toward unification and

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Power / Knowledge*. Trans. Colin Gordon, et al. New York: Harvester, 1980, p. 59.

⁸ Due to differences with London, especially due to the 1920 Revolution, he was "uceremoniously removed." See Toby Dodge, p. 149.

⁹ Mu'ammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr, pp. 278-79.

nationhood, it is only because Great Britain enabled the colonial state to do so. This discourse which was popular among architects of imperial policy and thought still persists.

As a matter of relevance, a reading of Iraqi culture, for instance, its recent historical formation, could have led nowadays to some solid understanding of material realities. While there is evidence to suggest present duplication of British colonial procedures and information since 1917,¹⁰ along with accompanying successes and failures, there is also surprising bypassing of a positive American cultural presence in Iraqi popular and elitist culture in the 1930s-40s, which could have become fundamental toward an understanding of cultural dynamics as operating on life and politics. The trainees in Middle Eastern studies as well as pragmatists may well miss the mark whenever expediency and a self-congratulatory reading of the past become the priority.¹¹

Hence history as a record of imperial achievement receives expedient attention, and empires complacently bequeath their legacies to each other, for in 330 BCE. Alexander the Great seized Babylon, promising to regain Babylon's glory as the center of the civilized world. The Mongols made no such promises when invading Baghdad in 1258, but were driven there by an ambition to be at the center of the Islamic world, causing enormous cultural destruction and racial cleansing that was unequaled. Their Ottoman successors in 1534 were as brutal, but they were there for the wealth of Iraq despite some efforts by their Iraqi appointees to re-build the country as a state once more. In the struggle between them and Iran to dominate Iraq, the country passed through turmoil,

¹⁰ See for instance the appeal to tribalism, the use of advisors, the approach to religious sentiments, the empowering of subordinates, the dissolution of the army and state apparatus, the jingoist jargon, and the sheer relish of absolute power, the baseless claim that all is in the hands of the Iraqis, the reluctance to look at the heart of the insurgency, its internal and external burgeoning, and the hasty desire to claim other reasons, etc. For material to compare, see Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, *Iraq since 1958*. London: Tauris, 1987, reprint.2001, p. 12. For the celebration of fire and military power, see Colonel Wilson's covert threats to the Shī'ī Grand Marjī' al-Iṣbahānī, who became so after al-Shīrāzī's death, reminding him of the imperial army of five millions "spread all over the globe," *al-'Irāq* daily, 27 Aug. 1920, n. 77, cited in Muhammad Maḥdī al-Baṣīr, *Tārīkh al-qaḥīyah al-'Irāqīyah* (Baghdad: Maḥba't al-Falāū, 1923), pp. 254-257. For cases that are worth comparison, see *ibid.* pp. 210, on insurgents; and civilizational mission, p. 165.

¹¹ In a talk at Columbia University Professor Stephen Holmes from NYU who was among the USA advisors to set the current Iraqi law, said: "we often disjointedly attempt to impose our own values and governmental structures on a nation without first trying to understand their contemporary institutions and situation." See *Columbia Spectator*, October 7, 2004, p.1.

suffering and destruction. Centuries later, on the 11th of March 1917, General Maude was lavish in his promises. The British imperial discourse had such markers as the absolute faith in the need to stay in Iraq, the claim that “the average Arab” realized “that he would lose rather than gain in national unity if we [The British] relinquish effective control,” and that Iraq under domination could present a “model for the rest.” (14 November, 1918).¹²

These ideas permeated the communications of Colonel Arnold Wilson, the Acting Civil Commissioner in Iraq, to the Secretary of State for India. Like many other servants of the empire, Arnold Wilson strongly believed in his civilizational mission, to bestow justice, efficient administration, liberation, and security on Iraqis. These administrators, in the paraphrase of Philip Ireland, looked upon counter-political aspirations as no more than “...vagaries of ungrateful extremists or to be repressed as firmly as wayward thoughts in any adolescent youth” (141). Phebe Marr rightly noticed that this kind of colonial logic “...was modeled largely on Britain’s imperial structure in India,” guided by faith in the “white man’s burden” with an absolute distrust of the ability of the natives for self-rule.¹³ The Iraqi historian ‘Abbās ‘Alī wrote on this point, for the British officials had no knowledge “of the temper of the Iraqi nation, its great difference from India in matters of feeling, sensibility and customs,” a fact that “...was the first reason behind spite, resentment, and hopelessness.”¹⁴

Although there were differences of opinion among those officials about the form of rule, there was little disagreement on the means to achieve ends, including the use of a few opportunists, sympathetic tribal Shaykhs, British advisors as ultimate arbiters, establishment of municipalities as administrative laboratories to form future politicians, the reliance on allegiance as a primary qualification for future employment, the recourse to planned plebiscites, and the disregard for

¹² Cited in Philip I. Ireland, *Iraq: A Study in Political Development*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1937, pp. 138-39.

¹³ Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1985, p. 31.

¹⁴ ‘Abbās ‘Alī, *Za’im al-thawrah al-‘Irāqīyyah* (The leader of the Iraqi revolution: al-Sayyid Mu‘ammad al-‘adri; Baghdad: al-Najā‘ū, 1950), p. 39. The writer largely relies on Muhammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr.

formative structures of feeling.¹⁵ The British might have lacked other alternatives, and found themselves with little choice to ensure their domination; this was not the case with the American occupation administration in Iraq. There has already been an infrastructure, a state, highly experienced staff and technocrats, and many graduates from the United States. While there is evidence to suggest the use of many Iraqis in advisory jobs, especially from among exiles and expatriates, it is difficult to claim there is enough recognition on the ground of this highly educated class.

In this instance of negligence, as perhaps in many others, there is more than a lapse, for a well-disposed acquaintance with this positive cultural axis could have led to a deep and thorough reading of Iraq beyond economic and political expediency, thereby ensuring a better vision and surely a more peaceful one. If, for the sake of argument at least, we accept the claims to rid Iraq of a dictator, there follows then the need to let its people make use of their manpower and revenues to establish a democratic and constitutional zed state. No monopoly over its resources or sovereignty should be exercised. The liberal thought that distinguished the growing Iraqi bourgeoisie between the 1930s and 1940s had a strong American strain that was tinged with a thin leftist sentiment attuned to the emerging labor movement.¹⁶ As will be shown in part four, in the 1920s, poets, scholars, and eminent Shaykhs celebrated President Woodrow Wilson's principles of self-determination and rule, which were attuned to their fight against the colonialist discourse of the British civil administration in Baghdad. To Gertrude Bell, the Press Secretary in the British Administration and the influential agent in colonial politics, the publication of these principles was untimely as it, along with other factors, led to a consolidated national front against British occupation.¹⁷ These national sentiments could have been passing outbursts of pride and manipulation of international politics, had it not been for the appearance of a body of translation

¹⁵ Ibid. 38-43.

¹⁶ See Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, pp. 36-38.

¹⁷ Mu'ammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr cited this along with other issues that Bell mentioned as responsible for a new Iraqi political consciousness against occupation. See *Tārīkh al-qa'èyyah al-'Irāqīyyah* (Baghdad: Ma' ba'at Al-Falāú, 1923), p. 78.

from American, Russian, and French cultures. In 1922, for example, the Iraqi lawyer, journalist, and writer of the first lengthy narrative Sulaymān Fayḫ (d. 1951) translated the law and constitution of the United States. Fayḫ was on record as contacted by Lawrence of Arabia (7 April 1916) to lead the revolt against the Turks, “and I will put the whole bank at your disposal and the army will provide you with the weapons you want.” Fayḫ rejected the offer,¹⁸ but it is good to know that he was one of the few Iraqi intellectuals with clarity of vision in matters of political nature. He also set the tone for other specific translations and comparative studies, especially concerned with laws, constitutions, supreme courts and concepts of democracy and change. Along with the well-known Iraqi thinker ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Ibrāhīm, one of the most influential thinkers in Iraqi middle class politics until 1960,¹⁹ there were other intellectuals who developed a similar sense of comparison, especially in their doctoral dissertations in the States. Two leading communists from a Christian background had their education in the States. Jamīl Tūma and Nūrī Rūfā’īl attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1928-31 and 1931-33 respectively.²⁰ Ṣal’at al-Shaybānī got his degree from Indiana University and was an Iraqi cabinet minister for planning and development many times since 1959. He wrote on the need for free elections to initiate genuine democratization; he also wrote a doctoral comparative dissertation on the Supreme Court in the United States and Iraq (1955). Others like Muḥsin Oghāzdīn made similar comparisons in "Corporation Accounting Procedures" (1956), while ‘Adnān al-Dūrī wrote on juvenile courts in Iraq and the States (1955). But these are mere instances of a relatively large academic effort to make use of American achievements in politics, science and education. Between 1938 and 1962, there appeared around 170 theses by Iraqi graduates from such American universities as Columbia, Harvard, Stanford,

¹⁸ See the full record of the interview, in *Fī Ghamrat al-niḥāl*, pp. 211-223, at. 216.

¹⁹ ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Ibrāhīm also published *Dirāsāt fī al-’ijtimā’* (studies in sociology; Baghdad: Al-Rābiḥ, 1950), a book that relates sociology to the social sciences, political science, statecraft, philosophy, civilization, environment, geography, economic theories, social classes, cultural exchange, the idea of periodization, the idea of the golden age, the concept of progress and material philosophy, division of labor, specialization, cultural change, nationalism and political entity. In other words, the author has in mind the need to take all these into consideration when analyzing the Iraqi society and his stand behind social democratization.

²⁰ See Hanna Batatu, pp. 425-26.

Univ. of Pennsylvania, Chicago, Duke, George Washington, University of Southern California, Johns Hopkins, Wisconsin, Kansas, Ohio State, Cincinnati, Georgetown, Maryland, Michigan and many others. A cursory survey of Gurguis 'Awwād's *Dictionary of Iraqi Authors* (1969) could well demonstrate the fruits of Fā'èil al-Jamālī's policy when in charge of education in the 1930s and early 1940s.²¹ Directed against nationalist centralization, al-Jamālī's policy to decentralize education in order to escape hegemony achieved greater success.

Enabling the poor and underprivileged south to make use of education and to vie for better positions and life, al-Jamālī ensured a better education for the Shī'īs without jeopardizing their cultural identity. Many received scholarships to study in the States. Indeed, 'Awwād's listing shows that at least two thirds of the total number of students abroad obtained their higher education in the States. Furthermore, dissertations completed in the States are immediately concerned with scientific and humanist applications. In 1939 'Abd al-Majīd 'Abbās wrote his doctoral thesis (Univ. of Chicago) on "Oil Diplomacy in the Near East." Another, A.T. Wālī, wrote on "The Education System in Iraq" (Univ. of California, 1954). Zakī 'Āli wrote his on "Origins of British Influence in Mesopotamia" (Columbia Univ., 1941). In 1947, 'Abd al-'Ā'ib al-'Alwān wrote his thesis on "The Process of Economic Development in Iraq" (Wisconsin), whereas Sa'dūn Hammādī had his education at AUB and the University of Wisconsin. He was a prominent leader and thinker in the main stream of the Ba'th party. Many made specific applications to law, urban planning, agriculture, and scientific research. Many became ministers before and after 1958. The pan-Arab educator and nationalist theorist 'Ā'ī al-'Īrāqī's (d. 1968) disappointment with this policy was

²¹ Salih Altoma studied and assessed 70 doctoral dissertations done by Iraqis at the American institutions until 1963, in terms of time and specialization in his capacity then as the Iraqi cultural attaché. See his article, "Dirāsah i'ṣṣā'iyyah 'ann ūamalāt al-duktūrāh al-'Irāqīyyīn," *The Professor*, College of Education, University of Baghdad, vol. 16, 1968-69, pp. 249-258. Fā'èil al-Jamālī was discharged of education in 1941 when the British advisor disapproved of his policy and suspected him of Nazi sentiments, an accusation that proved baseless. See Harry J. Almond, *Iraqi Statesman: a Portrait of Mohammed Fadhel Jamali*. N.E. Salem, OR: Grosvenor Books, 1993, pp. 37, and 43.

openly voiced in his critique of the Paul Monroe's Mission (1932).²² Mattī 'Aqrāwī was behind the invitation, but obviously Fā'èil al-Jamālī had a hand as he made use of his stay at Columbia University (1929 - 1932) as a doctoral candidate, joined the mission, and was appointed as the Iraqi government attaché for the mission to assess the situation in Iraq. It was that assessment which led to the radical educational transformation in Iraq. On the other hand, this educational policy, with its focused interest in de-centering, proliferating and dispersing power, was not of minor significance, not only because it counterbalanced 'Āk' al-Īuṣṣr's avowed discrimination against the south,²³ his reluctance to include its students in scholarships, but also because it partly undermined sectarian concentration of power. As the senior officers along with active politicians who came with the appointed king or served in the Ottoman army were "Sunnis almost to a man,"²⁴ power machinery and apparatus remained with a concentration that gave vent to discontents until 1958. According to the Ministry of Education sources, the commission, led by Paul Monroe, drew attention to the need for equal opportunity education. It noticed also that grants and fellowships to study abroad were not distributed equally.²⁵ In his capacity as Supervisor General (1932), Fā'èil al-Jamālī collaborated with Sāmī Shawkat, the Director General of Education, when the Shī'ī landlord and dignitary Sayyid 'Abd al-Mahdī was the Minister of Education (9 September 1933). Fā'èil al-Jamālī democratized education and raised serious questions regarding the need to cover Islam as a way of

²² In addition to what was already mentioned, Professor Paul Monroe was from Columbia University, Teachers College, and from the same college Professor Chandler Bagley, and Professor Edgar Knight from North Carolina. Fā'èil al-Jamālī was the Iraqi Government attaché to the Commission.

²³ 'Āk' al-Īuṣṣr's policy was mainly nationalist, but he had little knowledge of the history of Iraq, the reasons behind the rift between the Ottomans and the South, the reluctance of the South to be part of the government, etc. As such he discriminated against many as of Persian extraction, including the poet Mu'ammad Mahdī al-Jawāhirī, whom he relegated to a primary school teaching job, while approving of Shaykh Mu'ammad Bahjat al-Atharī for a better job at the Ministry of Education, as al-Jawāhirī argued with due recognition of al-Atharī's scholarship. Both appointees had no certificates. 'Āk' al-Īuṣṣr' looked upon the appointment of Sayyid 'Abd al-Mahdī as Minister with dismay. See Mu'ammad Mahdī al-Jawāhirī, *Dhikrayātī* (Damascus: Dār Al-Rāfidayn, 1988), vol. 1: 141-155.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 20.

²⁵ See 'Abd al-Karīm al-Uzrī, *Tārīkh fī dhikrayāt al-'Irāq, 1930-1958*. Beirut: NP. 1982, pp. 22-25. The writer was the Minister of Finance in the last cabinet of March 1958, before the revolution in July 1958. The British ambassador Sir Michael Wright thought of him as a "doctrinaire economist and land owner with progressive views and many ideas." Cited in Wm. Roger Louis in "the British and the Origins of the Iraqi Revolution," p. 48.

life, not as a State religion focused only on the four Sunni *madhhabs*. Fāʿil al-Jamālī's policy set a counter policy of great bearing on subsequent cultural formations. That policy was not only a “result of his association with Professor Monroe,”²⁶ but also in line with his upbringing in a traditional Shīʿī family. Summing up some of these issues in view of available scholarship, Phebe Marr concludes:

In 1930s, in particular, Fāʿil al-Jamālī, a Shīʿī, used his position as director-general in the ministry to encourage the shīʿah to attend the Higher Teachers' Training College. He also helped to spread schools to the rural south and to give the shīʿah scholarships to study abroad. The result of these efforts was a new generation of shīʿah with higher degrees—often from the west—in modern technical and professional fields as medicine, engineering, and economics (Ibid. 145).

This summation is of significance when set in relation to the 1958 egalitarian policy, but against the virtual centralized perspective as enhanced by Saddam's early ascendancy as *al-sayyid al-nāʿib*, the deputy. The efforts of the Iraqi regime since 1972 were to reverse that direction towards a centralized nationalist drive against indigenous orientations, an effort that had an ideological base, to be sure, for Saddam strongly believed in nationalism as way of life and state formation.²⁷

Rather than a passing interest, this American cultural engagement, with its Columbia University stamp, took a cultural route, noticed and followed up by the American Consul in Baghdad Loy Henderson, who began, upon his arrival in 1942, a series of visits to the Shīʿī holy sites at Najaf and Karbalāʾ, meeting on one occasion the Grand Mujtahid al-Sayyid Abū al-ʿasan

²⁶ See Harry J. Almond, *Iraqi Statesman: a Portrait of Mohammed Fadhel Jamali*. N.E. Salem, OR: Grosvenor Books, 1993, p. 44. This was not shared by al-ʿuṣrī, nor was it shared by Dhū al-Nūn Ayyūb. See 2: 283-85; and 1960: 24; 198-199, respectively.

²⁷ See Turi Munthe's conclusion, “Introduction,” to *The Saddam's Reader*, p. xxix. Saddam's combination of nationalist theory and pragmatics led to a reign of terror against opponents or suspected opponents, see his views as voiced in an interview, *The Saddam Reader*, pp. 6, 12, 23-25

(May 1944) whom the Iraqis revered for being of pure Arab and Iraqi extraction.

This American engagement should be set against the British early endorsement of the nationalist drive versus Islamism and its sectarian variations. Despite Colonel [later Sir] Arnold Wilson's reluctance to follow up T. E. Lawrence's advocacy of Arabism to counteract Islamism, the nationalist streak took hold in the early formation of the State because of a number of factors, as will be shown in due course. It should also be seen against a British disappointment at the Shī'ī popular revolution throughout the South in 1920 that enlisted the support of other sects and factions in the center of Iraq.

The Columbia nexus was not limited to the Paul Monroe Mission and its draft resolutions, as sponsored by Fā'èil al-Jamālī. In 1930 the young intellectual 'Abd al-Fattā'ú Ibrāhīm settled there under the guidance of Parker Thomas Moon.²⁸ Despite his short stay, the impact of Moon was great, leading the already anti-British mind to study colonialism and its impact on sociological formations, and to dissect the dying colonialist strategy. Upon returning and later joining the American University in Beirut, 'Abd al-Fattā'ú Ibrāhīm wasted no time in forming the *Ahālī* Group, a coterie of national intellectuals, reformist in the main, with an open distrust of both Pan-Arab nationalism and communism, or any ideology smacking of totalitarianism.²⁹

The immediate impact of the American grounding showed in his theory of "populism" and its democratization principles. Opting for equal opportunities to all social and ethnic groups, this theory enlisted on its side many intellectuals who were searching for a way out of the impasse. 'Abd al-Fattā'ú Ibrāhīm underwent persecutions for his "populism," and the whole group passed through a number of difficulties. With its disintegration, the whole scene became a theatre of

²⁸ To understand the impact, see Parker Thomas Moon, *Imperialism and World Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1926).

²⁹ The group consisted of American University of Beirut graduates in the 1920s, including 'Abd al-Qādir Ismā'īl who was to become one of the Iraqi communist party leaders. See Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, p. 18.

conflicts, where the army, the British and subordinate political parties wrought havoc and destruction.

Another side of the American cultural imprint could be traced in the growing cultural consciousness of the 1940s. The poetess Nāzik al-Malā'ikah demonstrated the influence of Edgar Allan Poe in her pioneering experimentation in poetry. Her Princeton (1951) and Wisconsin (1955) experiences later gave her poetry a new flavor, a sense of feminist identity. In 1945 the newly emerging journal, *al-Fikr al-îadẖth* (New Thought) began to publish articles that called for the application of American realism. Other poets, such as the influential al-Sayyāb, brought T.S. Eliot to the attention of many intellectuals. Sa'dī Yūsuf, another renowned poet, translated Walt Whitman. On the other hand, the Franklin Foundation (Free Thought Organization) found itself siding with al-Sayyāb and other Iraqi literati to challenge Marxist thought throughout the 1950s. Of no less significance was the return from the States in the late 1940s of such intellectuals and sociologists as 'Alī al-Wardī, Mu'úsín Mahdī, Mattī 'Aqrāwī and Majīd Khedūrī. There were other educators, too, who exerted a direct impact on the cultural scene. 'Alī al-Wardī's sociological mind drove him to develop a discourse of resistance against the *status quo*. His writings of the early 1950s were openly opposed to tradition as an elitist discourse, and to the concept of *belles lettres*. His *US <ūrat al-adab al-raft'* (Myth of belles lettres) that appeared as articles first caused a storm among nationalists. In a rejoinder, a well-known journalist was disappointed at al-Wardī's Americanization: "God forgive America... for benefiting us with the likes of al-Wardī," he wrote.³⁰

Between 1960 and 1990, hundreds of Iraqis received their doctoral degrees from American schools in every field of knowledge including law, economy, management, finance, media, engineering, medicine. It should certainly have been surprising to them to hear, between April 2003-June 2004 that the help of American junior professors was being enlisted to layout the constitutional and institutional mapping for post-Saddam Iraq. I am citing this example, not only for

³⁰ Cited in *Us <ūrat al-adab al-raft'* (The Myth of Belles Lettres), p. 63.

its ironic twist, the ignorance of recent facts and historical records respecting the land that offered humanity its first written laws, but also for its touch on culture and power as the topic for the present discussion. Local authorities since the so-called independence (the passage from mandatory rule, protectorate in 1921, to fabricated independence, 3 October 1932) proved to be aware of cultural dynamics. They were noticeably aware of culture as an effective ideological means for hegemony. Foreign powers demonstrated (and are demonstrating) not only inadequacy, but also superficiality in dealing with Iraq's structures of feeling, tempers, symbols, and lifestyles. Local authorities showed also readiness to reinvent tradition; foreign powers on the other hand thought then, and think now, in terms of might, physical coercion, and other disciplinary means as deployed in the hinterland.

The comparison and contrast does not suggest that local authorities were successful in the long run, for the monarchy (1921-58), the Republican rule (1958), and the military coups thereafter (1963, 1964, 1968, the internal takeover of 1979) came up with invented traditions, including claims of lineage to the Prophet, to profess legitimacy against opposition and to undermine any search for institutionalized democracy. Every attempt at legitimacy outside proper institutionalized processes or indigenous practices of social justice and communal wisdom proved to be authoritarian and absolute; or, in the case of colonial subordination, a mere façade.

Legitimacy and State Formation

Nevertheless, an overview of the meaning of tradition as such may well lead us to a focused reading of the role of culture, including ideology, in state formation, opposition, Revolutions and the emergence of the neo-patriarch. On many occasions, there were many competing discourses, for as Foucault argues in respect to mixed agendas and occurrences, "...a whole mass of discourses appeared pursuing the same confrontation."³¹ In state formation as well as in the consolidation of power around a group or a party, there is always an effort to enlist the intelligentsia, to influence

³¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1991, p. 68.

public opinion, and disseminate the ruling ideology; in short, to manufacture a new Gramscian hegemony. While this signifies a periodic success, hidden and marginalized cultural norms and repressed opposition gather in momentum to burst out into surprising manifestations of revolt, with a ready-for-use inventory of symbols, markers, songs, satires, elevating words, and street slander that may well belie clear-cut categorizations on ethnic or sectarian grounds, as was the case in Iraqi Revolutions. It should be noticed, too, that any disarray and anarchy following the collapse of a patriarch may draw nostalgia for a seemingly better past, not only because of the longtime association with that past, its cultural symbols and rituals, but also because of its relative stability and security.

As state formation (i.e. the process as involving the formation of its institutions)³² in modern Iraq worked for some time within rival or accommodating ideologies, like pan-Arabism, Islamism, and socialism, the state developed subtle means of undermining internal and external opposition through a number of ways that were mostly cultural. Foremost among these were its inventions of tradition, to use Eric Hobsbawm's terms. Although specifically used to refer to the effort to forge or "establish continuity with a suitable historic past," the term "includes both 'traditions' actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period...and establishing themselves with great rapidity."³³ The accompanying process of "formalization and ritualization" involves grafting symbols, current official ritual, and religious or nationalist markers onto old associations and connotations to "restructure historical memory and popular culture,"³⁴ not only to ensure hegemony, but also to circumvent other serious problems that invite and demand address in line with the challenge of democracy. To quell dissent and opposition and to repress any mention of social, ethnic or religious and ideological cleavage, there developed in Iraq – though periodically and with different

³² See Liora Lukitz's application of Anthony D. Smith's formulas. *Iraq: The Search for National Identity*. London: Frank Cass, 1995, p. 1.

³³ Eric Hobsbawm, Introduction, *The Invention of Tradition*. Eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 1.

³⁴ Eric Davis and Nicolas Gavrielides, Preface, *Statecraft*, p. xvii.

focus and emphasis – a series of invented traditions that boosted national pride, past glories, patriarchy, and sameness, not only to reinterpret the past and fit it into an institutionalized power, but also to appeal to the populace and “forge emotive links” with it against the learned and the educated.³⁵

While this thesis does not underestimate the natural flow of Arab and Iraqi nationalisms throughout the interwar period and after the Second World War, my focus is on the empowering invention and appropriation of culture and ideology. For the increasingly politicized Iraqis (in terms of ideological formations), political and social positions rise and fall throughout the period in question in view of categorical political labeling, ranging between nationalism and Islamism, and between communism and subordination to foreign powers. The latter is a stigma and a sin for the ordinary Iraqi, and regimes invested money and energy to manipulate these sentiments: “I wonder at treason,” writes al-Sayyāb in his poem “Stranger at the Gulf,” “can a man betray his country? / How could he exist if he betrayed the meaning of his existence?” In other words, labeling people politically derives its potency from political consciousness and anxieties as formed within national and nationalist predilections. These fluctuate to be sure, and priorities change within each social or economic stratum, but political determinants, including communal, ethnic, sectarian, tribal, and especially ideological affiliations, may cut across these formations, too, as the history of political parties in Iraq indicates.

On the other hand, authority has an invested interest in manipulating, forging, and accentuating religion, rituals, and history. These are its means to legitimacy in the absence of transparent constitutionalized process. Even when resorting to a counter discourse, this counter discourse cannot remain totally free from contamination. To oppose means to retain some aspects of the opposed discourse. The Karbalā’ calamity in 680 that culminated in the murder of the Prophet’s grandson and his family, for instance, has evolved in commemorative discourses and performances. These have evolved as representations of the oppressed, but when enacted under

³⁵ Ibid, p. 13.

Shī'ī sovereignty, they should grow into moments of triumph. In other words, they should give vent to the outcome of longtime suffering, to rejuvenation and joy.

Yet, even in such circumstances, there is nevertheless a sense of agony, for the past remains a scar, a bleeding wound that resists healing. It fuses into other discourses of the oppressed and may acquire a permanent stamp of resistance and opposition. In this passage into other discourses, it may undergo violation and suffer infraction. As much as the Karbalā' discourse speaks for Shī'ī opposition, it may also pass into mainstream Islamism as an undercurrent against oppression and authoritarian misuse of religion. Despite widespread checks and prohibitions, the father of Islamic jurisprudence, Imam al-Shāf'ī (d. 205/820), for instance, spoke of the Karbalā' tragedy.³⁶ While many from among Sunni jurists were no less sympathetic to the plight of the Prophet's family, politicians have made use of the tragedy to build emotive links with the masses. Yet, notwithstanding individual or authoritarian manipulations of practices and rituals, Karbalā' remains central to cultural consciousnesses regardless of secular affiliations. As a site of discourse, it invokes poets and writers from every platform to draw on it to express their lamentation of misuse, oppression, and injustice.³⁷ Karbalā' assumes a universal meaning and operates strongly on structures of feeling. In *ġabbāt al-naftālīn* (1986; English translation, Mothballs, 1996), the Iraqi woman writer 'ālyah Mamdū' depicts a Sunni family in the A'ēamiyah district in Baghdad, which does its burial rituals and prayers at Imam Abū ġanīfah mosque, while it also invokes the blessings of the "Lord of Martyrs, Hussein." The grandmother says: "We will ask him to soften Jamil's [her son] heart and heal him."³⁸ While this attests to the ideological hold of Karbalā' on the Iraqi conscience, it also explains why a state nationalist ideology, like Saddam's, feared this hold.

³⁶ His is one of the four Orthodox *madhāhib* or law schools.

³⁷ See Salih Altoma, "Martyrdom in Arabic Literature," in *Islam in the Contemporary World*, ed. Cyriac K. Pullapilly. Notre Dame, Indiana: Crossroad Books, 1980, pp. 54-69.

³⁸ 'ālyah Mamdū', *ġabbāt al-naftālīn*. 1986; English translation, Alia Mamdouh, *Mothballs* (London: Garnet, 1996), p. 96.

In the case of Iraq, the annual commemoration of the 'Āshūrā' or the ten days of the battle that ended with the murder of the Prophet's grandson (680), is not only an assertion of life against death, inscription against erosion, identity and survival against extermination, but also a writing back, a rejuvenation through rituals and carnivals, to redraw tradition in a leftist mode. As the whole idea of *rawāfi'è* (rejectionists, as the Shī'īs were called) was based on the need to recognize legitimacy only among the Prophet's immediate family, there is a vested interest in the idea through claims to lineage, as the 'Abbāsids did (750-1258). If the rejection of the first caliphal order amounted to a rejection of the Umayyad (661-750) as usurpers, the 'Abbāsids manipulated the idea to claim their immediate lineage to the Prophet through his uncle al-'Abbās. In later periods, ideological identification with the feeling of betrayal or with its roots in an Islamic message of great power and appeal could work politically, too, for both the communists and the nationalists.

Leftist ideology made use of this collective feeling of the oppressed to win over the masses; historical belonging and a rooted feeling in a tradition that sustains itself with the narrative of the Prophet's immediate family endow nationalism and the fight against colonialism with purpose and human power. No discussion of pain and suffering can bypass history and oppression in Iraq. Although writing on the late Iraqi Kurdish poet Buland al-îaydarî as early as 1967, 'Azîz al-Sayyid Jāsîm's words apply to this whole structure of feeling. He says:

Iraqi pain is real and old, it is the pain of a country passing through series of periods, Babylonian, Sumerian and Akkadian, and its forehead is smeared with the mud of submission. Instead of changing into a David, a Spartacus, or a Greek hero, he resigns, accepting oppressors' alms, and when revolting he is only freed from the Ottoman master to fall into the hands of the British master.

He adds: “From this Iraqi poet’s background, where our sorrows multiply in the heart of this land, no Iraqi poet emerges without passing through the cycle of pain.”³⁹ Pain becomes the corner stone in ideological formations. Hence, the history of communism and nationalism in Iraq cannot be seen as isolated from structures of feeling and practices that have informed collective memory. In other words, appeals to Iraqi Shī’ism as well as manipulations of its drive, and subsequent secular disregard of its burgeoning had a history of diversified ideological formation that should be taken into account while studying culture and power in Iraq.

Although Hanna Batatu argues in his book *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*⁴⁰ that social and economic interests and material facts determine all political dynamics, there are also other facts on the ground that suggest otherwise. In his monumental work, Batatu accepts extant class and economic formations as providing horizontal determinants, while the vertical ones include religious and ethnic categories. The latter surely intertwine with the former, but they are no less important in terms of political consciousness and deployment of political action.⁴¹ The story of political consciousness, its general and organized manifestations in tribal and party politics and ways of dissemination, may offer a balancing view in this respect. The tribes of the middle Euphrates, for instance, were more politically conscious, as evidenced by the 1920 Revolution and the 1991 Revolution, than some other more nomadic tribes; yet the latter could well become means to enforce authority through deliberate militarization as was the case during the ‘īrifs’ era (1963-68) and, especially, in Saddam Hussein’s times (esp. 1978-2003). Cultural politics assume a great role under manipulation and may well become fundamental in political change and reversible formations.

Again, the 1920 popular revolution should be in one’s mind whenever studying the elite, the landlords, and the populace in Iraq. Mu’ammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr’s reading of the Revolution, being

³⁹ “‘awla qaṣā’id ‘Irāqīyyah muntakhabah,” in *Dirāsāt naqdīyyah fī al-adab al-‘adīth* (Baghdad, 1970; reprint, Cairo: GEBO, 1995), pp. 123-140, at. 127.

⁴⁰ Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978.

⁴¹ See Liora Lukitz on this point, *Iraq: The Search for National Identity*. London: Frank Cass, 1995, p. 2.

one of its spokesmen and leaders, offers many insights into these combinational sites, for he rarely bypasses a detail whenever it is worth citing, focusing on Iraqidom as an issue concerning all the Iraqis, including Kurds and other ethnic groups. Elitist discourse, national communiqués, and clerical and intellectual leadership (along with tribal affiliations), proved great potency in organizing the populace, but popular genius, especially in revolutionary sayings and folk poetry, was more effective at being pervasive. While the media and cultural sites, including mosques, are venues for cultural manipulation, songs and symbols, including anthems, flags, pictures, images and the like assume greater significance because they take the streets at large as their free and liberating space. This does not preclude the manipulation of the cultivated medium, including poetry and narrative if the need arises. Hence, a better way to investigate the dissemination of culture that led to the 1920 popular revolution and all subsequent state building may lie with a discussion of the following:

1. Agents of change, especially dignitaries, religious and tribal leaders, and the notables in Baghdad and other cities.
2. Sites of cultural diffusion, especially *majālis* (singular *majlis*) i.e., assemblies, mosques, schools, newspaper coteries, prisons, marketplaces, clubs, guild and party headquarters, military camps, and islands of exile.
3. Communal and societal ethics, lore, recollections, religious rituals, forms of piety, and tragedies of epical dimensions like the ones on the systematic extermination of the house of the Prophet. The most passionate accounts of the so-called *maqātil* genre (used specifically in reference to these deliberate murders) have Abū Mihknif's report of the Karbalā' massacre as its prototype, as recorded by Abū Ja'far Ibn Jarīr al-Ṣabarī. This is the catalyst and inciter for redemptive suffering in annual assemblies and processions.⁴²

⁴² See Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil al-Ṣalibiyyīn*, ed. A'umad êaqr (Cairo: Al-Bābī al-Halabī, 1949); al-Ṣabarī, *Tarīkh al-umam wa-al-mulūk* (Beirut: Dār êadir, 2003), vol. 3, pp. 1012-1058; and Abū

4. Underground sites, including secret political movements.
5. Parties and social, ethnic, and professional movements.
6. Ideology formation, including the use of tradition and the openness to acculturation.

Against these is the counter–culture with its “sultans’ counselors,” to use ‘Alī al-Wardī’s book title (1954), opportunists who told the British occupation forces that all was well and that they had a good monopoly over the masses,⁴³ decrees, laws, restraints, and checks. Along with this presence, there is also the deliberate camouflage of institutions, their reproduction as a façade, not as genuine institutionalized apparatus, like the ones set by the Acting High Commissioner, in line with a British policy that was not remedied or corrected in the Cairo meeting (March 1921) as presided over by Winston Churchill.⁴⁴ The latter denied that the Iraqis expected full independence in an announcement, a denial that infuriated the Iraqis and led to the îaydarkhānah [an old Baghdadi district] Mosque meeting.⁴⁵ In 1921, the political agenda emanating from this meeting and its communiqué emphasized: full independence, democratic rule, and rejection of the mandate or any other form of subordination.⁴⁶

Agents of Change: Dignitaries and Activists

The role of dignitaries, notables, poets, and scholars cannot be exaggerated, for the Iraqis still think that what happened to a number of families since 1958 was a continuation of a British dismay at the role of these families during the national struggle. In the alleged plot of 20 January 1970 against

Mikhnif, *Maqṭal al-îusayn* (Tehran: Maktabat Intishārāt, n. d.). There are also other versions, like the *Maqṭal* of ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Maqrām, and *Al-Majālis al-saniyyah*, by Mu’usin Amīn al-‘Āmilī. See Ibrāhīm al-îaydarī, *Trājīdyā Karbalā’* (London: Saqī, 1999), p. 97.

⁴³ Mu’ammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr, pp. 68-69, 83, 453.

⁴⁴ For a review, see *ibid*, pp. 332-334.

⁴⁵ The meeting authorized al-Sayyid Mu’ammad al-êadr, Mu’ammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr, A’umad al-Dāwūd, Shaykh Mu’ammad al-Khālīsī, Yāsīn al-Hāshimī, and îamdī al-Bāchachī, to meet the King and discuss the matter with him. Although Yāsīn al-Hāshimī could not attend the meeting, he expressed his support. The group issued a communiqué that was repressed by the occupation authorities, but it became a kind of national contract for the Euphrates tribes, the other provinces, and groups

⁴⁶ Mu’ammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr, pp. 492-95. Hereafter citations in the text. Churchill’s record on Iraq is recalled with anger, as he also authorized the use of chemical weapons against the Iraqis.

the Baʿth regime, many traditional families were targeted, and the Iraqis thought the British repaid these families at the hands of the new revolutionaries. Perhaps, in view of a history of mistrust, public opinion was still under the overshadowing presence of Abū Nājī, i.e., the British. There were bases for the record of mistrust. On 3 November 1920, The High Commissioner made it clear that he was to deprive the areas of the popular revolution of participation in the general conference, the constitutional council that was to manage the guidelines for a national role (al-Baṣīr, pp. 292-94). Another instance that aroused suspicions was the effort of the occupation authority to divide the Iraqi national front by suggesting names (2 July 1920) from outside the fifteen dignitaries who were the broad public's choice from all segments of the society (religious and ethnic), a tactic that did not work as the national leaders hastened to meet their colleagues, including Christians, Jews and other minorities, at the house of Rifʿat al-Chādrchī (Ibid. 161). On another front, the active and shrewd press secretary of the British authority, Ms. Gertrude Bell, made an effort to invite the young revolutionary nationals for tea at her residence every Friday evening to keep them away from the planned meetings at mosques. She succeeded in the first invitation, but failed later when her tactic was exposed (Ibid. 146-47). Worst of all was the deliberate effort to imprison, exile, punish and execute leaders and dignitaries, ban newspapers, and enforce a campaign of terror (Ibid. 144-45, 187,432-33; 435-439). The fifteen representatives of the people who were chosen from every segment of the society to negotiate with the British authorities in 1920 provided a counter-discourse to the one that depicts the mosaic nature of the society as a problem.

There were a good number of those figures, according to Muḥammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr (pp. 151-55).⁴⁷ Those were only the people selected to supervise action or to take orders from the Najaf

⁴⁷ They were the Shīʿī Marjīʿ and actual participant in the anti-colonial struggle al-Sayyid Muḥammad al-ʿādr, the Grand Marjīʿ Taqqī al-Shīrāzī, through his advisor al-Sayyid Abū al-Qāsim who was a symbolic figure and the chief missionary for the Revolution; al-Shaykh Aḥmad al-Dāwūd; al-Shaykh Aḥmad al-ūāhir (of good grounding in religious sciences and he went underground after the crack on *ḥaras al-Istiqlāl* and came out after the formation of the first cabinet, Ibid.151); Jaʿfar Abū al-Timman (among the most brilliant businessmen and dynamic national leaders); Rifʿat al-Chādrchī (he was in his seventies then and was exiled to Istanbul and came back on the 7th of December 1921); al-Shaykh Saʿīd al-Naqshbandī (a religious leader, and the president of the *'Ahd* (Promise/Pledge) Society in Baghdad ; 'Abd

ḥawzah or the supreme Shīʿī council and the leaderships of both the *al-Istiqlāl* Society (Independence) and the *al-ʿAhd Society* (“Society of the Covenant,” 1919).

In other words, these, along with the officers of the *ʿAhd Society* like Yāsīn al-Hāshimī, ʿAlī Jawdat al-Ayyubī, Jamīl al-Madfaʿī (a very courageous anti-British nationalist from Mosul), Taʿūsīn ʿAlī, and such figures from the *ḥaras al-Istiqlāl* (February 1919), as ʿAlī Bāzirqān, Muḥammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr, Jalāl Beg Bābān, Shākir Maʿmūd, the officer Hājj Maʿmūd Rāmz, Muḥyīal-Dīn al-ʿAskarī, and Shaykh Muḥammad Riʿā al-Shabībī, were among many Iraqis, Kurds, and Arabs, who saw it as their responsibility to represent all the Iraqis and to fight for independence. They included officers, businessmen, religious leaders, notables, political activists, poets and scholars. Representation stemmed from a shared ethic and faith in Iraq. Their readiness to sacrifice life and wealth for their country made them symbolic of an Iraqi nation. The *Istiqlāl* group made it clear that they stood for all Iraqis (Ibid. 138); the *ʿAhd* (Covenant/Pledge) restricted its membership to sincere Arab or Iraqi members (Ibid. 106). The latter as a party was in coordination with its Syrian counterpart and in the hands of the nationalist officers.⁴⁸

In dialogue with other groups, ethnic and religious, these names represented the Iraqi society at large, its main nationalities, ethnicities and sects. This representational nature was more in keeping with the attitude of the *Istiqlāl* group, to “unite the word of the Iraqis” and to stand for “their ethnicities and sects” (Ibid. 138). There was an executive committee for the fifteen representatives that included al-Sayyid Muḥammad al-ḥadr, ʿAlī al-Bāzirqān, Jaʿfar Abū al-Timman, Yūsuf Afendī

al-Raʿmān al-ḥaydarī (from the famous ḥaydarī family in Kāzimīyyah, Baghdad); ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Nāʿib (one of the great religious leaders in Baghdad); ʿAlī al-Bāzirqān⁴⁷; al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Sayyid ḥaydar (from a great renowned family), Fuʿād Afandī al-Daftarī (although he was in his seventies, he was active enough to negotiate rising problems among his colleagues, and was imprisoned along with his wife and son in a military prison on 28th August 1920 and exiled to Istanbul and came back on the 7th of December 1921, and became the mayor of Baghdad); Muḥammad Muṣṣafā Khalīl (exiled to Basra, and imprisoned there and then exiled to Henjam); Yūsuf Afendī al-Suwaidī; al-Hājj Yāsīn Chalabī al-Khuʿairī (a man of wealth and good reputation). From the real center of the Revolution, Najaf and the Euphrates, there were al-Shaykh Jawād al-Jawāhirī; al-Shaykh ʿAbd al-Riʿā al-Shaykh Mahdī; al-Hājj ʿAbd al-Muḥsin Chalabī Shlāsh; al-Sayyid ʿAlwān al-Yāsirī; al-Sayyid Nūr al-Sayyid ʿAzīz; from ḥillah Raʿūf al-Amīn and ḥasan al-Qazwīnī.

⁴⁸ ʿAbbās ʿAlī, *Zaʿīm al-thawrah al-ʿIrāqīyyah*, pp. 44-45.

al-Suwaïdī, and al-Shaykh Aúmad al-Dawūd. To enforce the idea of a single unified Iraq, Muslims participated in Easter festivals and brought flowers to the churches all over Iraq. The *Iraq* newspaper published in that year an article titled “The Iraqis and Refined Social Intimacy” (Ibid. 156). On the other hand, upon meeting the group suggested by the occupation authority, the representatives arranged with their colleagues to have one, unified agenda (Ibid. 161-62). The British were unhappy with these arrangements and things deteriorated, with more imprisonments, atrocities, decrees of exile and repression, and disregard for the sentiments of people in the sacred cities, leading soon after to the Popular Revolution of June 30, 1920 (Ibid. 188-199).

Perhaps there is no better evidence to the impact of the media than the orders of the British High Commissioner in Iraq to ban the *Muñtad* and *Al-Rāñidān*, dailies that were issued by the national party, *al-ñizb al-Wa <anī*, and the Renaissance Party, *ñizb al-Nahèah*, on 26 August 1922. Sir Percy Cox’s decree included orders to imprison the editors Sāmī Khundah and Ibrāhim ñilmī al-‘Umar – who was able to disappear – and to exile political leaders of national standing, including Ja‘far Abū al-Timman, ñamdī al-Bāchachī, Mahdī al-BaŞīr, and Sayyid Muhammad ñasan èadr al-Dīn, ñabīb al-Ghayzarān and others (al-BaŞīr, 434). Writers, poets and activists were given the choice between exile or signing a pledge of non-interference in politics (Ibid. 438),⁴⁹ a practice set by the British in Iraq and followed henceforth by the nation-state or the post-independence one. Banning of newspapers, songs, poems, and the like was a practice shared by both occupation and national authorities. Both agree that in times of crisis and war, classical and popular poetry, political writing, songs, canticles, cartoons, and other means of expression could influence and inflame the masses and cause what Percy Cox called “insurgency and disorder,” as documented by Muáammad Mahdī al-BaŞīr (p. 432).

Sites of Protest

⁴⁹ The pledge is as follows: “I swear by God’s name to follow the policy of the government of his Majesty the King, and avoid any action that will cause disorder, and incite ideas against the government” (Ibid.438).

Although sites of protest change according to circumstance, the early practice of using mosques, schools, clubs and assemblies continues to be quite effective as the dynamic gate to the street, its publics and manifestations of power. *Jam'iyyat ĩaras al-Istiqlāl* (The Guards of Independence Society, later to become a political party) was quite effective in organizing these gatherings, along with its comparable, but less effective, *al-'Ahd* Party which issued the *Istiqlāl* newspaper (September 28, 1920-February 9, 1921) as the mouthpiece for the rebels during the Revolution. The measures taken by the occupation authorities against the newspaper on the 9th of February 1921, its editors and writers, ranged between exile for some, and imprisonments for Mu'ammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr, 'Abd al-Ghafūr al-Badrī, and Qāsim al-'Alawī (Ibid. p. 144). *Jam'iyyat ĩaras al-Istiqlāl* used to invite people for religious gatherings, especially to commemorate the Prophet's birth or on the occasion of the annual mourning for Imam ĩusayn, or for other reasons where poetry was recited and speeches were delivered. Unless we understand the impact of these occasions on collective memory and their ability to relate the present to the past, we may well miss why these occasions constitute the route toward social and political protest or resistance. Especially when attended by the Shaykh al-Sayyid Mu'ammad al-ĕadr, who used to be met by large groups every week upon coming down to Baghdad from Kaḏimiyyah, these gatherings assumed great significance and became explosive spaces that disturbed the occupation authorities (Ibid. 147-48). Another site was the schools, like the *Ahliyyah* Secondary School, established by 'Alī al-Bāzirqān (September 14, 1919), where secret meetings were held and where speeches were delivered every Thursday evening, until it became " a pure political club," said Mu'ammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr (p. 141).

On the other hand assemblies and clubs were no less able to bridge the gap between the elite and the public. Every meeting of some significance had its echo in the street, and on many occasions the street spread the message over a citywide network, transforming the whole society into a revolutionary boiler. The gathering of the masses outside the British High Commissioner's

office (July 2, 1920) where he had a meeting with the fifteen representatives of the people along with their colleagues (the ones selected by the British authority) was an instance of how assemblies and meetings could well reach to the street to empower representatives with the people's will (Ibid. 161-62). With due respect to religious authority, assemblies in the religious sites had a peaceful nature. Their significance as a rite of passage toward a covenant of faith and communal solidarity cannot be overestimated. Negligence on the part of the British governors with respect to these assemblies, and indeed their disrespect, led to discontents that were behind the emergence of the secret *Nah'èah Islāmiyyah* (Islamic Renaissance) society that was responsible for the assassination of Captain Marshal. The same negligence and arrogance was among the reasons behind the 1920 popular revolution.⁵⁰ Of no less importance were coterie meetings, café gatherings, dignitary assemblies, and religious *majālis* (assemblies).

As I am reserving the discussion of literary coteries and assemblies for the fourth part, it is worthwhile here to focus on the practice and meaning of these religious *majālis*, especially during the '*Ashūrā*', the ten days of the Mu'arram month recording the events that led to the massacre of the Prophet's grandson Imam al-ḥusayn (680), and *Al-Arba'īn Ziyārah*, the commemorative pilgrimage or visit to his shrine upon the passing of forty days after his murder. These commemorative occasions have been repressed since 680. The few instances when the community was freely allowed the practice enabled the community to remember the poetry and the narratives. These make up the *ta'ziya* (mourning) tradition that involved, in the Buwayhid period (945-1055) since 352/963, rituals, recitations, and chanting, along with processions of chest beating, self-flagellation, head cutting, and shows of suffering, along with enactments of the scene as envisioned in popular histories. The literature has survived as a marginalized one, despite the fact that many religious authorities from mainstream Islamism were in sympathy and support. Yet, hegemony works differently and installs its checks and measures to sustain an official view of history that

⁵⁰ Ibid. pp. 190-200. See also 'Abbās 'Alī, *Za'īm al-thawrah al-'Irāqīyyah* (The leader of the Iraqi revolution: al-Sayyid Mu'ammad al-ḥadr; Baghdad: al-Najā'ū, 1950), p. 41

upholds authority and power. The history of repression did not end with the Wahhabis' nineteenth-century invasions of the sacred sites in Najaf and Karbalā', for there were repressive measures against these by Iraqi Ba'th authorities, especially when Saddam was in virtual control in 1975-1977, that concluded with total prohibition in the 1980s.

These went against the practice of the monarchy, especially King Fayṣal's sympathy and participation in these, a gesture that won the community over and led it to place the national flag among the usual banners of these *ta'āzī* processions and assemblies – to the chagrin of people like ḥākim al-ḥuṣrī as noted earlier. The British were no less aware of the impact of those and showed some support and understanding despite their repression of the community in matters pertaining to the future of the country.⁵¹ In terms of usual practice, these *majālis* could be held in the courtyards of the shrines, mosques, streets, and private houses. They are usually enacted and sponsored for both women and men, for women's *majālis* are no less known for their educational and cathartic function. On the other hand, women also attend men's processions in the streets, where the society regains its oneness, becoming a *communitas* in suffering, pain and aspiration for regeneration.⁵² People usually move from one assembly to another, depending on how many notables have the money and piety to entertain these gatherings, and thereby to sustain a social, economic and moral contract with the society. Patrons have to prepare the assembly and its needs, to bring a *qāri'* (reciter, narrator or *rawzakhūn*) who narrates the events of the year 680 and reports accounts, along with poetic accentuations and melodious recitations, to maintain emotive links with audiences. Emotive links are usually consolidated through an association between the past and the present, with direct or oblique reference to social and political grievances. Security offices carefully monitored these in the past years, and many well-established reciters suffered persecution and murder. The sponsors have to bring a *rādūd* (chanter, literally one who reiterates rhythmically) who may start working on his audience at the assembly with poetic *la'miyyāt* (strophic recapitulations)

⁵¹ See Ibrāhīm al-ḥaydarī, *Trājīdyā Karbalā'*, pp. 72, and 70, respectively.

⁵² For a review of readings of these festivities, see Falih A. Jabbar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq* (London: Saqi, 2003), pp. 187-192.

of the occasion in a very moving rhythmic pattern, melodious voice, before taking over the center of the assembly, the street or the square where a *pulpit* is erected to enable him to supervise the audience and excite the youth and the pious from every age to interact and begin chest beating in a rhythmic pattern. These are different from the last night where the *waúshah*, the night of the forlorn, is meant to reenact what happened to the family of the Prophet's grandson, who were taken captive all the way to Damascus, concluding in the morning with the preparation of *harīсах*, a porridge rich with meat, where pots are spread around the assembly or in the street to be available to all, along with the service of water which becomes part of the ritual and rewarding practice as atonement for the betrayal suffered by the sacred family, and the denial of water to them. Water jugs or tanks are covered with black cloth, to associate water with the Imam's suffering, the denial of water to him and to his family, including the children. Jugs or tanks spread all over the city or village and community, with inscribed signs that they are free ("*ya- sabīl, ya- 'a < shān*") for the thirsty from among the passersbys, to repent for the crime committed against the Prophet's family, and to reintegrate into the community of the faithful. In the last *waúshah* night there should be no lights, for grief overwhelms the scene, and following the assembly and recitations, there may be a procession that goes on in the streets with solemn recitations of what were supposed to be the words of the Prophet's grandson: "My people, *shī'atī*, if you drink sweet water remember me, and if you hear of a martyr killed by oppressors, mourn for me."

One cannot exaggerate the impact of these reenactments on public and collective consciousness. Their work in shaping a collective memory and their consolidation of social life are not the only manifestations of significance. These serve too as preparatory grounds for organized politics and other ideological and cultural formations. They became the targets of secular ideology whenever the latter was empowered enough to relieve itself of its early tactical condescension, as was the case in Iraq in the 1970s and the 1980s.

In this sense, culture is more inclusive as it relates to structures of feeling. Although means and methods of deployment differ and vary, culture operates within the whole society, for, in the words

of Jacques Berque, “Culture... is nothing more than the movement of the social totality as it seeks for itself an expression and a meaning.” He has a caution, however: “This search for expression and a meaning may either comment on the movement of any given time, urge it to return to its structures, or project it into anticipation of the future. In any of these cases it acts upon the social whole and is acted upon.”⁵³ For this reason, compared to praxis and politics, culture is given priority, for can politics “succeed... without ideals and revolutionary images, that is without specifically cultural preparation?”⁵⁴

To cope with the complexity of the subject, I will argue the case of culture and power through an dialectic of exchange among power relations, cultural constructs, and basic structures of feeling, including nonconformity and “redemptive suffering” as pertaining to the typical Iraqi mood that subsumes Shī’ism,⁵⁵ and pride on individual and national levels. The latter should be taken seriously due to its rooted presence in collective memory, a fact that reporters of the current situation in Iraq recognize. Evan Thomas and Rod Nordland of Newsweek, December 22, 2003, said the following in commenting on the first images of Saddam in captivity: “In a part of the world where pride and dignity mean everything, the images were clearly intended to shame.” No matter who was the target in these images, and what expediency lay behind them, there was a deliberate humiliation, depending on who was the sufferer. Like Saddam’s recourse to public punishments, mutilations, executions and videotaped scenes of torture of public figures, these images mean to enforce sovereignty and power. Force becomes a discourse of its own, a counter-culture that believes in a concentrated power to intimidate the rest. Culture, on the other hand, works through proliferation, permeation, and accessibility. “A cultural approach,” writes Jacques Berque, “thus

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Jacques Berque, *Cultural Expression in Arab Society Today*. Tr. Robert W. Stookey. London and Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1974, pp. 194, 195

⁵⁵ In Mahmoud Ayoub’s monumental work, the phrase applies “transformation of suffering from a power of total negation into something of value...effected though human faith and divine mercy,” for suffering in this case “can be overcome only by its own power.” The term is applied to Shī’ī rituals and *ta’ziyah*. See *Redemptive Suffering*. The Hague, London, New York: Mouton Publishers, 1978. I am using the term in broader terms, however, in view of Iraqi ancient history, and also in view of the long Sumerian suffering.

implies reference to concrete, overall history but cannot be confined to it. It must try to learn to what extent and how this history tends to become expressive and meaningful: for itself, but also for others” (21).

I will draw on a number of things to bridge historical signposts since the British appointment of Fayṣal as King of Iraq, August 1921 (after a planned plebiscite voiced 90% approval). This argument will refer to a supportive movement that enlisted some Shīʿī dignitaries, Iraqi intellectuals, and Iraqi Sharīfī officers of diverse ethnicities though mainly Arabs like Nūri al-Saʿīd.⁵⁶ There is a reference to the British simultaneous change of the status of Iraq into a Protectorate, as a pivot, and to argue the whole case within an Iraqi sense of nationhood. The emphasis is laid on semiotics, and flags in particular, as they change in focus and priority, and on cultural figures, mostly covered in parts four and five, as both agents of change and as participants in delivering or enhancing structures of feeling, as was the case with the Iraqi poet from ḥilla Muʿammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr, and the next generation poet from Basrah Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb (d. 1964). The significance of both, among many others, for this prioritization of culture lies in their poetry and career as functionally enmeshed in a politic of revolution for the first and, for the second, of a difficult search for meaning and stance in a post-independence state. Muʿammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr is described as the “most famous among the poets of the Iraqi revolution,”⁵⁷ as his poetry was dynamically involved in political protest among every segment of the society, a point that will receive more attention in part three. His significance as activist, participant, and historian is no less important for delineating the political-cultural scene that led to the revolution against the British, which has become a touchstone and yardstick for Iraqi politics and dealings with foreign powers. While approving of Sir Aylmer Haldane’s critique of British policy as the reason behind the Revolution as described in his book *The Insurrection in Mesopotamia* (1922), Muʿammad

⁵⁶ For a full assessment of this movement, in its diverse ways and occupations, see Muʿammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr, pp. 82-88, 328-29, 341, 353-54, 389.

⁵⁷ See Yūsuf ʿIzz al-Dīn, *Al-Shiʿr al-ʿIrāqī wa-athar al-tayyārāt al-siyāsiyyah fīhī* (Iraqi poetry and the impact of social and political trends; Cairo: Al-Dār al-Qawmiyyah, 1966), p. 145.

Mahdī al-Baṣīr mentioned the British use of municipalities as a façade or as alternatives to genuine independence, their repression of intellectual freedom and the freedom of expression, and their reliance on opportunists as the real reasons behind Iraqi grievances (67-71). Muḥammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr was a fair-minded intellectual and a revolutionary whose concerns were purely Iraqi. His *Tārīkh al-qaḥḥiyyah al-'Irāqīyyah* (The History of the Iraqi Question) is an important document, not only for the information it has on local and national responses, but also for its coverage of British documents, speeches and responses. He maintains a critical insight into details, and never allows one point of view to dominate. Hence, he combined Gertrude Bell's assessments with Wilson's speeches; he cited responses to Ṣālib al-Naqīb's ambitions to be the king or ruler of Iraq against a background of popular discontent with his aspirations.⁵⁸ He demonstrated that Shaykh ħarī's cooperation and coordination along with his Zouba' tribes was the only courageous instance of actual participation in the Revolution northwest of Baghdad.⁵⁹

He was also among the few who gave us a first hand experience of the Henjam Island. This was the dreary place of exile used by the British against uncompromising national leaders, including the author of *Tārīkh al-qaḥḥiyyah al-'Irāqīyyah* Muḥammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr. He was exiled in 1922 as part of the British strategy to alienate the participants in the popular revolution and keeping them away from nation-state formation; i.e., the governing council.⁶⁰ The other poet, Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, from the next generation, was more involved in cultural production. His career and poetics, for instance, encapsulate issues that are seemingly disparate. As a pioneering voice in poetry since the late 1940s, he was among the few who reconstituted tradition in terms of keen awareness of modernity. His grounding in folk tradition and systematic reinvention of the classical in terms of modern awareness made his voice unique among Iraqi intellectuals. On the other hand, he developed an Iraqi poetic temper, which remains significantly clear and distinctive in

⁵⁸ Al-Baṣīr, pp. 335-337.

⁵⁹ Ibid. pp. 250-51.

⁶⁰ Ibid. pp. 435-39, and 294.

register and music, conjoining both ancient markers and melody while capturing a typical Iraqi note of “redemptive suffering” that can be associated with both ancient Babylonian and Sumerian rituals of Tammūzī death and rebirth, and Shi‘ī agony for their community’s tardiness in offering support to the Prophet’s grandson. He was also the typical Iraqi dissenter, a disinterested intellectual, a Sunni with a Shi‘ī temper, an opponent of the status quo, and a destabilizer of orthodoxy. Certainly, he was not alone among artists and poets, for his contemporary, the painter Kāzīm î aydar was no less preoccupied with the underpinnings of the Iraqi tragic consciousness. As Jabra argues, “for him [Kāzīm î aydar] the religious inspiration of Islam comes through a sense of tragedy, in signs and symbols that he makes his own; horses, helmets, swords, spears, men, women, tents, conspiracies, treacheries—the whole phantasmagoria of ancient battles in a peculiarly personal idiom.”⁶¹ But this common or shared register and vision that attests to al-Sayyāb’s representativeness does not detract from his unique poetics.

More than ever, Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb’s poetics and politics should validate the present discussion, to account for Iraqi agonies and sense of injustice. More than ever, his poetry resonates with immediacy and urgency, as Iraq is free from despotism but falls into war and anarchy. In the aftermath of the fall of Baghdad, April 9, 2003, things work in such a way as to remind the Iraqis of the troubled times of both the Ottomans of the nineteenth-century and the British occupation, mandatory rule (1920-32), and so-called Independence (1932-58) with its British advisors, lackeys, plebiscites, insecurity and misery. The comparison/contrast remains worthwhile in any search for understanding and settlements.

Empowering or Weakening Mosaics?

The Iraqi historian ‘Abbās ‘Alī wrote in a book devoted to the Sayyid Mu‘ammad al-êadr, *Za‘īm al-thawrah al-‘Irāqīyyah* (The leader of the Iraqi revolution), that the occupation authorities took a number of measures, like banning national newspapers that ended up putting the Iraqis in contact with the Arab cultural unrest through Syrian and Egyptian newspapers. Coercion resulted in great

⁶¹ *The Grassroots of Iraqi Art* (London: Wasit Graphic and Publishing Limited, 1983), p. 30.

national consciousness and opposition to the British authorities.⁶² The case was more so because Arnold Wilson was so opposed to Iraqi self-rule that he infuriated the Iraqis, inflamed their opposition and was in part responsible for the 1920 rebellion all over the country.⁶³ The sense of humiliation grew into rebellion to regain identity against cultural erosion, and a venue for regeneration – a movement, in the face of invasion, toward a past glory in a present reconstruction.

In this counter-movement, culture was dynamically involved in gathering the masses around leaders who were mostly poets, writers and shaykhs. The occasion prepared the Iraqi political scene for a resistance ideology, as will be explained in due course, for the British Acting Civil Administrator, says Philip Ireland, "...had no personal knowledge of the deep hold which Independence and Nationalism, as abstract ideas, had upon the 'Iraqī participants in the Arab Movement."⁶⁴ On the other hand, this response was in keeping with a common nationalist feeling that was still alive since the Revolutions "in 1915 and 1916 at Najaf, Karbalā, Hilla, Kūfa and Tūwairj," adds Ireland on another occasion.⁶⁵ The Shī'ī–Sunnī rapprochement, as Ireland calls the 1919-1920 organized meetings against the British,⁶⁶ was mostly perpetuated and consolidated by speeches and poetry, and manufactured mainly by the brilliant and committed Shī'ī leader and businessman Ja'far Abū al-Timman (d. 1945).⁶⁷

While this rapprochement went back to other occasions when notable Sunnis and Shaykhs participated in the mourning gathering on the occasion of the death of the grand Mujtahid and national leader Kāẓim al-Yazdī (April 1919),⁶⁸ the deliberate effort to put an end to schisms took a political turn that was also manipulated by the empowered circles to gain more shares in the allied or independent Iraq. Speeches and poetry were neither mere propaganda nor expressive flourishes,

⁶² 'Abbās 'Alī, *Za'im al-thawrah al-'Irāqiyyah*, pp. 44-45.

⁶³ See Muhammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr on Sir Arnold Wilson, p. 285. See also Toby Dodge, on the Iraqi "vocal nationalism," though with no reference to Iraqi documentation, pp. 148-49.

⁶⁴ Philip Ireland, 196..

⁶⁵ Ibid. 239.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 263.

⁶⁷ See Batatu, pp. 294-95.

⁶⁸ Mu'ammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr, pp.189-190.

for they acted on consciousness and retrieved a collective memory of glory and achievement when Baghdad was the center of the world. From the mid-Euphrates where the revolt took place on the second of July 1920, to the religious places and Baghdad, to the north and east of Baghdad, the 1920 revolution or Revolution spread, inflamed by speeches, slogans and poetry. Cultural consolidation of nationalist sentiment brought religious and ethnic communities together in an “unprecedented cooperation,” says Phebe Marr (33). In a paradoxical speech before leaving Baghdad on the 22nd of September 1920, Sir Arnold Wilson attacked the revolutionaries while proposing the idea that cultural and moral factors proved more effective than material ones, and were historically present in the East. However, the West took over and exported the ideas of nationalism and identity, giving birth to movements of independence as the anti-Ottoman *îijāzī* movement led by Sherîf al-îusayn of Mecca. In the same speech, he downplayed such factors in the making of the 1920 revolution, for in his view, as long as it was anti-British, it was disorder and anarchy.

The underpinnings of colonial discourse tend to downplay the native’s cultural potential in order to speak of the colonized nation in negative terms of violence and disorder. Muhammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr commented on the speech saying, “...this was the first time in which the speaker cared for factors other than force.”⁶⁹ Around that time, al-Baṣīr was ardently involved in an ongoing effort to enhance cultural and political consciousness, albeit with the terminology and discourse which was still in vogue then. In a poem on the need to advance and progress titled “Science and Us”:

Take to your breast the person of virtue
Guard their words and fruits of their study
Virtue is unhappy in Baghdad now
Sick, deprived of glory and destitute

⁶⁹ Ibid. 278.

If it has any grand expectation

It is in the houses of science, towards them it turns.⁷⁰

This combination of a revolutionary discourse with a poetics of change is part of a cultural commitment toward emancipation and independence. Its goals emanate from an understanding that to build an Iraqi state demands a multifaceted fight. Nevertheless, for the Iraqis, the revolution began to indicate the threshold towards modernity and independence. For Badr Shākīr al-Sayyāb decades later, Iraq was still holding a further promise of thunder and lightening, as he concludes in “The Canticle of the Rain,” and the promise is never dead, for the cycle of death and rebirth cannot be halted unless there is enough justice, enough understanding of needs and predilections, and unless there is a process that gives equal opportunity to all, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, sect, class, and gender.

Explanations for failure are not hard to find in a culture so rich with images, symbols, folktales, premonitions, perditions, predictions, oracles, and poetry. Alexander as a conqueror of Cyrus the Persian in Babylon, 330-31 BCE, failed to attend to the ruler’s function in the Babylonian Akitu festival,⁷¹ with its ancient rites, to defeat powers of sterility and disorder. For people who strongly believed in the diviners and their divinations, failing to attend the ceremony whereby gods appeal to the ruler to conquer Chaos signaled the end for Alexander the Great.⁷² So went the failures of the Umayyad in Iraq, and other dynasties, for they missed the nature of Iraq, its cycles, rites, and expectations. No matter how we read these legends, rites, and oracles, there is a common historical reference to speeches on Iraqis as nonconformists and prone to discussions, illustrated by no less than Imam ‘Alī (murdered in 661), the Prophet’s cousin, Ziyād Ibn Abīh (d. 673) the Umayyad governor on Iraq, and the Umayyad ruler of Iraq al-ḥajjāj Ibn Yūsuf al-Thaqāfī (d. 714), who coined the notorious appellations that describes the Iraqis as “ people of schism, dissent and

⁷⁰ In *An Anthology of Middle Eastern Literature from the Twentieth Century*, p. 83.

⁷¹ The name of the temple outside the city towards which the procession used to go. It gave its name to the festival.

⁷² S.K. Eddy, *The King is Dead*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961, pp. 24, and 109-110.

hypocrisy.” Meant as derogatory to confront their rebellion, the phrase continues to circulate, including among scholars, for Kamāl Dīb wrote a book on the Iraqi situation with the title, *Zilzāl fī arè al-shiqāq* (Earthquake in the Land of Schism).⁷³ A long time ago, al-Jā’idī⁷⁴ looked at the matter differently, for the Iraqis “...are people of great acumen and insight, and with these there will be search and investigation, and because of these, there will emerge condemnation and blame, critical judgment of people and rulers and exposition of their faults.”⁷⁴ Yet the main issue remains one of relevance, for the occupation power rarely accepts the Iraqis for who they are. The other side of this experience lies in resistance to foreign encroachments, for as the story goes there is no chance for foreign powers to stay for long in Iraq, even with an invented tradition that might have been acquainted, for instance, with what the eleventh century littérateur al-îuṣrī al-Qayrawānī (d. 453/1022) relates. He writes that Aristotle was asked by Alexander for a way to get rid of the Iraqis and settle peacefully in their lands. He answers,

If you kill them all, can you kill the air that feeds their temper and endows them with intelligence? If they die, others as identical will replace them. So he asked: what do you suggest? He [Aristotle] answered: These who have this intelligence have pride, haughtiness, high-mindedness, violent temper, and impatience with oppression; so divide them into factions, and appoint an emir for each, for this will lead to schisms, and with this they are no longer as powerful.⁷⁵

The British departed by force, and the clear-sighted dispositions of some sensible British officials were lost in the enormous greed of the empire and its total reliance on tribal factions and opportunists. In the 1940s, perceptive politicians, like the British Ambassador Sir Kinahan

⁷³ Beirut: Al-Farābī, 2003.

⁷⁴ Cited in ‘Alī al-Wardī, *Wu’ ‘āziz al-salātīn* (sultans’ counselors, 1954; London: Kufaan, reprint, 1995), p. 30.

⁷⁵ Al-îuṣrī al-Qayrawānī, *Jam’ al-Jawāhir*. Beirut: Al-Manhal, 1993, pp. 111-112.

Cornwallis,⁷⁶ advisor to the Minister of Interior until 1935, tried hard to draw attention to the need for an actual recognition of the rising learned classes, their consciousness, and search for equality, justice, and freedom for their people, with their ethnic and religious mosaics. While all the blame should not be assigned to the British, their strong men were the ones resisting change, and aligning their power with opportunists and the handful of exploiters. From the 1920s until we reach Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb in the late 1940s, there was a long line of intellectuals who suffered persecution and exile for their political stands. Like many, Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb saw corruption beneath a veneer of parliamentary rule in a state constituted to serve British interests. Recapitulating the intellectual ferment of the invasion and the occupation period, the Iraqi scholar Yūsuf ‘Izz al-Dīn writes, “What accelerated the spirit of pain and revenge was the British misadministration, their humiliation of the people, and their military and dictatorial rule that exhausted the national feeling.” He adds, “The colonizer tried to make Iraq subordinate to India and the people were treated badly, for the colonizer could not understand the nature of this people.”⁷⁷ Not only were the British insensitive to Iraqi pride in general, but they were also blunt about their rejection of Iraqi expertise, even from among the Iraqi officers in Damascus who agreed to offer their help in rebuilding their country and its state formation. Nājī al-Suwaidī was one of them, but he soon resigned when he noticed that the Acting Civil Commissioner was interested in him only as a “...cog in the British machine and that his advice would not be heeded and was not even wanted.”⁷⁸ The British High Commissioner Sir Percy Cox, despite his subtlety, could not offer a better phrase for the transformation of power to the Iraqis in the aftermath of the 1920 Revolution than asking for “a complete and necessarily rapid transformation of the façade of the existing administration from British to Arab.” Commenting on this D. K. Fieldhouse says, “The key word is ‘façade’. In practice, behind an indigenous front, the system created by Fox was as effectively British as that

⁷⁶ Matthew Elliot, *‘Independent Iraq’: The Monarchy and British Influence, 1941-1958*. London: I. B. Tauris Academic Studies, 1996, p. 21.

⁷⁷ Yūsuf ‘Izz al-Dīn, *Al-Shi‘r al-‘Irāqī al-‘adāth wa-athar al-tayyārāt al-ijtimā‘īyah wa-al-siyāsiyyah fīhī* (Iraqi poetry and the impact of political and social trends, p. 136.

⁷⁸ See Ireland, p. 190, and n.2.

proposed by Wilson,⁷⁹ for Cox set up a Council in October 1920, under his supervision and the guidance of his advisors, excluding Shī'īs and any notables suspected of Turkish sympathies. Although seemingly subsumed in an Iraqi sense of nationhood, sectarian as well as ethnic discrimination could act negatively even on the most progressive minds.

In an article in the Persian *Mardom* (The Masses), n. 9, dated 4 January 1946, Mahdī Hāshim, as one of the founders of the Iraqi communist party complained, “in the whole Iraqi diplomatic corps there are only two Shī'īs... and of the eighty staff officers of the Iraqi army only three come from Shī'ī families, while 90% of the soldiers are sons of the Shī'ī community.”⁸⁰ The exemption was the worst, divisive wedge ever implanted by the British, for it intentionally bypassed recognition of Iraqi ethnic and religious diversity, and evaded the issue of democratization. It was a blow to Iraqi pride, and a further perpetuation of redemptive suffering and its ingredients of pain, sacrifice and search for salvation through faith and possible insurgency.

The British colonizers invaded Iraq in November 1914, not only with army and armor, but also with an Orientalist legacy that spoke for and of the colonized in terms that were alive as late as G. E. von Grunebaum's notorious surmise that “One succumbs to colonization only when one is colonizable.”⁸¹ Sir Percy Cox proved more qualified than his deputy Arnold Wilson to make use of current colonial tenets, for he approached the matter with a ‘divide and rule’ strategy that he carried out to perfection, despite early promises to put an end to this policy that was also followed by the Ottomans. Yet, he was in line with Stanley Maude's subtle manipulation of Napoleon's address to the Egyptian ‘*ulamā*’, or the learned, for he also claimed ‘liberation not occupation, and welfare not oppression.’ Upon occupying Baghdad on 11 March 1917, the British conqueror General Stanley Maude pledged on 17 March 1917 to liberate Iraq from the Ottomans, promising to be up to the expectations of Iraqi writers and philosophers, and to have a prosperous and peaceful Iraq. “It is the

⁷⁹ See D. K. Fieldhouse, ed. with introduction. *Kurds, Arabs and Britons: The Memoir of Wallace Lyon in Iraq, 1918-44*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2002, p. 13.

⁸⁰ Cited by Hanna Batatu, p. 423.

⁸¹ *Modern Islam: The Search for Cultural Identity*. Berkeley: University Press, 1962, p. 1171.

hope of the British Government,” he said, “that the aspirations of your philosophers and writers shall be realized and that once again the people of Baghdad shall flourish, enjoying their wealth and substance under institutions which are in consonance with their sacred laws and their racial ideals.”⁸² The British authorities went even as far as participating in organizing Shī‘ī rituals, processions and rallies, gaining thereby some of their dignitaries’ appreciation and even trust, as reported in *Al-‘Arab* daily (23 October 1918). Such appeals to popular religion worked positively to be sure, and many Iraqis asked for patience and tolerance to give the British a chance to work out a viable policy of understanding and cooperation.

In these well-disposed positions regarding the occupation administration, temper has the upper hand, for in politicized societies, with tradition and legacy like Iraq, temper works in terms of trial and challenge. A show of negligence or disrespect may easily give way to revolt. As much as political maneuvers to coerce the Iraqis into acceptance of other imperial arrangements in the region – as indicated in the visit of the British Zionist Alfred Mond to Baghdad in 1928 – Arnold Wilson’s blunt imperial rhetoric as Acting High Commissioner, 1918-19, his fabricated plebiscites, and disregard for the masses resulted in violent demonstrations and nationalist opposition.⁸³ Pride and intelligence, as the two foremost emotions in Iraqi temper operate in this register, and can very often lead to violence.

Although these emanate from misrule, social, economic, and political injustice, they have become so interwoven into a national mood that they appear as leitmotifs in writings on Iraqi life and culture. Beneath a gentle and sensitive surface there lies a deep-rooted and latent sense of national identity—i.e., referring “to the collective self-image of the members of a national unit and to their distinctive cultural system as shared by the majority of the population”⁸⁴—that goes back to Sumer, Babylon, and Nineveh, and recaptures the glorious ‘Abbāsīd years of the historical Hārūn

⁸² For a full text, see Mu‘ammad Maḥdī al-Baṣīr, pp. 57-59. In English, see Appendix III.

⁸³ See Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, p. 79; and Batatu, p. 399, on the leftist organization of the demonstrations.

⁸⁴ See Liora Lukitz’s use and neat application of A.D. Smith’s ideas, *Iraq: The Search for National Identity* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), p. 2.

al-Rashīd (786-809). Encounters or invasions that bypass Iraqi history and culture usually end up in disarray. Since the time of Turkish occupation, even local authorities in Iraq have failed in the long run to gain Iraqi support for their tactical maneuvers, invention of tradition to square with their political schemes, and their deliberate misuse of power. In both cases, culture – as it forms a part of Iraqi temperament – resists fabrications of legitimacy. It also resists colonial mapping, for the Iraqis see Iraq as an entity that is more solid and permanent than empires and occupations. Issues of identity, tradition and power regain prominence in crisis and deserve sustained reading before following them up in writings since the British mandate. Certainly, a question that comes up whenever there is such a crisis relates to recent history, as Iraq finds itself mapped out, discussed and addressed without being given the chance to demonstrate its full historical inventory.

Is Iraq a New Entity?

To the British, pre-mandated Iraq under the Ottomans was “Turkish Arabia,” and since November 1914 was known as Mesopotamia – the “land between the two rivers” – as was described by Herodotus. The recurrent term and the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force which had been in the military lead were not random. The imperial effort took a Eurocentric form of appellation, which was at home with Herodotus more than with Arab/Islamic or ancient names. Iraq as the object of colonization needed to fit in British Imperial paradigms, which implied bypassing its people, imaginatively emptying the habitat out of its population, and treating it as an island waiting for a Robinson Crusoe. Inheriting the division of the three Ottoman Wilayets (provinces) of Mosul, Basrah and Baghdad, Great Britain, in the words of the Acting Civil Commissioner, on 14 November 1918, acted diligently “to keep Mesopotamia as a wedge of British Controlled Territory. That it should not be assimilated politically to the rest of the Arab and Muhammadan World, but remain insulated as far as may be, presenting a model to the rest.”⁸⁵ Although phrased against T. E. Lawrence’s pro-*ijāzī* pan-Arab strategy,⁸⁶ this communiqué lay at the heart of the

⁸⁵ Cited in Philip Ireland, p. 139.

⁸⁶ Ibid. Ibid. p. 164.

British policy in Iraq, as later developments and military blocs and alliances indicate. Its focus on an entity should be seen in view of an emphasis on the “Arabs of Mesopotamia,” as Wilson tends to say whenever speaking of national pride. “National unity means for them unity of Mesopotamia, and not unity with either Syria or Hijaz,” he argues.⁸⁷

In other words, history for the British was based on its imperial triumphs against Turkey and the Wilayets under its control. This referent skips all of Islamic history and its Iraqi referentiality, to maintain a lineage with a name circulated in a European legacy since Herodotus, but emptied of Babylonian and Sumerian markers. The British legacy in this respect derived power and authentication from a tradition that would signify leadership in a world order. Summoning a Eurocentric history to its side, it swept away the history of colonies, and proclaimed them anew as imperial belongings and initiations. British success thereafter was accepted as a given by all who subscribed to the idea that a nation-state did not exist before the British take-over. From now on, the dominating imperial discourse had to imprint its own markers on nations and minds, leading even the well-intentioned to speak of Iraq as an artificial state, as if World Wars did not create European states, and as if the world as we know it had already existed in the form of various states. In a cogent argument, Isam al-Khafaji shows the contradictions in this line of thought, its subordination to other discourses and its lack of scholarly rigor.⁸⁸ Not many tried to read this logic against its underpinnings: for were there many nation-states, in the present sense of the word, before that date?

The renowned Orientalist Bernard Lewis was not alone in repeating in 1991 that Iraq did not exist as a state before 1915-1921. Iraq and Tunisia were the names of “medieval provinces,” he said once.⁸⁹ Although recognized by almost every writer as “of considerable antiquity,” as far as the “administrative region of Lower Mesopotamia” is concerned, there is also a consensus that the

⁸⁷ Cited in Ireland, p. 138.

⁸⁸ See Isam al Khafaji, “Not Quite an Arab Prussia: Revisiting Some Myths on Iraqi Exceptionalism,” in *Iraq: the Human Cost of History* (London: Pluto press, 2004), pp.213-257, at. 217-20.

⁸⁹ Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1982, reprint 2001, p. 60.

“modern state of Iraq includes upper Mesopotamia and was created during and after the First World War,”⁹⁰ says another writer. Among Arab writers, Hisham Sharabi also says as much, for “[B]efore 1920 Iraq had never existed as a separate and independent political entity; like Syria and Lebanon, it came into being as a result of the postwar settlement based on the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1915 and the Anglo-French compromise reached at San Remo in April, 1920.”⁹¹ While these premises have currency in view of the modern sense of state formation with its institutionalized structures, they overlook the power of historical narrative and its invocation of multiple interpretations. Interpretation “is not an isolated act,” explains Jameson, “but takes place within a Homeric battlefield, on which a host of interpretive options are either openly or implicitly in conflict.”⁹² Although the name of Iraq recurs in Islamic records often in reference to the wealth of *arè al-sawād*, from Tikrit north of Baghdad to the Gulf, the ancient combination of the Assyrian and Babylonian civilizations with their common cultural codes should have given the land and its people some distinctive characteristics.⁹³

In each new interpretive context, there are some characteristics that gain more attention than others. The Umayyad dynasty was afraid of its people’s propensity to fight, for instance, hence the able and shrewd caliph Mu’āwiyah (d. 60/680) advice to his son to resign to their wishes even if they demanded a change of a governor every day. Others had different impressions, and historians never tired of applauding its people and lands. In other words, narratives evoke different interpretations and conclusions. In searching for what he took for granted as a specific breed of people, the Iraqi sociologist ‘Alī al-Wardī, for example, admitted that he changed his interpretations

⁹⁰ Matthew Elliot, *‘Independent Iraq’: The Monarchy and British Influence, 1941-1958*. London: I. B. Tauris Academic Studies, 1996, p. 5.

⁹¹ Hisham Sharabi, *Governments and Politics of the Middle East in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Nostrand, 1962, p 149

⁹² *The Political Unconscious*, p. 13.

⁹³ For a review of these, see McGuire Gibson, “Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *Iraq: Its people, History and Politics*, pp. 23-34.

a number of times to account for the nature of the Iraqis.⁹⁴ But he never swerved from his major contention that there is a specific Iraqi character, nevertheless.

Understandably interested in seeing their country as one entity, Iraqi nationalist officers who joined the King thought of the country as such, “its well-known frontiers from the north of Mosul to the Persian Gulf,” writes ‘Alī Jawdat al-Ayyūbī, who was once a Prime Minister under the monarchy, and whose early training in the military academy in Istanbul increased his sense of nationalism.⁹⁵ Like other Iraqi officers in the pan-Arab movement, ‘Alī Jawdat al-Ayyūbī participated in spreading nationalist resistance. Iraqi religious and national leaders, from every segment, sent a number of documents to the would-be King of Iraq, complaining about British military rule in Iraq. They requested him to make known their demands for an independent Iraqi state from the north of Mosul to the Gulf. These were conveyed by Shaykh Mu‘ammad Ri‘ā al-Shabībī as the messenger to the would-be-king despite the difficulties and dangers attending the trip around that time (January 1919).⁹⁶

The Iraqis see themselves as so well established and historically rooted as to deride geographical mapping as no more than a matter of convenience in world politics, or, in the words of Donald Quataert, “strokes of pens on treaties and on maps.”⁹⁷ The land carries connotations of cultural diversity, for as the Iraqi ex-communist leader ‘Azīz al-ġājj argues, “From ancient times Iraq was the meeting place and mixture of races, nations, cultures and religions.”⁹⁸ Al-Sayyāb, for one, cannot think of Iraq in terms of these maps: “The wind screams at me: Iraq, / and the waves wail at me: Iraq, Iraq, only Iraq!” he says in “Strangers at the Gulf.” The Iraqis look at the matter

⁹⁴ See *Dirāsah*, p. 5.

⁹⁵ Cited from *Dhikrayāt*, p. 89, in Malik Mufti, *Sovereign Creations*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 23.

⁹⁶ Muhammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr, pp. 86-87.

⁹⁷ Eric Davis and Nicholas Gavrielides, *Statecraft in the Middle East: Oil, Historical Memory, and Popular Culture*. Miami: Florida International University Press, 1991, p. xii.

⁹⁸ Cited in Hala Fattah, “The Question of ‘Artificiality’ of Iraq as a nation-State,” in *Iraq: Its History, People, and Politics*, ed. Shams C. Inati. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2003, pp. 49-60, at. 57.

with suspicion when it is argued to justify occupation and foreign rule, as the case was with the maneuvers of the British administration that led to the 1920 rebellion.

For the Iraqis, there is and always has been an Iraq, regardless of state formations and colonial arrangements. The underlying sense of Iraqidom was recognized by no less than Arnold Wilson himself. For no matter how opposed he was to self-rule, he recognized the Iraqis as so full of independence that “they resent the importation of social or administrative institutions or methods that savor of India.”⁹⁹ These sentiments were recalled, not to recognize Iraqidom, but to ensure a British control, free from pan-Arabism and its aspiration for a unified Arab state, against artificial borders, as its ideologues will continue to argue. To counteract T. E. Lawrence’s view of having a Hashemite leadership in Iraq, Sir Percy Cox, before being appointed as High Commissioner, and the Acting Civil Commissioner Arnold Wilson as well resorted to a carefully managed plebiscite (30 November 1918) to ensure a British full control, to get Sir Percy Cox to be “...the first incumbent of the post,” i.e. the head of the State,¹⁰⁰ “...without any Arab Amir or other head of the State, but with Arab Ministers backed by British Advisors.” Before being transferred to Iran, Cox was supported by no less than the renowned Orientalist D.S. Margoliouth who was then part of the British administration in Iraq. In a meeting for this purpose (22 January 1919) Margoliouth said: “Iraq is used to foreign rule since ancient times, for it was ruled by the Mongols, the Turks and the Iranians, as it cannot rule itself. Thus, the Iraqis should choose the British to rule them, or to be under their mandatory rule and protection.” In Ayyūb’s novel of 1939, the protagonist’s father-in-law repeats these words in a comment on the 1936 coup, for the Iraqis proved that they were unable to rule themselves, said the missionary, who was one of the pillars in British India.¹⁰¹ In the same meeting, the British military administrator for Baghdad, Frank Balfour, addressed the gathering

⁹⁹ Cited In Ireland, p. 138.

¹⁰⁰ See Ireland’s citations, p. 172, and n. 4-5.

¹⁰¹ See my citations and comment, in *The Post-colonial Arabic Novel* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), p. 64.

soon after as follows: “We are leaving now, and you are to get us your opinions in writing.”¹⁰² But Winston Churchill’s Cairo meeting in March 1921 used the consent of some notables to appoint Fayṣal as the King of Iraq, 23 August 1921, guided on significant international and financial matters by the British High Commissioner. A treaty followed the appointment in 1922 to ensure British virtual control of Iraq for twenty years. Gertrude Bell’s comment on the issue is worthwhile: “We have carried him on our shoulders,” she said to the American Chargé d’Affaires. The appointment was a shrewd tactic, not only to rally the Ottoman Sunni remnant in Iraq behind the British, to make use of the Hashemite Arabism against Turkish Islamism and to involve the newly appointed kings’ retinues in the new state,¹⁰³ but also to play on tradition, the lineage to Quraysh, the Prophet’s tribe, and the Prophet’s family.¹⁰⁴

Despite some discrepancies under the British influence, “...the public in Baghdad, Kadimiyyah, Najaf, Karbala, and the rest of the country,” recollected Muḥammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr in 1923, “led by the intellectual class and the religious ‘ulamā, was fully interested in establishing an independent Arab administration presided over by one of King ‘īṣayn’s sons as king for Iraq.”¹⁰⁵ Citing the speech of one of the leaders of the Revolution, the dignitary and landlord Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wāḥid al-ḥājj Sukar, “we are not up to a republic yet, nor are we Parisians, Turks or English, to choose a Persian, a Turk or an English emir: we are Arabs, and as the Sherīfī (*sharifian*) family in Mecca is the largest in the Arab World, we are inclined to have an independent

¹⁰² See Alī al-Bāzirqān, *Al-Waqāi‘ al-haqīqiyah fī al-thawrah al-‘Irāqiyah*. Baghdad: 1954, pp. 66-67.

¹⁰³ It should be noted that the British looked with suspicion on Iraqis. They allowed and advised Ṣālib Pāsha al-Naqīb to go in “voluntary exile” to Ceylon. Other Iraqi officers in the Turkish army who offered their services like Nūrī al-Sa‘īd and ‘Abdullah al-Damlūjī were sent into detention camps in India and Egypt, before joining later as the real pillars of the pro-British national alliance. See Ireland, p. 239, and n. 1-2. Fieldhouse offers a better view, more consistent with Iraqi accounts, as Ṣālib Pāshā al-Naqīb was “arrested on Cox’s order after having tea with Gertrude Bell.” That was on 17 April 1921. Fieldhouse comments: “Nothing demonstrates more clearly the arbitrary nature of British methods: this was their standard tactic when dealing with recalcitrant people in their colonies.” P. 17.

¹⁰⁴ See Muḥammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr on this issue, and how Iraqi notables in Baghdad and the South, along with Iraqi officers in the Turkish army, were supportive of this appointment on a variety of bases, including nationalism, but the Hashemite legitimacy was foremost, pp. 82-85.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 82.

Arab government presided over by one of King Hussein's sons."¹⁰⁶ There was a double appeal here to Arab nationalism as opposed to purely Iraqi sentiments, including ethnic and sectarian identities. D.S. Margoliouth's words as well as T. E. Lawrence's politics took root in British foreign policy to control Iraq through a legitimacy that appeals to Pan-Arab, not regional, sentiments, and to Arab-Islamic, not Islamite¹⁰⁷ temper. Tradition was reinvented to suit its policy, quell opposition, and put an end to lingering pro-Ottoman sentiments.

Elitism and Hegemony

The association between the newly appointed king and nationalism might well work against the British in the long run. In the meantime, it served British interests and forestalled organized opposition like the one that helped in the 1920 popular revolution. A comparison between the new pan-Arab State, the monarchy, and the Iraqi national one of 1958 can be demonstrated in a comparison between the two flags. The colors of the monarchy flag have resisted change. Yet, the long-time application of the pan-Arab flag was disrupted in 1958 (July 1959-63) with the national revolution that decidedly opted for an Iraqi national identity, ironically, in line with Arnold Wilson's early objections to pan-Arabism, specifically the 'Arabs of Mesopotamia,' as he termed Iraq. In the flag of Iraq as a kingdom, 1921-24, the horizontal colors, of green, white and black are the same as the colors of the kingdom of ḥijāz, as ruled by the King's family. They were also the pan-Arab movement colors, and are still the markers of the Arab nation. The black stands for the Prophet's flag, used in early Islam, and also by the 'Abbāsids. The white was the flag of the Arabs in Damascus in the Umayyad period. The green was the color of the Prophet's family. The horizontal tricolors, black, white and green, were joined with a red equilateral extending from the hoist. There were no stars at first, but these were mentioned in law no. 36, 1928. The two heptagonal (seven-pointed) white stars referred to the new divisions, the fourteen provinces that

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 83-84.

¹⁰⁷ The phrase here indicates the specific emphasis on root, Islamic nation and rule.

constituted the Iraqi Kingdom. There was since then a change in color order, for green was at the top, then white in the middle and black at the bottom.

The colors appealed to Arab-Islamic history, and derived their potency from a verse by the ardent Iraqi poet of the fourteenth century ʿaḫfī al-Dīn al-ʿillī (d. 1348), in which he celebrated the unblemished deeds and achievements of his people, their valor, and the beauty of the land, as symbolized in colors, their significations, and associations.¹⁰⁸ The colors obviously targeted political affiliations, too. They vied for emotive links to associate people with larger issues and lead them back into history. They definitely worked against Turkish affiliations and invoked an Arab and Islamic tradition. The opposite national view of Iraq as an independent entity, not as part of an Arab union, found a clear expression in the 1958 revolution flag, as described and formalized in the official governmental paper.¹⁰⁹ It replaced the horizontal colors with vertical ones, to indicate an independent line more reminiscent of the flag of the French revolution. Communist organized rallies addressed the Prime Minister and leader of the revolution, the officer ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim (d. 1963), with the following slogan: *Jumhūrītak yā-Karīm mustaʿūl itṣīr iqlīm* (your republic Karīm cannot be a province), and this was reflected in the flag. While taking into account the historical background or colors, verticality dissociates them from pan-Arabism, drawing them to another center, an ancient Iraqi core, where the red sun in the middle of the flag is a reference to the Assyrian symbol of the national god Ashur. In the center of the sun, the yellow color refers to the Kurdish hero ʿalāʾ al-Dīn who liberated Jerusalem from the crusaders. The red stands for the 14 July 1958 revolution and also for the Arab flag in al-Andalus. The eight-pointed star and its yellow circle indicate the unity of Arabs and Kurds, who “compose the Iraqi people since ancient times.” The coup of 8 February 1963 reverted to the monarchy pan-Arab flag, but also with changes that

¹⁰⁸ The verse reads as follows: “White are our deeds (we are good and generous); black are our battles (they make our foes grieve); our fields are green (we are affluent not needy); and our swords are red (we are cavaliers and knights who defeat their enemies).”

¹⁰⁹ *Al-Waqāʿiʿ*, no. 189, 27 June 1959.

were more in line with the Egyptian flag as representative than of pan-Arab nationalism. Three stars appear in the middle white space.

The flag continued throughout, and was the one used by the 17 July 1968 coup until Saddam Hussein added to it in his own handwriting: *Allāhū Akbar* (God is Great), in an effort to rally Muslims behind him against the American-led alliance of 1991 as well as against Saudi Arabia and other governments as apostates, as he designated all Arabs who stood against him. The religious emphasis was a tactical move especially to counteract Khomeini's appeal to Islamism, to be sure, but it should also be seen as culmination of Saddam's belated disenchantment with the old concept of Arab unity that drove him in his youth to fight and battle the communists in the streets and colleges for their call for Arab federation, rather than unity. On 8 September 1982, he argued, "Unity must not be imposed, but must be achieved through common fraternal opinion. Unity must give strength to its partners, not cancel their national identity."¹¹⁰

Each law or decree for a flag reveals an ideology that operates on cultural predilections as well. The King came with this understanding of a pan-Arab federation, if not a unity, and designed his flag accordingly in arrangement with the British advocates of Arab nationalism against the Turks. Like any reinvention, legitimacy as such could not survive for long. The King realized this; for early in 1933 he came to the conclusion that there was no support for him. In a memorandum circulated among his attendants, he complained as follows: "Iraq lacks the most important social element, the cultural, ethnic and religious unity, for it is divided and scattered, and there is no one Iraqi people yet, but social forces empty of national feeling and a unified coherence. He who knows the hardship of people formation under these circumstances should understand the enormous efforts to be exerted toward this end."¹¹¹ Instead of looking upon multiplicity and diversity as potential dynamics for cultural and social growth, patriarchy looks upon the Iraqi mosaic as a burden.

¹¹⁰ Cited in Christine Moss Helms, *Iraq: Eastern Flank of the Arab World*. Washington, D. C. 1984, pp. 114-115.

¹¹¹ Cited in Amīn al-Mumayyiz, *Baghdad kamā 'ariftuhā* (Baghdad as I know it), Baghdad, 1985, p. 62.

Despite the King's keen desire to establish a nation-state, and despite his sincere commitment to a new Iraq, the motivating ideology remained British as far as colonies were concerned.

The political system as deployed by the British was not meant to foster democracy despite the initiation of institutionalized structures, for to ensure its control the British administration used portions of the intelligentsia, military officers and landowners as a "historical bloc" to further its own interests, a façade not a dynamic mechanism as back home.¹¹² Excluding social forces and political groups with challenging and opposing views and deporting many,¹¹³ it unwittingly undermined the monarchy's claims to legitimacy, its sole and only justification to rule. To recapitulate, opposition began to gather impetus through education, cultural consciousness and political organizations. The more the British were bent on coercion and control, the greater was this opposition. Intellectual figures, including nationalists from among the officers, became soon after the King's death political organizers. In the absence of genuine constitutional administration and a proper civil society, and after the enormous British effort to contain centers of rebellion and discontent and the little allowance made for the left, there remained only the obvious actors, including landlords, professionals, officers, and dignitaries who were politically inefficient, and who lacked the desire to transform the society radically.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, educators were bent on spreading education among rural areas, resisting the policy of impoverishment, and giving all Iraqis the opportunity to study abroad, whereas artists, poets, and short story writers brought a new sense of modernity and change into the whole Arab climate.

As referents, colonialism, the façade administration, and tradition were and are central to any discussion of the counter-movement, its growth and proliferation into the whole society, and its conspicuous markers in each stage. Post-colonial culture had these as referents, and its underlying consciousness stood behind the evolution of ethnic and sectarian sentiments, as well as issues of class and gender, into ideological accentuations as subsumed into grand narratives, especially

¹¹² See Eric Davis and Nicolas Gavrielides' use of Gramsci's phrase, p. 25.

¹¹³ Mu'ammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr, pp. 68-69.

¹¹⁴ See Elliot, pp. 10, 16.

formulated as agendas by competitive political parties. These vary in outcome, but they make up the Iraqi elitist formal façade since 1920, culminating in idealist impositions or totalitarian and dictatorial rule.

Cultural Inroads:

Elitist ideological formations are merely the conspicuous facets of a culture, which are balanced and, indeed, offset by the literary and artistic output in its popular and written forms. The latter transgresses limits and offers the larger context of Iraqi cultural life beyond authoritarian or imperialist infringement and manipulation. Its crude emanations may gather into gossip, rumors and their like, for as the narrator in *Duktūr Ibrāhīm* (1939) says, “In this country people transmit reports as frequently as their practice of walking, eating and drinking. In this region rumors do the work of newspapers, and perform their job with perfection.”¹¹⁵ Cultural practices include assemblies, coffeehouses, processions, religious rituals, and visitations, along with many popular and literary/artistic performances. Although seemingly binary and dichotomous, the relation of these to the identified reference (i.e. sites of power) is rife with anxiety and complexity.

Culture shows this complexity, its beauties and scars, smoothness and schizophrenia, unity and rupture. Iraqi writers, especially sociologists like ‘Alī al-Wardī, tried to study complexity in terms of binary and dichotomous paradigms based on a culture and civilization divide between nomadic life and urbanization, between Islamic values and desert life, and between social values, pragmatic needs and jurists’ edifications. While Islam teaches resignation, piety and justice, Bedouin values invoke pride, lineage, and mastery, he argues.¹¹⁶ He contends that duality shows more in places that are closer to the desert, and have a large number of religious clerics.¹¹⁷ These he found in the make-up of the Iraqi character. Wars, coercion, and violence since Sumerian times, but especially

¹¹⁵ *Duktūr Ibrāhīm*, p. 40.

¹¹⁶ See *Wu’āz al-salātīn* (The Sultans’ counselors or preachers; 1954, reprint. London: Kufaan, 1995), p. 19.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* 20.

since Islam, have involved the character into a duality, “*izdiwājiyyah*,”¹¹⁸ a phrase that found much currency among the chest-beating generation of mediocre writers. The sociologist ‘Alī al-Wardī also used Gardner Murphy’s reading of personality to trace the latent vengeful attitude against exploitation, misery, and marginalization.¹¹⁹ On the other hand, he adapted Ibn Khaldun’s separation of Bedouin and the urban mentalities as ways of life that remain with people and inform their use of power. Like any generalization, its paradigmatic sets, it attempts to justify recurrent ways of behavior and thinking in inclusive terms, without probing into the mechanisms of coercion and repression, agony and release. There is Iraqi pain, as noticeable in songs and music, but it is an exquisite one, that carries within its making a redemptive faith, a conjoining of suffering, pride, belief in a promise, search for a better future, enjoyment of life to the full, dashing into the most daring adventures, rapture in discovery, as well as repetition of past cycles of pain.

The presence of the imperial power, the façade administration and the dictatorial rule, act as reminders of comparable past occurrences, to be sure, but recollection intensifies a struggle and involves the most seemingly complacent writing or art into multiple layering that defies offhand categorization. Joseph Braude was not off the mark when he drew attention to the recurrent theme in Iraqi storytelling of “...joy emerging after periods of the darkest trauma,” for the flood left “...a better world in its wake,” and the judge Abū ‘Alī Ibn ‘Alī al-Mu‘āssin al-Tanūkhī (329-84/941-94) devoted volumes to stories of relief after hardships in his compilation *Al-Faraj ba‘da al-shiddah* (Relief following hardship).¹²⁰

The underlying faith in a better world to come recedes into the past to engage the present, for the Iraqis speak of their ancient past in terms that may sound strange to foreign ears. Recollection is a deliberate act, as the annual commemoration of ‘Āshūrā’ indicates, especially its use for political

¹¹⁸ pp. 19-20.

¹¹⁹ Gardner Murphy has many publications, including *Personality: a Biosocial Approach to Origins and Structure* (New York: Harper, 1947); and *Approaches to Personality*, co-authored with F. Jensen (New York: Coward-McCann, 1932).

¹²⁰ *The New Iraq: Rebuilding the Country for its People, the Middle East, and the World*. New York, NY: basic Books, 2003, xv.

celebrations, even as the ancient Tammūzī rituals used to be. Even gatherings of a social kind, meetings at mosques, like al-ġaydariyyah Mosque in Baghdad, became throughout the 1920s sites of resistance, where poetry and oratory resumed their archetypal role as empowering means of resistance.¹²¹ Both offer enough scope for masochistic expression and tender embracement of life and love, and both carry within them seeds of reconciliation and revolt. But rather than duality, there lies a complexity that has also a surface layering of emotional outbursts, unsought musings, superficial dealings, and hasty accentuations that may show in writings and songs, too.

A New Reading:

In the following pages, I will trace hegemonic practices, counter ideologies, and cultural opposition, its tracks and fluctuations. On many occasions, the three are brought together in anti-imperialist and anti-traditionalist discourses. Hanna Batatu's argument in this respect sounds right, for in Mahdī Hāshim's article in *Mardam*, the anti-imperialist temper conjoins with a sense of neglect and hardship in a country that has all the means of affluence and welfare. An elementary school teacher, wireless operator, and a railway station official, Mahdī Hāshim, a Shī'ī and a founder of the ICP among other Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Jews, recollected how in the British siege of Najaf in 1920, the British army tore down their house, and many other houses in the same quarter, in retaliation for the resistance and fire that was "directed against the British besiegers." In later days, hatred for the foreign occupants came to mean to him the same thing as communism.¹²² The association between the two can work both ways, for British agents might explain things this way to evade reference to or recognition of facts on the ground relating to opposition to occupation and its local administration. In a letter to the High Commissioner in 1932, the police chief thought that the anti-imperialist talk was no more than "...the wail of those who

¹²¹ Muḥammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr, p. 148.

¹²² Batatu's conclusion based on a personal conversation, p. 423, n. 23.

failed to obtain or retain government posts,¹²³ an explanation that does not square with the later developments, insurrections, coups, and revolutions.

Both the British colonizers and their puppet regime were held responsible for the poverty, injustice, and corruption in a country of plenty. Although at this stage echoing early sentiments and, perhaps, continuing them, a politicized consciousness was in the making. Unlike the early confrontations and scenes of protest and revolt that were fighting the physical presence of the occupation authority as humiliating to national pride, the growing political consciousness since the late 1920s, and especially after the 1932 alliance treaty as enforced by the British, opted for a diversified agenda, including political and economic independence. This diversity took many forms and channels as party formations indicate.

Traditionalism was not spared, for the fight for freedom and justice was inclusive in the early 1920s. As young intellectuals began serious work and organization, in networks that spread wide within many social spectrums, their defense of women's rights became paramount in their agenda for reform and social progress. The father of Iraqi Marxists (Batatu 293), as *îusayn al-Raúúāl* was called, noted in his newspaper *Al-Saúífah*, 28 December 1924 that the veil and the harem belong to an aristocratic order that survived through exploitation of women. He drew a comparison between this order and the laboring peasants who knew nothing of this seclusion and veiling. But this essay, "Determinism in Society," was not the only destabilizing article, for he argued in another article dated 1 March 1925, "...it is not religion that moves social life but social life that moves religion," concluding that "the era when people believed in the divine guidance of natural events was gone."¹²⁴ The author came too soon under the impact of historical materialism and naturalism to digest social realities. Perhaps it is this fact that pertains to the whole issue of ideology in Iraq. Intellectualized and acculturated in Western and Marxist thought, leftist ideology could successfully negotiate the issue of religion, despite the effort since 1935 to cope with the questions

¹²³ Ibid. P. 413.

¹²⁴ Ibid. p. 397.

of nationhood and religion.¹²⁵ By proving so much insularity and distance they gave way to counter-thought that was bound to grow and cause a wide future rift among ideological positions, with partisans on each side. This gave way in turn to officers and party operators to manipulate the situation thereafter and sabotage the accumulating political consciousnesses and its ensuing expertise in every track of life and statecraft.

Party structures in Iraq often emerged from social and professional clubs, a fact that has a cultural drive, for members gather around an idea, but are organized first through city and place affiliations, school or university, and familial networking.¹²⁶ Although plausibly leading to formations and gatherings, place might have imposed its own incentives and decisive impact on impressionable minds as was the case with two Iraqi writers of the late 1940s, Fu'ād al-Takarlī (b. 1923) and 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī (d. 1999) who lived in Bāb al-Shaykh, an urban, working-class district in Baghdad. The case of the *Ahālī* group was an example of urban togetherness, but *Nādī al-Shabībah* (The Youth Club, founded 1929) was another, an urban leftist gathering that began as an association of liberals, but with focused emphasis on freedom, liberty, justice, tolerance, and treatment of all Arab countries as one. In its defense of women's rights, freedom of expression, criticism of religious institutions, emphasis on democratization and institutionalization, and pan-Arabism, this group became the nucleus for the Iraqi communist party.¹²⁷ Prior to it was al-Ra'ūf's and Yūsuf Zaynal's *Nādī al-Ta'āmun* (1926), a gathering for the youth with socialist ideas, but with a penchant for organized work, and demonstrations as the anti-Zionist demonstration of 8 February 1928 indicates. This proved to be one of the major links to the subsequent organization of the ICP.

¹²⁵ The organ of the Central Committee of ICP, *Kifā'ū al-Sha'b*, n. 2, Aug. 1935, pp. 6-7, warned in "The Question of Religion" members from concentrating on a topic, "when addressing the people when the latter having not yet attained the perspective that would make a forthright discussion of such a matter feasible." Cited in Batatu, p. 409, n. 18.

¹²⁶ See Batatu's note regarding early formations, pp. 412-13.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 406-7.

More significant in the early fight for independence was the role of Ja'far Abū al-Timman (d. 1945), who proved to be a formidable politician, statesman and organizer. Coming from the wealthy business class, a Shī'ī with no sectarian qualms, and an effective leader in the 1920 Revolution, he carried a lot of weight to bring notables from Sunni and Shī'ī sects together in the renowned rapprochement against the British. He was the founder of the National Party, 1928-33 that was banned by the British. He was also the President of Baghdad Chamber of Commerce from 1935-45. The British also exiled him to the dreary Henjam Island in 1922, an island that became an exile for many intellectuals, including the poet and national leader Mu'ammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr.¹²⁸ As noticed by many who wrote on the history of Iraq, from the National Party emerged all the significant parties and associations that were to play the main political role in Iraq, including the ICP (founded in 1930, formally in 1935) the Association against Imperialism, the *Ahālī* group, the Association of People's Reform, the National Democratic Party, the *Muthannā Club*, and the Independence party.¹²⁹

While there were many motivations behind these organizations, their growth and impact on the struggle for power in Iraq, their main and common cultural denominators rest on the following: 1. Political and economic independence 2. Formation of a democratized state 3. Iraqi nationhood within a pan-Arab one 4. Transformation of the status quo. The common struggle of these forces rested until 1958 on an anti-imperialist stance. This shared agenda could not hide their divisions as heterogeneous structures for long, or their identities as derived from a mixture of class, sectarian and ethnic interests, or grievances. While many of these forces have this mixture in their formations, the grievances of ethnic and sectarian roots found more expression in leadership roles, especially in the making of the ICP. No matter how significant the national issue was, there were also other issues that involved these groups in discussions and differences as pertaining to class, gender, ethnicity and sect. These divisions operated and continued to operate until the counter-

¹²⁸ Mu'ammad Mahdī al-Baṣīr, p. 150.

¹²⁹ For a survey, see Batatu, p. 296-97.

emergence of the patrimonial rule, the brothers' 'ārif rule, 1963-66 and 1966-68, and Saddam's control, especially the years 1978-2003, when a discourse of nationhood became the official mask that was hiding hegemonic practices. Ideological rifts and increasing political divides among these groups became more pronounced since the Rashīd 'Ālī coup of 1941 than ethnic, sectarian, and class affiliations. Behind these was an acute political consciousness as propelled by the Palestinian debacle, the powerful onslaught of Arab nationalism (especially after the 1952 revolution in Egypt), the growth of the non-aligned movement, and the cold war situation. Every ideology vied for its markers and register, and the cultural scene imbibed these while feeding their agendas with more justifications and accentuations to further emotive links with targeted audiences. Every party had a slogan of its own, a motto, and rituals of organization.

A cursory reading of the many Iraqi cabinets after the Rashīd 'Ālī coup of 1941¹³⁰ could tell us not only of unrest and political and economic competitions among the leading strata, but also of the lack of a constitutional power and system due to an early and underlying disregard for Iraqi people's interests and needs. Although every party or organization, especially the ones with a large military base, spoke of transformation, revival, and resurrection, terms of achievement were never smooth or transparent. Each party had its chance to be in the leadership (1936, 1958, 1963, and 1968). But every one met a counter-movement too. The 1958 had its 1963, and 1963 had its opposite coup in the same year; the 17 July 1968 coup was diverted in a "reformist" direction on the 30 July; and the 1979 internal coup (within the ruling party) put an end to broad leadership in the Ba'th Party and the start of absolute dictatorship). Each one tried to legitimize its presence by discrediting opponents. On the other hand, the parties that were operating openly throughout the same period were either of very small constituency, or representative only of the empowered elite.¹³¹

¹³⁰ See Matthew Elliot's Appendix, pp. 169-180.

¹³¹ Ibid. 181-183; but see Batatu, for extensive references.

Political parties, even from among the pro-British ones, spoke of transformation, too. The terms were not new, to be sure. As early as 1928, Jalāl Khālid, the hero of the novel of the same name, was mostly fashioned and modeled after ḥusayn al-Raʿūf, though it has something of its writer's, Maʿmūd Aʿmad al-Sayyid, temper and ideology, too. In this novel, the writer uses the word resurrection for change, for in the words of his Indian companion, the journalist F. Swami: "...if only we were more numerous, we would rise and carry the day and then take hold of the people and drive them with whips toward civilization and the free and true life and this would not be a distress to them nor an injustice but a mercy and a resurrection."¹³² The Indian journalist is made to speak for ḥusayn al-Raʿūf and al-Sayyid. Two things deserve attention here: the attack on traditionalist views associated with religion, and the use of the word resurrection. The word "ba'th" or "inbi'āth" means resurrection and is loaded with different connotations, both cultural and religious.

The opposition to religion was a show of leftist infantilism, as many of the religious leaders in Iraq participated in the 1920 Revolution, and developed a very progressive anti-imperialist discourse. Many intellectuals granted this fact at a later stage or, otherwise, met with resistance that led to failure as was the case between the Grand Muḥtāhid al-Sayyid Muḥsin al-ḥakīm and the ICP in 1961 onwards. Their opponents encouraged this rift, but they did little to remedy it. Swami's use of the word "Resurrection" would be echoed late in the 1940s, when Arab poets came across politics of regeneration, in a mixed register of Babylonian mythology, Christian sacrifice and Shīʿī rituals. One of the Iraqi Communist Party leaders, the Christian from Baghdad Jamāl Tūma, wrote upon coming back from Boston Workers' School and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, 1928-31: "When I returned, Iraq seemed a dreary barrenness. Its condition cried for change."¹³³ Both the cry for change and the need for sacrifice and resurrection crept into the slogans and names of political parties, especially the *Ba'th* (established first in Syria, and then in Iraq,

¹³² Cited in *ibid.* p. 401.

¹³³ *Ibid.* p. 425.

1949-1950), meaning resurrection, while the ICP finds in “Free homeland and happy people” enough justification for its struggle. Both meanings were captured, however, by the Iraqi poet al-Sayyāb with his pioneering poetics that spread all over the Arab world in the 1950s, giving literary expression and voice to the latent but accumulating need for freedom and change. It is worth remembering that al-Sayyāb began as a communist, then moved to liberalism and nationalism, and was claimed by the Ba’th. He was one of the main poets of the Tammūzī Movement and its inclusive recapitulation of the regenerative myth, especially in its Babylonian invocation of fertility and joy against ever-present aridity and death, its appropriation of a politics of rebellion and change, and its innovative outlook in every aspect.¹³⁴ As late as 1977 we read “A Suggested Form for the Gypsy Epic” by the Iraqi poet ḥamīd Sa’īd, in which the markers of the rebirth poem coalesce into a matrix of promises and vows. Significantly, it is a gypsy epic, a combination of the desire of the marginalized and the heroism and valor of the epical heroes:

I bring you good tidings:
 You take the earth and build on it
 From its issue a filly shall rise
 Where’re her hooves flit on the earth
 Our dreamy bowers are kindled,
 The udders filled, pastures turned green
 And the Arab Homeland begins to course in our veins.¹³⁵

Culturally speaking, the poetic and artistic practice was a crystallization of the underlying consciousness in opposition to imperialist and traditionalist rule, a matter that will be documented in part three of this monograph.

¹³⁴ This movement received this name later, and the Iraqi-Palestinian Jabrā I. Jabrā coined the term. It became the term to include Jabrā I. Jabrā, Adūnīs, Khalīl Hāwī, and Yūsuf al-Khāl, among others. Significantly, the title and name were taken from the Babylonian god of fertility Tammūz, with his equivalent in Greek mythology Adonis. For further information, see my *Arabic Poetry: Trajectories of Modernity and Tradition*. London: Routledge/Curzon, forthcoming.

¹³⁵ ḥamīd Sa’īd, “A Suggested Form for the Gypsy Epic,” in Selection of Contemporary Iraqi Poetry. Trans. George Masri, illustrated by Dia al-Azzawi (London: Iraqi Cultural Center, 1977).

In the last years of the monarchy, there was an accumulating cultural opposition that fed rebellious sentiments and paved the way for a bloody revolution. Thus, joining Iraqi emigrants in search of work in Kuwait, al-Sayyāb's persona sings in agony of both misery and culminating transformation in "Canticle of the Rain," 1954:

Since we were children
The sky has slipped into clouds in winter
And it always rained.
Yet we're hungry.
In Iraq not a year has passed without famine.
Rain...
Rain...
Rain...
Every drop of rain
Holds a red or yellow flower.
Every tear of the starved who have no rags to their backs
Every drop of blood shed by a slave
Is a smile awaiting fresh lips
Or a nipple glowing in the mouth of a newborn
In tomorrow's youthful world, giver of life!
Rain...
Rain...
Rain...
And Iraq springs into leaf in the rain...¹³⁶

¹³⁶ I used Abdullah al-Udhari's early translation, *Modern Poetry of the Arab World*. London: Penguin 1986, p. 31

Al-Sayyāb's career and poetry may also acquaint us with four aspects of Iraqi culture that have direct bearing on power politics: the infiltration of popular lore into Iraqi literature, in line with the growing peasant and the labor movement against elitism, the use of the native tradition to counterbalance and displace the colonial claim for Biblical space, the valorization of a revolutionary poetic dialect against monarchy and British control, and the appeal to basic Iraqi structures of feeling beyond sectarianism. As these will be dealt with in part three, it is worth mentioning that al-Sayyāb's poetic refrain for rain and regeneration is not a complacent perpetuation of infantile leftist ideology. Despite his political opposition in the 1950s, al-Sayyāb's disappointment at the revolution of 1958 did not translate into approval of consequent changes including bloodshed and the emergence of exclusive idealism with its claims to truth that verged on total negation of social forces and their political representations. His poetry tends to undermine unitary discourse. Yet, Tammūzī poetics leaves enough space for the emergence of another Tammūz, a hero and a leader bent on sacrifice and atonement to offer renewal and life to his land. It may also accommodate the devil impersonating that role, an anti-Christ or a sham hero in disguise. Like any retrieval of myth, many, especially in times of great ideological vehemence, can claim this dialectic. The emerging consciousness of the 1950s moved the Iraqi scene beyond the 1920 politics of rapprochement and independence toward the regeneration of the nation, whereby history received further attention, not only to enhance views of nationhood, but also to consolidate the role of the individual in the reconstitution of the society. No wonder participants in the reconstitution of culture were either members of political parties or active contributors to nationalism, democracy, and class-consciousness.