Haunted histories and ambiguous burial grounds in Iraqi Kurdistan

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Abstract: As part of a wider research project that documents site-specific oral history associated with caves and cemeteries among the rapidly changing populations of Iraqi Kurdistan, the present study analyses oral histories and traditions concerning one particular graveyard. Reputed to be the burial site of seventh century Muslim conquerors, this graveyard is concomitantly preserved by taboo and subject to transgressive acts. This article discusses the anachronisms that underpin the cemetery's reputation, the aetiological functions of the local lore and the shifting significance of the memorial space in relation to current events. As the region faces the menace of the self-declared Islamic State, this cemetery has become a locus for reconsidering allegiances and identities with regard to the past and present.

Key words: Kurdistan; graves; memorial; taboo and profanation; Islamic conquest; Sahaba; Islamic State

The town of Shaqlawa [شهقلاوه] lies 400 kilometres due north of Baghdad, fifty kilometres northeast of Irbil, in the region of Kurdistan, Iraq. This article concerns the oral histories of a graveyard, known as the Sahaba Cemetery [گۆڕی نهسحابان], on the outskirts of Shaqlawa.

Purportedly a burial ground for soldiers of the Arab-Islamic armies who originally conquered the area in the seventh century CE, this memorial space is the subject of local traditions that portray it as both a target for well-deserved defilement and a hallowed ground with its own uniquely supernatural properties. The Sahaba Cemetery's status as an equivocal site – a fixed point of reference around which divergent histories have accumulated – renders it especially relevant to the region's past, present and future. These divergent histories variously cast the cemetery as a supernaturally safeguarded resting place of saintly conquerors, or as a reminder of a regional, cultural exceptionalism pitted against an intrusive force akin to today's Islamic State.

In the generation following the death of Mohammed (632 CE), his successors led the Arab-Islamic armies eastward into the Sassanian empire and westward into North Africa. Within three decades, the earliest caliphs had extended their control from the Muslim hub of western Arabia to encompass a vast swathe of territory, stretching between present day Tunisia and central Asia. According to conventional, written histories, the mountainous region that includes the town of Shaqlawa was subjugated by the caliph Omar (alternatively transliterated as Umar, who ruled from 634 to 644 CE), when the Kurdish tribes aligned themselves with the Sassanian Persians.

Shaqlawa, then part of a Median province, was overrun by Arab-Islamic forces *en route* to the city and plain of Shahrazor. The chain of valleys where Shaqlawa lies nestled between Mount Safeen and the Sork Ridge seem to have formed something of a corri-

dor for successive waves of invasion and subjugation. But the earliest written accounts of the Arab-Islamic conquest were not set down until almost 200 years after the fact. Moreover, lands like that of present-day Kurdistan were peripheral, in terms of both geography and historiography. Far removed from the decisive battles at Qadisiya and Nihavand, far from the grand capitals and centres of power like Ctesiphon, they existed on the fluctuating frontier between the tottering Byzantine and Sassanian empires, and consequently do not figure prominently in the record of events. For these reasons, beyond the general contours outlined above, the written histories are murky or entirely silent concerning the particulars of the Arab-Islamic expansion into and through the vicinity of Shaqlawa.[1]

Sarah Bowen Savant has commented on the ways in which local lore developed in this context: 'As one of the most dramatic events in human history, the [Islamic] conquests gave rise to a creative mythology that long afterward continued to inspire generations of traditionists, who recalled the events of the conquests as they negotiated their own loyalties to the Abbasid state and its successors, to sect and family, and to region, town, and neighborhood'.[2] The present study shows that, for lands once part of the wider Persian hegemony, Savant's incisive statement is equally true for the period prior to the Abbasid Caliphate and remains relevant to the 'creative mythology' of today.[3]

Oral traditions comprise a large part of what we know concerning the past two millennia in the region now called Iraqi Kurdistan. The manner in which such traditions are conveyed, reconfigured, and incorporated into oral histories also has profound implications for the present.[4] Jan Vansina's now classic distinction between 'oral tradition' and 'oral history' is a useful point of departure for understanding the kinds of complex, personal testimonies connected to Shaqlawa's Sahaba Cemetery. Vansina defines the product of oral tradition as 'oral messages based on previous oral messages, at least a generation old', while oral history entails 'events and situations which are contemporary, that is, which occurred during the lifetime of the informants. This differs from oral traditions in that oral traditions are no longer contemporary.'[5]

In Shaqlawa, oral traditions rehearse the events and circumstances of the initial Arab-Islamic conquest of the region in the seventh century; oral histories convey recent, personal encounters with the cemetery that the conquest purportedly left in its wake. In practice, however, the distinction is not always clear-cut.[6] Although Vansina proposes that the two categories 'are very different with regard to the collection of sources as well as with regard to their analysis',[7] the oral accounts from Shaqlawa mingled ancient lore with more immediate experience. For these informants, the conquest that occurred more than thirteen centuries ago holds an ineluctable relevance, and they perceive it with varying degrees of distance and immediacy. As we will see, the supernatural properties which tradition ascribes to the local Sahaba Cemetery grant a particular contemporaneity to a bygone event. This cemetery, a dynamic, interpretive memorial, figures in oral traditions, oral histories and combinations of the two, for it reflects and refracts the community's present perceptions of itself, as well as individuals' retellings of traditions in relation to their own experiences and allegiances.

In December 2014, the authors carried out a series of individual and group interviews with adult male residents of Shaqlawa, a town of roughly 25,000 inhabitants. The twelve informants were uniformly Kurdish by ethnicity; were Muslim, at least nominally; and, with the exception of one, were above the age of fifty. Among these twelve, however, levels of education and social class ranged from that of an illiterate shepherd who had no formal schooling, to that of a *mukhtar* (a local dignitary, akin to an elected mayor), who would have completed secondary education. A more diverse sampling of informants – one that includes women and youths, for instance – might have yielded significantly different responses.

The demographic parameters of the present study reflect, in part, the interviewers' limited access to members of the community other than older men. The interviewers, both male and both outsiders in Shaqlawa, did not gain access to private homes. Cultural norms prevented interviews with women, yet the interviewers might have eventually been able to interview women if accompanied by their family members or in groups, after spending more time in the town.[8] Such limitations meant that the authors, on the advice of local historian Sarbaz Majid Omer, sought their informants in public settings, beginning with the *kobunewey ewaran* [گۆری نەسحابان], or evening gatherings – a traditional context for communal story-telling, in which men gather near the wall of the mosque, public building or tea house for conversation. Even individual interviews in or near such settings were by nature public; in all of the interviews, additional listeners were never far away. This factor granted the present study, almost paradoxically, a wider reach with potentially greater inhibitions. The men conveyed an awareness that they were speaking for themselves and, to a certain degree, to and for their town.

In spite of a population sample that is supposedly relatively homogenous, the sheer variety of accounts and perspectives these interviews ultimately obtained is significant. The interviews elicited a wide array of lore concerning the initial Arab-Islamic expansion into the region and local repercussions; accounts ranged from brief reports of traditions that scarcely constitute a narrative, to personal anecdotes, to traditional tales. The Sahaba Cemetery at the edge of town loomed large in their collective memory. It served as a stimulus and focal point for what they related. That acre dotted with gravestones, the informants concurred, is a burial site for those who died fighting to extend the dominion and religion of the Rashidun Caliphate into the region. Furthermore, the special status of those buried there entails an exceptional, supernatural restriction on the

The Sahaba Cemetery in Shaqlawa. Photo: Tyler Fisher, December 2014.

Gravestones in the Sahaba Cemtery. Photo: Tyler Fisher, December 2014.

The town of Shaqlawa viewed from the Sahaba Cemetery. Photo: Tyler Fisher, December 2014.

use of the site: no other cadavers can be interred in that place, for the land will reject such bodies. In spite of a perceived scarcity of suitable land for graves in the vicinity of Shaqlawa, the Sahaba Cemetery remains off-limits for fresh burials.

This, in brief, is the oral tradition on which the interviewees agreed, though they varied in their personal experiences with the Sahaba Cemetery and presented discrepancies in the degree to which they subscribed to a belief in the supernatural sanction. The variations in their accounts transpose personal and collective preoccupations onto the cemetery, a locus that serves to reify shifting patterns of allegiance. Ironically, then, this is one patch of ground whose significance has not been neatly conquered or controlled.

Of stones and stories

In contrast to traits normally associated with Muslim cemeteries in the region, the gravestones of the Sahaba Cemetery, in their present form, bear no apparent markings. No ornamental trees or flowers adorn the gravesite of these anonymous dead; no one makes weekly visits for the upkeep of the place, nor erects fences to delineate plots of familial interest, because no one feels a direct familial connection to it. There is, nevertheless, a sense of communal caretaking in the mere fact of its preservation. Set on a small hill among pasturelands, this particular cemetery has been spared, thus far at least, from encroaching development. From the site itself, one can see recently constructed roads and related elements of infrastructure, mining operations, housing, sports facilities and two neighbouring, modern cemeteries that show clear signs of recent use, including fresh graves. But no such developments or interments intrude upon the present perimeters of the Sahaba Cemetery.

The *mukhtar*, Hassan Kadr Khdir. Photo: Tyler Fisher, December 2014.

Nevertheless, several informants conveyed first-hand impressions that the dimensions of the cemetery or the number of similar cemeteries had been reduced during their lifetime. 'Shaqlawa was full of such grave-yards. There are only a few cemeteries left from the golden days', according to Abdul Kadr Aziz Taha, who was born in Shaqlawa in 1932 and had a career working on the town's water and sewage systems. 'There were several cemeteries', sixty-two-year-old Gazi Saeed Rashid agreed. The consensus among the interviewees was that the Sahaba Cemetery today is a diminished remnant of what was once a much more numerous network of analogous burial sites. Hassan Kadr Khdir, Shaqlawa's *mukhtar*, said:

It is the only such cemetery left in Shaqlawa. There used to be many more. Although there are scattered single graves around Shaqlawa, this is the only collective graveyard. I remember the cemetery being larger when I was a child. It extended where the paved road now runs.

Kadr Hammad, an eighty-two-year-old shepherd, emphasised how the sheer profusion of such graves has given rise to a popular, unofficial name for the valleys themselves, the *Doli Ashaban* [دۆلی ئەسحابان] or Sahaba Valleys:

All the way from Shaqlawa to Ranya, there is a chain of valleys called Sahaba Valleys, where there were many graveyards of Sahaba who died when they came to Kurdistan. [...] They were fighting the infidels.

But the wider Sahaba Cemetery and the other, similar burial sites have since been effaced. They have been effaced, moreover, without inciting any apparent retribution from the supernatural forces that protect the burial place. The hallowed ground could not or simply has not resisted diminution over time. Of course, it does not substantially matter if the witnesses' recollections concerning a more extensive cemetery or more abundant graveyards correspond to a veritable obliteration of such sites, or if childhood impressions only construe them as having been larger in retrospect. What is important is that a perceived vulnerability to obliteration calls into question the uniquely protective powers ascribed to the site – its powers to ward off inapposite bodies.

Regarding the cemetery's purported powers, the verb the informants used to denote the supernatural rejection of new burials requires close attention. They repeatedly employed two distinct verbs to express what the sacred ground does to foreign bodies. The more common of the two was *fredan*, *fredadat*, [فرێدان، فرێدەدات], which denotes rejecting, discarding or throwing out. The other verb phrase was *qbul nakat*, [قبوڵ ناکات], signifying that the earth 'does not accept' the intrusive body. These lexical choices are sufficiently abstract and imprecise to allow a broad scope

for imaginative speculation on what form(s) that rejection might take. The Sahaba Cemetery again shows itself open to interpretation. One could imagine the ground simply proving impervious to inhumations, for instance, or one could imagine a more active expulsion of the bodies, with projectile possibilities. The indeterminate verbs for rejection or non-acceptance can sustain a variety of imagined deterrents and afflictions for an unwelcome body.

Nor, it seems, is this peculiar burial ground any more tolerant of living occupants than it is of extraneous corpses. Aziz Hassan Kadr, who was born in Shaqlawa in 1943, related a tale from 'a long time ago, when [he] was young': a man inadvertently built upon a Sahaba gravesite.

In the night, a Sahaba came to him in a dream and told him that he had built his house and farm on a Sahaba graveyard. In the morning, the man dug a hole and found a Sahaba, his body intact but bereft of an animating soul.

The implication of this vision and excavation was that the man must vacate the sacrosanct space of the Sahaba's gravesite. Still, as long as the introduction of personal property into the Sahaba Cemetery did not constitute a permanent installation, its protective powers also, apparently, extended to safeguarding personal effects. The *mukhtar* recalled that 'in the old days, people used to leave their belongings there when they went hunting for days at a time, and no one would disturb their belongings because they were in a holy place'.

Aetiologies and anachronisms
Aside from any supernatural properties, the Sahaba Cemetery's explanatory power has preserved it from being entirely effaced. In other words, its capacity to lend persuasive force to explanations of past and present circumstances has ensured its conservation as both a physical space and a part of oral tradition. The Sahaba Cemetery serves an aetiological function on both a micro- and macro-level, on a narrowly local and broadly national scale. On the most localised level, the traditions that regard this as a burial ground of seventh century Arab-Islamic warriors serve to explain the presence and preservation of the graveyard on that particular site. On the macro-level, the Sahaba Cemetery serves to explain the rightness or legitimacy of the Islamic conquest; its status as a sacrosanct space, which supernaturally impedes additional burials, stands as a justification of the presence of those Arab bodies in lands beyond the Tigris. In this way, the cemetery becomes a self-justifying, self-perpetuating memorial, but not, as we will see, an uncontested memorial.

The explanatory function of the Sahaba Cemetery relies on several apparent anachronisms. In terms of historicity, these anachronisms are problematic, yet they are richly productive. The anachronisms include

the identity of those who are buried in the cemetery, the age of the gravestones and the site's association with Hasan Basri. First, strictly speaking, the *Sahaba* or *Ashab* (the conventional transliterations of the Arabic term ‏سحابه، الاسحابه‏) were the 'Companions of the Prophet', that is, Mohammed's relatives, closest associates and disciples. Over time, however, the definition of *Sahaba* broadened to include anyone who had any contact with Mohammed during his lifetime.[9] Among the Kurds of Shaqlawa, the application of the term has clearly expanded even further. The local usage goes beyond the orthodox acceptation to encompass a very extensive group indeed: all members of the conquering armies, some of whom qualified as *Sahaba sensu stricto*, while many, of course, would never have had contact with Mohammed. This is the first point of anachronism for Shaqlawa's Sahaba Cemetery – the categorical inaccuracy that underlies the very identity of the site. By assuming a closer association with Mohammed, by suggesting a closer link to the origins of Islam, the designation as a *Sahaba* cemetery entails a heightened status for the space, a space accordingly endowed with powers of self-preservation or, in effect, deemed worthy of preservation by the community.

Secondly, the vertically erect slabs of sandstone that presently mark the purported graves cannot possibly have endured the more than thirteen centuries that have transpired since the conquest by the so-called *Sahaba*. Relatively friable sedimentary rock of this kind is particularly susceptible to weathering and other forms of erosion. If this cluster of little monoliths in Shaqlawa does, in fact, mark a burial ground for the invading Arab-Islamic armies of the late seventh century, local peoples must have replaced the memorial stones at certain points over time. A more likely explanation, however, is that the cemetery has no veritable connection to the original Arab-Islamic conquests, but is rather a vestige of some relatively minor, forgotten skirmishes of more recent date, perhaps between the Ottoman Turks and the Kurdish tribes of the region – skirmishes that resulted in heavy casualties, hasty burials and very little in the way of lasting socio-historical impact. The octogenarian Abdul Kadr Aziz Taha's summary concerning the Sahaba Cemetery includes a telling bit of guesswork on this point:

> A long time ago, in the Ottoman Empire or before, Muslim invaders came to Shaqlawa and were buried there. You cannot bury anyone else there. That is what we have always been told and believe.

For this informant, the Sahaba Cemetery is equally likely to pertain to the time of the Ottomans as to the first waves of Islamic expansion. A vague sense of antiquity, of incursion by outsiders and general credence are the important points in his conceptualisation of the cemetery's significance.

One factor that might have influenced the preservation of this particular space is its proximity to a small cave called the Cave of Hasan Basri (referring to al-Hasan al-Basri, 624-728 CE), located roughly 200 metres from the cemetery in a ravine. Among the informants in Shaqlawa, Aziz Hassan Kadr gave a précis of the traditions concerning the cave in this way:

> Hasan Basri lived in the cave. He was the commander of the *Sahaba* army. He used the cave to rest, pray, worship. It has always been known as the Cave of Hasan Basri.

This is another anachronism that enhances the status of the cemetery's location and reinforces its association with the conquest. The historical Hasan Basri pertains to the generation of early Muslims called *al-Tabi'un*, the Successors of the *Sahaba*. The Successors were, technically, two degrees removed from Mohammed, after the true Companions. Although they could not claim to have had direct contact with the prophet of Islam, the closeness of their association conferred a level of authority on these saint-like figures, who were distinguished for their piety and exemplary wisdom.

Hasan Basri did serve with the conquering Arab army in what is now Afghanistan and south-eastern Iran, though his principal activities were fiscal administration and teaching.[10] By that time, the lands around Shaqlawa were under the caliphate, and there is no historical record of Hasan Basri's presence in the region. It must, nevertheless, be granted that biographical accounts concerning Hasan Basri are largely inconsistent and contradictory, so it is difficult to rule out entirely any connection between the historical personage and the cave that now bears his name. Once again we find ample latitude in the oral tradition – a willingness to take liberties with time and place in order to augment the prestige of those associated with the cemetery (the *Sahaba*, a legendary Hasan Basri) and thereby to enrich the aetiological value of the place.

These anachronisms evince a measure of flexibility and versatility in how the cemetery and its history are construed and negotiated. The gravestones are, after all, ambiguous, multivalent monuments. On the one hand, they memorialise the resistance, valour and military prowess of the local, pre-Islamic tribes; as one informant said, with an evident sense of patriotism:

> There were more *Sahaba* killed in the Khoshnaw area [Knoshnaw is the name of the predominant local tribe] than anywhere else in Kurdistan. We as Khoshnaw people have killed more *Sahaba* than any other Kurdish tribes anywhere.

On the other hand, the gravestones are also monuments to the justness or legitimacy of the conquest – of the rightness of subjugating those tribes to the conquerors' rule and religion. These seemingly incongruous commemorative functions that inhere in the Sahaba Cemetery give rise to a variety of personal reactions, including physical gestures of defiance, as the Shaqlawa interviews attest. In spite of or because

of its aetiological capacities and its anachronistic underpinnings, the cemetery occupies a peculiarly precarious status between sacred taboo and target for profanation.

Taboos and transgressions

The informants' responses reveal an exceptional phenomenon in this regard: the Sahaba Cemetery is a contested site that vacillates in its status between taboo and target for defilement, between being a consecrated tract of hallowed ground and an object of desecration. A standard definition of 'taboo' (or *tabu*) in its anthropological acceptation gives its meaning as 'anything that is forbidden under supernatural sanction to adherents of a religion or members of a community'. Taboos involve 'rules of avoidance, prohibition, or restriction [such as those] regarding a particular ritual state or setting'.[11] The definition fits the sense of interdiction against interring new bodies in the Sahaba Cemetery, particularly in the manner in which the threat of supernatural exclusion from the space underwrites that interdiction. But this cemetery's taboo is also one that is peculiarly vulnerable to violation. Rather than being diametrically opposed points on a spectrum, there is a thin line here between reverence and sacrilege, between devout preservation and dismissive, derisive profanation.

Describing acts that ranged from the innocuous to the more deliberately sacrilegious, the informants reported challenges to the sacrosanct space. The Sahaba Cemetery, as previously noted, seems to have been much more extensive in the past, at least in Shaqlawa's collective memory. Yet the rising tide of erasure by nearby development has met no paranormal resistance at the cemetery. Moreover, 'children used to play marbles in the cemetery', Hassan Kadr Khdir, the *mukhtar*, recalled. He especially associated disregard or defiance of the gravesite with local youth, who pitted their rebelliousness against the time-honoured space. Mitigating a personal confession with the first person plural, he admitted: 'We used to spit on the cemetery on our way to school'. Thus, the cemetery proved susceptible to demolition, irreverent incursions, even physical contamination.

Naturally, one might expect this testing of the taboo to correlate with an increasing scepticism concerning the sacred status of the site. But the informants perceived no neat trend along such lines. Yes, they pointed to a general waning of belief in the supernatural sanctions, yet the impulse to preserve the Sahaba Cemetery persists. 'It is strange that we now have no more space for cemeteries, and still no one uses that hill for burial', Gazi Saeed Rashid remarked. The *mukhtar* concurred: 'Even those who do not believe in the stories are cautious about the area'. According to informants' estimations, rather than correlating with degrees of scepticism, factors such as newcomers' ignorance of the traditions, younger generations' lack of interest and, perhaps most importantly, shifting attitudes towards the *Sahaba*, would render the cemetery

and its accompanying oral lore vulnerable in the future. 'Of course it will change. Outsiders relocating here have no connection to this city. People will forget the cemetery', the *mukhtar* continued. 'The stories I tell about the cemetery are from my father, who heard them from his father. [...] But when I tell my own children the stories of my father, they do not care about such stories.'

As the interview with the *mukhtar* drew to a close, Mohammed Hassan Ahmad, a local teacher who also runs a stationery shop, offered his unsolicited comments on the matter:

> The place should not be kept as sacred because those people were invaders, enemies who tried to conquer Kurdistan. If the government decided to destroy the cemetery, it would not be a loss, nor would it attract much opposition from the people. Younger people especially would have no reaction against it, and Shaqlawa is not very religious. People always call it the Cemetery of the Invaders [*dagirkaran*, also meaning 'occupiers' فرێدان، فرێدەدات], though some people think they were liberators [meaning bearers of a true, enlightened religion].

At the age of forty-three, this was the youngest of the informants. His comments crystallised a point of tension that emerged throughout the interviews. The cemetery is only deserving of respect and preservation if the putative Sahaba died in a rightful conquest of the place. The taboo only wields power if the Arab-Islamic hegemony is perceived as supernaturally endorsed.

Common ground: seeing parallels in the past

Greil Marcus has theorised concerning what he calls 'history as disappearance':

> It's as if parts of history, because they don't fit the story a people wants to tell itself, can survive only as haunts and fairy tales, accessible only as specters and spooks. [...] History is a kind of legend, and we do understand, or sense, buried stories, those haunts and specters, without quite knowing how or why.[12]

The traditions concerning the Sahaba Cemetery in Shaqlawa do not figure in any official, conventional histories; they reflect a complex form of folk religiosity that exists outside of institutionalised religion.[13] Yet this cemetery encapsulates a story that the people of Shaqlawa simultaneously want and do not want to tell themselves. The deeper, underlying narrative of the Sahaba Cemetery is the story of Shaqlawa's contentious self-perception. Do the Kurds of Shaqlawa hold a greater affinity (ethnic, religious or otherwise) with the conquering *Sahaba* or with the tribes that resisted those first waves of conquest? Like the cemetery itself, is the land still occupied, in some sense, by an alien power?

The informants, taken together, held these alternatives in tension, and differences are not merely

Kadr Hammad. Photo: Tyler Fisher, December 2014.

generational. One can see this by comparing two statements offered by octogenarians, previously quoted in part. The shepherd Kadr Hammad said that 'there were many graveyards of *Sahaba* who died when they came to Kurdistan. [...] They were fighting the infidels. [...] They were retreating from the infidels'; while Abdul Kadr Aziz Taha stated that 'Muslim invaders [داگیرکاران] came to Shaqlawa and were buried there'. The local peoples who resisted the *Sahaba*, in Kadr Hammad's version, are 'infidels' [بێباوەڕان, or 'enemies'], those outside the faith. In the latter version, the indigenous resistance is only implied, but the Arab-Islamic forces are clearly categorised as 'invaders'. Abdul Kadr's characterisation of the *Sahaba*, as we have seen, is echoed in the views of the teacher who is forty years his junior.

Recent events inflect this depiction of the *Sahaba* as foreign invaders. At the time of the interviews, the Kurdish military was engaged in a desperate counter-offensive to secure their border and drive Islamic State forces back towards Mosul. Only months earlier, in August 2014, the aspiring caliphate had seized villages within thirty miles of Irbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. For most of the informants in Shaqlawa, points of analogy between the *Sahaba* and the self-declared Islamic State were readily apparent. Gazi Saeed Rashid saw no difference between the two aggressors, past and present:

> During Caliph Omar's rule, his army came to invade Kurdistan. [...] Anyone who refused to convert was killed. He also killed many Christians. People who converted to Islam were left alone. It is the same with IS.

The *mukhtar* drew a similar parallel between the seventh century conquest and the current situation:

> IS is trying to conquer by force like the *Sahaba* first did. When IS came, we first said, 'This is a fight that does not concern Kurds'. Most were content to let them go attack Baghdad.'

But the Kurds suddenly found themselves compelled to defend their territories, putting up a resistance that re-enacted the purported genesis of the Sahaba Cemetery. One informant pointed out a distinction between the would-be invaders. Bakr Osman, a retired policeman, commented:

> One cannot say that they [the *Sahaba*] were the same as IS. When the *Sahaba* came, there were no Muslims around, but IS is fighting Muslims.

A group interview in Shaqlawa. Photo: Tyler Fisher, December 2014.

The difference is one of degree, not of kind, in his view. The Islamic State, which espouses an extremist interpretation of Islam, is attacking their more moderate co-religionists – the people who accepted or succumbed to the religion of the earlier caliphate.

'Places are not fixed, static, preservable entities', one theorist of oral history has observed, 'but more like processes, [...] they are not bounded territories, but are permeable – they are both shaped by and they shape other parts of the world.'[14] The Sahaba Cemetery, as a semiotic space, retains an acute relevance for the people of Shaqlawa. In it, they perceive and negotiate their collective histories and identities, as in a microcosm that embodies the wider territorial struggle for ethnic and political autonomy. The informants' readiness to see analogies in groups across time also show how the anachronisms inherent in the Sahaba Cemetery traditions could have rapidly arisen from changing circumstances. If today's informants draw analogies between the Islamic State and the seventh century conquerors, a similar telescoping or conflation of historical events might have mapped an Ottoman incursion or even more recent conflicts onto the versatile graveyard.

Regarding his experience during the armed, internecine conflicts between the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in the 1990s, one informant, Aziz Hassan Kadr, related in passing, 'I was hiding in a cave and found some old arrowheads and gathered them, which just confirms that this has been a bloody place around Shaqlawa.' The cluster of gravestones, like Aziz's arrowheads, encapsulate the history of conflict in this contested region; as a memorial that offers chronological and hermeneutic flexibility, the Sahaba Cemetery is a focal point for the active interpretation of these conflicts.

Conclusion: living history

This article has referred to a region that is presently designated Iraqi Kurdistan. At the time of this writing, that is its official name, but the question of its status as a semi-autonomous region or as an emerging nation state in its own right remains a volatile one. A successful transition from a stateless nation to a nation state will depend, in part, on cultural allegiances that go deeper than mere political decrees. Oral histories, like those concerning the Shaqlawa Cemetery, might well shape the course of history to come, for these unwritten stories express and condition the Kurds' varying degrees of affinity with or alienation from the Iraqi Arab regions, culturally and politically. Oral history, in this case, holds a striking, current relevance.

At the dawn of oral history's emergence as a discipline, John Marshall made the following prescient prediction: 'As oral study develops, it will provide rich and living data [...]; the local (or regional) historian, using oral history as his tool, can supply the sense of place that is often missing.'[15] More recently, Shelley Trower has underscored how 'oral history provides unique insights into places'. She argues that 'place and oral history can both have active, interactive roles. Oral history can help articulate how people experience places, can change perceptions and understandings of places'. But a local, place-specific focus need not preclude an awareness of how that rich, living data may have wider regional, even global resonance: 'oral history can develop in-depth knowledge of localities, re-establishing the connection between the local and oral in new ways and with new relevance in a global context.'[16] The potential these theorists and practitioners recognise in oral history's applications plays out in the highly localised Shaqlawa interviews and their wider relevance to emerging Kurdish autonomy, fraying ties with Baghdad and the Kurdish counter-offensive against the Islamic State.

The oral histories and traditions concerning the Sahaba Cemetery of Shaqlawa are no mere relics of an all-but-forgotten past. They also provide a living barometer, as it were, of current and historic sentiments among the conduits of these oral histories – dynamic perspectives on how the local peoples, particularly Kurds, see themselves in relation to the Arab ethnic groups of the south and west of Iraq. As we have seen, current events inflect the informants' interpretation of this space and of those buried there. Were those who are now buried in the Sahaba Cemetery rightful conquerors or wrongful intruders? Were they bearers of divine truth or imperial militants, akin to those who now menace the region in the ranks of the self-declared Islamic State?

The answers are not, as the figurative idiom in English would have it, written in stone. Rather, the answers are negotiated in a field of brittle sandstone, where the sacred and the profane exist in tension and a community's voices convey the events of a pre-literate era that still echo in today's headlines.

Notes

1. Hans J Nissen and Peter Heine, *From Mesopotamia to Iraq: A Concise History*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp 134-43; Kaveh Farrokh, *Shadows in the Desert: Ancient Persia at War*, Oxford: Osprey, 2007, pp 262-72; Michael Eppel, 'Historical setting: the roots of modern Kurdish nationalism', in Ofra Bengio (ed), *Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014, pp 37-62.

2. Sarah Bowen Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory, and Conversion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p 91.

3. Savant's study focuses on the cultural aftermath of the conquest among Iran's Persians in the ninth through the eleventh centuries CE. These centuries comprised the height of the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258 CE),

during which post-conquest Iran was brought firmly within the Islamic fold. The Kurds of Shaqlawa, by contrast, date their effective Islamisation to an earlier time, under the Rashidun Caliphate (632-661 CE), to which they attribute the Sahaba Cemetery. The Rashidun Caliphate comprised the reigns of the four immediate successors to Mohammed. A helpfully accessible guide to the successive caliphates can be found in John L Esposito (ed), *The Islamic World: Past and Present*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, sv 'Caliphate'.

4. Christine Allison charts the rich legacy of verbal artistry in Kurdish culture – a legacy that endures, albeit precariously, in spite of predictions of its decline: 'Kurdish oral literature', in Philip G Kreyenbroek and Ulrich Marzolph (eds), *Oral Literature of Iranian Languages: Kurdish, Pashto, Balochi, Ossetic; Persian and Tajik: Companion Volume II to A History of Persian Literature*, New York and London: IB Tauris, 2010, pp 33-69. See also the chapter on this topic in Robert L Brenneman, *As Strong as the Mountains: A Kurdish Cultural Journey*, Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 2009, pp 51-66. For efforts to document Kurdish oral traditions and oral histories in the wider diaspora, see Gina Lennox (ed), *Fire, Snow and Honey: Voices from Kurdistan*, Sydney: Halstead Press, 2001; and Philip G Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism in Europe: Different Generations Speak about Their Religion*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009.

5. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, pp 3, 12-13.

6. Recent theorists have called attention to the potential for overlap between oral tradition and oral history. See Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices*, London: Routledge, 1992, pp 44-45; and Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, London: Routledge, 2010, pp 25-26.

7. Vansina, 1985, p 13.

8. The lack of women among the informants for the present study is a gap that calls for further investigation. Christine Allison has reported that Kurdish women express shame about oral performances before a mixed audience, yet can reveal a vast repertoire of oral lore when their audience is limited to other women or children: 'Folklore and fantasy: the presentation of women in Kurdish oral tradition', in Shahrzad Mojab (ed), *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds*, Costa Mesa: Mazda Press, 2001, p 184, pp 181-194.

9. Azim Nanji, *The Penguin Dictionary of Islam*, London: Penguin, 2008, sv 'Companions of the Prophet'; Fu'ad Jabali, *The Companions of the Prophet: A Study of Geographical Distribution and Political Alignments*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003, pp 41-55.

10. Suleiman Ali Mourad, *Early Islam Between Myth and History: Al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 110H / 728 CE) and the Formation of His Legacy in Classical Islamic Scholarship*, Leiden and Boston:

Brill, 2006, pp 1-16, 23-25.

11. Robert L Winzeler, *Anthropology and Religion*, second edition, Lanham and Plymouth: AltaMira, 2012, pp 130, 292.

12. Greil Marcus, *The Dustbin of History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995, p 24.

13. This particular dimension of the oral lore concerning the Sahaba Cemetery corroborates what Sarah C Williams has asserted in the pages of this journal: oral history 'offers a medium by which to counterbalance the opinions of the socio-religious commentators and to explore para-institutional expressions of religiosity in some depth' (in 'The problem of belief: the place of oral history in the study of popular religion', *Oral History*, vol 24, no 2, 1996, pp 27-34). The local definition of *Sahaba*, as we have seen, goes beyond the orthodox categorisation, while the contested taboo operates outside of canonical Islamic teachings concerning transgressions and retribution. The subtly heterodox aspects of Shaqlawa's tradition grant it a dynamic vigour.

14. Shelley Trower (ed), *Place, Writing, and Voice in Oral History*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p 12.

15. John Marshall, 'The sense of place, past society and the oral historian', *Oral History*, vol 3, no 1, 1975, pp 19-25.

16. Trower (ed), 2011, pp 2-3.

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