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AFRO-IRAQIS AND THE POLITICS OF NON-MEMORY

Taif Alkhudary

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About the Author

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Abstract

This paper finds that the history and culture of Afro-Iraqis are absent from dominant discourses around Iraq's history and its people. It argues that complicated processes, both volitional and unconscious, have worked to relegate the history of this marginalised community to the realm of 'non-memory'. In other words, they have worked to create a 'blank spot' in collective memory but have not been able to erase the community's history altogether. These processes include the refusal to publicly acknowledge racial discrimination in Iraq or its role in the slave trade. It is also the result of the legacy of long-entrenched stereotypes about the Black Other in the Middle Eastern imaginary, which has meant that it is taken for granted that the history and the culture of Afro-Iraqis lack importance for broader Iraqi society. In the face of non-memory, Afro-Iraqis have preserved their history and culture on a community level, through rituals, which have their roots in African religious practices. These allow Afro-Iraqis to connect with their ancestors and maintain a sense of community and spirituality. However, stigma and shame around the cultural practices of people of African descent and the death of knowledge keepers of these orally transmitted traditions continue to pose significant challenges to their preservation.

Executive Summary and Recommendations

This paper finds that the history and culture of Afro-Iraqis are absent from the dominant discourses around Iraq's history and its people. It argues that complicated processes, both volitional and unconscious, have worked to relegate the history of this marginalised community to the realm of 'non-memory'. In other words, they have worked to create a 'blank spot' in collective memory but have not been able to erase the community's history altogether. These processes include the refusal to publicly acknowledge racial discrimination in Iraq, or its role in the slave trade, with those who have attempted to do so being accused of working for 'foreign interests' and sometimes leading to violent coercion. In addition, the persistence of racial hierarchies and racist stereotypes and slurs against black people has meant that it is taken for granted that the history and the culture of Afro-Iraqis lacks importance for broader Iraqi society, keeping it out of public institutions such as archives, museums and school curriculums.

In the face of non-memory, Iraqis of African descent have preserved their history and culture on a community level, through rituals and embodied acts performed in sacred spaces across Basra known as *Makeeds*. These rituals, which have their roots in African religious practices, allow Afro-Iraqis to connect with their ancestors and maintain a sense of community and spirituality. Through the rituals, Afro-Iraqis also reinterpret what it means to be black from the perceptive of their Iraqi positionality, including through incorporating religious singing in Arabic into these ceremonies. The community's preservation of its heritage has also given some Afro-Iraqi people the opportunity to document and study their traditions, marking the start of attempts to write their past into scholarly discourses. However, stigma and shame around the cultural practices of people of African descent and the death of knowledge keepers of these orally transmitted traditions continue to pose significant challenges to their preservation.

Therefore, this paper recommends:

- The government of Iraq (GOI) should initiate a nationwide campaign to raise awareness of the history and lived reality of Afro-Iraqis, as well as to tackle stereotypes about the community and the use of derogatory terms.
- The GOI and the international community should urgently support local initiatives to document the heritage of Afro-Iraqis while working with locals to ensure that this support does not endanger them.
- The GOI should take steps to ensure that the history and the contribution of Afro-Iraqis to society are documented in public institutions representative of the Iraqi state, such as museums, public monuments, archives and school curriculums.
- The GOI should adopt measures to counter the socio-economic deprivation faced by Afro-Iraqis, including putting in place affirmative action schemes to ensure that they can complete their education and achieve high-ranking roles in society

Introduction

Visible above the high walls of one of the many buildings that line Old Basra's narrow streets is a small wooden ship mounted on a tall pole. This ship is located in *Makeed Al-Masry*, one of the sacred spaces of Afro-Iraqis where spiritual rituals take place. It is meant to symbolise the journey that Afro-Iraqis took across the sea to arrive in the port city of Basra. The ship is symbolic of Basra's rich cultural heritage, which lies beyond established narratives about sectarianism and victimhood that have come to dominate discussions of Iraq's history and people.

The historian Dina Khoury has argued that since the Iran-Iraq war national memory has been dominated by a discourse of martyrdom 'through which individuals or communities make claims for social or political rights through the construction of difference based on degrees of participation in suffering experienced in war' (Khoury 2013, p.11). According to Khoury, this legacy continues to infuse the politics of the current governing elite who still utilise the language of victimhood to make their claims to citizenship and power. They do so by drawing on sectarian narratives, which afford the highest degrees of suffering and thus political and social entitlement to particular sects and ethnicities. Culture has been key to the way that these narratives have been mobilised, including through plans to 'de-baathify' the visual landscape of Iraq through the destruction and removal of cultural heritage and its replacement with religious and sectarian symbols that seek to re-write the country's history in a sectarian and exclusionary manner and to glorify the rise of militia groups (Antoon 2010; Khoury 2013, pp.251–2; Kathem, Robson, and Tahan 2022).

Against this background, this paper uses the example of the Afro-Iraqi community, to examine how alternative histories that do not fit mainstream narratives of Iraqi history as being marked predominantly by suffering and sectarianism, are forged, maintained and preserved.[1] To this end, I draw on the concept of 'non-memory', which refers to 'past matter' that has significance beyond the individual but exists outside the dominant discourse (Sendyka 2022, p.252). This 'past matter' has not been eliminated altogether and is preserved through whatever fixing methods are available (p.252). I argue that in the case of Afro-Iraqis, rituals and cultural practices within the community are a keyway through which their heritage is preserved and remembered. While this paper is by no means a comprehensive study of the cultural practices of Afro-Iraqis, it does try to shed light on some of these practices, how they are carried out and their significance to the Afro-Iraqi community.

In what follows, I begin with a brief note on methodology, before further unpacking the concept of 'non-memory' that frames my argument. I then examine the historical legacy and contemporary reality of anti-blackness in the Middle East. In the final section, I examine some of the rituals and cultural practices through which Afro-Iraqis preserve their histories and some of the challenges they face in this regard.

[1] It is estimated that there are between 400,000 and 2 million in Iraq, predominantly located in the southern province of Basra and the areas of Old Basra, Al Zubair and Abu al-Khaseeb (Minority Rights Group 2017).

Methodology

The findings of this paper are based on a dozen semi-structured interviews with members of the Afro-Iraqi community, active in the culture and arts scene in Basra. The interviews were all carried out in Arabic between January and February 2024. To recruit participants, I used gatekeeper sampling which had the advantage of allowing me to carry out interviews efficiently and it meant that participants were more willing to partake in interviews as they were facilitated by someone they trusted from within their community. Despite this, I nevertheless found it difficult as an outsider to gain access to a large number of interlocutors, perhaps due to fear of community members and stigmatisation of their cultural practices.

The perception of me as an 'outsider' and part of the dominant community in the Middle East that has long oppressed people of African descent was made apparent to me through the fact that I was construed and often referred to by both the gatekeeper and participants as 'white'. This, for me, represented a displacement of racial signifiers, because having studied race and racism in an Anglo/American context, I am used to being identified as ethnically Arab and therefore non-white. It served as a constant reminder that there is no essence to race. However, while it might be socially constructed, it is made material through the embodied consequences of racism, including violence, premature death and economic inequalities (Voyles 2015. p.10). My 'whiteness' may have also served to limit the kind of information that my participants were willing to share with me.

The term 'Afro-Iraqi', largely based on the 'African American' model, has emerged as the dominant way of referring to Iraqis of African descent in English literature on the topic and is used throughout this paper. However, among Afro-Iraqis themselves there is not one unified term used to refer to their community. In some of my interviews, interlocuters said that they identified first and foremost as Iraqi, as opposed to seeing themselves primarily in terms of how they have been racialised, while others sometimes referred to themselves as 'black' or as 'people of brown or black skin'.[2]

Non-Memory and Cultural Identity

According to Roma Sendyka, non-memory refers to 'societally significant gaps in collective memory' (2022, p.524). It includes not only that which has been obliterated but also 'what has not been yet comprehended, incorporated, digested, voiced, symbolised and fully communicated.' This can happen through a variety of processes, including some which are 'automatic, routine and unconscious' and others which are 'fully volitional'. It is also shaped by individuals, political and religious institutions and the media. The contents of the past are always in negotiation in the public realm and may be shaped passively 'by means of not recording or memorialising, overlooking, neglecting some components of the facts concerning what has happened,' but also 'in an active way through negation, erasure, censorship' (p.525).

[2] Interview with University Professor in Basra, February 2024; Informal conversations with friends in Basra City.

Sendyka argues that to think about how 'past matter' that exists outside the dominant discourse is conveyed and sustained, it is necessary to turn to vernacular forms of remembering. This type of remembering exists outside of organising institutional factors, such as the state, nation or political power and instead exist on the communal level (p.527). This, according to Sendyka, means that 'past matter' is not 'transmitted through the socially dominant structures of language, symbolic culture or systematic activities' (p.527). Instead, 'the transfer occurs by means of distorted symbolic modes (mythologised narratives, dictums, unfinished sentences), and [...] extra-symbolic mode, as well, thanks to non-verbal elements of speech and performative acts: somatic activities, interactions with objects and people' (p.531). It is in this 'symbolic blend of memory forces' that Sendkya locates the realm of non-memory (p.532).

Other scholars have also highlighted the importance of performative acts to remembering. For example, Edward A. Alpers has argued that the principal vehicle for memory of 'Africa' in the Indian Ocean World is popular culture, and in particular 'music, song and dance; religion and healing; religion and folkways...popular religion, spirit possession and healing' (2000, pp.90-91). Such rituals are thought to be meaningful because they have significance for the whole life of the community beyond the ritual performance itself (Connerton 1989, p.45). Through repetition, they imply continuity with the past, and at times even explicitly claim it through the re-enactment of events that are said to have taken place on some past occasion. Performative acts are also crucial to how communities are imagined. However, as Stuart Hall has argued, engagement in such performances is not an act of unearthing a stable identity, but rather of constructing it (1990, p.224). While cultural identities come from somewhere and have histories, they are constantly being transformed. Thus, Hall asserts that far from being grounded in mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the different names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past' (p.225). Thus, instead of having an essence or a stable point of origin, identity is always constructed and suffused with politics, memory, desire and location (p.232).

Slavery and Anti-Blackness in the Middle East

The presence of people of African descent in Iraq dates back to the Abbasid era when large numbers of slaves were transported to Basra usually from East Africa. This form of slavery, which took place all over the Islamic world, was different from that which later occurred in the Atlantic Ocean. Slavery was sanctioned by Islamic law as long as the person was captured during Jihad which meant that not only black people were captured, but also others including Europeans such as 'Slavs' (Powell and Hunwick 2002, p.xv). This also meant that certain tenants had to be respected, which rendered slaves part chattel and part person (Gordon 1998, p.14). On the one hand, slave owners had full title over slaves and could sell and dispose of them as he pleased. On the other, slaves had particular rights that the master had to abide by and they could be emancipated under certain circumstances. What is more, while in the context of the Atlantic Ocean slave trade, slaves were

trafficked in large numbers to cultivate land for profit accumulation, in the Islamic world they were used as domestic servants, childminders, concubines, keepers of the harem and tend to palm trees and mine salt (Powell and Hunwick 2002, p.xxi).

During this period many Arab scholars and writers produced work that carried clear racist sentiments, which was largely inherited from the Greeks. These works presented black people as animals, morally corrupt and irreligious because their supposed closeness to nature meant that they could not understand dualisms such as good vs evil (Renison-Video 2021). It is likely that slave owners, many of whom would have been literate, read and were influenced by these portrayals of the 'black other'. Moreover, slave rebellions such as the Zanj revolt which took place in Basra between 869 and 883 AD and was led by the descendent of an Indian slave – Ali Ibn Muhammed – suggest that social and class stratifications did exist at the time (McLeod 2016, p.110; Talhami 1977; p.455). This notion is further supported by the publication of works such as that of the 8th century Basrawi writer Al-Jihaz's 'The Boasts of the Blacks Over the Whites' in which he not only lists the virtues of black people but also refutes stereotypes against them. Nevertheless, these stratifications are often described as far less rigid than those that underpinned the Atlantic slave trade in academic work on the subject (Gordon 1989, p.15).

The use of slaves for military, administrative and domestic purposes was the norm by the time that the Ottoman Empire began to rise in the 13th century and continued well into the 20th century (Tolendano 1993, p.3). While up until the 17th century many of the slaves brought to the Ottoman Middle East were 'white', captured in the Balkans, Crimea or Georgia, as the advance of the Ottomans into Europe declined in the 19th century, slaves were increasingly brought from Central Africa, Sudan and Ethiopia (Lewis 1992; Toledano 1998, p.7). This period also happened to see a peak in the number of slaves transported, with estimates putting the number of slaves imported into the Ottoman Empire each year during the 19th century at between 16,000 – 18,000 (Toledano 1998, p.8). During this period, racial stratification was again pronounced, as 'white' slaves were referred to as *mamluks*, meaning owned, and black slaves were referred to as *abed* meaning slave (Powell and Hunwick 2002, p.xviii). While the former could achieve high-ranking positions in society and the military, the latter were not afforded the same opportunities. This goes to highlight the specificity of racial formations in the Middle East, which are rooted in historical, sociological and theological processes found in Arab and Muslim society (Ochonu 2021, p.101; Babül et al. 2021).

Stereotypes about black inferiority and Arab superiority were further shaped by Western imperialism across the region. For example, while British abolitionists pressured the Ottoman Empire to end slavery and eventually cut off slave trading routes, at the same time they reinforced racial hierarchies and saw their endeavours as a civilising mission (Tolendano 1993; Gross-Wyrtzen 2023). Legacies of slavery and deeply entrenched racial hierarchies are widely silenced and taboo in the Middle East today. However, they suffice everyday life most prominently in the derogatory media portrayals of people of African descent, which often depict them in comedies as servants, doormen and sex works, as well as through the frequent use of blackface (Hilizah 2022, p.16). It is also prevalent in everyday acts of racism that see black people referred to as *abed* or racist slurs, often

disguised as jokes, that compare people of African descent to animals or insult their intelligence. Formations of race in the Middle East have also been influenced by postcolonial nation-building projects and contemporary labour regimes (Babül et al. 2021). This is most apparent in the Kafala system used in Lebanon, the Gulf states and increasingly in Iraq, which gives private individuals and companies, near-total control of the immigration employment status of migrant labourers (El Hadidi 2022). As I elaborate below, it is against this background of anti-blackness that Afro-Iraqis have worked to sustain their heritage on a community level.

Community Level Preservation of Cultural Heritage

In this section, I examine vernacular forms of remembering within the Afro-Iraqi community that allow them, in the face of the powerful forces of non-memory, to preserve their histories. In particular, I show that these take the form of performative acts and ritual practices. I try to shed light on some of these performative acts, their significance for remembering and how this has enabled the beginnings of the construction of a scholarly history of their past.

Afro-Iraqis perform several different types of rituals which connect them to their African heritage and have their roots in African religious practices. These rituals are held for various purposes, including honouring the dead, healing the sick and as a form of entertainment or celebration.[3] The rituals take place in buildings known as *Makeeds*, which are located in different areas in the province of Basra, including in Al-Fao, Al-Zubair, Old Basra and Abu Al-Khaseeb, where Afro-Iraqis are concentrated. While initially there was only one *Makeed*, later as the families who owned these spaces moved away, they split into several *Makeeds*.[4] The *Makeeds* are usually named after the families that own them or the place of birth of their ancestors, (Al-Azraki and Yousif 2023, p.17). They include, for example, *Makeed Al-Masry*, which refers to Egypt as the birthplace of the owners' forefathers and *Makeed Wanika*, the oldest of all the *Makeeds*, which refers to the family name of its owners.

A central element of Afro-Iraqi rituals that take place in the *Makeeds* is the concept of the *Zaar*, which are spirit-like entities that members of the community believe are inherited from their ancestors (Al-Azraki and Yousif Yaqoob 2023, p.30). In many interviews, interlocutors were keen to point out that the *Zaar* differed from the jinn and to distance it from sorcery, which is largely frowned upon in Islam.[5] While there has been very little written about how the concept of the *Zaar* has travelled and been shaped by its encounter with Iraqi culture, it is largely viewed within the academic literature as a possession cult and religious healing practice common among societies around the Red Sea, Arabian Sea and the Gulf (El Hadidi 2022, p.4). John Hunwick and Eve Powell Troutt argue that the idea of the *Zaar* is likely to derive from Sahelian culture and was brought over to the Middle East by enslaved people from the African continent, as a means of reassurance and familiarity at a time when they experienced great psychological and physical distress (2002, p.xxii-xxiii).

[3] Interview with *Makeed* Elder in Basra, February 2024; Interview with Afro-Iraqi actor in Basra, January 2024.
[4] Interview with 'white' Basrawi married to an Afro-Iraqi in Basra, January 2024.
[5] Interview with Afro-Iraqi musician in Basra, February 2024.

Inside the *Makeeds* there are spaces called *Al-Maidan* where ritual performances, including singing, dancing and drumming, sometimes up to seven days at a time, take place. These performances symbolise a battle between good and bad *Zaar* (Al-Azraki and Yousif Yaqoob 2023, p.17). They are called for a variety of reasons, including to heal spiritual illness, to commemorate the dead and for community gatherings. There are several different types of rituals with varying origins that are performed in each *Makeed*.[6] For example, Amir Al-Azraki and Thawrah Yousif have argued that the ritual of *al-jakānkā* is thought to have its origins in the Bantu language of Chitonga spoken by the Toga people in Zambia and Zimbabwe (2023, p.19). Whereas the *Nuban* ritual, which is performed *Makeed Al-Masry* is thought to have its origins in Nubia.[7] Most of the songs performed in these rituals are not in Arabic and those who participate in them do not understand their meaning but rather have learnt to repeat the sounds of the languages in which they are performed.[8] In other words, in these rituals, the past is transmitted through 'distorted symbolic modes', in languages not properly understood or articulated and in somatic activities.

For Afro-Iraqi participants in this study, the rituals performed in the *Makeeds* served as a link and reminder of their African heritage, with the musical skills they entail passed down from 'grandfather to father'.[9] As an Afro-Iraqi academic interviewed for this paper explained, 'I remember my roots through singing and dancing. I go to the *Makeed* and others join from all over the place and we sing and dance in Swahili and we have a great time'.[10] Another Afro-Iraqi interlocuter, active in the cultural scene in Basra, explained that 'the music [played in the *Makeeds*] represents the culture of a society, it is an inheritance...a form of spiritual remembrance.'[11] For another participant, who plays several instruments and often partakes in the *Nuban* ritual, her involvement in the *Makeed* gives her a sense of safety and community outside her immediate kinship group, which she has built since childhood in the face of an environment hostile to her traditions and where, as a woman, she is often told by her 'white' husband that her voice should not be heard outside the house.[12] In other words, the rituals provide a transgressive space where it is possible to challenge strict social expectations and norms of behaviour (Hilizah 2022, pp.15-6).

The rituals performed in the *Makeeds* also have a functional purpose in so far as they are used to heal the sick. As one informant explained 'If you lose your roots and are out of touch with the *Makeeds* you might get sick. In one case, I heard about a family that brought all its members to the *Makeed*. After they were cleansed [through a ritual ceremony] they never had to go back again.'[13] Before a ritual takes place, a piece of the sick person's clothes is taken to the *Makeed* and they are required to spend the night there to ascertain if the *Makeeds* can help them and what type of ritual is most appropriate for them (Al-Azraki and

[6] Interview with Afro-Iraqi academic in Basra, January 2024.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Interview with Elder in Makeed Al-Masry in Basra, January 2024.
[9] Interview with participant in *Makeed Al-Masry* in Basra, January 2024; Interview with Afro-Iraqi Actor in Basra, January 2024.
[10] Interview with Afro-Iraqi singer and drummer in Basra, January 2024.
[11] Interview with Afro-Iraqi actor in Basra January 2024.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Interview with Afro-Iraqi musician in Basra January 2024.

Yousif Yaqoob 2023, p.24). Then a particular mixture of herbs is prepared and applied to the body over three days (Ibid). During the ritual itself, and in the case of the *Nuban*, the *Zaar*'s presence is sensed in the frantic dancing of the sick person for whom the ceremony has been called and when their movements begin to slow down, it is believed that the *Zaar* is fulfilled and is ready to leave their body (Ibid, p.25). The sick person at the centre of the ceremony then falls down to the ground and becomes unconscious.[14] Rosewater is sprayed on their face to wake them up (Ibid). Some informants reported seeing participants in trance-like states, including floating above the ground unconsciously eating hot coal and not remembering feeling anything after waking up.[15] In this way, spirit possession within Afro-Iraqi rituals act as a means of embodied remembrance of the African heritage of participants.

However, Afro-Iraqi rituals do not just represent a process of unearthing a hidden untouched past but rather have also incorporated elements of Basrawi and Islamic heritage, as well as being fused with diasporic music. For example, some rituals known as *Al Sada* and *Al Waya* have their origins in Sufism and include religious singing in Iraqi dialect and modern standard Arabic (Al-Azraki and Yousif Yaqoob 2023, p.21). During the 14th and 15th centuries, some of the biggest Sufi schools were located in Basra (Ibid). Sufi lodges, where whirling dervishes perform, still exist in Old Basra nearby and sometimes next door to the *Makeeds*.[16] Moreover, the rosewater used to wake up participants in ritual ceremonies is meant to symbolise prophet Mohammed's sweat (Ibid, p.26). The *Zaar* was also often described by interlocuters in moralising terms and as the guardian of religiously infused ideas of the good life. For example, an interviewee explained 'the *Zaar* is like an angel, they go into you, and they clean the house so that you become a clean person and live a good life. The *Zaar* doesn't want you to drink for example, so you might become sick or the *Zaar* might send you different warnings to make you stop. If you carry on you might be struck down and killed.'[17] The rituals practised in Afro-Iraqi culture have also taken on diasporic forms in the work of the Iraqi jazz musician Ahmed Monika who often talks about the way that he learnt to sing and dance through these healing rituals, which he fused since being forced to migrate to Canada, with Jazz, blues and funk music (Off Beat Media 2021; Szekeres 2022). These forms of cross-cultural exchange represent a refashioning of what it means to be African through the lens of Basrawi culture, Islamic religious practices and forced migration from Iraq.

In a context where Afro-Iraqis are completely absent from archives and museums, the *Makeeds* also serve as a means of housing the material cultural heritage of the Afro-Iraqi community in the form of musical instruments used in healing ceremonies. As an interlocutor explained, 'In these spaces, including *Makeed Wanika*, people try to preserve their history, for example through preserving old instruments, such as a 300-year-old drum or a type of guitar that their ancestors brought from Nubia called a *Simsimiyya*.'[18] Other instruments used in rituals include the *tambura* which is an instrument used in the *Nuban* ritual,

[14] Interviews in Basra, January and February 2024.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Interview with Afro-Iraqi actor in Basra, February 2024.
[17] Interviews in Basra, January and February 2024.
[18] Interview with Afro-Iraqi professor in Basra, January 2024.

which is a harp-like instrument made up of six strings and organic materials such as oak and leather and is likely to have originated in upper Egypt and Sudan in Nubia (Women's Literacy in Sudan 2021). In addition, the Manjur, thought to have originated in East Africa, is made up of a leather piece of cloth onto which dried sheep's hooves are attached and tied around the musician's hips so that when they move it makes a rattling sound (Farrant 2024). In this way, the *Makeeds* serve as a private means of preserving Afro-Iraqi heritage on a community level in the face of the total absence of state-sanctioned initiatives to this end.

Some interviewees also spoke about personal projects that they had undertaken on their own initiative to document their rich musical heritage. For example, one participant spoke about his project to film, and explain the origins of and ways of playing instruments associated with the Afro-Iraqi community.[19] He also recalled that a select few of the younger generation of the families that own the *Makeeds* have begun to study music at university with a specific focus on the cultural heritage of the Afro-Iraqis. Whereas, the prominent Afro-Iraqi academic Thawrah Yousif (2015) wrote her doctoral dissertation on the depiction of popular rituals, including those of Afro-Iraqis, in Iraqi theatre. Thus, while the cultural heritage that ties Afro-Iraqis to their roots has been preserved through vernacular forms of remembering, through initiatives such as those mentioned above, members of the community have also begun to produce academic studies of their heritage and how it lives on in new forms.

The Politics of Non-Memory

Despite being practised and preserved on a community level, Afro-Iraqi rituals are stigmatised and thought of as being forms of sorcery, evil and irreligious (Al-Azraki and Yousif 2023, p.26). This stigma was most clear in interviews with women interlocutors, who were hesitant to discuss their involvement in Afro-Iraqi cultural practices due to shame surrounding women singing or dancing in public. As one interlocuter explained, she would not pass down her Afro-Iraqi traditions to her daughters because of the stigma surrounding the practices and the fear that involvement in the 'popular arts' would be bad for their 'reputations' and compromise their marriage prospects.[20] This stigma has also meant that in rituals, women often cover their faces with a cloth called a *būshī* to protect their identities. What is more, because these rituals are orally transmitted and were not written down by older generations, the death of knowledge keepers means that it is becoming more difficult to preserve these practices (Al-Azraki and Yousif 2023, p.19). As Mullah Aboudi, the owner of *Makeed Wanika* put it during a televised interview 'I live and die for the popular arts [in reference to Afro-Iraqi rituals], but the younger generations don't know it very well. Some of it has become extinct. The young people don't understand it and don't get close to it. If the young people returned to it, it would revive me and give me power' (Alforat HD 2021). This is the case to such an extent that at present only the *Nuban* ritual in *Makeed Al-Masry* is held regularly and well known among the Afro-Iraqi community (Al-Azraki and Yousif 2023, p.22).

[19] Interview with Afro-Iraqi actor in Basra, January 2024.
[20] Interview in Basra with Afro-Iraqi informant, January 2024.

Other interlocuters explained that the practices of Afro-Iraqis are thought to be a source of shame in some Basrawi circles.[21] This idea has been reinforced by al-Sistani's spokesperson in Zubair where most Afro-Iraqis live, who held a sermon in which he preached to his followers 'In your conscience, when we see these *abd* and each of them is holding his drum [he imitates the sounds of the drums], is this shameful or not? This is shameful. In the city of knowledge, where Jafaari pilgrims have come to visit, they greet them in this way [...] this is something that is rejected in all Islamic countries' (Al Taghier 2021). In addition, the practices are thought to be frivolous and often Afro-Iraqis are referred to as *Kawlyia*, a term that suggests that they have nothing better to do other than to sing and dance.[22] Another informant explained that there is a saying in Basra that you should not approach Afro-Iraqis on Thursdays, (one of the designated days when rituals take place), because they are going to be moody and will refuse to do other things ahead of the ceremony taking place.[23]

The shame and stigma associated with Afro-Iraqi ritual practices derive from dogged stereotypes and racism against them in broader Iraqi society. Amongst the most persistent of these is that black Iraqis are 'simple-minded' and animalistic (Whelan 2020). For example, a play that ran in Baghdad from at least 2016 to 2019 referred to black Iraqis as 'monkeys' (Al Hurra Iraq 2019), and during public performances black actors have been subjected to racial slurs including being called 'goats' (Al Taghier 2021). Racial discrimination against Afro-Iraqis has had significant material consequences. For example, as a result of racist bullying Afro-Iraqi children often drop out of school, meaning that illiteracy levels are high among the community (Whelan 2020). This has also resulted in high levels of poverty and, for the most part, kept Afro-Iraqis out of high-level jobs in the civil service or politics, confining them instead to domestic and manual labour and to the service industry (Al Rubai 2022; Whelan 2020). As a result, the city of Zubair has the lowest per-capita per capita income quantile (Whelan 2020).

In addition to the dogged stereotypes and racism against the 'Black Other' passed down through generations in Iraq, there is a refusal across all sectors of society, including in politics, religion and academia, to recognise the Middle East, and in this case Iraq's, involvement in the slave trade. This extends to the failure to recognise the contributions of Black Iraqis to society or the contemporary forms of racism that they face (Mahmoud 2009; Al-Azraki 2021). When activists, writers or academics have spoken out, they have been attacked and ridiculed and accused of working for foreign institutions (Al-Azraki 2021; RenisonVideo 2021). This was a central accusation made against the Free Iraqi Movement, a political association founded in 2007 to defend the rights of Afro-Iraqis and ensure that they had political representation (Al Taghier Channel 2021). In turn, this worked to justify the assassination of the movement's founder Jalal Diab in 2013 by political factions opposed to him running for political office (Al-Marashi 2020). In addition, interviewees suggested that some women who partake in Afro-Iraqi rituals refuse to show their faces because of cases where they have been attacked and killed for their participation.[24]

[21] Interview in Basra with three Afro-Iraqi actors, January 2024.
[22] Interview in Basra with Afro-Iraqi actor, January 2024.
[23] Interview in Basra with Afro-Iraqi three afro-Iraqi actor, January 2024.
[24] Interview with Afro-Iraqi musician in Basra, January 2024.

These dynamics suggest that two sets of operations are at work when it comes to the politics of non-memory in the context of the Afro-Iraqi community. Firstly, fixed stereotypes about Afro-Iraqis are 'inherited' and have become the norm, and in Sendyka's terms are automatically or unconsciously thought and regurgitated. This makes them deeply ingrained and therefore difficult to challenge. At the same time, non-memory is produced volitionally, through the active refusal to remember and the repercussions of being accused of being a traitor working for foreign interests, presumably against the Iraqi state, for those who do. The politics of non-memory thus raise questions about the kind of national subject and histories (even those of suffering) that the Iraqi state has chosen to recognise and the kind of imagined community it seeks to produce.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to show how powerful forces of non-memory have meant that the history and culture of Afro-Iraqis exist outside the state-sanctioned cultural memory in Iraq. This process has been volitional as represented by the refusal to engage publicly in discussions about racial discrimination in Iraq, or its involvement in the slave trade. It is also the result of the legacy of long-entrenched stereotypes about the Black Other in the Middle Eastern imaginary, which has led to the marginalisation of the community and its rich cultural heritage. In this face of non-memory, Afro-Iraqis have preserved their history and culture on a community level, through ritual performances, distorted symbolic modes and embodied acts. This has allowed them to connect with their African roots and ancestors, while also reinterpreting what it means to be black from the perceptive of their Iraqi and diasporic positionalities. The community's preservation of its heritage has also allowed new generations of Afro-Iraqis to document and study their traditions, marking the start of attempts to write their past into scholarly discourses.

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