

EU Grundtvig Workshop Programme:  
*AN INTERGENERATIONAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY  
OF GENOCIDE*

Rijssen, Netherlands, June 10-16, 2011

Workshop Organizer: Inanna Foundation, Netherlands

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This workshop was convened in order to bring scholars, promising students and activists together to discuss the impact of genocide on a community, more in particular the impact of the Seyfo (peak period 1915-1916) on the Syriac Christian communities. It was sponsored by the *EU Grundtvig Lifelong Learning Programme* and organized by the Inanna Foundation. This foundation has been established by a few young Assyrian/Syriac academics and professionals with the aim to contribute to the educational, social, cultural and political development of Assyrians/Syriacs worldwide, with a special emphasis on those in Europe.

The workshop focused on the role a genocide can play within the community of survivors. Almost a hundred years ago the Seyfo took place in a large and ethnically and culturally diverse, and often dangerous, region in the Near East. In the following century many Assyrians/Syriacs emigrated and settled in relatively safe societies in – predominantly – Western countries. Although so long ago and so far away, the Seyfo nevertheless still plays a considerable role in their life. Only a few of the Seyfo survivors are still alive but most members of the community have inherited their life stories and their pain. The aim of this workshop was to bring the voice of the survivors, the generations who inherited this voice and experts who study such acts of violence together, and to discuss how to further research, document, and deal with the historical, political and social aspects and the post-traumatic implications of the Seyfo for new generations.

A total of 25 speakers from various European countries and the USA dealt with the topic of Seyfo from various perspectives. Although there is no room to discuss all the presentations two contributions deserve special attention.

First of all Prof. Dr. David Gaunt of Södertörn University (Sweden), who has been a central figure in the factual research of

the genocide in the last decades.<sup>1</sup> His participation was invaluable, both in his own presentation (*The place of Seyfo in Modern Genocide Research* and *The Sources for the History of Seyfo*) and in his contributions in the discussion of other papers. On the one hand he described the history of modern Genicide research which has evolved from being first and foremost focused on the Holocaust as an archetypal case against which to measure genocides, to a more diverse setting of comparative research into other genocides during the world wars, European colonization, civil wars, and other contexts. In his second paper he discussed an extensive bibliography on the Seyfo put together by himself, Jan Beth Sawoce, and Racho Donef. At the end of the workshop he was honored for his extraordinary work.

Another highlight was the contribution of Dr. Ton Zwaan (Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Amsterdam). In his seminal paper, *Transgenerational Consequences of Genocide*, he discussed the impact and long-term effects of a genocide on a community in general. He asserted that the only way to recovery can be found through integration into society and coming to grips with the past which includes a truthful historical understanding, an open public discussion, justice and compensation, and collective remembrance at the institutional level.

The other papers can roughly be divided by topic. There were several historical papers: Dr. Uğur Ümit Üngör (Utrecht University) *Eastern Turkey as a Zone of Violence and the Destruction of Ottoman Christians*; Prof. Dr. Efrem Yildiz (Salamanca University) *The Armenian and Assyrian Genocide Report through the Eyewitness Testimony of Israel Odo and Jacques Rhétoré*; Jan Beth Sawoce (Mesopotamian Library, Södertörn University) *A Short Study About The Sayfo Issue in The Vatican Secret Archives*; Dr. Andrew Palmer (Münster University) *U-gubo da-qTiloye – The Cistern of the Slaughtered: Christians and Muslims in M'arre*; Scharbil Raid Gharib (University of Tübingen) *Sword and Betrayal – the Repercussions of Seyfo on the Syriac Speaking Communities*; Dr. Jan van Ginkel (Leiden University) *1917: A New Bishop in Amid/Diyarbakir. Who was this Mor Dionysius 'Abd an-Nur Aslan?*; Nineb Lamassu (Cambridge University) *The Private*

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. D. Gaunt e.a., *Massacres, resistance, protectors: Muslim-Christian relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I*, [Piscataway, NJ] : Gorgias, 2006.

*Archive of Malik Yaqo Malik Ismael and Early Attempts of Compensation for Seyfo.*

The importance of the psychological aspects of a trauma like genocide on a community was discussed: Prof. Dr. Ciano Aydin (Delft University of Technology, University of Twente) *Collective Trauma and Cultural Identity*; Dr. Önver Cetrez (Uppsala University) *Genocide and Posttraumatic Stress in a Generational Perspective: Examples from Different Cases.*

Another aspect was the impact on the perception of identity of and among the Assyrians/Syriacs: Aryo Makko (Stockholm University) *From 'Forgotten Genocide' to the 'Main Pillar of Identity': The Role of Seyfo in Contemporary Assyrian Historiography*; Dr. Hannibal Travis (Florida International University of Law) *Constructing "The Armenian Genocide": How Genocide Scholars Unremembered the Ottoman Assyrians*; Prof. Dr. Michael Abdalla (Poznan University) *Opportunities and Barriers to Disseminating the Holocaust of the Assyrians in Poland*, but also the tension between the Turkish denial and the communal experience (Sabri Atman (Director of Seyfo Centre) *Seyfo Activities at the International Level*; Abdulmesih BarAbraham (Yoken-Bar-Yoken Foundation) *Turkey's Key Arguments in Denying the Assyrian Genocide*; Ibrahim Seven (Activist) *Seyfo in the Turkish and Kurdish Media*; Sanherib Demir (Bielefeld University) *Seyfo – A Result of Conflicting National Identities*; Oya Nuzumlali (Sabanci University) *Configurations of Genocide: The Case of Chaldeans in Istanbul.*

Finally also the role of the genocide in Assyrian/Syriac culture was presented both in theoretical papers and by practical presentations (e.g. Prof. Dr. Shabo Talay (University of Bergen) *Impacts of Seyfo on the Aramaic language*; Naures Atto (Leiden University) *Lyrics about the Seyfo*; Mousa Elias (Composer & Oud Player, Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm) *The Place of Seyfo in Mousa Elias' Music*; Nahrin Malki Atto (Artist, Netherlands) *Presentation and discussion of her Seyfo-related paintings*).

The workshop can only be described as an intense meeting, not only because of the breadth of topics presented, but also because of the subject itself. The organizers, notably Naures Atto and Soner Önder, much be congratulated with their determination to bring together more or less the first academic meeting with the Seyfo as its central theme. It certainly should encourage others to add to this endeavor and preserve and analyze and deal with such an important topic within Assyrian/Syriac culture.

The meeting was fruitful for the participants, but will also have broader repercussions. The organizers are already in the process of editing and publishing a collection of papers, which includes also work of some scholars that could not attend the workshop itself.

Finally it should be mentioned that we also had time for a warm and very social get together, where it became very clear that Assyrian/Syriac culture is certain alive and not only mourning events from the past, but also joyfully celebrating past, present and future.