

Chapter 11

Iraqi Kurdistan: Talking Story

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Kurdistan is a researcher's paradise. In Iraqi Kurdistan, its openness and accessibility, the unhesitating friendly and hospitable nature of its people, its rapidly developing academic institutions, and the accelerated modernization of its infrastructure, including its airports and roads and telecommunications, are all factors that support the exploring, examining, and interpreting of Kurdistan's story. Of course, there is no one story. There are innumerable stories to be researched, told, known, understood, and appreciated.

In the hierarchy of human behavior, the next higher level would be to analyze the stories—to dissect and learn lessons in order to apply their learnings. What is it in some stories that propels them to be told and retold over many centuries? What are their timeless elements? Why do people tell the stories they do? Even more important would be to synthesize or create new stories, fictional as well as nonfiction. And the highest level would be to evaluate and judge the stories according to traditions and standards. This discussion is a means to take writers and readers deeper into their knowledge and understanding of their valued heritage. Every student at every level can contribute to telling Kurdistan's story. As soon as students can write, they can, under good guidance, do invaluable research. For example, imagine the youngest students, who are learning how to write, going home and asking questions of the oldest person in their extended families and writing the responses.

This is raw research based on original sources. Then, imagine higher level students examining that research and writing a larger story. And imagine reading those larger stories and learning more about a culture and its contribution to the human condition.

But this is less about the readers than it is about the students and faculty who produce the stories. It's more about what students learn and understand as they go through the process of deciding the questions to be asked, how to ask them, whom to ask, how to write the answers, how to record information in an organize way for other students to analyze and write other stories that contribute to telling the story of Kurdistan. This is where

Kurdistan's many universities can play a critical role in developing and promoting methodologies and the organization for stories to be told, to collect them in organized ways, and to process and manage them in the public interest.

With today's technologies, conceptually this is not difficult, though it may at times amount to substantial, painstaking work. To simplify, it means scanning, categorizing, and archiving stories, and making them readily accessible on the internet.

What's going on here? At the raw research level, students learn how to write while learning something that connects them to earlier generations and to their land. Their stories are not only writing lessons, but also lessons in history, and perhaps in sociology, cultural anthropology, environmental psychology, archaeology, perhaps in all the social sciences. By participating in this exercise, they learn the parameters and features of various disciplines while writing their story.

The underlying potential impact is that students learn about their cultural heritage and that it has value, about themselves that through their raw research they are valued, and that their families and communities are valued. This process of realizing their value is a process of empowerment through the development of pride in whom they are.

Why is this important? Because as Kurdistan proceeds into its future, students will face the effects of not only the decades of the recent past, but also many centuries of life that brought them to their present. It helps to inform the decades ahead of them. In other words, what has the struggle for self-realization and self-determination been really all about and where is that struggle going?

At a different level, there are stories tied to most any academic discipline that contributes to cultural heritage, including technical subjects. For example, let's look at higher-level stories in engineering.

What's the story of the engineering expertise applied in the construction of the canal that ran from Khennis, near Shekhan, all the way to Nineveh when it was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. The canal, completed around 700 BCE, includes the oldest aqueduct in the world, built during the reign of Assyrian King Sennacherib. In 1935, archaeologists at the University of Chicago Oriental Institute published a 140-page academic report on this aqueduct. An Oxford University researcher proposes the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient

World, were, actually, nowhere near Babylon in south-central Iraq, but in northern Nineveh where they were irrigated by the water from Sennacherib's canal. Her academic paper explains her thesis, which has been the subject of a television documentary. The story of this canal is an integral piece of Kurdistan's rich cultural heritage. And, what's the story of the engineering that brought water from many kilometers away near Bastora underground to the Erbil Citadel, which is claimed to be the oldest continuously inhabited human settlement in the world, perhaps 8,000 years old? How was it calculated? How was it constructed? Who were the people who did the underground excavation and what obstacles did they face, like fresh air?

Archaeologists from some of the world's leading universities, including Johns Hopkins, Harvard, and Cambridge Universities in recent years have been discovering more of Kurdistan's rich cultural heritage. To what extent are Kurdistan's students being educated and trained to participate in discovering and examining these important aspects of their heritage, to tell this part of their story?

As valuable as it may be, telling Kurdistan's story is not only about discovering and examining that which is ancient, it's also about discovering and examining the present. For example, imagine students going home and collecting jokes from their elders, which could be hilarious fun.

We all know local people for whom there is no end to the jokes they can tell. A student at the University of California at Berkeley wrote her master's thesis on Kurdish humor. Why do different people tell the kinds of jokes they do? She organized Kurdish jokes into ethnic, political, and social categories, and explained how people of Kurdistan observed and commented on their lives through jokes.

An Introduction to Iraqi Kurdistan's Rich Cultural Heritage in One Day

When working on stories pertaining to ancient features of Kurdistan's rich cultural heritage, a good day-drive through a limited piece of Kurdistan would introduce students to a wide range of aspects that contribute to telling their story.

Start in Erbil, the regional capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, which is located roughly in the center of Iraqi Kurdistan. Drive through the Christian community of Ainkawa toward Ifraz on the Great Zab River and turn

right toward the new (unfinished) bridge to Rovia. What are the stories of the Christians of Kurdistan where their religion was established and has been functioning since the first or second centuries AD, and who speak a neoAramaic language that is a derivative of the language spoken by Jesus Christ. What are the different Christian communities of Kurdistan? What's their history and how do they differ?

At Rovia, turn toward the left and continue beyond Bardarash to the south side of Maqlub Mountain. Continue through a checkpoint and after a short distance, turn right and follow the road another nine kilometers to the door of Mar Matti (St. Matthew) Monastery, a very prominent, large structure high up on Maqlub Mountain.

This Christian Syriac Orthodox monastery began in the 4th century CE and continues to function today. Visitors are welcome. What is this monastery all about and what are its stories? Who were the first inhabitants and where did they come from? Why did they leave their previous location? Of all places, why did they come to Maqlub Mountain? It's said that at its peak there were seven thousand monks. How did they survive, what were their sources of water and food? How were they supported? How did they protect themselves from adverse elements, both natural and human? How did they relate to other communities in the area?

Drive back to the checkpoint on the main road. At the checkpoint, immediately turn left and follow the road along the north side of Maqlub Mountain to the last paved road on the right. Turn right and follow the road to Mehat/Mahad collective town, which is a large Yezidi community on the main road from Rovia to Duhok.

After departing Mar Matti Monastery and before reaching Mehat/Mahad there are two camps of displaced people. What are the stories of these camps? Who are the displaced people? What are their ethno-religious and socio-economic backgrounds? Where did they come from? Why and how did they come here? What are all the other questions that could be asked of them to tell their stories?

The area before reaching Mehat/Mahad is likely the site of the Battle of Gaugamela where Greek-Macedonian Alexander (The Great) defeated Persian King Darius III in 331 BCE. This battle occurred over 2,000 years ago and it is well documented in some detail. What are those details and how do they fit the actual situation on the ground? What do people currently living in the area know about the battle? Have they come across



Mar Matti (St. Matthew) Monastery on Maqlub Mountain



Inside the monastery

any artifacts like arrowheads and spearheads, or other weapons of war? Has any archaeological activity been conducted in the area?

At the highway near Mehat/Mahad, cross over to the other side and turn left toward the Shekhan junction. After a short distance, opposite Mehat/Mahad, before going up to Betnaur village at the top of the hill, there is a dirt road to the right that goes to the oldest aqueduct in the world, only about ten minutes from the main road.

This aqueduct was a large, two-million stone block structure, a bridge that carried canal water across a shallow valley. Water coming down the valley flowed in a stream underneath the aqueduct. The 140-page academic report published in 1935 by the University of Chicago Oriental Institute presents substantial, very interesting information about its construction and significance.

On the side of this aqueduct is cuneiform writing, a system of writing that began to emerge about 6,000 years ago. The cuneiform writing on this aqueduct is about 2,700 years old. What does it say? There are archaeologists and other researchers specializing in Assyriology who can read it. If archaeologists from foreign institutions of higher education are coming to examine and read these ancient writings, to what extent are faculty and students at Kurdistan's universities developing such expertise?

What's the story of this aqueduct in the lives of people who live nearby? What do they know about it? Where did the huge stone blocks used in construction of the aqueduct come from? Such stone is nowhere to be seen in the area. How were the stone blocks transported to the aqueduct site? Many stone blocks are missing. Where did they go and what was done with them?

After visiting this aqueduct, next is the headwaters of the canal at Khennis where there are prominent Assyrian rock sculptures (bas reliefs). Go back to the main road and turn right, passing Betnaur village on the highway at the top of the hill and continue to the junction to Shekhan (Ain Sifni) Town. Turn right to Shekhan and continue through and beyond the town, and turn right onto the first good paved road, maybe 15 minutes beyond Shekhan.

After turning right, it's about another 20 minutes to Khennis on a small river from where the canal to Nineveh begins. At Khennis are elaborate bas reliefs (rock sculptures) of Assyrian nobles and other images and structures with stories to tell.



Sennecherib's Aqueduct at Jerwan



Cuneiform writing on Sennecherib's Aqueduct

What's the ancient story of Khennis? What does it tell us? Who did it, why? How does it figure into the lives of nearby inhabitants during modern times? How is the area valued today and what measures are being taken to preserve and protect it? What do visitors today know and think about it?

Return on the road back toward Shekhan. At the junction, left goes to Shekhan, right to Lalish and Atrush. Turn right to Lalish, the paramount Yezidi religious site. After a short distance, the road to Lalish is on the left. Very soon after turning left, on the left side of the road is a very interesting, very old caravanserai, a place for travelers and their animals to rest.

This caravanserai is usually overlooked because the roof level is below the road level. To see the inside, take a very short walk down the hillside and enter from the side. The interior is very old, original, and fascinating.

What's the story of this caravanserai? When was it built? By whom? Who were the travelers who stayed here? Where did they come from? Where did they go? How did the caravanserai function – how was it supported? What is being done to preserve its heritage value, and protect it from damage and destruction?

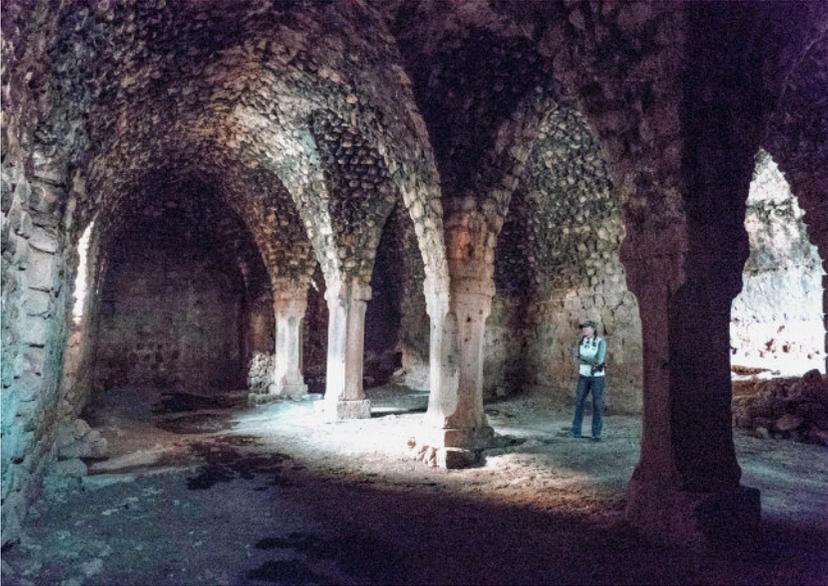
Ahead up the same road is the Lalish complex of Yezidi temples and many other structures of worship and places for Yezidis to stay and spend their time during their pilgrimages. Visitors are welcome. When entering sacred places, no shoes are to be worn and door thresholds are to be stepped over, not stepped upon. There are various sections including the crypt of Sheikh Adi and room of classic jars of olive oil for the 365 oil lamps that are lit every evening around the temple complex.

There is much to learn about the Yezidis, many questions to ask. What's the history of their religion? What and where are its origins? How has the religion evolved down through the ages? Where are the Yezidis today, how many are there, and what is their society all about? How do they conduct their religious affairs, what are their rituals and practices? What is the social setup of its followers and how do they relate and interact with people of other religions?

What is the situation at Lalish and how do they conduct their affairs throughout the year? What are their major festivals and significant religious days and when do they occur, and what is their significance? These are few of many questions to ask about Yezidis and their religion.



Assyrian bas reliefs at Khennis



Caravanserai on the road to Lalish



Lalish, paramount Yezidi religious site

After leaving Lalish, head toward Atrush, then to Mareba and Qasrok. Along the way there are a few Christian villages among many Muslim villages. Beyond Qasrok, after crossing the bridge over the Khasir River, drive a little ahead up to the main road. At the T-junction, turn left toward Akre. In Akre, continue up into the old city with its very interesting view of houses covering a steep mountainside.

Coming from Lalish and the Yezidis, Akre is a city where the old part was the home of Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Nearby in a valley is a Sufi shrine.

Newroz, celebrated as Kurdish New Year's Day, occurs on the spring equinox, March 21st. Akre is the site of a major Newroz celebration with fireworks and a torch parade down a mountain where there are ancient Zoroastrian ruins on the summit. For Zoroastrians, fire is a sacred element.

Thus, within about an hour's drive, are the stories of five religions and their adherents living together in close proximity with each other. There is much to learn about the history of each of these religious communities and their interconnectedness down through the centuries, and their presence and status today.

Kurdistan was largely an area of numerous villages that were not fortresses for protection from those who differed by religion. The environmental psychology of the story of how this situation naturally evolved is important to understand today's Iraqi Kurdistan and what it means for its future in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world.

Departing Akre toward Erbil, about 15 minutes beyond Akre, turn left through the scenic gorge of Gali Zanta to the once Jewish town of Dinarta. What's the story of ancient travels through this gorge? Who were the original settlers of Dinarta? Where did they come from, when? West of Dinarta is Nahle Valley with its Christian villages. What's their story?

Continue beyond Dinarta up and over Pires Mountain into the valley of the Great Zab River, crossing the bridge at Ble. North up the mountain goes to Barzan Town on Shireen Mountain and the route west to Amedi and Duhok. But at Ble turn right along the river towards Rezan where the Rukuchuk River and Great Zab River join. This is a good place to pause for a fish meal.

Ahead along the Great Zab River the road continues to the junction at Spilik and onward to Shaqlawa and back to Erbil. But about 15 minutes from Rezan, instead of proceeding to directly to Spilik and back to Erbil,



Old Akre Town



Akre on Newroz



Akre, Zoroastrian ruins



Road through the gorge of Gali Zanta



From Pires Mountain into the valley of the Great Zab River at Ble



At Rezan, where the Rukuchuk River joins the Great Zab River

turn left up toward Shanidar Cave, perhaps the oldest archaeological site in all of Asia.

During the 1950s and early 1960s an archaeology team from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington and Columbia University in New York discovered skeletons of Neanderthals that lived in this area about 60,000 years ago. More recently, archaeologists from foreign institutions are continuing to examine Shanidar Cave. To what extent are faculty and students of Kurdistan's universities participating in this and other similar explorations and examinations?

Are there any local people still alive today who participated with the Smithsonian-Columbia team back in the 1950s and 1960s? What is their story and what do they have to say about their experience? Back then, this area must have been quite remote. Were there motorable tracks or roads? How was Shanidar Cave selected for examination? Were other places in the area also examined?

From Shanidar Cave, continue up through the scenic gorge to Goratu and turn right to Mergasur and Diana-Soran, to the junction of the Hamilton Road. At the junction, left goes to Soran and up through the highest mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan to the border crossing to Iran near the small town of Haj Omran. But turn right, down through the gorge of Gali Ali Baig and the deepest canyons in the Middle East, then to Spilik, Shaqlawa, and back to Erbil.

The story of the construction of the Hamilton Road is well told in the book 'Road Through Kurdistan' by A.M. Hamilton, the British (New Zealand) engineer who was responsible for building a motorable road through Iraq from Erbil to Iran. He completed his work from 1928 to 1932, after the first World War and the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, to link the British and Persian Empires through overland travel by rail and road that would take about 11 days. His book talks about the challenges he faced.

Of course, there is always more to the story. What was the impact on the lives of local people who participated in building the Hamilton Road? And what was the impact of the road on the communities and lives of the people in the area? If there are no people alive today who worked on the road, are there stories told their children and grandchildren by those who were associated with Engineer Hamilton?



Shanidar Cave, once a place of Neanderthals



The Hamilton Road through Gali Ali Baig

Continuing down the Hamilton Road to Erbil it's worth pausing at the Swedish Village Stars Restaurant, arriving before dark, to review and debrief this extended journey. This is a one-day, all-day introductory excursion. It offers a rapid exposure to broad aspects of Iraqi Kurdistan for students and faculty to select for later, closer, and more time-consuming examination.

Let's look at where we've been: Erbil-Ainkawa-Rovia-Mar Matti Monastery-Gaugamela Battlefield-Mehat/Mahad Yezidi community-Sennecherib's aqueduct-Khennis Assyrian rock sculptures-Lalish Yezidi complex including the caravanserai-Christian villages-Akre with its Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Sufi, and Zoroastrian features-Gali Zanta-Dinarta-Pires Mountain-Great Zab River-Ble-Rezan-Shanidar Cave-Goratu-Mergasur-Soran-Gali Ali Baig-Spilik-Shaqlawa-Erbil.

This is only one of numerous day trips very possible to do. As impossible as this may appear, this one-day all-day introductory excursion is doable. It's tried and tested, it's been done a few times. And there are many options and variations to consider based on the length of daylight available. Of course, there are also many shorter versions to consider, plan, and travel.

The point being made is that Iraqi Kurdistan offers students and faculty unlimited accessibility and important opportunity to connect with their land and its people to research and share their stories.

In addition to learning about their land and heritage, a potential practical benefit of extensive travel throughout Iraqi Kurdistan is the knowledge, understanding, and experience to share with visitors. With an increasing number of tourists and travelers visiting Iraqi Kurdistan there is a strong need for students and faculty to provide professional guide services.

This requires local people who are well versed in their land and heritage with the communication skills to share their understanding. It means being very fluent in the languages of visitors, with a sensitive understanding of their perspectives and behaviors, and with capacities to engage visitors in ways that attract, broaden, and deepen their interest.

It means being inquisitive and well-read with extensive field experience, with knowledge and understanding to respond intelligently to questions and concerns. It also means possessing an important level of organization and logistics capabilities to facilitate a smooth, engaging, safe, and secure travel experience. This calls for well-trained experts.

While no well-trained expert can specialize in the whole of Iraqi Kurdistan, the area could be broken down into smaller units for sharper, in-depth focus. Iraqi Kurdistan is already broken down into about 30 administrative districts. Perhaps students and faculty could focus on only one or a few districts.

For example, Soran District is particularly attractive in many respects. It stretches from Balisan Valley, Warte, and Zargali in the south up all the way north to where Iraq, Turkey, and Iran join. It includes Soran City with the nearby Christian communities of Diana and Hawdian, a major portion of the Hamilton Road, the erstwhile Bekhme Dam construction site, the historical town of Rawanduz, Korek Mountain Resort, the deepest canyons in the Middle East of Gali Ali Baig, a major tourism site at the gushing spring of Baikhal, high mountain lakes, and many other distinguishing mountainous and historical features such as Hassan Beg and Berserin.

Soran District is composed of more than 400 settlements - cities, towns, villages, and hamlets. Overwhelmingly, most are small rural communities. Each community has its stories to tell, beginning with its origins. When was the village first inhabited, who were the first settlers and where did they come from? Why did they leave their previous settlement and how did they decide to resettle where they did? What was life like down through the years since the community began? How did the community feed itself and what did it produce? Was the village destroyed and, if so, where did the inhabitants go, and how did they survive? When did they return and how did they go about reconstructing and resettling their community? What is their life and livelihood all about today?

Mastering Soran District is about researching and studying a wide variety of aspects in detail. It's about mastering the natural environment, its geology and flora and fauna. It's about mastering the sociology, cultural anthropology, history, and environmental psychology of every community. It's about the work of geographers, including cartographers to produce updated detailed maps and other products that show spatial relationships and movement information. It's about producing academic papers, theses, and dissertations.

To begin to offer expansive knowledge that would help to deepen understanding, possible product of regularly updatable information about each community might be an online district gazetteer, a geographical dictionary or directory with maps showing physical features and social statistics, including demographic and historical information.

While researching the district as a whole might be an ultimate goal, perhaps the district could be examined and mastered subdistrict by sub-district. There are many ways of going about learning about communities and sharing the learnings for the purpose of deepening interest in the land and its people and strengthening commitment towards addressing the future of culture and community.

It's up to universities to think it through, to set the goals and patterns, to design the process, detail methodologies and test them, plan, evaluate, and replan, motivate and train participants, organize and archive, broadly share Kurdistan heritage electronically, build and maintain momentum to keep it going. It's a never-ending process, but one that needs to begin with thoughtful vigor.

What kind of Kurdistan do students and faculty want themselves, their children and grandchildren to experience 10, 20, 50 years from now? How to describe the features of a wishful future? How to describe the past that brought them to the present? What are the stories?