

Halabja Remembered: Narratives of Survival, Loss, and Intergenerational Memory

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Abstract

Background and objectives:

The memory of chemical bombardment of Halabja in 1988 was a turning point in the Kurdish collective memory, but the commemoration of this atrocity changed over time in terms of how it is narrated, silenced, ritualized, and politicized. This study examines how Halabja is remembered in personal testimonies and family narratives; how silences, artifacts, and everyday routines shape knowledge transmission; how commemorations, artistic forms, and religious practices anchor collective memory; and how these processes influence Kurdish identity, belonging, and claims to justice across generations.

Methods: Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Van Manen, 1990), we conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 participants (8 men, 4 women; ages 32–76) residing in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq who survived the attack or are relatives of those killed. Required data were collected by conducting interviews (70–90 minutes) with the participants from June to August 2025. Data analysis followed Van Manen's six steps, with phenomenological thematic analysis to identify essential themes.

Results: Data analysis led to the emergence of five

themes: 1) Personal narratives of survival, 2) Transmission of memory across generations, 3) Collective and cultural memory practices, 4) Identity, belonging, and the legacy of violence, and 5) Intergenerational differences in understanding the atrocity.

Conclusion: Halabja's memory endures through embodied recollection, curated silence, and communal ritual that together shape Kurdish identities and justice claims. The results contribute to cultural trauma and post-memory theory through a foreground of how remembrance is embodied and learned through, within, and at home. Among implications are culturally based education/commemoration design, survivor-informed health/social policy, and efforts that support intergenerational dialogue aimed at recognition, resilience, and civic responsibility.

Keywords: Halabja, Kurdish memory; cultural trauma; intergenerational transmission; hermeneutic phenomenology; survivor testimony

Introduction

On March 16, 1988, the town of Halabja in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq was the scene of one of the deadliest and severely devastating chemical attacks in the modern world that killed an estimated 5,000 innocent civilians and seriously injured

thousands more (McDowall, 2021). The attack, which is one of the elements of the Anfal campaign, has since taken a key position in the Kurdish collective experience and identity construction (Baser, 2015).

The study of cultural trauma focuses on the idea that the events do not stop after their immediate cycle, but they are thematic and last for decades (Alexander, 2012; Bar-Tal, 2013). Specifically, the phenomenon of intergenerational memory when the generation that has not directed such atrocities directly passes on the emotional and moral burden of historical atrocities to the future generations has proven to be a fruitful study area (Hirsch, 2012; Olick, 2016). Such dynamics are quite noticeable in the case of Halabja regarding the fact that full-fledged formal justice and recognition have yet to be achieved (Sikkink, 2011).

Moreover, the ways of remembering, which are the complexity of family oral traditions, the silence, the commemorations, rituals and artistic means of memorizing are crucial to maintain the communal identity and their resilience (Assmann, 2011; Williams, 2016). Practices like these also imbue the present with the past, but at the same time these practices bring the past generations to negotiate belonging, responsibility, and hope when faced with chronic loss in the future generations (Volkan, 2013).

Political and historical narratives have been used to describe the magnitude and purpose of the atrocity, but little consideration has focused on how those who experienced the atrocity shared the experience and how this is translated across generations. These narratives are important to understand how communities can endure cultural trauma and to rebuild meaning socialized after mass violence. In this regard, the present paper examines the presence of personal and intergenerational accounts of the Halabja chemical attack and how the memory is embodied, passed on and ritualized within the modern Kurdish society.

Methods

Study Design

The methodology employed in this qualitative study was a hermeneutic phenomenological approach proposed by Van Manen (1990) that assigned it an in-depth expository of the experiences of the victims who survived the chemical attack in 1988 in Halabja, together with their relatives. This was also an effective technique in the realization of individual experiences in relation to community reconstruction, memory, trauma, and survival.

Participants

A total of twelve participants that included eight men and four women participated in the study; they were chosen from those who had either survived the 1988 genocide in Halabja or were relatives of those who were killed. Recruitment was accomplished through purposive sampling. The criteria for inclusion required participants to be survivors or relatives of the killed willing to share their firsthand experiences. Individuals who declined to participate were excluded from the study. Samples were between 32 and 76 years old.

Data Collection

The data was selected through the semi-structured interviews that were carried out from June to August of 2025. These interviews were mainly done in settings that were comfortable for the participants. Data was collected until the themes showed thematic saturation, that is new themes were not developed as the discussions continued. The interviewees were asked some key questions as follows:

- How do you recall the day of Halabja attack?
- What was your family and personal reaction to the event as it was occurring and in its aftermath?
- Are your memories changed with time?
- Can you itemize any losses you underwent as a result of the attack?
- Am I wondering about any particular moments, or images?
- How have you talked with your children or your younger relatives about Halabja?
- In what ways is Halabja memorialized in the

community today?

- Do you feel being a survivor has any impact on the perception of others to you?
- What do you hope will be the lessons to learners in future about the Halabja incident?

Interviews varied in length from seventy to ninety minutes and were audio-recorded with participant consent before being transcribed verbatim and subsequently translated into English for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed six methodological steps outlined by Van Manen (1990). The initial step was associated with the orientation on lived experiences; this investigation was conducted by a researcher who is highly knowledgeable about relevant areas of genocide and Anfal history, having lived in one of the affected communities. The second step focused on examining experiences as they are lived; hence, survivors and victim family members shared their firsthand accounts. Essential themes were identified through phenomenological thematic analysis as part of the third step. The fourth step entailed drafting and redrafting descriptions to accurately reflect the participants' voices. Maintaining close connections with the phenomena studied constituted the fifth activity; each theme was contextualized within the participants' experiences. Lastly, the balance between the individual-coded transcripts and more holistic themes was found after the analysis (Van Manen, 1990).

Trustworthiness

To guarantee the reliability of findings, steps that were put in place include extended interaction with the participants, verification of the findings through member-checks and professional peer debriefing. A good relationship between the researchers and the participants ensured good data collection. The lead researcher's background in forensics, genocide, and Anfal studies, along with the personal understanding of the local community happenings added to the credibility and context of this work.

Narratives of the participants were the basis of interpretations; transcripts were reviewed several times to ensure accuracy.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance to undertake the study was obtained from Hawler Medical University College of Nursing Ethics Committee (Project No. XX; Approval Date: DD MM YYYY). Subjects were fully informed of the study goals, confidentiality measures, and their right to bail out at any other point without penalty, and their consent was achieved by signing an informed consent document. Anonymity of the participants was established by giving each of them a code (e.g., P1, P2), so that all the data was secure.

Results

Following the data analysis, five main themes, each having two subthemes, were extracted. The main themes were "personal narratives of survival", "transmission of memory across generations", "collective and cultural memory practices", "identity, belonging, and the legacy of violence", and "intergenerational differences in understanding the atrocity". In the following section, the quotes related to each main theme and subtheme are presented.

Main Theme 1. Personal Narratives of Survival

The nature of the following testimonies takes account of the first-hand experience of being attacked by chemicals in Halabja, and how collective knowledge has long-lasting effects.

"The day with me was like a second skin, the sky had gone mute, then all the things had slowed, including my heartbeat. We ran without knowing where, holding onto each other's sleeves, so no one disappeared." – P9

"Sometimes I think survival was a choice I didn't make – my feet simply moved when the ground told me to run. The ones who had not followed have, nevertheless, stayed at the back of my tongue every morning." – P6

Subtheme 1.1. Lived Experience of the Attack

The following testaments contain the details of the moment of the attack as it was going on with special emphasis on the memories of the senses of exposure, panic, and loss.

“There was an odd sweetness in the air, and it was turned to fear in the next breath, and the streets were changed under that mist. I remember counting the steps to the door, then forgetting how to count at all.” – P4

“We hid behind a low wall while the world sounded muffled, like it was underwater. My mother had put a wet scarf over my face, and told not to breathe deep, as though breathing were become perilous.” – P10

Subtheme 1.2. Coping with Immediate Aftermath

These thoughts present how survivors managed the initial hours through weeks following the attack as they pieced together routines to sustain a life after the loss, the wounding, and the migration.

“In the first weeks, we learned new routines – boiling water, sleeping in shifts, memorizing the faces in case one was missing. Grief arrived in fragments, like splinters we pulled out slowly.” – P7

“I stitched our papers into the lining of my coat and told my little brother stories, so he’d sleep. Food tasted of smoke for months, but we found solace too to be divvying up one loaf between many hands.” – P2

Main Theme 2. Transmission of Memory Across Generations

The memories of survivors are not forgotten with time; instead, they are recreated, transformed and translated, to the descendants who get to inherit a fragment of the trauma as well as an identity.

“Our family history is measured by before and after Halabja, every story bends around that date. Even those born later speak as if they remember, because the telling makes the memory theirs.” – P1

“The past moves in our house like another relative who never left. We talk to it, argue with it, and set a place for it every March.” – P8

Subtheme 2.1. Storytelling in Families

These accounts highlight how families deliberately share stories to keep memories alive while protecting children from their full weight.

“My grandmother’s voice changed when she told us about that day – soft first, then steady like a prayer. She let us ask the hard questions and answered only as much as our ages could hold.” – P11

“At night we sit with tea and pass photographs like fragile maps. The youngest ones memorize faces before they learn the alphabet.” – P5

Subtheme 2.2. Silences and Gaps

These accounts show us that trauma may also be passed in what is not said, requiring the descendants to assemble half-secrets.

“There are rooms in our story we do not enter; when a name is mentioned, my father looks at the window and becomes quiet. In those silences, I learned how heavy a memory can be.” – P7

“Some details were tucked away to keep us from drowning too soon. I found them inadvertently in a folded missive, and the sheet was made of such solid paper.” – P4

Main Theme 3. Collective and Cultural Memory Practices

The unique ways memory of the tragedy in Halabja is expressed publicly through the various rituals and cultural practices carry the grief beyond the individual and place it in a collective heritage that endures across generations and across communities.

“At the throng in the anniversary, I feel smaller and stronger, something like a common language is the grief. The candles teach us that light may be shared without being lost.” – P3

“We keep the names alive because we say them out loud and we share our breaths with them, and they enter into the cold morning. This is how those who cannot respond are taken attendance.” – P12

Subtheme 3.1. Public Commemoration

Such considerations characterize ceremonies and memorials as the expression of shared memory in restating community identity and strength.

“On each 16 March, we go at the memorial, and the sound of the prayers can be felt beats in a tapestry. As I stand there, I understand how remembrance is a sort of work that we engage our bodies in carrying out.” – P2

“I take my children to put flowers, so they have the memory of reverence in their hands. Their words are important, but it is the quietness that follows that informs them most.” – P5

Subtheme 3.2. Artistic and Religious Expressions

When memories are too painful to talk about in ordinary terms, poetry, music and painting and ritual provide a form, which sustains cultural identity and heals.

“What can we say without spoiling; what can we mean without breaking; what we cannot do the songs our poets made dwell between their lines. When the daff drum sounds the straightening of the elders is as if presented by name.” – P8

“I see the hills the color of ash and green in the same breath because that is what is true here. Our dispersed hearts hearing the voice of the imam, become whole again and are sewed back together with amen.” – P3

Main Theme 4. Identity, Belonging, and the Legacy of Violence

The memory of Halabja is constitutive of personal and communal sense of self and identity, of who Kurds are, through loss and common history.

“Halabja is the sinew that forms my Kurdishness to my morning coffee, my accent, my stubbornness. I am a member of a race that has gotten used to the carrying of memory like a standard and a scar.” – P9

“Although, when I went to the diaspora, the city had accompanied me, in my passport and in my name. Home ceased being an entity and became a vow to recall.” – P1

Subtheme 4.1. Shaping Kurdish Identity

These voices reveal how Halabja is at the center of Kurdish identity, both in terms of silent pride and a duty to remember.

“I am not boastful about the fact I am Kurd, but I am also immovable, in a sense matured by what my forefathers went through. The narrative of Halabja aids in defining us and presupposes us how to stand.” – P11

“When I am passing Kurdish to my child, I am not just passing words onto him/her, I am giving him/her the route map back to ourselves. The words contain voices of Halabja and aspirations of what we can reconstruct.” – P6

Subtheme 4.2. Perceptions of Justice and Recognition

These descriptions express continued distress with time passing on justice and acknowledgment, and how such lack of recognition creates an impediment to healing.

“Justice is an open door that everyone keeps telling is going to be opened, and there is an entire community waiting outside that door to open it with a lot of documents and the dead. Recognition is important because without it, people will always be inquiring whether this happened indeed.” – P5

“I do not want revenge, I want recognition, health care, and history books that talk about our history. Till that time, our prayerful observances are half-way crowned and solemn.” – P7

Main Theme 5. Intergenerational Differences in Understanding the Atrocity

Memories of Halabja have been processed differently by the people who lived through it and those who are told these memories thereby making new perceptions of trauma and resilience.

“My mother re-lives the smell, the street, the precise time; I live with the narratives and the heaviness in her hands when she is talking.” – P12

“For the young, Halabja is a history we inherit alongside our birthdays and our language. We are learning how to turn that inheritance into

responsibility, not just sorrow.” – P10

Subtheme 5.1. Survivors vs. Descendants

These reflections contrast lived memory with inherited memory, showing how both groups understand Halabja through different lenses.

“As a survivor, I measure time by the distance from that day; my daughter measures by what opportunities it delayed. We are both right, and we teach each other what we cannot see alone.” – P9

“My son asks for dates and numbers; I answer with the tremble in my voice and the cracks in the ceiling I still notice first. He wants to build; I am still busy keeping what remains.” – P3

Subtheme 5.2. Changing Meanings Over Time

The meaning of the memory of Halabja as the nationwide tragedy is changing as political and social context shifts, and the memory turns into a symbol of durability and responsibility.

“When the politics changes, the language with which the citizens talk about Halabja changes too, like a flag in new wind. Still, the core meaning stays: a demand to be seen and to protect each other.” – P10

“As the city rebuilds, the memory becomes less about only death and more about endurance. The past does not loosen its grip, but our hands grow stronger around it.” – P6

Discussion

The five themes of the current study map closely onto the recent scholarship on cultural trauma, intergenerational memory, and memorialization while extending it with texture, sensorial depictions of survival and a finely grained account of everyday coping and ritual practice. Below, the themes and subthemes are compared with relevant literature, and convergences, tensions, and contributions are highlighted.

The vivid, sensorial immediacy – “a strange sweetness in the air” and “the world sounded muffled” – mirrors the phenomenological density found in survivor testimony research, including work with Anfal survivors in Kurdistan-Iraq (Hardi,

2011). Like the participants in the current study, Hardi’s interlocutors recount embodied traces (smell, breath, skin) and micro-acts of protection that anchor memory in the body and domestic sphere. The emphasis on improvised answers to queries in the direct aftermath boiling water, sewing documents into clothing, serve to expand narrative-identity approaches (Hammack, 2011) occurring in the form of survival as a repertoire of embodied practices not just as an after-making exercise. It also resonates with cultural trauma concepts highlighting how privatized experiences are rendered publicly readable with the help of a narrative template (Alexander, 2012), but the data of our study interfere in these templates by depicting how verbality vacillates with body-resistant knowledge (holding sleeves, shallow breath).

The theme of inheritance is connected to the idea of post-memory (Hirsch, 2012): the descendants can know about the events they never experienced through mediated family stories, photographs, rituals. The quotes describing curated truth-telling – “answers only as much as our ages could hold” – fit Hirsch’s emphasis on ethical mediation and graduated exposure. It is also critical to note the exigencies of the silences and omissions with their own instructive value. This is in line with literature on the social authority of silence in traumatic legacy, where absence, deferral, and unsaid are part of a different archival guard that succeeding generations just learn to interpret (Olick, 2016; Hirsch, 2012). Our results augment and refine by demonstrating that everyday items (folding letters, family photos) are used as memory cues that provide a link between the privacy of home life and historical events; aspects discernable with Assmann (2011) thesis involving communicative (short-term, intra-social) and cultural (long-term, objectified forms) memory.

The transfer of personal bereavement to collective memory in the form of anniversaries, commemorations and processions fits well into the theories of cultural memory and commemorative performance (Assmann, 2011; Olick, 2016). Participants’ sense that “remembrance is a kind of work we do with our bodies” underscores what

memorial museum studies describe as the pedagogical and affective labor of commemoration (Williams, 2016). Our data note the potency of silence after speeches and the tactile pedagogy of laying flowers with children; this speaks to the way ritual choreography transmits values and identities intergenerationally without overreliance on discourse. The poetry, the music, the painting, and the recitation of religious texts that make up Subtheme 3.2 only expand upon this to show how words fail where what is unspoken needs to be known. This matches the findings in the literature on reducing the therapeutic and community-building roles of artistic and religious activities in the context of atrocity, according to which such activities are used to stabilize collective memory and aid coping because they serve as the symbolic containers of overwhelming emotion (Koenig, 2012; William, 2016). Meanwhile, the conclusions of our paper hold a critical incisiveness: ritualization has the ability not only to empower but to obligate the canonization of memory in a manner that may close off diverse experiences (Olick, 2016). The “light may be shared without being lost” can be read as a counterpoint – forms that encourage multiplicity as opposed to closure in a communal setting.

The participants’ statements that Halabja is both banner and wound reflect cultural trauma theory’s insight that group identity may be consolidated around a shared narrative of victimization and endurance (Alexander, 2012; Bar-Tal, 2013). The quotes showing Kurdishness braided into language, routine, and diaspora movement parallel narrative-identity research in protracted conflict settings (Hammack, 2011) and articulate what Baser (2015) documents in the Kurdish diaspora: memory as a transnational resource for political belonging, mobilization, and moral claim-making. Subtheme 4.2 – frustrations about delayed justice and recognition – follows along with the conclusion that state acknowledgment and culpability is perceived as a precondition to substantive healing and integration of traumatic pasts into civic life (Sikkink, 2011; Alexander, 2012). We temper this by factors that are more concrete – things like care

of the sick, curricular inclusion that locates recognition as a matter of everyday welfare and pedagogical justice, rather than a matter of law.

The contrast between survivors’ temporal anchoring (“measure time by the distance from that day”) and descendants’ prospective orientations (“turn inheritance into responsibility, not just sorrow”) coheres with research on generational shifts in mnemonic frames (Hirsch, 2012; Olick, 2016). Volkan’s (2013) notion of “large-group identity” and the transmission of “chosen trauma” helps explain the durable emotional charge across generations, while the data of the present study show how younger cohorts re-functionalize this inheritance toward constructive civic and rebuilding projects. Subtheme 5.2’s observation that meanings evolve with political winds is also widely noted in the memory literature: mnemonic regimes are not static but recalibrated as institutions, curricula, and international discourses shift (Olick, 2016; Assmann, 2011). The participants demanding that the core meaning is the demand of being seen and providing each other protection indicates that there is stable core in the morality and theory drift.

Our description of domestic, tactile, and communal stunts (wet scarves, stitched papers, shared loaves) adds to a literature that tends to favor narrative and representational interpretations at the expense of the humdrum logistics of making ends meet and holding community together (Hardi, 2011). This moral weight of measured revelation sets up post-memory arguments in a vernacular concern that tethers revelation and conceals according to the ethical measures of care within the family (Hirsch, 2012).

By thematizing the corporeal work of remembrance and its didactic silences, our interviewees provide a counterpoint to primarily text-based museum/memorial studies (Williams, 2016) and a warning against the possibility of sacralization (Olick, 2016). The conjoining of healthcare/curricular truth-telling to acknowledgment extends the boundaries of justice to juridical domains (Sikkink, 2011; Alexander, 2012). The descendants’ emphasis on responsibility aligns with a broader shift

identified in memory studies from victimhood to stewardship, yet our data ground this in specific intergenerational dialogues that co-produce future-oriented agency (Hammack, 2011; Bar-Tal, 2013).

Conclusion

The present hermeneutic phenomenology throws light on the way Halabja survives in the material embodied memory, selective forms of silence, and social ritual, which define Kurdish identities and identity claims. As themes, five interlocking areas trace survival, transmission and shifting meanings across the generations. This association between domestic practice and the memory of the populace expands theories of cultural trauma and post-memory, emphasizing commemoration as active work that is at once sustaining (to ensure continuing belonging) and demanding (to demand justice).

Implications

The results highlight the necessity of culturally oriented educational/commemorative activities that observe both spoken and unspoken memory. Any policy developed to deal with recognition, health care, and curricular inclusion should incorporate the lives and voices of the survivors and their descent as a means of ensuring the healing process and avoiding historical erasure. These methods may reinforce resilience in the community and stimulate the intergenerational process of dialogues focused on justice and productive civic service.

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