

Oral History in Understanding Ethnic Group Education

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This study examines the importance of oral history in understanding and gaining familiarity with the education system among unique minority groups in Israel. The article focuses on the development of Circassian education at the end of the nineteenth century in a remote region of Ottoman Palestine, showing how their education system was created, with emphasis on the socio-educational views of this ethnic minority whose language is oral in origin. The Circassian population described in this research is an ethnic group with a spoken language, while the written language is unclear to the community members due to changes in the letters of the alphabet and the way it is written.² In this case, the oral evidence is a primary source, supplying information which is not available in any other way. The research is based on fifteen interviewees, 'elders of the village,' whose estimated ages ranged from 70 to 95. The memories of the interviewees were personal and were adapted from family stories. Respondents were asked to describe their studies at school and the development of the educational institutions at Kfar Kama as they remember them.

This research originated in the framework of a close acquaintance with the Circassian community which began as geographical neighborliness. As time went by, the acquaintance deepened with young members of the community who were students in the regional high school (of which one of the researchers was principal) and college students of education. The Circassian community is a small ethnic minority in Israel and may be described as a minority within a minority: Circassians are Sunni Muslims, as are most of the Arabs in Israel, but they are not of Arab origin.

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² Isabelle Kreindler et al., "Circassian Israelis: Multilingualism as a Way of Life," *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 8, no. 2 (1995): 149-162.

The idea for the research stemmed from many years of listening to the stories of Circassian high school and college students, stories in which the importance of education to the Circassian community in general and their own educational system in particular were prominent and were spoken of with pride and with a sense of uniqueness. The research was aided by Circassian students in convincing older members of the community to be interviewed. The interviews took place in the homes of the interviewees. The questions were translated from Hebrew into Circassian and the answers from Circassian to Hebrew by two Circassian teachers who are also Masters students of Education and who were present throughout the interviews. The decision to use two translators resulted from the desire to ensure the reliability of the translation. But in addition, the very presence of the two community members helped to create a family atmosphere in which there was no tension and aided in having an open dialogue, clear to all of the participants. Therefore, there was a combination of an external researcher and two secondary internal researchers who were young people of the community. The time period being researched can be divided into two sub-periods, the Ottoman period and the British Mandate. In each period, three main issues were investigated: a profile of the male former students of the school system, a profile of the female former students and the status of the teachers.

Research Sample

The interviews were carried out in 1998 and focused on ‘the elders of the village.’ There were fifteen interviewees: six Circassian women and ten men whose estimated ages ranged from 70 to 95.

Among the men, six had studied in the community educational system and four had been students in the government school. Only one woman had studied in the British government school. The memories of the interviewees were personal and were adapted from family stories. In the interviews, they were asked to describe their studies at school and the development of the educational institutions at Kfar Kama as they remember them. In addition, they were asked to tell their personal stories about their teachers, the content of their studies, social life, the language of study and where they had studied. Intervention on the part of the interviewer was minimal, so as not to harm continuity and concentration. At the end of the interviews, the interviewees were prompted to discuss relevant topics if these had not come up during the interview.

The Circassian group described in this research is an ethnic group with a spoken language, while the written language is unclear to the community members due to changes in the letters of the alphabet and the way it is written.³ In this case,

³ Kreindler et al., “Circassian Israelis,” 149-162.

the oral evidence is a primary source, revealing information which is not available in any other way. This method has been used in research of Native Americans and Serbian Gypsies.⁴

Using Oral History as Evidence⁵

Alistair Thompson and others have seen the first paradigm of Oral History research as one that attempted to give a voice to groups that have not been documented. Paul Thompson views the use of memory as a source for historical research.⁶ Oral history has developed as a source of data for interpretive research of text as a result of the “linguistic turn” which enables us to seek the meaning of such documentation for the tellers themselves. In this instance, by analyzing what the community elders report, we are exploring the role of education in the design of Circassian identity as they themselves see it. Our analysis utilizes the testimony of different groups of speakers: men and women who studied in the community school system, and those who went to the government school. Attitudes towards the role and place of education vary with the respondents.

The Ottoman Period (1878-1918)

This study deals with Circassian life preceding the establishment of the State of Israel. It begins when the village was established under the Ottomans in 1878 and continues to the end of the British Mandate. The Circassians reached the Middle East when the Ottoman army, in which they served, was defeated in a war against the Russians who had conquered the Caucasus. The Ottoman Turkish government allocated them land and positions in Turkey, Jordan, Syria, and Palestine. The Circassian tribes were uprooted from their environment and resettled in these new countries. In the beginning, they tried to earn their living as they had in the Caucasus, by grazing animals. However, this meant that the men were out of the village. The village was at the center of community life, and the women, children and elderly remained there. However, the Bedouin attacked the village, expediting a change in their way of life, as the Circassians became farmers.⁷

⁴ Ronald J. Grele, "Oral History as Evidence," in *Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 43-57.

⁶ Alistair Thompson, "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History," *The Oral History Review* 34, no. 1 (2006): 49-70.

⁷ Kfar Kama was established 27 years earlier than the Jewish settlers of the first wave of immigration, who settled in Ilaniya, Kfar Tavor and Yavniel. A good relationship developed between these three villages and the Circassians which was strengthened by the geographical proximity of the origin of the new immigrants (Odessa) to that of the Circassians (the Caucasus), the foreignness of the four

During this period, when the Circassian ethnic group migrated to a new location, it tried to establish a community with certain public institutions which would enable it to maintain its way of life in accordance with its traditional norms. One of the first institutions to be established was the school. This was done as well, for example, by Swedish immigrants to Chicago during the second half of the nineteenth century⁸ and Chinese immigrants to St. Louis who set up schools teaching in Chinese in order to maintain their culture.⁹ Both the studies of the Swedish and the Chinese immigrants are also based on oral history. In the latter case, Huing Ling determined a series of topics about which the interviewees were asked; each person was interviewed for the same time period. Among the subjects discussed was education. In our research as well, the interviewees were asked the same questions in given time periods and the questions centered on the educational system in the village.

Against this backdrop, the establishment of the Circassian educational framework is described by G.S., an 88 year old man: “Kfar Kama, which had just been settled, opened a school when, in the other villages, there was not even one.” There are two salient aspects of this statement and of similar accounts. There is pride in the importance the Circassians attached to their children's education. In addition, there is a comparison which singles them out positively from the surrounding villages.

These messages are emphasized in the statement, “there was not even one.” Local pride is articulated in the stress on ethnicity as can be seen in the words of S.A., another 88 year old man and one of the “elders” of Kfar Kama: “Just after settlement a school was opened, the first in the area. The area had many Arab villages, but none of them had a school.”

The Circassians are a small ethnic group and they were significantly fewer in number than the Arab population, but nevertheless they made sure that their children would be educated from the first year of their settlement. In the elders’ memories, there were two educational systems in the village. The first one to be established was a community system which was funded by the parents of the pupils with no support from the government. The community schools were religious and culturally-oriented and were meant to educate to Sunni Islamic values and Circassian tradition. Thus, the development of education would logically be compared to that of the Arab population who shared their religion. In Jewish communities at the time there were

settlements in new surroundings which refused to accept them, and other problems of identity. These good relations were expressed in cooperation, defense, and safe passage of the settlers through the village.

⁸ Anita Olson Gustfson, “North Park; Building a Swedish Community in Chicago,” *Immigration & Ethnic History* 22, no. 2 (2003): 31-49.

⁹ Huing Ling, “Reconceptualizing the Chinese American Community in St. Louis: From Chinatown to Cultural Community,” *Immigration & Ethnic History* 24, no. 2 (2005): 65-101.

Jewish schools.¹⁰ The Circassian community schools were located in a home environment. A. B., an 85 year old woman, remembers that “the male teachers (religious leaders) and the female teachers in the village taught in their homes.” The children studied in a room, sitting on the floor on straw mats, and opposite each pupil, there was a small bench. Anyone from the village could attend the school, without consideration of age or personal status so “pupils were of different ages and sometimes a few brothers of the same family were in the same class.”

The teachers of these ethnic-religious schools were religious leaders of the community. They were respectfully termed “the educators and the writers,” connoting admiration and honour.¹¹ Such terms were used only for teachers in the community educational system and thus, they create a status system between community teachers and those in the public schools.

In addition to the educational framework established by the community teacher, they also gave advice to the adults of the village. The function of the school as well as the objectives of the advice were to preserve traditional life in the new country and to suit this new life to the cultural-religious framework which was brought from the Caucasus. A.S. describes the school: “About two rooms; the children were six to twelve years old. The teachers received no pay but the pupils gave them money from time to time.”¹²

The schools were small, usually one or two classrooms. The school seems to have been similar to those of the small rural communities in British Columbia and Newfoundland, Australia, the west of the United States and many others at the end of the nineteenth century.¹³

An Ottoman state school was later opened in the village in a structure near the mosque. The school had disappeared from the memory and from the stories of most of the interviewees. However, M.A., a man born in 1905, indicates that “there was another school in the village, the Turkish school, near the house of the Chadish family, in the south of the village.” L.A.H., 76, states that “I know from what I heard

¹⁰ Rachel Elboim-Dror, *Hebrew Education in the Land of Israel*, vol. 1, 1854–1914 (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1986).

¹¹ In addition to their tasks as educators, these teachers aided in writing and reading letters. The writers had an important status in the village as they could read letters and explain their contents.

¹² S.A., an 88 year old man, 1988. Nirit Raichel, "The Role of the Educational System in Retaining Circassian Identity during the Transition from Ottoman Control to Life as Israeli Citizens 1878-2000," *Israeli Affairs* 16, no. 2 (2010): 251-66.

¹³ Kay Whitehead and Judith Peppard, “Placing Grandy Sisters as Teachers in Pre-Confederation Newfoundland,” *Historical Studies in Education* 17, no. 1 (2005): 81-105; Helen Raptis, “Bending the Bars of the Identity Cage: Amy Brown and the Development of Teacher Identity in British Columbia,” *History of Education*, 29, no. 2 (2010): 199-218; Kay Whitehead and Stephen Thorpe, “The Function of Age and the History of Women’s Work, The Career of an Australian Teacher, 1907-1947,” *Gender and History* 16, no. 1 (2004): 172-197; Charles E. Rankin, “Teaching; Opportunity and Limitation for Wyoming Women,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1990): 147-170.

from the elders of the village that the official school existed between 1905-1914.” He remembers nothing else.

When the interviewee says “I know from what I heard from the elders,” s/he distances the testimony and responsibility for its content. The status of the state school was weak in the collective memory in contrast to the detailed descriptions of the community school. It may be assumed that the Ottoman state school was not a significant element in the ethnic identity of the Circassians.

The Profile of the Desired Male Graduate

All educational systems aim for graduates who reflect the values which guide it. These values also inform the choice of learning content. If certain content is rejected, this indicates that the designers of the system did not consider it necessary and important or felt that it would be contrary to the worldview which they were trying to establish.¹⁴ The two profiles of the Circassian school graduate can be determined from the memories of the interviewees, those who were themselves educated in the Circassian educational system and those who studied in the state school, as based on the objectives of the two types of schools. The aim of the community school was to transmit Circassian tradition to the next generation. This tradition had two main elements: to educate a religious Muslim who would live according to the rules of the Qur'an and who knew the language of the Qur'an, Arabic. Thus, studies focused on learning Arabic and on religion, as recalled by A. H., a 90 year old man, who states: “The Qur'an, religious precepts, rules and laws were taught to boys.” This goal was shared by Muslim community-religious schools all over the Ottoman Empire and was not specific to Circassian schools.¹⁵ The second aim was the assimilation of Circassian ethnic characteristics, making them an inseparable part of the students' way of life. This was to be accomplished by fostering the native Circassian language.

As the language was only a spoken language in that period, it was safeguarded by making sure that it was used as much as possible both at home and in school. The second way to accomplish this was to become acquainted with Circassian mythology and history. S.A. relates that it was in school that he was introduced to the Adiga and he explains with pleasure and in detail that the code of customs and traditions includes a clear system of norms, behavioral rules and laws. The *Adiga H'abza* has been passed down from generation to generation for thousands of years. Its rules direct Circassian behavior in every situation. The system determines behaviours on the personal and community levels and is binding on all classes of the community. It directs every citizen to be sensitive to individual distress

¹⁴ Peter McLaren and Henry A. Giroux, “Writing from the Margins: Geographies of the Identity of Pedagogy and Power,” *Journal of Education* 174 (1992): 7-30.

¹⁵ S.K. Mar'i, *Arab Education in Israel* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1978).

and to react by giving the necessary aid. An important basis of the code is granting respect to adults and to the elderly, while at the same time, adults are required to maintain respect for those who are younger, and to be role models and leaders.

In contrast to the desired graduate of the community school, the student of the government school was to be an Ottoman citizen, speaking Turkish, with basic general knowledge, and to obey the Ottoman Empire's laws and rules. The school in the village was part of the new system of European model schools.¹⁶

The Turks demanded that lessons be given in Turkish or in Arabic. As previously noted, the spoken language of the pupils was Circassian, the only language which was used in the family home. To ensure that the pupils would understand the lessons "a translator would translate the words of a preacher or educator into Circassian." L.S. states that the teacher had a helper, the oldest student in the class, who would assist in preparing lessons and in teaching. The helper would often serve as a substitute if the teacher was "busy with other affairs ... Pupils studied every day of the year with no vacations or breaks." The addition of an assistant teacher from among the older students was common in one room schoolhouses during the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century in many places throughout the world.¹⁷

The curriculum of the state school was formulated by the Turkish government and the subjects included arithmetic, religion, and later, Arabic lessons, reading, writing, and Turkish language study. Special emphasis was placed on learning Islamic religion and Arabic. Groups of children read together; the older pupils read first and the younger ones afterwards. The pupils helped each other; a pupil who knew the material helped a pupil with difficulties, and older pupils helped the younger ones.

The very small number of interviewees who had been students in the government school remembered details from their experiences in the school. They emphasized that the teachers could immediately identify anyone who made a mistake. "A pupil who had completed a number of chapters from the Qur'an would bring presents or sweets to the teacher and the pupils" as described by S.P., an 87 year old man. H.A.A., an 83 year old man, remembers that "each pupil had his own small board." One of the learning methods used during that period was repetition and memorization. The method for learning Arabic was very structured: "At the beginning, the marks were learned together with the vowels; then the letters, the syllables, the words, the sentences, and finally reading paragraphs. There were no textbooks" (H.A.A.). Other interviewees remembered that the material "was learned

¹⁶ C. Fortna Benjamin, *Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); A.B. Tibawi, *Arab Education in Mandatory Palestine: A Study of Three Decades of British Administration* (London: Luzc & Company, 1956).

¹⁷ Nick Palm, "The History of the Present; Toward Contemporary Phenomenology of Schools," *History of Education* 30, no. 2 (2001): 177-190.

orally. The pupils had to repeat, to learn by heart, and to recite on the next day in front of the teacher” (L.S.H.). In addition to the learning program which was received from the authorities, the Circassian teachers taught Circassian history: “We learned of the origins of the Circassians, arithmetic, religion and other subjects, and we also learned to write in Turkish. In the Mosques, we learned Qur'an and Arabic” (L.S.H.). L.S.H., 83, completed his studies at the age of 13 but he states that “those who wanted to continue their studies ... went to Akko or Nazareth.” Those who completed school received official certificates as elementary school graduates. This document was recognized throughout the Ottoman Empire and enabled the bearer to continue his or her studies.¹⁸

The Profile of the Desired Female Graduate

Circassian society was patriarchal and traditional, sanctifying the separate domains for men and women, with males in the public and females in domestic spheres.¹⁹ Accordingly, the community school educated young girls to assume two “natural” gender roles, wifehood and motherhood. The girls were taught by female teachers whose education had mainly been religious in nature. These teachers served as role models for the young girls and contributed to gender construction. Each school included students of different ages. The parents of the girls chose their daughters' community school in terms of proximity to the home, the girls' friends and of course the teacher-principal.

B.H., an 85 year old woman, pointed out that girls learned the same subjects as the boys, but that they were taught by female teachers. Alternately, A.S., an 83 year old man, remembers that “studies were separated into girls' classes and boys' classes. The boys learned all subjects and the girls learned only religion.”

The incompatibility between the two descriptions regarding the content of studies emphasizes the importance of the subjective dimension of oral history as identified by Alessandro Portelli.²⁰ While S.A. assumed that a religious education was enough for women in order to fulfill their gender roles, B.H. tried to see the school as a place which enriched her childhood, her education and her life. She stated, “In school all of our friends studied together. During the long break, we laughed. We told secrets and we laughed at all sorts of things. After school I went home. I did not play in the street because my mother didn't allow it and needed me to help her at home. I met my friend almost only at school.” From this description, it

¹⁸ M. Al Haj, *Education Among Arabs in Israel: Control and Social Change* (Jerusalem: Magnes, Hebrew University, 1996).

¹⁹ Janet Siltman and Michelle Stanworth, “The Politics of Private Women and Public Men,” *Theory and Society* 13 (1984): 91-118.

²⁰ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New England Press, 1991).

can be understood that B.H. perceived of school as a public sphere which widened the boundaries of gender freedom.

A.B., an 85 year old woman, remembers that among the girls, “the teacher would take home the head covering of the girl she had taught, and the pupil’s parents would send her presents.” Circassian women's head covering is different from the head covering of Arab Muslim women. It is a different color, always white, and is an identifying mark for the Circassian women. It does not depend on personal status. For example, among religious Jewish women, it is the norm to cover their heads after marriage and thus, to signal that these women are not available for courtship. For Muslim women, after the age of ten, all girls cover their heads to demonstrate their modesty. In both cases the head covering is an endocentric expression, signaling women as sexual beings who might threaten the male-controlled social order.²¹ For Circassian women, the head covering is not only an expression of gender, but also a symbol of the woman’s personal development. She is allowed to wear it when she feels it is the right time for her. In this way, she marks an identification with her ethnicity.

The interviewees spoke of their studies with pride and described them as part of Circassian tradition which attributes importance to girls' education and to the status of women. They stressed that this was not characteristic of other Muslim women in the area who were denied the right to study.²² S.A , an elderly man, explained “Women have an important and valuable status in Circassian society, in general, and in the family, in particular, and they play a significant role in the responsibility for educating children. Women are considered appropriate mediators in family conflicts and in inter-family disputes. In the oral tradition, when an individual in the community was killed, the murderer would flee to the house of a woman to find shelter and protection. No person would dare to break into the house and the murderer would remain there under the woman’s protection until the anger had subsided.” The story testifies to the fact that Circassian women were given a highly significant role in preventing conflicts and bridging them, recognizing the qualities of women and making use of them in daily life. According to the traditional behavioral code, no quarrel should take place in the presence of a woman. A young

²¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Sherry Ortner, “Gender Hegemonies,” *Cultural Critique* (Winter 1989-1990): 80-85.

²² Letter from Dr. Hirshberg, Head of the Muslim Department of the Ministry of Religions, sent in 1949 to the Minister of Education: State Archives G/145/1733. A census taken by the Mandate government at the beginning of the 1930s indicates that the Israeli Jewish population was educated and literate in comparison to the non-Jewish population. Ninety-three percent of the Jewish men and 79 percent of the Jewish women knew how to read and write while among Muslim populations 25 percent of the men and 3 percent of the women were literate. Christians were relatively more educated than Muslims but there were still great gaps between them and the Jewish population. Fewer than half of the Christian women knew how to read and write.

woman should be allowed to choose her partner in life without pressure or coercion.”²³ L.S.H, another man, explains that the Circassian tradition forbids marriage between relatives. This prohibition was so strict that in the Caucasus, marriage between young people of the same village was forbidden. In Circassian communities, it was not customary to have more than one wife, despite religious permission. Women were also allowed to inherit possessions both from their husbands and from their own families.

The Profile of the Teachers

All of the interviewees signaled respect for teachers. It was emphasized that the teachers had wide authority to enforce rules of behaviour in the classroom. There are recollections of a strict atmosphere, including the use of physical punishment. This form of punishment characterizes traditional education which grants the teacher the role of the parent. In the Circassian case, physical punishment was used both in the community educational system and in state schools.

Physical punishment is mentioned in a number of stories told by the interviewees. The accepted method was “a long stick ... with which the teacher used to touch a pupil whom he wanted to hear. And it was used to hit, usually lightly, when the pupil did not recite what was requested.”

Interviewees identified exceptional teachers. There are many studies in the literature dealing with how students remember their teachers. The goals of the studies vary. Some deal with the development of pedagogical knowledge while others discuss the experience of learning for students. Memories of teachers can be a bridge to negative and positive assessments of the past.²⁴

Among specific teachers mentioned in this study were Chal’ako Shaker and Chal’ako Ahmad,²⁵ two religious leaders who arrived with the community from the

²³ Any attempt to do harm to this right may fail as the *Adiga Habza* offers the couple a solution which enables them to stand up against the family without harming its honor or that of the tribe. This solution is known as the *Chekakan*- the kidnapping of the bride to a neutral residence in the village until the matter of the wedding has been settled with her parents. The reason for this lies in the Circassian way of life in the small villages which have served as centers to which the men returned at certain periods during the year. In the villages, women, children and older people remained, mostly in extended families, in which the women took care of all of the children rather than nursing only their own children. In Islamic law, and apparently in Circassian tradition, mutual nursing created the status of brothers and sisters among the children.

²⁴ N. Norquay, “Life History Research: Memory, Schooling and Social Difference,” *Cambridge Journal of Education* 20, no. 3 (1990): 291; Richard T. Walls, Rayne A. Sperling, and Keith D. Weber, “Autobiographical Memory of School,” *Journal of Educational Research* 95, no. 2 (2001): 116-128; A. Quigley, “Looking Back in Anger: The Influences of Schooling on Illiterate Adults,” *Journal of Education* 174, no. 1 (1992): 104.

²⁵ Chalaka Haj Ahmad T’choko (1826- 1888) led the Circassians who settled in the village (whose origins were in the Caucasus, including Romali) until his death. He received his education from

Caucasus. The former focused on teaching and religion while the latter offered advice to village residents and ‘mediation in social disputes’. At their sides and under their leadership, were their successors: T’choku Osman (Wasman Yfend) (1857-1930) became the instructor and dealt with religious matters, and Nash Ischak (Ischak Yfend) dealt with village matters.²⁶ Nash Ischak was one of the first to leave Kfar Kama to broaden his knowledge. He received an academic degree from the University of Istanbul in Turkey. When he returned to the village, he became an educational and cultural advisor. One of his sayings which is quoted in textbooks and which was repeated in a number of interviews was, “There is no one who does not err! Everyone may make an error- and it is no shame to err! Shame is not to admit an error and not to correct it! Everyone who makes a mistake should ask for forgiveness and not repeat the mistake!”²⁷

The government school teachers, unlike the community school teachers, were sent to the village by the Turks. Among the very few who mentioned the Ottoman school, A. H. noted that, “the teacher, Abd Almagid Hurshid from the Vov family also studied in Egypt. He taught in the school that stood next to the mosque, the school which was officially under the authority of the Ottoman Empire.” The school is described by some of the interviewees as a window to the modern world which could open on to new horizons, teaching new subjects. A.S. describes the Ottoman school as the product of the changes which were occurring in the Ottoman Empire, “In 1908, the el-Ittihad Party (the Young Turks) came to power, and they favored equality and democracy and were against discrimination and racism ... They demanded that other subjects be taught to develop the pupil and the educational system. These subjects were geography, history, arithmetic and geometry ... Most of the educated people were Lebanese and they were spread throughout the Middle East. Three Lebanese teachers reached Kfar Kama.”

During this period, parents were involved in two significant decisions: whether to send their children to school and in which system they would study.

Turkish Mushrads (spiritual leaders) in the Caucasus. He was one of the founders of the mosque in the village.

²⁶ Nash Ischak Haj Musa Yfend (1854-1935) was a pupil of Haj Ahmad and they exchanged places as Imam. Nash was one of the most respected individuals in the village. He received his education at the Islamic College “Kwalla” in Romali where many of the religious leaders of the village had studied. He studied at the University of Istanbul in Turkey. He was the educational and cultural advisor of the village. T’choka Wassman Yfend (1837-1930) was a teacher and educator, studied at the Islamic College “Kwalla” and completed his studies at the University of al-Azhar in Cairo, Egypt. His wife, the sister of Nash Ischak Yfend. Wassman, by profession, a teacher, educated a generation of village inhabitants. He taught religion and Islam, in addition to holding educational positions and teaching other subjects. He taught throughout the Ottoman period and then continued to teach during the British Mandate.

²⁷ The interviewees peppered their speech with sayings and epigrams which reached me second-hand, as they were quoted in Arabic or in Circassian.

Neither the curriculum of studies nor school discipline were relevant issues.

The data clearly shows that Kfar Kama preferred the pragmatic solution, two parallel educational systems, one which was required by the laws of the state to which it had to express its loyalty, and the other, a community solution, which strengthened the Circassian identity. The recollections of the interviewees and the information regarding classes for girls, for whom there was no school requirement, attests to the centrality of the community educational system. Research dealing with the history of education and educational thought indicates that this is an arrangement which exists in places where the education laws threaten the unique identity of a community.²⁸

The British Mandate Period (1918-1949)

During British control, there were no significant changes in the way of life in Kfar Kama. Despite the poor economic standing of much of the population, the young boys of the village and a large number of the girls received basic education. The two educational systems were active as in the Ottoman period, but the government school became more significant. The government school system began in the schoolhouse which had served the Ottoman system. At the beginning of the 1930s, two schoolrooms were built in the north of the village.

The School Students

The state school in the village was chosen by the Mandate government to be the regional school for the village children and for any other interested pupils from the surrounding villages. The registry of the family names of the pupils who were enrolled in the state school has remained complete for the Mandate period. It indicates that there were pupils from the village and also from the surrounding Arab and Bedouin villages in the area.²⁹

Research into the history of education during the British Mandate indicates the momentum of development and the expansion of the school system during those years in the various colonies including Mandatory Palestine.³⁰ According to Clive Whitehead, this educational system strived to give its students an acquaintance with the cultural environment in which they were growing up and according to a

²⁸ Catherine Burke, "Contested Desires: The Edible Landscape of School," *Pedagogica Historica*, 41, no. 4-5 (2006): 571-578.

²⁹ Among the names: Shibly, Kfar Sabah, Magher, Ulam, Hadith, Um el-Aleq. However, there were no girls listed as pupils.

³⁰ Mariam Mari, "The Arab School and Actual Issues" in *Co-existence and Contents of Identity Education*, The National Committee of Chairmen of Arab Local Authorities and the Follow-up Committee for Arab Education (Haifa, 1988), 95-103.

humanistic model.³¹ A.A. confirms this, “At that time, the school was a regional one; there were Arab pupils from the area- Shibly, Kfar Sabah, Siran, Maghar, Ulama, Hadith, Um el-Aleq. The Circassians learned to speak Arabic from their friends in the class.”

Some of the interviewees remember British rule as a time of momentum in education. As A.S. recounted, “After the British conquered the country, education developed more and more. As new subjects were studied and new fields were opened, religious education lessened.” A.S. views the expansion of education as a “development” and expresses the result of less religious instruction without particular concern. He hints at disagreement regarding the best education of Circassian youth and about “modern” education’s effects on the community. The differences in opinion are not specifically described by the older interviewees in an obvious way, but the lack of consensus is obvious in the attitudes towards the official school: some interviewees either ignored the issue or spoke of a vague memory in contrast with those who were enthusiastic about educational progress and teachers’ contributions.

Classes were organized according to children’s ages. Most of the children studied at school, and when they did not, it was because of the economic needs of the family and the fact that the parents wanted their children to work with them. If a child left school, this was arranged between the parents and the teacher. Parents would visit school infrequently and only for pressing reasons. The teacher would ask how the pupil was feeling if he or she had not come to school for a few days. Children listened to the teacher and behaved well. There was physical punishment very infrequently for children who did not behave well. There was no water at school. A student who wanted to drink went out to the yard of the mosque, which was close to the school, and drank there. Each child had a tree growing around the school. He would have to take care of the tree and water it. The school year began in September and ended at the end of June. From the end of the 1940s, the school issued report cards on which the subjects were printed along with the standing of the pupils. These report cards have been kept by a great many of the interviewees who completed school. Writing implements, workbooks and other school supplies “belonged to the school; the state provided them. Learning materials stayed in school.”

In retrospect, L.S.H. regards his achievements with satisfaction: “I learned Arabic very well in five years in spite of the fact that I was younger than those I was studying with.”

³¹ Clive Whitehead, "The Historiography of British Imperial Education Policy, Part II: Africa and the Rest of the Colonial Empire," *History of Education* 34, no. 4 (2005): 441-454.

The Profile of the Desired Male Graduate

As during the Ottoman period, two profiles of school graduates are apparent from the description of the interviewees: graduates of the community school and graduates of the state schools. In contrast to the Ottoman period, during the British Mandate a graduate of the community school was educated not only in religion and ethnicity but also received a basis in general education, due to the competition with the state school. However, the preferred profile for a male community school graduate during the Mandate was similar to the earlier Ottoman graduate profile.

Community education focused on the study of Islam according to Circassian tradition. Studies, which took place in the homes of the teachers, included learning Arabic, basic arithmetic and religion: religious laws, precepts, reading the Qur'an and its interpretation. S.P.S., an 85 year old man, remembers that "the textbook was the Qur'an. There were no excerpts from other texts, stories or poems..." The languages of instruction were Arabic and Circassian.

From the stories of the interviewees, it is clear that the community school tried to enrich the pupil and to equip him with a broad education in both the realms of religion and by the addition of a practical subject, arithmetic. According to L.S.H.: "I did not learn in the state school, even though there was one in the village. I studied with Abd Allah at the end of the 1930s. We studied Arabic, religion and arithmetic from the morning until noon. We had an afternoon break and then the older pupils returned to study religion. I returned to study also, even though I was younger than they were."

In contrast, the desired male graduate of the state school was supposed to become a British subject, with a basic education which would enable him to continue studying at the high school, either the state school or another. In addition to expertise in his heritage and his language, he would have basic knowledge of English, mathematics, and other fundamental subjects, learning with his geographical neighbors of different cultures. As the common language was Arabic, the official language of instruction at school was Arabic with translation into Circassian when needed and according to the ability of the teacher.

The curriculum in school was based on the accepted course of studies in Arab schools. Uniforms were encouraged and this was noted with amused pride by some of the interviewees. Among the school subjects were Qur'an studies, Arabic, arithmetic, history and geography. From the end of the 1930s, agriculture, English, sciences, music, drawing and physical education were added to the course of studies. English studies began in the fourth grade. In the state school, there were no special lessons devoted to the study of Circassian heritage or to the Circassian language, which continued to be the general language of oral communication for the pupils. H.A.A. remembers that "lessons would begin at 8:00 A.M. There was a break to eat, we studied until the afternoon, and then we went home. We had a summer vacation

of two months, just as they do today. When we returned from vacation we went up to the next grade. We did not have trips, or anything but our studies. Sometimes they would let us play football in the yard adjacent to the school.”

A.L.B., an 83 year old, relates, “I studied in the first and second grades in the rooms near the mosque. Our teacher was Amin. Only boys studied with us. We studied Arabic, religion, arithmetic, basic science ... When I wanted to continue my studies in Nazareth, because the school in the village only went up to the second grade, we traveled to Nazareth where they gave me a certificate indicating that I had completed my studies.” L.B.B., 77 years old, relates: “In 1930, I went to Nazareth with another two pupils who ... came from a rich family, in order to continue our studies ... They rented a small apartment for us.”

The state school continued to grow in the memory of the interviewees. The objective was to lessen the gap between the Circassian graduate and those of similar schools throughout the British Empire.

According to A.L.B.: “In 1932, pupils were divided into four classes. During these years, different age groups studied in the same classes: The first and second grades studied in one classroom and the third and fourth grades studied in the second. Each class sat in a different row and the teacher taught using his own arrangement.”

The government school recruited teachers who were well suited to its objectives even if they were not Circassian and this exposed students to other neighboring cultures. The integration of non-Circassian teachers in the school apparently contributed to the change of the language of instruction to Arabic.

A.A., a 76 year old man, relates that “[t]he principal was Muhammad al-Fakhouri, an Arab from Beit She’an (and before him, there was Hassan, an Arab). He taught mathematics and English to the fourth grade. We studied in Arabic. We studied in a school which was located where the junior high school stands today. There were two rooms and, in each room, there were pupils from two grades, the first and the second grades together and the third and fourth grades together. When the teacher came in, he would teach half a lesson to the first grade and then he would give them work to do and do the same for the second grade.”

During the school year 1947-1948, studies were held up to the sixth grade, according to A.A. Other interviewees remember that parents brought in a teacher and paid him to teach in the fifth and sixth grades. From the stories of the interviewees, it is not clear who funded these two additional classes but there is agreement about their existence.

A.A. described how pupils in school were not only divided according to age but also according to levels of knowledge. Many of those interviewed emphasized the school’s concern for their health, with a nurse from Bethlehem or a doctor “from

Tiberias who would visit the school every week.”³²

These descriptions fit the increasing attention in the British educational system to the health of the pupils. This was part of a general approach which viewed health and hygiene of the individual as a public concern. The perception of the school as an institution which was meant to care for the welfare of the child and not just his or her education alone had begun at the end of the nineteenth century in Britain when the government decided that the school was to undertake the examination of students' health.³³

After World War One and with the British occupation of the country, the public health system was greatly broadened with the establishment of a new hospital and with the growing recognition of the importance of preventive information. Hygiene and health were defined and were outlined as a scientific topic based on rational criteria. Interest in hygiene and health was accelerated in the Jewish settlement by nurses and doctors who arrived from abroad and by the establishment of a teaching institution for nurses and the opening of a family health center in Jerusalem for the Jewish and Arab population. The activities of school nurses were common in the Jewish educational system³⁴ and the Mandate Government Ministry of Education cared primarily for the Arab population.

The Image of the Desired Female Graduate

Similar to the Ottoman period, girls studied separately from the boys and under the direction of a woman. In one case, this was a mother and daughter. “During the 1920s, the teacher Chujtsakwa taught the girls at her home, and with her, was her daughter.”

The reality in which a mother and daughter functioned as teachers demonstrates the institutionalization of the profession as a family tradition, passed on from generation to generation as was common in many traditional societies.

Community education during the British Mandate, as in the Ottoman period, aspired to educate Circassian girls to be proper mothers and wives. To this end, girls had special lessons during which they studied the rights and duties of women from a book called *Chaver el-Nisa*. During lessons, there was no dialogue, but rather reading from a text and its explanation by the teacher, including examples from daily life.

³² The doctor apparently visited once a month or once every two months, but the health education and the medical tests which were accompanied by explanations, left a great impression on the pupils.

³³ David Crook, “Editorial - Education, Health and Social Welfare,” *History of Education* 36, no. 6 (2007): 651-657. Dorothy Porter, *Health, Civilization and the State: A History of Public Health from Ancient to Modern Times* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

³⁴ Dafna Hirsch, “Interpreters of Occident to the Awakening Orient: The Jewish Public Health Nurse in Mandate Palestine,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50 (2008): 227-255.

From this example, it is clear that teaching strategies were very conservative and that students were not active participants but rather were to remain passive and to internalize the rules which were transmitted to them with no discussion or critical thinking. These strategies characterize traditional teaching based on the assumption that learning involves passively assimilating information from some source, usually a teacher or a book. It is necessarily based on listening to a verbal text or reading a book. The adults possess the information which they transmit to the students who are empty vessels. Currently there is sharp criticism directed at such traditional teaching.³⁵

In community education, the gender separation was still expressed in the division of the sexes. Boys studied with male teachers and girls with females, except in one case where a woman describes studying with a well known male teacher: L.R.H. talks about her studies with a group of girls during the 1940s, “When I was five years old, I began to study with Abd Allah the teacher. The place we studied, at his home, was called “makhtab”. He was also Imam for a period of time. We used to sit on a rug of straw, opposite a small bench for each of us. Those who read for the teacher sat on a chair. The older girls were the first to read for the teacher and the younger ones read afterwards. We helped each other and taught each other. When one of us had finished reading a few chapters of the Qur'an, she would bring presents or sweets for the teacher and for the other pupils. Where Abd Allah taught, there were two rooms, one for boys and one for girls.”

One of the interviewees explains that towards the end of the British Mandate in Palestine, a number of Circassian families chose to send their daughters to the government school in the village. A.A. emphasizes the significance of the change: “For the first time, studies were held for girls in the state school. Girls learned in a separate classroom and studied the first and second grades.”

The Image of the Teacher

During the British Mandate, the community schools continued to revolve around the teacher but some of the schools were expanded and moved out of the teacher's home. The teachers were chosen according to their expertise in religious subjects and their knowledge of the Circassian language. Sometimes Circassian teachers who arrived to teach in the state school during the Ottoman period became community teachers during the British Mandate.

The interviewees remembered the didactic-pedagogic skills of their teachers, as demonstrated in the following: L.S.H. describes with admiration: “Four or five children read together and the teacher always succeeded in identifying the pupil who

³⁵ Chris Shute, *Edmond Holmes and the Tragedy of Education* (Educational Heretics Press, 1998).

made a reading mistake. He added emphatically: “Our teachers were very good at teaching.”

The interviewees also mentioned the atmosphere of respect in the classroom. Their descriptions sketch peer relationships which were very warm, with mutual help given and received, and teachers who were respected and received almost complete obedience to their orders. In this regard, there was similarity between the traditional home and the community school. “The teacher would not punish the pupils because there was no need” or “He controlled the discipline and the children were polite and respected him.” The interviewees noted the mutual help among pupils as part of the teaching method. “The children helped each other; anyone who knew helped someone who did not, or someone who was younger than he was” or “a pupil who succeeded in learning to read the Qur'an well became a pupil who taught...”(S.P.S., 77 years old).

During the Mandate, as in the Ottoman period, the community teacher received a monthly salary from the parents of the pupils. Some of the interviewees mentioned additional names of teachers who taught in their homes. Some of them also remembered two levels of study. For example, “[a]t the same time, even though there was a state school in the village, Khajur Ahmad continued to work with children in his home, and those who completed their studies successfully with him, continued on to study with Abd Allah Khujah, who taught on a higher level, in his home”(S.P.S). The descriptions lead us to conclude that community education which took place in private houses was varied and enabled the family to choose a “learning group” which was suitable for the student, his abilities and goals.

In contrast to the religious teachers whose education had been primarily religious, it appears from the descriptions of the interviewees that the teachers and the principal in the Mandate state school were usually high school graduates and some had higher education. Most came from outside of the village and were Christian Arabs or Muslims. From the 1940s, the school also included local staff. The interviewees stressed that during the British Mandate, parents became more involved in school life. In this period, an organization, which had not previously existed appeared, a ‘Parents Committee’ which was involved in education and in various educational issues. Members of the committee made visits to the homes of parents to report on how their children were doing in school and to congratulate the parents of pupils who excelled, and to try to encourage their continuing studies. The interviewees emphasized that one of the objectives for the parents in visiting homes was to cause the other parents get to know the school, to be satisfied and to encourage other people in the community to send their children to study without concern.

Conclusion

The stories of the 15 interviewees about the educational system in their village illustrate the necessity of oral evidence to obtain descriptions which would not be heard or written about otherwise. After rereading the testimony of the interviewees again and again, all of whom were graduates of one of the two Circassian educational systems in their village, we can learn about their different attitudes towards the state school in comparison to the role of the community educational systems. The descriptions of the community schools were rich; the interviewees remembered visual details of the classrooms and of the physical image of the teacher, as well as experiences from the life of the classroom.

The community educational systems are clearly and almost unanimously described as playing a significant role in developing ethnic identity. The teachers, both women and men, are described as role models both materially, for example in their clothing, and spiritually, in their language and behaviour. They are portrayed as agents for safeguarding the Circassian legacy.

In contrast to the community educational system, the state school under the Ottoman Empire is described as representing the government. During the British Mandate, the state school played the role of a modernizing agent and created the opportunity for general education, enabling its graduates to continue their studies outside the village. In addition, the state school is portrayed as being a place of care and attention to the student, providing health education. The interviewees presented the state school as ignoring the importance of Circassian ethnicity, although it was treated with respect. Thus, the school did not hesitate to combine the Circassian students with those who were not Circassian and to set the school uniform according to Arab dress rather than from the Circassian clothes' cupboard.

The stories of the interviewees sketched profiles of the desired graduates of the community schools and the state schools. These profiles differ. It becomes clear from their descriptions that there was a gap in gender expectations between male and female graduates of the community system. The differences were expressed in the form of gender construction within a patriarchal society. One example is the fact that Circassian boys were directed to a broader education than were girls both in religious and state education systems. One interviewee remembered that the boys' religious education was different in its depth than the girls'. It can be concluded that there was a clear hierarchy between boys' studies and those of girls. This is in contrast to the memory of one of the women who was interviewed and stated that she had learned a program which was "richer than expected."

During the Mandate period, the state educational system opened its gates to provide a Western education for both boys and girls. However, until 1946-1947, the girls did not take advantage of this opportunity. This is explained by the combination of Circassian societal and patriarchal norms. However, it should be

noted that all Circassian girls were sent to the community school, and were provided with basic education as they were expected to conserve the ethnic Circassian identity. From the stories of the interviewees, it can be seen that education was considered to have great importance as it served as an agent of conserving Circassian identity. The other subjects in school, found at the core educational discourse such as peer interactions, learning achievements, were of secondary importance. Their quantitative weight is smaller and their role in the interviewees' narratives was reduced.