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ETHNO-CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY OF SYRIAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS¹

SARGON GEORGE DONABED & SHAMIRAN MAKO²

Introduction

Many Middle Eastern Christian groups identify or have been identified with pre-Islamic peoples in the Middle East: the Copts with Ancient Egypt, the Nestorians with Assyria, the Maronites with Phoenicians and some *Rum Orthodox* and other Christians with pre-Islamic Arab tribes. The concern of this study is the Syrian Orthodox Christians or Jacobite(s)³ (named after the 6th century Monophysite Christian bishop Yacoub Burd'ono or Jacob Baradaeus of Urfa/Osrohene/Edessa), specifically those whose ancestry stems from the Tur Abdin region of Turkey, Diyarbekir, Mardin, Urfa, and Harput/Elazig.

The introduction of the Ottoman *millet* system had divided the Middle East into ethno-religious communities, the Eastern Christian minorities being a classic example. Of the various groups, the Syrian Orthodox Christians (*Suryaniler*, *Suryani Kadim*, *Asuriler*) are a case in point to identity issues including creation, evolution, fabrication, denial, and assimilation caused by both internal and external influences. The identity of this community is a major point of contention among the laity and the clergy, as well as among non-Syrian Orthodox scholars of Middle Eastern Studies. Thus, this paper is an

¹ The authors would like to dedicate this article to Afram Koumi for his instrumental support and aid with research materials and to the memory of Professor Fuat Deniz of Örebro University, Sweden.

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³ Both terms are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

analysis of contentious identity formation among the Jacobite or Syrian Orthodox Christians, which will analyze the community from three key perspectives: internal lay, internal clergy, and external/academic lay.

Overall, the Syrian Orthodox in Turkey, Syria, and to a lesser extent Iraq, have been identifying (and have identified themselves) with the Assyrians and more recently, the Arameans of antiquity. It is of interest for this work to see how the scholarly community has labelled these Syrian Orthodox Christians over the past century and the influence academia has had over the development of a cohesive identity among the community. Correspondingly, this community will be examined for the first time from three distinct and relevant perspectives: internal lay; internal clergy; external academic and external political. This methodology is crucial in order to delineate and appropriate reasons for identity evolution and propagation. This research will also clarify when these identities took root and if the gradual shift in this communal identity (as expounded by the Church) from the mid 1930s to the present day, was politically motivated, economic, academic, all of the aforementioned, or something else entirely different. Furthermore, it will critically examine the inconsistencies in scholarship in its portrayal and conceptualization of this group's ethnic and cultural dynamics.

Defining Terms and Methods of Observation

Firstly, must all Syrian Orthodox necessarily share the same ethnicity and culture? Certainly not, as is evident by the Indian origin of the members of the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church of Kerala. Thus, we must specify that the Syrian Orthodox Christians discussed in this study are those who hail (in some sense of the word *originally*) from various regions within the confines of Northern Mesopotamia. We will confine our study to those of the Middle East and (later diasporic development in) North America with brief incursions into Europe.⁴ It is imperative to note that there is little reason to begin the study in the ancient world simply because Western concepts of ethnicity, nation, and culture are absolutely foreign to the understandings of those people in those times, and may thus be deemed inadequate as frameworks for analyzing such 'groups of people'.

⁴ For an excellent study on the specific case of Sweden see Deniz, 1999.

It is in the theory of this paper that the Syrian Orthodox Christians have been witness to two ethnogeneses since the 18th century — which may or may not have some historic validity — in terms of western concepts of nationalism. This was firstly the Assyrian ethnogenesis, and more recently an Aramean ethnogenesis. Our research stipulates that the Assyrian ethnogenesis appears, from all fundamental knowledge of the oral and written history and culture of the people themselves, to be a logical redevelopment and reassessment which was retained in the subconscious mind of many Jacobites who, once given a feasible outlet, constructed a more formulated sense of identity based on their Assyrian past. Yet, we must first define our terminology, and then perhaps deconstruct the definitions.

Max Weber, although expressing his frustration with the confining definitions of an ethnic group, referred to the term as,

[T]hose human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for group formation; furthermore it does not matter whether an objective blood relationship exists. (Weber 1978:389)

Thus, for Weber, the focus is on the historic veracity of contemporary identity construction and the ways in which it shaped cohesive identity formation, which reinforces the historic importance attributed by ethnic groups in solidifying their identity and group dynamics. This may or may not be steeped in actual historical fact as mentioned by Weber, and as Ernest Gellner states, “my own view is that some nations possess genuine ancient navels, some have navels invented for them by their own nationalist propaganda, and some are altogether navel-less.” (Spencer *et al*, 2005: 44) Expounding on the idea of ancient navels, though differing in approach from Gellner, this paper stipulates that the identity of Syrian Orthodox Christians is historically path-dependent, and only following a close exploration of this historiography does one come to conceptualize its Assyrian origins.

Conversely, Benedict Anderson’s explanation of what *invention* is as an ‘imagined’ or ‘created’ juxtaposes the birth of nationalism and the basis for, and birth of, group identity formations with European

historical developments. For Anderson, the emergence of nationalism and the solidification of identities is a product of eighteenth-century movements that began in Europe and were later transported to the Americas. In the same vein, nationalism and the notion of 'nation-ness' are cultural artefacts; to understand them, "we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy." (Anderson 1990:13-14) In this sense, Anderson's typology is conducive to the nature of this study since it places great emphasis on the historic elements of nationalism. It is worth noting that nationalism remains a largely contested field, lacking a uniform definition or consensus regarding its core elements. This is perhaps due to the negative notions associated with the term, which have resulted in limited definitions and multiple interpretations. However, nationalism can also be perceived as a movement of people originating from the same or similar geographic origin, sharing a common language, customs/traditions, and history or the awakening of like-minded individual elites.

While Anderson surveys nationalism through the guise of Western history, Anthony Smith asserts that there exists a cultural component to *ethnies*. For Smith, an ethnic group which characterizes an 'ethnie' is defined as "a type of community, with a specific sense of solidarity and honour, and a set of shared symbols and values." (Smith, 1981:65) The pervasiveness of ethnic groups is thus entrenched in the group's rationale of its cohesion, sense of belonging, myths of group origins and liberation, and group uniqueness that links successive generations. Smith stipulates that the 'pre-existing components and long-term continuities of ethnic communities and nations are cultural and symbolic rather than demographic.' (Spencer *et al*, 2005:26) The relevance of Smith's analysis is embedded in its emphasis on the historic development and solidification of ethnicity and nationalism over time, rather than its mere emergence as a 19th century phenomena. For Smith:

Nationalism... has deeper and firmer roots in the distant past: and nations are not simply the inventions of a modern breed of intellectual. National loyalty and national character may not be inborn, and they are certainly historical phenomena; but their modernity, their embeddedness in a specifically recent history, is anchored in an antiquity, a prehistory, of ethnic ties and

sentiments...And while that antiquity does not allow us to treat nationalism, or ethnicity, as something 'natural', it does compel us to frame our enquiry differently, to understand nations as a recent type of political formation utilizing an ethnic base and transforming the style and content of much older, and often dormant, ethnic ties. (Smith, 1981: 85)

Within the framework of the current discussion, this is discernible most visibly in the 'Assyrianism' among the Syrian Orthodox of Harput, Malatya, Diyarbakir, Urfa and Mardin. Being relatively distant from what is considered to be the Assyrian heartland around ancient Nineveh (the Mosul region of today's Iraq), these people developed a symbolic attachment to their ancient past rather than to an immediate visible material one which the people living in the vicinity of Nineveh could do with greater ease. The same can be said for many Jewish communities, distant from Jerusalem or for Pontic and Anatolian Greeks, far from Athens.

Building on the framework developed by Anthony Smith, it is the opinion of this study that the Syrian Orthodox Christians do not constitute an ethnic category but rather an ethnic community (a community which is distinguished by outsiders). However, in the sense of being part of a greater ethnic community, it is apparent that those who consider themselves 'Assyrian' share this in common with others outside of their ecclesiastic sect whereas 'Aramean' is almost solely representative of Syrian Orthodox Christians.⁵ 'Assyrian', in this sense, is both a foundation and an outlet for the creation of a cohesive identity by which secular members (and originally clergy) of the Syrian Orthodox Church identify with. (See Appendix C) Nonetheless, in the case of the Syrian Orthodox, it must be perfectly clear that the invention of its own ethnic group, such as in the case of the former Yugoslavia, is solely based along religious lines. Yet, for those Syrian Orthodox whose lineage is traced to Northern Mesopotamia, it appears to be part of a larger context, at least in the past 200 years. A meticulous exploration of the development of a consolidated group-identity among the Syrian Orthodox must thus contextualize the recent parallel

⁵ Non Jacobite scholars and others in favour of a recently promoted Syriac-Aramean identity have begun promoting a Pan-Arameanist ideology, which follows exactly the development of pan-Assyrianism from within the community itself.

developments of ‘Assyrian’ and ‘Aramean’ of this group’s identity formation and propagation.

It is imperative to note that the study of ethno-national groups and processes of identity development by western concepts of nationalism and ethnicity are necessarily flawed when analyzing non-Western nationalism(s). Accordingly, one cannot dismiss Eastern concepts of identity formation of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. This is most apparent in the Neo-Assyrian period, which successfully saw the formation of an Assyrian (*Aššurayu*) identity from amongst various tribes, clans, city-states, and linguistic groups. Hence, in order to contextualize the identity formation of Syrian Orthodox Christians as an ethnic community, one must internally examine its genesis, principally during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Western Contact

This community’s sense of identity requires surveying the greatest champions of the old Orientalist ideology by looking at the Syrian Orthodox from the pages of 19th and 20th century travellers. A noteworthy example is Horatio Southgate, a 19th century historian in search of Syrian Christians, who discovered that:

At the Armenian village of Arapout, where I stopped for breakfast, I began to make inquiries for the Syrians. The people informed me that there were about one hundred families of them in the town of Kharpout, and a village inhabited by them on the plain. I observed that the Armenians did not know them under the name which I used, *Syriani*; but called them *Assouri*, which struck me more at the moment from its resemblance to our English name *Assyrians*, from whom they claim their origin, being sons, as they say, of Assour, (Asshur,) who ‘out of the land of Shinar went forth, and builded Nineveh, and the city of Rehoboth, and Calah, and Resin between Nineveh and Calah: the same is a great city’. (Southgate 1844:87)

In 1841 Southgate was astounded to find that these “Christian Syrians” were referred to by the Armenians, and even more startlingly, by themselves, as sons of Ashur, or more simply Assyrians. It baffled him and indeed also many “researchers” (many of whom were in actuality British

Secret Service officers) who had made their travels in the Near East.

Now, what differentiated Southgate from other missionaries⁶ of the time and region was the statement “whom they claim their origin, being sons, as they say, of Assour, (Asshur).” Southgate informs us, that the Syrian Orthodox people of Harput termed themselves, the sons of Ashur prior to 1844, before the hypothetical Anglican labelling of the “Nestorians” as “Assyrians”. This was not a label imposed on them, but rather reflective of the group’s internal sense of identity and origin. This strangely non-Orientalist attribute by Southgate of the people and their beliefs makes it of pivotal importance to this study due to its less imposing bias.

Internal Lay⁷

Among the majority of late 19th and early 20th century Syrian Orthodox intellectuals, it is apparent that the predominant affiliation was to the Assyrian identity/ethnicity. Beginning with the general populace of Harput referring to themselves as the “Sons of Asshur” as mentioned above, the earlier recorded identification with the Assyrians of antiquity certainly existed at least to the 1840s, and probably even earlier. Certainly, and at least till the early 1930s, the Syrian Orthodox of Harput, Diarbekir, Urfa and Mardin identified to the *Suryani Kadim* (in Turkish and Arabic) and the *Assori* (in Armenian) as the same “Assyrian” identity that built Nineveh and Assur.

Though it would be impractical to list all the secularist writings among the Syrian Orthodox Christians, a prime example of the divergence in the dialogue between the secularists and clergy especially post 1933 is evident in the exchanges between Farid Nuzha and his Holiness Mar Ignatius Ephrem Barsoum. Nuzha’s ideology is summed up in an article from *Asiria* in 1939, which he wrote in response to a letter received from a Syrian Orthodox writer from Mosul, Iraq.⁸

⁶ This is in reference to Asahael Grant’s initial labelling of Nestorians to be the ‘ten lost tribes of Israel’ (see Grant 1845) or Rev. Wigram’s initial insistence that the Nestorians were not ‘Assyrians’ and later that it was the only logical answer for their historical identity (See Wigram 1929:178) among other writers.

⁷ See Appendix A which lists the most influential modern Jacobite writers and their work in order to give a sense of their own views on the identity of their people.

⁸ It should be noted that this rift arose after the decimation of Nestorian Assyrian villages in the Simele region of Iraq in 1933.

At a time, one of our honourable and ardent writers wrote to the editor of Al Jamia'ah Al Suryaniya (Farid Nuz'ha) saying: wipe off, correct or change the Spanish name of your magazine (Asiria), because this name does not please our country's government since it means (Assyrian - Ashuri). As you are descendent of an honourable Suryani family know by its enthusiasm and clinging to Suryani doctrine... etc, such naming should displease you too and must be disregarded. The editor, (Farid Nuz'ha) smiled with a mockery for such a conclusion with a prayer to God to protect people from such disaster. He said: I would ask the honourable writer, if your right honorable ruler dislikes the Assyrian naming, does your manner and dignity of your nation and church allow you to change them for something different just for the sake of blackness of your prince's eyes and to satisfy him? What will you do if your dictatorial master says to you pull out the cross from your church's door and it is forbidden for the Christian community to ring the bells? What will you reply to him if tomorrow he said to you that Suryani teaching is contradictory to the official education system? You are not expecting such disasters will happen! However, since you submitted to him with subservience and cowardice that will encourage him for immoderation with his oppression and absolutism. Tomorrow he will say to you; Hey you Suryanis ... if you are faithful to your country and government you have to accomplish your faithfulness and obedience by the only way of changing your Suryani language to Arabic, then at that time what you will reply to your government? If Suryani means nothing other than religion or denomination then I truly say we are not in need for it. You, as a "great master, expert and defender of Suryani (language)", must say that Suryani is a nation and ethnicity not a religion and denomination. A religion or faith could be shared by many nations, as it is our status with Copts and Ethiopians, but there is no sharing in ethnicity. If we deprive the ethnicity from our people what will remain to them? I am sure your will say: religion. I say, they can get the same religion from somewhere else, from Egypt and Ethiopia and that what is happening because of your teachings. If we teach our people that (being) Suryani is a real science, a name for our ancient nation and explain its historic nobility, then you will see how they will

adhere to this name and they will be proud of it, no matter what the critical times and deadly conditions are.

How sweet you were when you, full of foolishness and ignorance, said that saying Ashuri means (being) Nestorian by faith! Such view is very far away from reality and all experts and the public condemn such misunderstandings. I am sure you cannot deny the reality of the fact that Suryanis are the same Ashuris, descendents of ancient Chaldeans/Babylonians and I will never accept your protest without convincing and obvious evidence of the invalidity of my opinion. Anyone with minimum knowledge of language and history knows that the word Suryani originated from the Greek term "Assyrian" which is the same name of "Ashuri". Apart from that, everybody knows that Ashuri is not a religious name and if you review documents of the Church history you will find out that our brother Nestorians never recognized themselves by such a name, but rather as Nestorians. If they were recognized by the Ashuri name then they are to be envied, but regrettably I say that their denominational naming is Nestorian not Ashuri.

However, if that naming of Ashuri is referring to those who had rejected merger with or melting in Arabism and resisted the oppressive governments, and as a consequence they suffered murder, persecution, looting and all kinds of injustices & hardships, then that is an exclusive great honour to them. Then future generations will frequently commemorate that martyrdom and will remember these disasters committed by the foes of God and humanity as long as there is a human being on this earth. (Nuzha, pars. 6-8)

This example of this common laity writing points to an obviously 'Assyrian' perspective that appears to transcend religion and church denomination. Yet, as the secular ethno-national movement developed in an obvious direction in Diaspora, and even in the Middle East with the founding of the Assyrian Democratic Organization by Jacobites in Syria in 1957, the Syrian Orthodox Church began to shift its official stance; thus, influencing denominational differences and much later, creating a counter movement to neutralize the impact of secular Assyrians.

Internal Clergy⁹

The Syrian Orthodox/ Jacobite clergy was, paradoxically, both instrumental in advancing secular Assyrianism and later in reducing it by creating a separate ‘Aramean’ or ‘Syrian’ (later Syriac) identity. Perhaps the most significant of those clergy members who made a continual impact on the identity of the Syrian Orthodox Christians was Patriarch Ignatius (Severios) Ephrem Barsoum (1887 Mosul - 1957). Former Bishop Barsoum (along with fellow Jacobite Captain Abraham K. Yousef) was originally part of the Assyrian Delegation to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, which requested a homeland for the Assyrian people. (See official statement in Appendix C) He later became patriarch in 1932, the same year the patriarchal residence was moved to Syria from Deir Za‘afaran in Mardin, Turkey. Following the Simele massacres of 1933, Barsoum took an avid anti-Assyrian stance, which influenced the entire religious mindset of the Syrian Orthodox community. In concert with his push towards a new ‘Syrian’ identity Barsoum began a crusade to eliminate the term ‘Assyrian’ from any Jacobite church or related institution. This adoption of ‘Syrian’ became problematic in the 1940s and 1950s due to the fact that the then-current Antiochian Church referred to itself officially as the Syrian Orthodox Church. Despite much opposition, Barsoum incited a legal battle to successfully commandeer the ‘Syrian Orthodox’ name from the Antiochians. However, members of St. Mary’s Assyrian Apostolic Church in Worcester, Massachusetts and the Assyrian Apostolic Church of the Virgin Mary in Paramus, New Jersey (USA) refused to comply with the identity change. They succeeded in keeping the Assyrian name by registering their parishes independent of the main church under a trustee group. Archbishop Mor Cyril Aphrim Karim later succeed in removing the name ‘Assyrian’ from St Mary’s Church in Worcester, but Paramus yet retains its original appellation. To justify the name change for other diocese, Patriarch Ephrem Barsoum published a pamphlet in 1952 entitled, ‘The Syrian Church of Antioch in Name and History’ where he rejected the term ‘Assyrian’ in reference to the Syrian Orthodox Church and its members, the term

⁹ See the list in Appendix B in reference to individuals influential in the development, propagation, and dissolution of ethno-religious and ethno-cultural ideas within a highly church-based Jacobite identity group.

which he so adamantly utilized and defended at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. (The cover is illustrated in Appendix C)

Relatedly, Bishop Mor Polycarpus Eugene (Edip) Aydin of Gundukshukro or Qritho d'ito ('village of the church'), Tur Abdin, the current Syrian Orthodox bishop of the Netherlands, completed his MA thesis in 2000 entitled *The History of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch in North America: Challenges and Opportunities*. The work was an attempt at showing the development of the Syrian Orthodox/Jacobite identity in the United States. Aydin acknowledges the early Jacobite (though he uses the term 'Syriac') immigrants to the United States utilized the English word 'Assyrian' to define themselves, their church, and their language. It was also part of the official church name, Assyrian Apostolic Church of Antioch.¹⁰ (Aydin 2000:10) Thus, there is little doubt that the early settlers to the United States used the name 'Assyrian' unabatedly across the board as an inclusive term of the varying ecclesiastical denominations of the Assyrian people. Simultaneously, Aydin further contends that in official church documents the Archbishop Yeshu Samuel used the term 'Assyrian' to address his archdiocese, and as the official name of the church. This is also evident in the language of the Jacobite church where the terms *Suryoye* and *Othuroye* (continuing today) were used interchangeably denoting Assyrian.

What is striking about Aydin's work is his mention of the two possible reasons why the Syrian Orthodox 'adopted the term Assyrian' in reference to their ethnic identity. Firstly, he contends that it may be a case of the Syrian Orthodox wanting to identify themselves with Nestorian (Church of the East) Assyrian nationalists for political or ideological reasons. Secondly, that they wished to avoid the term 'Syrian' because of its misleading reference to the modern country of Syria. What is unsure is whether or not Aydin states that the 'correct' title of the church was 'Syrian' or if he is solely stating the position of Archbishop Samuel and the church in the United States at that time.

For this case Aydin's arguments for the adoption of the term 'Assyrian' among early Jacobite immigrants to the West, are important for identity retention and invention. Was this a case of Jacobites

¹⁰ See also Donabed and Donabed 2006: 53 for a copy of 1930 United States census where early Jacobite immigrants referred to their place of birth as "Assyria." This is the case in previous census accounts as well.

aligning themselves with the Nestorians, considered to be ‘the Assyrians’ or *Othurōyō* by Aydin, for political and/or ideological reasons? Certainly they shared a common ideology, but ‘Assyrianism’ developed independently among Jacobites and Nestorians, and following all rhetoric to the contrary, apparently began earlier among the Jacobites’ prior to the so-called labelling of the Nestorians by Protestant missionaries.¹¹ Also it seems obvious that the terms *Suryani Qadim*, *Suryani*, *Assori*, *Suryōyō* and *Othurōyō* were used interchangeably by the community (secular and religious) in reference to a continuous ‘Assyrian’ self-identity. Furthermore, it seems improbable that the Jacobites would desire to ally themselves with some foreign ‘Assyrian’ element (if indeed Aydin and other arguments are to be accepted) for political reasons, when the Assyrians had no political clout. The more predominant tendency of societies is to follow the path of least resistance and not the path to most persecution. Thus, there was no political benefit in the Syrian Orthodox Church and laity in identifying themselves as Assyrians in the 18th to the early 20th century, but, there was certainly, following the Simele massacre, a political reason to distance themselves (as the church did) from the Assyrian identity.

Secondly, the argument relating to the adoption of the ‘Assyrian’ appellation solely for the purposes of distancing themselves [Jacobites] from the state of Syria appears ill-founded since the Arab kingdom of Syria was established in 1920 and the actual state of Syria in 1946. According to Southgate’s visit, the Jacobites of Harput referred to themselves as Assori/ sons of Ashur in the early 1840s, thus negating the second possible reasoning of Aydin. In fact every reference prior to 1920 of the Jacobites referring to themselves as Assyrian in the Middle East or Diaspora negates this second theory.

External Academic: Aramean, Assyrian, Syriac, Syrian

Early travel literature provides a first glimpse of these people through a western lens. Pietro della Valle (1586–1652) was an Italian

¹¹ The ‘Nestorian’ labelling assumption is also incorrect. What is understandably difficult to realize is that the English minister Rev. Wigram and even Rev. Asahel Grant, who at the time was convinced he had discovered the lost tribes of Israel upon encountering the Nestorians.

traveller in Asia; his wife named Maani, was a native of Mardin. What is noteworthy are the two distinct ways she is identified: “When his Assyrian wife, Sitti Maani, died in Persia, he had her embalmed and carried the body with him for 4 years, finally burying her in the Aracoeli church in Rome.” (Pietro della Valle, par. 2) The New Advent Catholic Encyclopaedia, on the other hand, refers to her as a Syrian Christian. (Pietro della Valle, par. 1) In most cases it appears Assyrian and Syrian are interchangeable, yet, the modern usage of the term Syrian makes the usage ‘Syrian Christian’ both confusing and misleading.

A trend has become more prevalent in modern scholarship to dismiss the ‘Assyrian’ claim. Much of this finds its strongest proponents within the field of Syriac Studies. The major three volume work complete with video entitled *The Hidden Pearl: The Syrian Orthodox Church and its Aramaic Heritage* spoke from a unequivocally ‘Aramean’ perspective by the authors, in tandem with the current position on the church hierarchy. The following is a reference to the self-identity of some Syrian Orthodox Christians marked under a subheading ‘A Tiresome Issue’:

In passing it should be mentioned that some have regrettably preferred to take on the name ‘Assyrian’ which, in the course of the last 200 years or so, has been widely adopted within the Church of the East and is now part of the official title of one of the two patriarchal lines of that church. This has actually given rise to a great deal of further confusion, quite apart from its inappropriateness, in that its use ignores the rich and varied ancient Aramaic heritage to which all the Syriac Churches are legitimately the prime heirs. The alleged ethnic identity with the ancient Assyrians is in fact a recent creation, which has taken place in the course of the last century and a half, and it lacks any sound historical basis. Where earlier Syriac writers used the term Athoraya/o of themselves, this is simply a geographical term, indicating that they come from Mosul/Athur. (Brock, Taylor, and Witakowski 2001:123)

The statement ‘its use ignores the rich and varied ancient Aramaic heritage’—assumes that modern Assyrianism (and in fact ancient Assyrian culture) does not have an ‘Aramaic’ component. The

terms used such as “confusion” “inappropriateness” and “alleged” are all clearly indicative of a predisposition, while the blanket statement “lacks any historical basis” is simply inaccurate. The identical usage of the terms *Suryaya* and *Athoraya* as meaning ‘Assyrian’ by the people in question would appear to alleviate this issue. Yet this is also rejected by some scholars (including the above citation) in any case (ancient or modern) when the term ‘Assyrian’ is used by Syrian Orthodox Christians.¹² The language used is reflective of a position based on selective observation or by demanding impossible perfection as in the case of *Athoraya* being simply a “geographical term.” Again, there is a clear inclination to diverge from Ockham’s razor as in every case where ‘Assyrian’ is used in literature from the fall of the Assyrian Empire to the present day, it is (usually) categorically rejected by historians.¹³

It may be of importance to note that following the war a delegation naming itself the ‘Assyrian delegation’ made up of Jacobites (including then Archbishop Severius Afrem Barsoum), Nestorians, and Chaldeans attended the conference in Paris 1919 in order to further desires for an ‘Assyrian’ homeland. (Donabed and Donabed 2006:104) The following excerpt describing the victims of genocide in Anatolia in the early part of the twentieth century is the zenith of an evident partiality:

Although the total of those killed is not nearly so high as the one and a half million or more Armenians massacred, if it is set alongside that the total number of Syrian Orthodox in the Orthodox Church lost well over one third of its members in the Middle East. Very large numbers of men women and children belonging to the Chaldean Church and the Church of the East likewise perished in the course of massacres in eastern Turkey and the Urmi region. The brutality of the killing was often horrific, resembling that of the ancient Assyrians on their

¹² It is sometimes also done in the case of the Nestorians and their Assyrian identity as illustrated by Mark Levene’s comments below.

¹³ Ockham’s razor is a principle attributed to the 14th-century philosopher and Franciscan friar William of Ockham. The principle is often expressed in Latin as the *lex parsimoniae* or the “law/principle of parsimony” *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*, “entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity.” It states that the explanation of any phenomenon should make as few assumptions as possible. In other words, the simplest answer is usually the best.

campaigns against the Aramean population in the very same region some 27 centuries earlier. (Brock, Taylor, and Witakowski 2001:68)

J.F. Coakley's work *The Church of the East and the Church of England* predominantly discusses the Assyrian appellation in relation to the Church of the East or Nestorians. Yet in order to discuss the identity conundrum in detail he mentions the Jacobite element as well while reproaching the Assyrian identity as a 'bogus ethnology'[sic] in the following quotation:

I refer here to the link created between modern "Assyrians" and the ancient Assyrians of Nineveh known to readers of the Old Testament. In modern times, Syrian children have been named 'Sargon', 'Nebuchadnezzar', etc.; the winged lions of Nineveh have appeared as national symbols; and, in short, the name is now inseparable from a whole bogus ethnology [sic]. (Coakley 1992:366, note 12)

Coakley postulates the "link created" as an inconceivable proposal yet with few historical examples to support his case. If the 'bogus ethnology' argument is perceived as a traditional case of burden of proof then it would be assumed it would be filtered into research concerning all ethnic groups throughout the globe (i.e. the ancient/modern Greeks, Jews, Turks, Arabs etc.) In the case of the Italian identification with ancient Rome, the modern Greek with the lineage of Aristotle, or the Jewish with the line of David, such defining "created links" seem to be easily understood.

It is possible that the negative interpretation concerning the "Assyrian" ancestry of the Syrian (Orthodox) Christians made by researchers is connected to either a personal ideological conflict or perhaps varying political agendas. In fact it would be logical to imagine that the Syrian Orthodox claim of descent from any ancient people would be looked upon with similar doubt and disbelief. Yet this is not the case as illustrated below:

Few historians of the Christian East are aware of Tur Abdin, that remote plateau around Midyat in southeastern Turkey, where the Syriac liturgy is still preformed in ancient churches by a

dwindling enclave of Aramean villagers and monks. (Palmer 1990: xiii)

Of particular interest to this study is the uncritical postulation that these people are the Arameans of antiquity with no questioning of the historical veracity of the claim. In this case it appears scholarship has chosen to have a general consensus of acceptance regarding the recent hypothesis that the modern speakers of “Aramaic” are the ancient Arameans.

Such a trend is not only part of biblical and early Christian studies but also modern political studies, human rights, and genocide studies:

First, however, a few more words about the people themselves, including an apology, given that the term ‘Assyrian’ is just plain wrong, owing everything to nineteenth-century western orientalism and nothing to the community it purports to describe. The correct appellation, at least the one the people in question themselves traditionally used, is ‘Suraya’, i.e. Syrians. (Levene 1999:8)

Though he regularly uses the term ‘Assyrian’ Levene’s apology follows suit with most modern literature. In the case of academics who use ‘Assyrian’ in reference to these Syrian Orthodox/ Jacobite Christians (and sometimes the Nestorians and Chaldeans as well), there still appears to be a personal interest in the people and their culture.

The Assyrians have been variously described as a people of ‘uncertain racial origin’, and as ‘a Christian element of a most ancient and illustrious tradition,’ ‘the spiritual descendants of the pioneer missionaries of the East,’ who maintained their separate religious identity throughout centuries by ‘a resolute adherence’ to their faith. They have also been described as a ‘Semitic people’ or a people with racial affinities with the ancient Turks. Atatürk described them as ‘a scion of the Hittite Turks.’ The Assyrians themselves claim to be ‘the most God-fearing and peace loving people on earth’, ‘the descendants of the ancient Assyrians’. Heazell and Margoliouth, however, observe that they ‘probably compare favourably with anybody of Western Christians in

morals, with the exception of certain, special defects, of which the most prominent are jealousy of each other, and quarrelsomeness - universal faults amongst the Eastern Christian'. (Sonyel 2001:1)

In the following pages, Sonyel examines the “cruelty” of ancient Assyrians and cites an issue of the *Watchtower*, a Jehovah’s Witness’s semi-monthly magazine, entitled “Cruel Assyria” as proof of their barbarous past. Yet with Sonyel, some motives illustrative of the aversion to the historical Assyrian claim become apparent:

A number of Assyrians, particularly a few extremists, who have emigrated to West Europe and North America from Turkey, mainly for economic reasons, have indulged in propaganda, spreading rumours intermittently that they were compelled to leave their homeland because they were oppressed by the Turkish authorities. They also draw parallels between themselves and the Armenians of Turkey, and claim that they have shared the same fate with them. Apparently some of these extremists are cooperating with numerous secessionist and terrorist organisations whose aim is to destabilise and dismember Turkey. They are supported and aided in this venture by some Turcophobe organisations. In this book I shall try to relate the history of the Assyrians in Turkey, particularly since the foundation of the Ottoman Empire, in the light of archival sources, in order to bring to light the actual relationship between them and the Turks. The reader will then be in a better position to judge whether the above accusations levelled against Turkey and the Turkish people are true or false. (Sonyel 2001: Preface)

Some may consider this issue as a fallacy of extension in that the ideas of the author are reflective of a position of some Assyrians to have recognition of their identity and cultural rights in the modern Turkish state and for the acknowledgement of what is considered by more recent scholarship as genocidal acts against its populace.¹⁴

¹⁴ For the complete Resolution, visit: http://genocidescholars.org/images/PRelease_16_Dec07IAGS_Officially_Recognizes_Assyrian_Greek_Genocides.pdf. For supporting documentation for the Resolution, see http://www.genocidetext.net/iags_resolution_supporting_documentation.htm.

Linguistic

Perhaps the largest issue is the appellation in the linguistic sense, or questions surrounding the various appellations with which these Syrian Orthodox Christians have been identified and have identified themselves. Part of the dispute stems from the translation and indeed meaning and significance of such terms. Firstly, the historical literary term by which they refer to themselves in their own language and since the 1960s used more frequently in everyday speech: *Sūryōyō* and *Sūrōyō* as identifiers of a “people”. Following are the terms from foreign languages including *Suryani* in Arabic, *Suryani Kadim* and *Asurlier* in Turkish, and *Assori* in Armenian. There are also the self-identifications *Othūrōyō*, and *Oromōyō* which have today become synonymous with defining oneself with either being “Assyrian” or “Aramean”, respectively. The discussion over the precise translation of *Sūryōyō* or *Sūrōyō* is the crux of the matter.

Wolfgang Heinrichs states in footnote 102 that *Sūryāyā* / *Sūryōyō* becomes *Sūrāyā* / *Sūrōyō* due to haplology; the elimination of a syllable when two consecutive identical or similar syllables occur. Heinrichs argues further that in the spoken tongue of the people of Tur Abdin, *Sūrōyō* retained the meaning “Christian” while *Sūryōyō* meant “Syrian”. This is definitely not the case since the people of Tur Abdin used simply the terms *Sūrōyō* and *Sūrayt* for people and language respectively until approximately twenty years ago. In fact in a conversation with a Jacobite man of the village of Midin in Tur Abdin, Turkey he was confused as to how they had come to use *Sūryōyō* for both people and language.

Heinrichs, on the other hand, continues to assert that the true “Syrian” designation for Assyrian is *Othūrōyō*.¹⁵ However, whenever the term *Othūrōyō*/*Athūrāyā* is used in Syriac sources or by the Syrian Orthodox Church, it is dismissed as being an identifier for a person from Mosul, Iraq. (Brock 1982: 16-17) This inclination is common within academia and can be seen early in the historical record with discussions on Tatian and Lucian of Samosata (self-identified Assyrians or as one who comes from the land of the Assyrians). (Miller

¹⁵ In many dialects of modern Sureth/Surayt, the consonants T, TH, SH, and S are used interchangeably in many words as well as the addition of a prosthetic aleph in certain words, and the dropping of the initial aleph in others.

1993:227) Conveniently, in almost all cases, any mention of ‘Assyrian’ after the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C. has been interpreted by scholars as a ‘mistake’ or ‘geographical confusion’ but not in actuality meaning ‘Assyrian’ in the sense of a distinct identity and culture descending from ancient Assyria.

Heinrichs accepts Noldeke’s hypothesis which states that when the name *Sūryāyā* is followed back in history it is largely the

...result of an earlier renaming of the people. With the adoption of Christianity in the second century the old inherited self-designation Aramean “Arameans” was superseded by the term Suryaye derived from the Greek Syrios (or Syros). This was done because the name Aramean, following the Jewish usage, in which “Aramean” had come to mean “pagan”, had been used in the Syriac translation of the New Testament to render the word Hellen (Greek) which likewise meant “pagan”. (Heinrichs 1993:103)

It appears if we are to once again employ Ockham’s razor then the jump from Syrios/Syros in Greek to Assyrios (Assyria) is a logical progression, especially since the history of the interchangeability of the words was prevalent in the Luvian (Neo-Hittite) language much earlier.¹⁶ The leap from Syrios/Syros to Aramean (as reflective of the Septuagint) is linguistically, less probable yet from recent research, more readily promoted by scholarship.

Conversely, Assyriologist Simo Parpola has taken a different approach to the claim of an Assyrian descent for current Syrian Orthodox Christians. In the discussion of the term *Sūryōyō* he states:

In this context it is important to draw attention to the fact that the Aramaic-speaking peoples of the Near East have since ancient times identified themselves as Assyrians and still continue to do so. The self-designations of modern Syriacs and Assyrians, *Sūryōyō*¹⁷ and *Sūrāyā*, are both derived from the ancient Assyrian word for “Assyrian”, *Aššūrāyu*, as can be easily established from a

¹⁶ The reference here is to the recent article by Rollinger 2006:284-287.

¹⁷ It is perhaps worthy to make a simple note here that the people of the Tur Abdin region called themselves *Sūrōyō*/*Sūrōyē* in their spoken tongue until perhaps 20 years ago. Most Edessen or classical Syriac sources employ *Sūryōyō*/*Sūryōyē*. This appears to be nothing more than a dialectal anomaly.

closer look at the relevant words...The word *Aššūrāyu*, “Assyrian”, thus also had a variant *Sūrāyu* in late Assyrian times. (Parpola 2008:11)

This linguistic discussion by Parpola follows both a historical trend in Assyria as well as the logical expression of the quandary. Despite this and other examples, the translation problem has persisted both in scholarship and within the community itself.

Probable Reasons for the Identity Crisis

Geographic-Linguistic Definitions

Without a doubt, the Assyrian identity is the only contested ethnic claim made by members of the Syrian Orthodox community.¹⁸ It is probable that the use of the Aramaic language (and not the Akkadian as used by the ancient Assyrians, Babylonians and others) is part of this debate. If we use the Parpola paradigm, that “this was not the language spoken by ethnic Arameans but a creation of the [Assyrian] Empire” (Parpola: 9), then the point is moot. Aramaic was essentially today’s English and therefore using language solely as the determinative of ethnicity is both insufficient and inadequate in the case of Indians, Scots, Irish, Welsh, Cornish, South Africans, First Nations/Aboriginals and many others.

Accordingly, the geographic issue follows a similar pattern. Since the term “Syria” is part of the confusion it may be prudent to acknowledge two types of “Syrians” — those east of the Euphrates and those West of the Euphrates. By the third century B.C. the population of the Roman province of Syria west of the Euphrates consisted of not only the Arameans but also of Greeks, Romans, Canaanites, Arabs, and Assyrians. Michael the Great, the 12th century patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox/Jacobites, acknowledges that both Arameans and Assyrians were known as *Sūryōyē* but distinguishes between the two by writing those who lived “in the east of Euphrates, going to Persia, had many kings from Assyria and Babylon and Urhay.” (Chabot 1963:750)

¹⁸ This includes using terms such as Kurdish Christians, Turkish Christians, Turko-Semites, Arab Christians, Persian Christians among others.

Religiosity and Ahistoricism

There is also the issue of the religiosity as remarked upon by Wolfhart Heinrichs (1993).

Obviously, in saying this, the presumption is that we are indeed dealing here with a revivification rather than a continuous tradition of the name. The latter is what many Modern Assyrians would prefer to believe; however, there is no evidence that their forbearers in pre-modern times called themselves “Assyrians” in the sense of claiming descent from the ancient people of that name. And it is *a priori* unlikely that they would, seeing that the ancient Assyrians do not have good press in the Bible. (Heinrichs 1993:99)¹⁹

Thus, part of the problem may also stem from the certain ‘bad press’ the ancient Assyrians have in the Bible. This is consistent with many modern ‘Biblically-oriented peoples’ (of all manners of education) attitude towards Assyrians today. This issue, as Michael Mann points out, was due to the fact that “the Assyrians made the mistake of mistreating the Jews, whose chronicles became the sacred texts of the world’s biggest religions.” (Mann 2005:40) It is probable that many scholars within the field of Biblical Studies and Eastern Christianity are unwilling to hear today’s ‘Syrian Christians’ identifying themselves with the ‘ruthless’ and ‘barbaric’ Assyrians of the Old Testament and are therefore ‘dutifully’ correcting a grievous injustice to an obviously pious people.

Assumptions and Partiality

Since most modern scholarship on the Jacobites has built on previous scholarship it made postulations based on incomplete data in relation to the historical record. As with the above statement by Heinrichs, the following Coakley quotations are illustrative of one another.

The first currency of ‘Assyrian’ may be traced to the years just

¹⁹ The blanket statement by Heinrichs neglects numerous commentaries in Syriac sources of the authors claiming to descend from the ancient Assyrians. The Southgate testimony is also illustrative of this assumption.

before the First World War when a name was sought by secular minded Syrians to denote their ‘nation’ – that is, the ethnic group represented historically by the Church of the East but also including members of other churches, Catholic and Protestant, and of none. After 1918 ‘Assyrian’ practically ousted ‘Syrian’ (which anyhow being pre-empted by a different and territorial meaning), and so the semantic state of affairs remains today. I have had to recognize the fact in the last chapter dealing with this period, even though the adoption of the name ‘Assyrian’ has been, in my opinion, unfortunate in some respects. (Coakley 1992: 5-6)

When studied further, according to Horatio Southgate and his travels among the Syrian Orthodox, this was not the case. These Jacobites (not Nestorians) used the term Assyrian as in “sons of Asshur” in mid-19th century eastern Anatolia. Interestingly Coakley declares his distain for the adoption of the name Assyrian by the Nestorians, which alludes to a more personal issue with the term rather than a strict scientific concern. He continues further by stating:

Occasionally ‘Assyrian’ is used in an extended sense, which includes those whose origin is in the West Syrian churches. This usage may go back to the influential Syrian-American writer D.B. Perley, though now it seems to appear most commonly on the continent of Europe. Perley made the claim that all Syrian Christians East and West have the same ethnic; but no one, I think, has pursued this argument. The name now is simply the coinage of nationalists who wish to make common cause for practical reasons. The Syrian Orthodox are understandably divided on whether they wish to be numbered among ‘Assyrians’. (Coakley 1992: 366, note 11)

Interestingly, David Barsum Perley is referred to as a Syrian-American writer, something Perley himself never employed in his writings, being neither from the country of Syria, nor believing that ‘Syrian’ was a proper appellation for his ethnic heritage. Furthermore, Coakley assumes that this argument of a pan-Assyrian identity was not furthered by other ‘Assyrians’, and certainly not outside of Europe. Yet the arguments unsuitability is evident by observation of the workings of the Assyrian Democratic Organization (*ADO-Mtakasto*) established

in 1957 by Jacobites in Qamishli, Syria. To the current day, the organization holds to the unwritten rule that in order to approach the upper echelons of representation a member must fluently speak both dialects (usually termed *madenḥoyo/madenḥaya* and *ma'erboyo/ma'erbaya* (Eastern i.e. Nestorian, and Western i.e. Jacobite, respectively)).²⁰ Furthermore, Jacobites, though forming the majority of its representation due to geographic proximity (i.e. Syrian Jazirah) and as the founding fathers, are by no means its only members.

Accordingly, the constitution and bylaws of the Harpoot Assyrian United Association of America (HAUAA) Article V: Membership, Section 1, reads as follows: "Membership in this corporation shall be restricted to Assyrian Jacobites, born in Harpoot, Turkey, or in the vicinity thereof. Other Assyrians may be accepted but as honorary members without any rights."²¹ Thus, it must be stated that David Perley was certainly not the only person promoting what Coakley proposed as 'a common ethnic origin of both East and West Syrians' and nor was this philosophy that of 'nationalists who wish to make cause for practical reasons' as certainly the HAUAA's objective lacked a single phrase of any Assyrian nationalist thought or aspiration besides an attempt to promote fraternity among its members.²²

Political Influence

Since the Jacobite church's patriarchal see was moved from Deir Za'afaran in Turkey to Homs, Syria in 1932 and later Damascus, the identification with 'Syria' became the official stance of the church. The trend to begin the distancing from the term 'Assyrian', which occurred as the world witnessed the massacre of Nestorian Assyrians (many of whom were former British Levy officers and troops) in Simele in Northern Iraq, is obvious. This moment is pivotal in our understanding of the various Middle East governments' effect on ethnic groups, as especially exemplified by the identity of the Chaldean Catholics, and in our case, the Syrian Orthodox. The concerted efforts by various Arab governments to diminish ethnic pluralism in the Middle East through

²⁰ Interview, Ninos Aho, Chicago, November 2007.

²¹ See bylaws of the Harpoot Assyrian United Association of America, Worcester, Massachusetts, 1927:3-4.

²² Bylaws of the Harpoot Assyrian United Association of America, Worcester, Massachusetts, 1927:1.

successive policies of arabization, as exemplified by the Ba’athist regimes in Syria and Iraq, are both causal and contributory factors in the hardening of otherwise ecclesiastical designations, namely “Chaldean” and “Syriac”.

Following the tragic events of 1933 (which became known internationally as the ‘Assyrian Incident’) many armed Nestorian Assyrians moved into French-controlled Syria to settle in the Khabur region in some 35 villages between Al Hassake and Al Qamishli. It must be kept in mind that these Assyrians were part of fighting battalions and were considered separatists by the Iraqis and thus a sense of fear was assumed by the Syrian authorities. In addition, alarm over a possible confrontation due to escalating fears by the Syrian authorities over these ‘Assyrian fighters’ affected the newly established Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate in Syria, especially since the Nestorian settlement was centred in the same geographical region (the Syrian Jazirah) as the Jacobite one. Thus, we see the beginnings of a trend to completely disassociate the Syrian Orthodox from the Assyrian identity shared by the newly arrived Nestorians.

The Syrian Nationalist Socialist Party (*Qawmi Sūri*), along with the Ba’ath regime (both started by Christians) have influenced and indeed propagated the identity crisis within the Syrian Orthodox Christian community as well. This ideology left little to no room for the acceptance of ethnic pluralism in the region, evidenced by its ideological drive for the homogenization of an otherwise ethnically heterogeneous region. The Syrian Orthodox community of Urfa in Turkey attempted to assimilate within the larger Syrian society:

Their political attitudes were reflected in the Syriac names of their youth groups. For example *Ninawa* (‘Nineveh’) and *Aryo* (‘Lion’), in commemoration of the Assyrian Empire, whilst *Lahmat* [*sic*]²³ *Lishono* (‘Friends or Lover of the language’) and ‘Ito Lishono [*sic*]²⁴ (‘the church language’) celebrated their Syrian Christian past. Syrian Christians tried to use Syriac, their liturgical language, both as a marker of their unity with Syrian culture and as a means of validating their Syrian origins. This is a process of cultural enactment through which they demonstrate

²³ *Rahmat*

²⁴ Probably originally *Lishono d ‘ito*.

that Syriac is a remnant of the ancient language of Syria. Indeed, it was even a *lingua franca* of both Syria and Mesopotamia at the time of the Assyrian Empire. (Sato 2005: 325-26)

The early Jacobite immigrants from Urfa to Syria identified with an Assyrian heritage, which was brought with them from Urfa in Turkey. The overwhelming adoption of Syrian nationalism forced an underlying or perhaps subconscious Assyrianism to be gradually replaced by Syrian, Syriac, and Arameanism which could easily be linked to the newly-formed country of Syria, “in the case of the Urfali, they tried to establish their rights by adopting the dominant political discourse of Syrian nationalism,” where Assyrian was still more associated with Iraq (and by extension the Nestorian Assyrians who were seen as a foreign element). (Sato 2005: 327)

It is imperative to note that such associations are not lost to the researcher simply because the later development of Arameanism (as obviously linked to ancient Syria) is directly a result of these governmental pressures and influences. It stood logically as follows: If Syriac is the ancient language of Syria, and Syriac is Aramaic, and Aramaic is the language of the ancient Arameans who lived in ancient Syria, then the people who speak Syriac must, therefore, be Aramean and the ‘true’ Syrians. Thus, the secular among the Jacobites were given a plausible way to express their ideas while remaining a non-threat to a newly formed government. In a sense, it allowed them to be ‘more Syrian than the Syrians’.

Conclusion

The current trend among Syrian Orthodox Christians appears divided along the lines of Aramean and Assyrian, with Aramean having a foothold due in part to the intertwined academic and church trend to identify ‘Syrian/Syriac’ people, culture, church, language, and so forth, with the Arameans of antiquity. More often the terms ‘Syrian’ and ‘Syriac’ are respectively used for the people, culture, and language by the church; a phenomena coincidentally echoed and propagated in academia. However, since the year 2000, more scholars and church officials have begun using the term Syriac in identifying the people and culture as well as the language. Most churches in the United States have also begun using ‘Syriac’ rather than ‘Syrian’. Though this trend has

gained momentum, there remains a subtle Aramean element, which seems to appease those members of the church who continue to remain reticent of the Assyrian identity, but wish to express themselves ethnically as Arameans. This is illustrated by a majority of church-related websites containing the following quote:

The Syriac Orthodox Church is one of the most ancient Christian Churches tracing its roots to the Church of Antioch. The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch (Acts of the Apostles 11:26, 14:26). It is the first Church, which was established in Jerusalem out of the Apostles, Preachers and other converted Jews, and was grafted in Antioch by those who were converted from among the Arameans and other gentile elements.²⁵

A recent phenomenon has also been the emphasis on the three volume work *The Hidden Pearl*, discussed earlier, for being the best source of history on the Syrian Orthodox Christians. It is promoted ceaselessly by the Church at all venues, furthering the propagation of an emerging Aramean identity, as echoed by a select group of scholars.

The question remains, can the discussed group of people be considered Syrian or Syriac or Syriac-speaking for that matter based on their linguistic orientation alone? What is it that makes a Syrian/Syriac: language, geographical place of origin, church affiliation? Can people be considered ‘Syriac-speaking’ if they do not speak Syriac? Harput, Diyarbekir (with the exception of some surrounding villages), Mardin, Urfa – not one of these early immigrants from these regions spoke “Syriac” but expressed their Assyrian identity through various civic institutions created in the United States during their early immigration in the 1920s and onward. This is indicative of the fact that they cannot

²⁵ See the following: Archdiocese for the Western US <http://www.soc-wus.org/ourchurch/introduction.html>, <http://www.syrianorthodoxchurch.net/Location/Global/SOC-index-Global-en.htm> and also at one time existed on www.syrianorthodoxchurch.org and <http://sor.cua.edu/>. See also Rev. A.G. Doumato’s pamphlet, *The Syrian Orthodox Church Yesterday and Today*, (1974), p. 6, “The Syrian Orthodox Church finds its origin in the ancient nation of Aram. The Land of Aram consisted of what is today known as Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and its boundaries extended to the Persian Gulf on the East and the Mediterranean on the west.” Language very reminiscent of modern Syrian Arab nationalists claims on the entirety of *Bilad esh-Sham*.

be labelled ‘Syriac’ or ‘Syriac-speaking’ although their ecclesiastic and linguistic attributes may have belonged to such designations. Many even left the Syrian Orthodox Church during the 1960s, when the name ‘Assyrian’ was replaced by ‘Syrian’ on all churches within the United States. Are they then still ‘Syrian’ if they are no longer Syrian Orthodox?

According to the ‘Aramean’ element, can one be ‘Aramean’ and not Syrian Orthodox? For the most part, the consensus is no. Syrian Orthodoxy and the ‘Aramaic/Syriac’ language are necessities. As for the Assyrian element, can one be an Assyrian but not Syrian Orthodox? The answer is overwhelmingly yes. We have seen a type of ‘Assyrianism’ from both lay and religious elites within the Syrian Orthodox community, which is shared by members of the Chaldean Church, Church of the East, and indeed among some Yezidis²⁶, Mhalmoye²⁷, and other individuals from Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.

This further begs the question, what impact does the vernacular have on group identity formation and continuation? Although language has become a primarily marker of social communication and cohesion amongst communities, it nonetheless fails to contextualize the role of other, more powerful markers of ethnic ties. As stipulated by Smith, the effects of language as a group indicator must be examined in relation to its historical unity among the population in question, and the historic formation of that community overtime. (Smith 1981:51) Essentially, analyzing the development of these people solely through the lens of two monolithic rubrics, namely, religious sect and linguistic identity, is flawed due to the lack of examination of the profound and numerous elements that are a point of similarity rather than a point of differentiation. In other words, to see the “Syrian Orthodox Christians/Jacobites” as separate from the “Chaldean” and “Nestorian” elements of this “people” is not completely justified since the commonalities outside of ecclesiastical and dialectical attributes,

²⁶ See Leroy 1963:195. See also the statement of Prince Anwar Mu’awiya al-Umawi <http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=57428>, and, Ainsworth 1861. See Werda 1924:198-202.

²⁷ Though not much is known of these people, the general conjecture is that the Mhalmoye were converts to Islam from Syrian Orthodoxy in the sixteenth century and now speak Arabic. This is based on oral traditions, including our own research. We have met a few ‘Mhalmoye’ both in Turkey and in North America who identify themselves as Assyrians.

primarily those relating to customs, folklore, and cultural traditions supplant the two aforementioned identifiers. While some development was certainly independent of one another — as much as was the *Harpulli* development from the Tur Abdin development within the Jacobite rite — the ties which bind the transformation of these peoples into their current identity group(s) are grounded in the same or similar historical process.

It seems incongruous to attribute ethnic identities based solely on one of or both of these cultural composites. They must be looked at from not only a socio-cultural lens, but from its historic relevance and development. Along with those people, which share linguistic and religious affiliation, they also share a geographic, historic, mythic, and cultural heritage. In other words, to look at the development of identity structures of Jacobites from Northern Mesopotamia without linking them to other surrounding groups is speculative, at best.

This paper has stipulated that the Syrian Orthodox community, as an ethnic community, in ‘Smithian’ terms, has had a greater historic attachment to an Assyrian identity formation from all elements, namely, internal lay, internal clergy, and external/academic lay. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the identity and ethnic conundrum that exists within the Syrian Orthodox Community is longstanding. It may be of import to note that this Assyrian-Aramean dichotomy within the Syrian Orthodox Christians of Northern Mesopotamia (both in the Middle East and Diaspora) is a continuing issue.

Though we attempted to find Aramean nationalist writings from among the laity, we could not find mention of anything until much later than even the clerical attempt at distancing itself from the Assyrian identity, which was clear after the events at Simele in 1933. It is not until the late 1960s and 1970s that a clear Aramean identity is unmistakably being promoted by social and cultural groups (though originally attached to the church). Relatedly, in almost all cases the establishment of Aramean/Syrianska ‘clubs’ in Sweden were originally composed of former members of Assyrian/Assyriska clubs.²⁸ In fact it is arguable that the entire Aramean movement in Europe is most likely

²⁸ This is a simple matter of seeing the years of establishment of Assyriska and Syrianska clubs in Sweden. The most evident of these is the soccer teams of Assyriska FF, established in 1974 (<http://www.assyria.se/>) and Syrianska FC est. 1977 (<http://www.syrianskafc.com/>). Also mentioned in the ‘Yellow Bible’.

the church's reaction stemming from the growing secular Assyrian movement heavily fostered by various groups, but most recently and strongly by the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO) in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁹

September 2008

²⁹ Founded in 1957 in Qamishli, Syria by Syrian Orthodox Christians, the ADO remains very influential among the community in Europe. It should be pointed out that the beginnings of the removal of the name Assyrian from almost all the individual parishes of the Assyrian Apostolic Church of Antioch in the United States corresponded to the time immediately following the founding of the ADO. Also it may be of interest to note that the ADO was not specific to Syrian Orthodox Christians. Many of its members were and continue to be of Nestorian, Chaldean, and Syrian Catholic religious affiliation.

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Appendix A

Ashur Yousif (Harput, Turkey 1858 - 1915) professor / author / philosopher

A professor at Euphrates College and an Assyrian author/poet prior to World War I. In 1909, he started the publication of a magazine entitled *Murshid Athuriyon* or 'The Assyrian Guide' written in the Syriac script and Ottoman Turkish in language.

Naum Faik (Diarbekir, Turkey 1863 - 1930) author/poet

Faik published the *Beth Nahreen* (Mesopotamia) newspaper beginning in 1916 New Jersey. He also taught in Urfa, Adiyaman and Homs before returning to Diyarbakır. Naum wrote numerous books concerning the Syriac language and people. In 1910, Naum began publishing a newspaper for the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Syriac communities, entitled *Kokwo Madinhoyo* ("Star of the East"). While written entirely in the Syriac alphabet, Star of the East was actually tri-lingual with articles in Ottoman Turkish, classical Syriac and Arabic. He went on to establish various different Assyrian newspapers including *Beth Nahrin* in 1916 and became the head of the editorialship of *Huyodo*, a magazine that is still published today under the same name in by the Assyrian National Federation of Sweden.

Farid Elias Nuzha (Hamah, Syria 1895 – Argentina 1971?)

Perhaps one of the best examples of Jacobite secular writers, Nuzha was born in Syria in 1895. Nuzha's grandparents had originally been immigrants from Harput, Turkey. In the year 1911 Farid Nuzha immigrated to Argentina. He later founded the *Centro Afremico Asirio* in August 1934. In the same year, the club published the first issue of a magazine entitled *Al Jamia'ah Al Suryaniya* or *Asociación Asiria*, which remained in publication until 1959. (Naby and Hopper 1999: 40) His ideology clashed severely with Mar Ignatius Ephrem Barsoum (1887-1957) the Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church. According to Shapeera, Nuzha had described the Patriarch (who had formerly joined the Assyrian delegation to the 1919 Paris Peace conference) as "the false Sheppard" or "the despotic pontiff whose trifle with the nation's dignity and fortune" and "conductor of plots". Consequently, this led to the excommunication of Farid Nuz'ha by the Patriarch.

Yusuf Namek (Urfa, Turkey) poet/author

A correspondent of the magazine *Al Jamia'ah Al Suryaniya* or *Asociación Asiria* published by the *Centro Afremico Asirio* and its editor Farid Nuzha in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Namek wrote under the pen-name *Bar-Ashur* or 'son of Ashur/Assyria'. Later, many of Yusef Namik's writings were altered in the Middle East. An example of this occurs in his book entitled *Al-Qafila Al-Akhira* printed in Syria where any reference to 'Assyrian' was later replaced with 'Aramean'.

Abraham K. Yousef (Harput, Turkey 1866 - 1924) military officer/medic/philosopher Founding member of the Assyrian Five Organization in Massachusetts in 1917 as well as founder of the Assyrian Benevolent Association in 1897.(Donabed & Donabed 2006: 64) Yousef along with fellow Assyrian author/activist Joel Werda travelled to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference as part of the Assyrian Delegation.

Youhanon Qashisho (Azekh, Tur Abdin, Turkey 1918 - 2001) writer/poet

Though originally born in Tur Abdin, Turkey, Qashisho and his family settled in Qamishli, Syria following WWI. In 1940, Qashisho's family moved Palestine where his father was serving as the priest of the Parish of Bethlehem. There, he worked very actively serving Assyrian refugees. In 1948, he returned to Syria and spent most of his time teaching and writing. Qashisho wrote over 200 poems in his native tongue including, *Shamiram*, *Dolabani*, *Sargon*, *Mor Afrem*, *Senharib Hammurabi*, *July/Tamuz*, *Ishtar*, and *The Tree of Raspberries*. He also wrote the popular nationalistic anthem *Ho 'Ohdinan/Dokrinan* in praise of Na'um Faik as a leader of the 'Assyrian people'. In 1970, he immigrated to Sweden where he continued his writing.

Senharib Balley (Diarbekir, Turkey 1878-1972)

Founding member of various Assyrian organizations in Syria and the United States; author of *Swato d'Orthuroye*.

David Barsum Keshish Perley (Harput, Turkey 1901-1979) lawyer/author

David Perley was best known as an Assyrian activist and cofounder of

the Assyrian American National Federation in 1933. His major work *Whither Christian Missions?* (1946) was written in response to the apathy of the international community in the aftermath of the Simele Massacre of Nestorian and Chaldean Assyrians in Iraq.

Hanna Abidlaki and Shukri Charmokli

Natives of Qamishli, Syria. Created the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO) in 1957.

Youhanna Salman (Omerli/Ma'sarta, Turkey 1914 - 1981)

Considered one of the early proponents of 20th century Assyrian nationalist thought.

Ibrahim Hakverdi (Urfa, Turkey)

Publisher of *Lishono dUmtho* newspaper in Beirut 1927-1946 written in Syriac script.

Ibrahim Gabriel Sowmy (Midyat, Turkey 1913 -)

Os Assírios: Análise Histórica Dos Assírio, (Sao Paulo Brazil, 1992) and *Assírios Em Todas Épocas*, (Asurbanipals bokförlag, Jönköping 1996)

Abdel Messiah Nu'aman Qarabash (Qarabash, Turkey 1903 – 1983)

Author of *Dmo Zliho* (Bloodshed) concerning the genocidal campaign against 'Assyrians' during WWI.

Gabriel Afram (Anhel, Tur Abdin, Turkey 19) author/poet

Of the many works, Sweden based Gabriel Afram is perhaps best known for his work as host of *Qolo* radio program. He wrote numerous nationalistic works including *Reports* (2006) *Svensk-Assyrisk (Swedish-Assyrian) Dictionary* (2005), *Comments* (2001), *Correspondence* (2000), *Reflections* (1993), *Mesopotamian Culture and Civilization* (1980), Poetry including the following; *Tashitho D'emo*, *Haymonutho*, *Gantho D'hubo*, *Bayto D'roze*, *Togo D'Othour*, *Tur-Abdin*, *Aguno D'haye*, *Fardayso*, *Mimro Omthonoyo*, *Ulmo Hat Z'uro*, *So'urutho L'ninwe*, *Ganath Shabruth Tur-Abdin*.

Ninos Aho (Gerke Shamo, Syria 1945 -) poet/activist

Ninos Aho is perhaps one of the most beloved poets among Jacobites, Chaldeans, and Nestorians alike. Aho has written numerous poems in

both major dialects of what he believes comprise the ‘Assyrian people’. Aho was one of the initial proponents of utilizing both dialects in his poetry. Those works include; *Habtho d’Heto*, *Zabne w’Dore*, *Aturaya Khata*, *Shimsha d’Shrara*, *Egartho d’Hubo*, *Shahro* among many others.

Appendix B

Bishop Philoxinos Youhanon Dolabani (1885 - 1969)

Perhaps one of the most prolific writers of the Jacobite rite in the last few centuries, Dolabani, a native of Mardin, spent the majority of his life at Za’afaran Monastery where he lived both as a well known writer, and at times a contemplative hermit. Bishop Dolabani wrote many works throughout his life though for this ethnographic study perhaps the most meaningful are the ‘culturally Assyrian’ poems entitled *Othur* and *Zmirto d’Athl_to* among others. (Dere, Eliyo, and Isik, Tomas 2007)

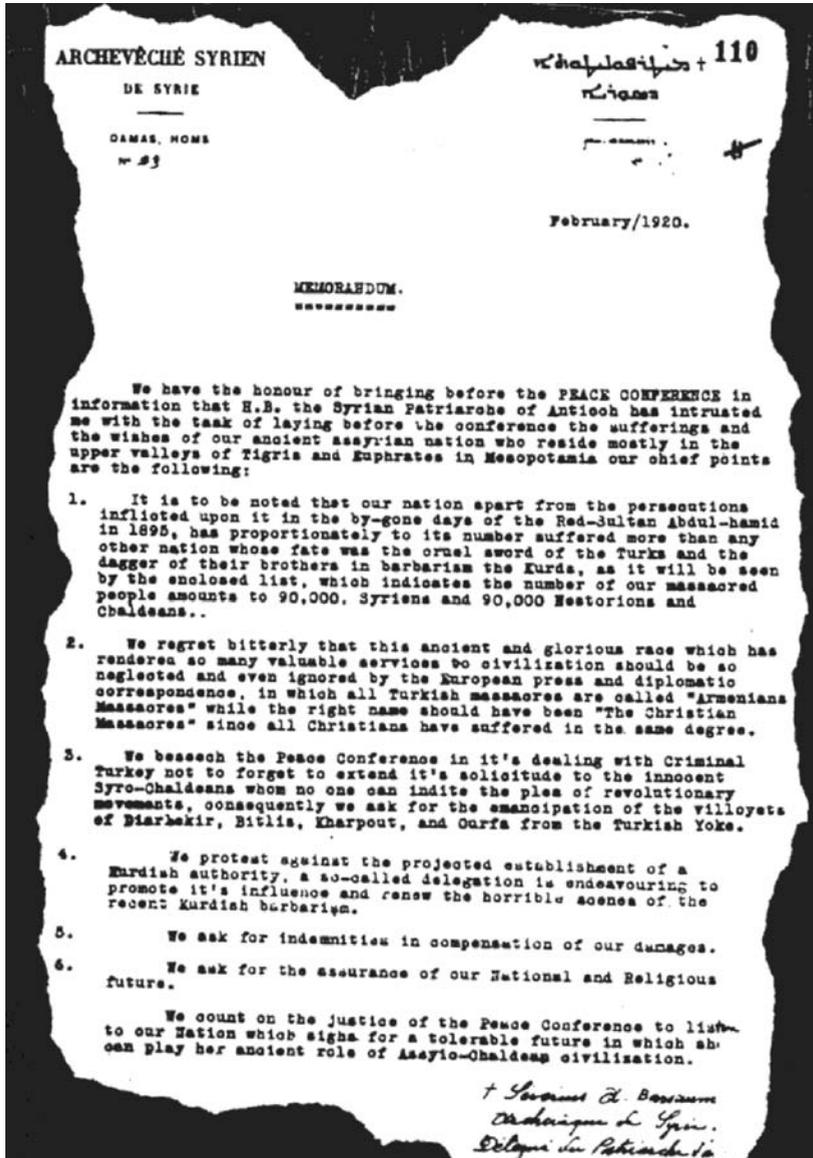
Patriarch Ignatius Zaka ‘Twas (Mosul, Iraq, 21 April 1933-)

The young man who would later become patriarch of the Jacobite rite was named Sennacherib after the ancient king of Assyria of the same name. (Barsom 1991:107).

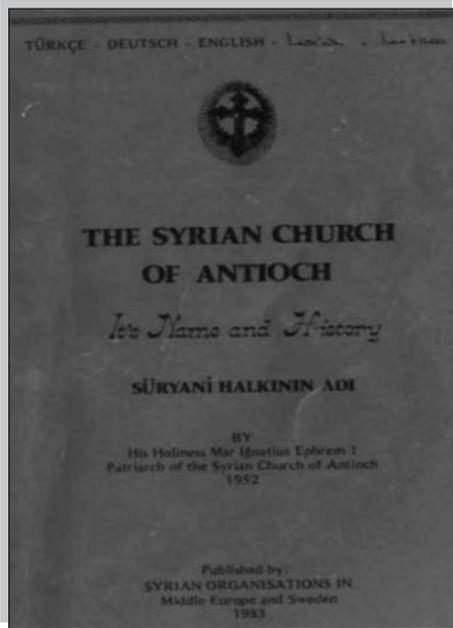
Bishop Yulius Çiçek (Upper Kafro, Tur Abdin 1942 - Holland 2005)

As former Bishop of the Netherlands, and founding member of the Assyrian club in Berlin, Yulius Çiçek slowly changed his leaning toward an adamantly anti-Assyrian stance. On various occasions Çiçek removed portions of books that mention Assyrian, including Chaldean Bishop Touma Oudo’s *Simta d-Leshana Suryaya* when reprinting them in the printing house Bar Hebraeus Verlag owned by the Syrian Orthodox Monastery in Holland. One remark on Çiçek’s original Assyrian self-identification can be seen in the book of the late Helga Anschütz. “Take my picture from the side...does my profile not resemble an Assyrian relief?” (Anschütz 1985:50, 250).

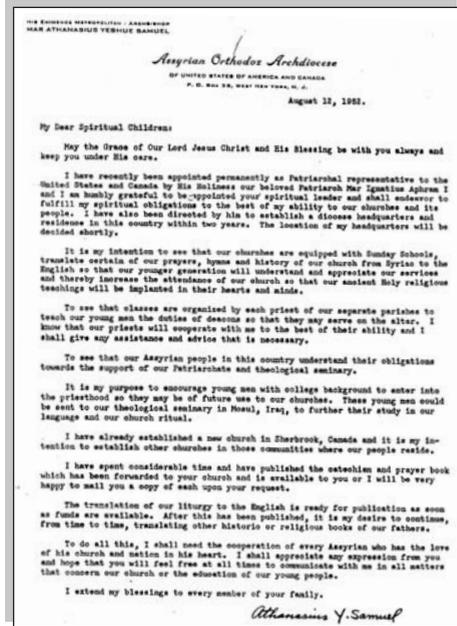
Appendix C



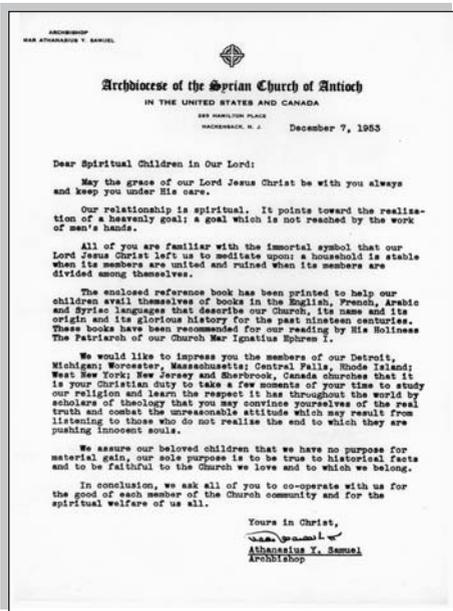
Letter from His Holiness the late Mor Severius Ephrem Barsoum, to the Paris Peace Conference, 1920



Booklet cover of the Church identity by Patriarch Mor Ignatius Ephrem I, on the 'Syrian' Church of Antioch, 1953



Notice of appointment of Mor Athanasius Yeshue Samuel as Patriarchal representative to North America, proclaiming the Assyrian identity and acknowledging the presence of the Assyrian community in the United States. Circa August, 12, 1952



Shortly following his appointment, one begins to see the change of perspective on the Assyrian identity of North American parishioners as Archbishops Samuel promotes the Patriarch's booklet on the 'Syrian' identity (see above). Circa December 7, 1953

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE ASSYRIANS

FELLOW ASSYRIANS:

Recently there has been circulated a pamphlet by Archbishop Athanasius, containing 31 pages, entitled, "The Syrian Church of Antioch", allegedly emanating from the Patriarchate in Rome. It is written in Arabic, Syriac and in English. The sub-title indicates that it is an explanation of its name and history, giving it an ostensible religious color. It is more than a religious document, however; for, it brings our very ancestral existence in question. Its mission is to adduce evidence to convince us that we are Syrians (the same as Arameans) and not Assyrians.

The pamphlet has stirred up no substantial intellectual interest among the Assyrians. On the contrary, it is so misleading and so naive, and the citations are so distorted, that it has irritated the reader's sense of humor and mental equilibrium. Hence, we have under immediate consideration the publication of a reply-document which will expose its falsifications, half truths, untruthfulness, and the godlessness motivating the publication of the pamphlet. In our view, too many errors of omission and commission have been committed. They are anonymous, immodest, and undignified.

These erudite divines have deluded themselves into the belief that since they are authorized to be the mouthpiece of the Almighty concerning the sacred and romantic mysteries of heaven and the lurid fantasies of hell, they are, also, equally authorized to deal with all issues touching secular knowledge. Fortunately for the welfare of the Assyrian Churches and people, this kind of supercilious arrogance has generally been still-born in recent days. The Assyrians have no longer a childlike, superstitious belief that their clergy possess unlimited knowledge of almost every

-1-

subject under the sun. Gone is the blind reverence for an unquestioned confidence in the infallible learning and wisdom of their clerics. Intellectual honesty, moral integrity, and spiritual sanity, they believe, are as imperative upon the clergy as they are upon the laity. And no academic idolatry, however sophistic, will create fratricidal strife or religious warfare among the Children of Ashur regardless of the number of religious denominations.

We will endeavor to prove that not a single valid argument has been advanced to show that we are not Assyrians. Indeed, the phantasmagoria of their undisciplined imagination with regard to the origin of the modern Assyrians is only excelled by the devastating confusion with which they have treated the problem. No depth of mind, heart, and soul has been revealed but the attainment of the chief ingredients of political opportunism. The pamphlet betrays apostasy from their fathers' faith and national heritage.

We will aver and establish further that because we are often called Suryay, Saryan, Murray, Sryians, and numerous other appellations, these terms do not necessarily imply that we are not Assyrians. The Assyrians need no further nicknames (they already have too many); and they resent any conspiratorial ingrafting of new ones, or emphasis thereof.

They shall not be thinking of the light of national aspirations. Their issue is valid, true, and in keeping with their racial characteristics, national and spiritual hopes and sentiments, around which their highest aspirations may cluster. We will assert that nationality implies a rich legacy of memories and a longing to preserve those memories. Religion and language are important but irrelevant in this connection. Nationality refers to common experiences of triumphs and defeats, of sorrows and comforts, of spiritual and moral achievements and failures. If these elements make a nation, then no people is

-2-

richer in such wholesome memories than the people whom the pamphlet seeks to consign to eternal oblivion.

The recital of French and German authors, and the NONNALS of libraries in foreign capitals, is done for the unholy object of conferring upon the pamphlet pontifical authority and assurance; and upon the authors, the role of cautious, laborious, and accurate historians. No such deception or fraud can mislead the Assyrians. Great names can neither impress the informed nor instruct the uninformed unless they have a direct bearing upon the issue under consideration. Our filial indignation will express itself in truthful but contradicting assertions, duly annotated and corroborated by responsible source-materials.

We shall re-affirm our faith that God in His infinite wisdom created Ashur, One of the first men, in His image; and what He creates, no earthly Holiness can uncreate.

Yours in National Service,

ASSYRIAN NATIONAL PRESS CENTRE

Jan. 28, 1954 F4-15,1954
New Jersey,
U. S. A.

-3-

Open letter of protest from the Assyrian National Press Centre, a civic organization, denouncing the Patriarch's Syrian identity propagation in the "Syrian Church of Antioch, its Name and History", also sponsored and adopted by Archbishop Mor Samuel following his appointment. Circa February 15, 1954 (Page 1-3)

Handwritten note: Used types from...

ܡܪܝܩܐ ܫܡܘܥܝܠ
ܘܐܡܢܢܐ ܡܘܨܝܐ ܫܡܘܥܝܠܐ



ARCHDIOCESE OF THE SYRIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH
IN THE UNITED STATES & CANADA

293 HAMILTON PLACE • HACKENSACK, NEW JERSEY 07601
(Area Code 201) 343-8708

ARCHBISHOP
MAR ATHANASIOS Y. SAMUEL

September 22, 1973

Dr. Thomas D. Newman
American Schools of Oriental Research
126 Inman Street
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

Dear Dr. Newman:

I wish to take this opportunity to thank the American Schools of Oriental Research for their gracious gift of a copy of the Scrolls from Qumran Cave I. The volume is beautifully done and I shall always treasure it in my personal library. It is most gratifying to me to see that the Dead Sea Scrolls, once in my keeping, have done so much to enlighten scriptural and archaeological scholars throughout the world. We are grateful to God for having allowed us the privilege of caring for these valuable manuscripts upon their discovery. We are likewise proud that we allowed the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem the opportunity to photograph the Scrolls in very much of their original state, especially since we have heard that the manuscripts have deteriorated greatly since they left our keeping.

In reading through the introduction, we have noted that Dr. Trever, on page 7, refers to me as an "Assyrian" Metropolitan which is incorrect. My Church has always been known as the "Syrian" Church, and has never had anything to do with the term Assyrian. Moreover, the title Assyrian has never been historically the name of any Church, but has only recently been applied to the Nestorian Church. I am very much surprised that after all his contact with me in Jerusalem and in America, Dr. Trever would use such a title. When, in 1949, I first came to America, I found that some of our people, due to the influence of the Nestorians, were calling themselves Assyrians, but our Patriarch and myself immediately corrected this. We have made it clear to all that we are not Assyrians, but rather are Syro-Aramaicans, as my letterhead bears witness to. I do hope that this will help to clarify all future references.

Hoping this letter finds you and all the staff of the American Schools in the very best of health, and again thanking you for your gracious gift, I remain,

Most sincerely yours,
A. Y. Samuel

Letter from Archbishop Mar Athanasius Samuel denouncing any prior existence of an Assyrian identity, circa 1973. A clear contradiction from prior archival data



The original St. Mark's Monastery banner, prior to its name change



Current banner of St. Mark's Monastery in Jerusalem, following the name change, decorated with flags of the Aramean movement

