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LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY IN THE ASSYRIAN DIASPORA

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The modern Assyrians are a Christian population from the Middle East who trace their ancestry to the ancient Assyrian empire and who speak a Neo-Aramaic language. This chapter examines the link between language and identity in the Assyrian diaspora. It discusses the way in which Assyrian nationalists have constructed etymologies to support the claim that their ethnic group has always self-identified as Assyrian. It also documents their attempts to use modern Assyrian cognates with Akkadian, the language of the Assyrian empire, to support their thesis that the modern Assyrians are the descendants of the ancient Assyrians. In addition, this chapter examines how a developing literary language and oral koine have had an important part in the development and maintenance of Assyrian national consciousness and how a political goal, the unification of different Middle Eastern Christian communities as one national group, has led Assyrian nationalists to treat as one language dialects that linguists consider to belong to separate languages. Finally, this chapter discusses the role that codeswitching plays in affirming Assyrian ethnic group membership and establishing boundaries between Assyrians and members of other ethnic groups.

Has a nationality anything dearer than the speech of its fathers? In its speech resides its whole thought domain, its tradition, history, religion, and basis of life, all its heart and soul. To deprive a people of its speech is to deprive it of its one eternal good ... With language is created the heart of a people (Herder 1783, cited by Fishman 1972:1).

Introduction

As the quotation above from the German philosopher and theologian Johann Gottfried von Herder indicates, scholars have long recognized that there is an intimate relationship between the language a people speaks and that people's social identity. Today, that relationship is the focus of interest to social scientists

from a wide range of disciplines who are investigating issues of nationalism and ethnicity. Lambert 1979 and Giles 1979, among others, have noted that even a small amount of oral language produced by a speaker may be sufficient to elicit a full set of ethnic attributes in the mind of a hearer. Fishman (1989:47), a scholar particularly renowned for his work on language and ethnicity, notes that although the link between language and ethnicity 'is not an inevitable one, it is clearly a highly likely one, both as a result of the general symbolic function of language as well as because of its specific implication in the paternity, patrimony, and phenomenology dimensions of ethnicity experiences'. Enninger (1991:24) claims that the specific design features of human language make linguistic performance the prime medium for the projection of ethnicity. The role of language in marking ethnicity and in-group versus out-group relationships has also been extensively treated by those scholars investigating the phenomena of codeswitching (cf. Gumperz 1982; Heller 1988; and Myers-Scotten 1993). The case for the centrality of language in the construction of social identity is well summarized in the following quote from Le Page & Tabouret-Keller (1985:248):

> In language, however, we are offered by the society we enter and we offer to others, a very overt symbolization of ourselves and our universe, not only in the various grammars and lexicons and prosodies we can create for various domains of that universe, but also through the social marking which each occasion of use carries. Language is not only the focal centre of our acts of identity; it also consists of metaphors, and our focusing of it is around such metaphors or symbols. The notion that words refer to or denote 'things' in 'the real world' is very widely upheld, but quite misplaced; they are used with reference to concepts in the mind of the user; these symbols are the means by which we define ourselves and others.

While it is clear that language generally has an important role in the construction of social identity, it may come to have a particularly important role in diaspora communities whose members may feel threatened by a loss of or uncertainty about ethnic identity. Such problems are particularly intense within the Assyrian community for two reasons. First, the Assyrians do not have their own nation state or even any type of autonomy within an existing nation state. Furthermore, it is possible that today there are more Assyrians living in diaspora than in their traditional homeland because of the oppression that they face there. Second, ethnic identity has been a shifting social construct for Assyrians. Indeed, there is no general consensus in the present-day Assyrian community, either with respect to the existing peoples who should be included within the ethnic group, or with respect to the historical origins of these peoples; and, to some extent, that uncertainty is mirrored in the scholarly community.

The uncertainty about the roots of the ethnic group, Assyrian, Aramean, other, or a combination thereof, has given rise to very acrimonious debates over the very names to be used in designating it,[1] and the language its members speak.

Its people have called themselves and been called by others Assyrians, Suryaye, Suraye, Suroye, Curyaye, Syriani, Aramaeans, Chaldeans, Assyro-Chaldeans, among other labels. The language they speak is commonly known in the community as Surit, but is referred to by Assyrian nationalists as *leshana aturaya,* the 'Assyrian language'. The term 'Assyrian' will be used here to refer to the ethnic group, since that is the term currently given greatest acceptance;[2] and, following Tsereteli 1978 and Odisho 1988, the language spoken by the ethnic group will also be called 'Assyrian'. However, it should be pointed out that the name 'Assyrian', when applied to the Neo-Aramaic languages and dialects spoken by members of this group, is somewhat misleading, since they belong to the West Semitic branch of the Semitic language family, while the term Assyrian has traditionally been applied by linguists to the dialect or language (Semiticists differ with respect to the status they accord it) spoken in the Assyrian Empire, which together with Babylonian is known as Akkadian. Akkadian formed the East Semitic branch of the Semitic family and is extinct.

The Assyrians of today are a Middle Eastern people whose traditional homeland included Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Two dimensions are typically used in determining Assyrian ethnic group membership — religion and mother tongue. To be considered a member of the ethnic group, a person must, first, be a Christian, and second, a native speaker of a Neo-Aramaic language or dialect. In the Middle East, where the Christian Assyrians are a very small minority in a mostly Moslem world, it is their Christianity that is perhaps their most salient characteristic. In diaspora in a mostly Christian world, it is their mother tongue that most clearly distinguishes them. However, neither mother tongue nor religion, nor even the union of the two, offers a totally unambiguous criterion for group membership.

First, Middle Eastern Christian Neo-Aramaic speakers do not all belong to the same religious denomination. Although today some belong to Protestant denominations and a few belong to the Syrian Catholic church, historically they have belonged primarily to three churches. These are the Nestorean Church or Church of the East, the first organized Christian church in the world; the Chaldean Church, a uniate Catholic Church which broke off from the Church of the East; and the Jacobite Church, also called the Syrian Orthodox Church, which is separate from the group of Eastern Orthodox Churches, which includes the Bulgarian, Greek, Romanian, and Russian Orthodox Churches.

For some Assyrians, only those people who are members of the Church of the East are truly Assyrians, while, for others, any Christian Neo-Aramaic speaker is an Assyrian. Members of the Church of the East generally tend to have embraced the Assyrian ethnic identity, while many members of the Chaldean Church simply consider themselves Chaldean, and many members of the Syrian Orthodox Church consider themselves to be Aramaeans. Furthermore, while some members of one religious denomination consider members of the other two to belong to the same ethnic group if they are Neo-Aramaic speakers — even though they may

have disagreements with those people as to the appropriate ethnic-group label — other people do not accept even Christian Neo-Aramaic speakers as members of the same ethnic group if they do not belong to the same religious denomination.

There are two additional complications to this picture. While all Chaldeans from Iran are Neo-Aramaic speakers, not all Chaldeans from Iraq speak a Neo-Aramaic dialect: Some speak only Arabic. Arabic-speaking Chaldeans are considered to be Christian Arabs by some Assyrians, while others, at least at some level and for some purposes, include Arabic-speaking Chaldeans as members of the Assyrian ethnic group. Indeed, in political discussions, some Assyrians claim as fellow ethnic-group members all Christians whose churches use, or HAVE IN THE PAST USED, Syriac as their liturgical language, thereby including even the Maronites of Lebanon.[3]

Not only religious affiliation but also linguistic background can be a source of complications in the definition of who is, in fact, an Assyrian. The Modern Aramaic dialects are divided by Hoberman 1989 into Western Aramaic, represented by Ma'lula, Bakh'a, and Jubb 'Adin, and Eastern Aramaic, divided into Turoyo, Mlahso, Northeastern Aramaic, and Modern Mandaic. Some scholars have classified Turoyo as a central group intermediate between Western Aramaic and Northeastern Aramaic. While some people consider both Christian Turoyo speakers and Christian speakers of Northeastern Aramaic dialects to be members of the same Assyrian ethnic group, others do not. Furthermore, while speakers of the Northeastern Aramaic dialects may be members of any of the three churches — the Church of the East, the Syrian Orthodox Church, or the Chaldean Church, in the past all Toroyo speakers belonged to the Syrian Orthodox Church. As mentioned above, some members of the Syrian Orthodox Church, and particularly some Toroyo-speaking members, consider themselves to be descendants of the Aramaeans rather than of the Assyrians, and these people are in great part the Toroyo-speaking members of the Syrian Orthodox Church.

Finally, mother tongue is an imperfect criterion for Assyrian ethnic-group membership because there are Jewish groups which speak Northeastern Neo-Aramaic dialects which are almost indistinguishable from some of the dialects spoken by the Assyrians.

There are different ways in which members of the Assyrian community have used language in the social construction of their ethnic identity, first turning to an examination of what might be termed 'folk linguistics' or 'ethnoreconstruction'. Under this heading fall both community members' discussions of the origins of the different names for the community, and also their attempts to use cognates in ancient Assyrian, the Akkadian dialect spoken in the Assyrian Empire, and in the Modern Northeastern Aramaic, spoken by the Assyrians of today, to validate their assertion that the modern Assyrians are the direct descendants of the ancient Assyrians.

Let us first consider the issue of the appropriate name for the ethnic group. A website for the Syrian Orthodox Church provides an account of the derivation

of the Church name written by the patriarch H. H. Mar Ignatius Yacoub III which states:

> This name was derived from Cyrus the king of Persia (559-529) who conquered Babylon (539 B.C.) and liberated the Jews by permitting them to return to Judea ... The name 'Syrian' is equivalent to the term 'Christian' which was applied to the disciples in Antioch for the first time, because those converted Jews believed that Cyrus, their liberator from captivity in 538 B.C., resembled Christ, the liberator of captive mankind, ... This name was used in Syria to distinguish between the Christian Arameans and the Arameans who were not yet converted ... Likewise, the Aramaic language was called Syriac. Until the present days the Christians who speak Syriac are called, in this sense, 'Suroye' or 'Suraye' or 'Curyaye'.
> (http://www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~t-issa/syr/details/name.html)

Modern Assyrian nationalists argue that the name 'Assyrian' has been used by their people throughout their history. They base their claim on the fact that throughout many centuries Northeastern Aramaic speakers have used the term 'Suryaye' (Syrians) in self-designation, together with the fact that in the modern dialects this term has a variant form 'Suraye.' They then argue that the term 'Suraye' is derived from the term 'Asuraye.' This position[4] may be seen in the quote below from a website established by Peter BetBasoo which includes his response to a previously posted argument, indicated by arrowheads, deriving the term 'Suryaye' from King Cyrus:

> >   I think the idea that the title of our PEOPLE, 'Syrian', was derived
> >from the word 'Assyrian' is, in a way, very simplistic. For this reason it
> >may appeal to many people, but it is simply wrong. Because how do
> >you account for the timing??? Why after thousands of years of such a
> >rich history between the Aramaeans and Assyrians, the name 'Syrian'
> >suddenly appears to describe our people AFTER the coming of Christ?
> >The derivation of the word Syrian from the name of the Persian King
> >Cyrus is the most likely scenario.
>
>   What is the problem of timing? It is completely reasonable to ex-
> pect a word to EVOLVE in pronunciation. The original word for 'fort-
> night' (which means 'two weeks' in English) was 'fourteen nights'.
> Over time this compound word contracted to 'fortnight'. As any
> speaker of Assyrian knows the letter A (allap) is very flexible and can
> appear and disappear. It is not at all unreasonable, and it is the most
> logical explanation BECAUSE it is the simplest explanation, that *As-
> suraya* → *suraya,* a simple dropping of the initial allap. Assyrians will
> say *Akhona* or *khona,* and both are perfectly intelligible.
>
> Your argument that 'Cyrus' is the most logical etymology has several
> fatal flaws:

1) The ORIGINAL name is *Chosreos* (*korish* in Assyrian). How does *Chosreos* transform to *suraya*?

2) Most importantly, there is written evidence of the word *suraya* being used long before Cyrus came on the scene.

(http:www.netadventure.com/~soc/SORFForum/messages/230.html)

Just as Assyrian nationalists frequently engage in folk linguistics or ethnoreconstruction to provide justification for their claim that their ethnic group has historically identified itself as Assyrian, so too they often attempt to employ historical linguistic arguments to substantiate their claim to direct descent from the ancient Assyrians. Thus, they assert that modern Assyrian, a Northeastern Neo-Aramaic language, has more cognates with ancient Assyrian or Akkadian than do other modern Semitic languages. An example of such argumentation may be found in the following quotation from a note posted by Peter BetBasoo on the Internet newsgroup soc.culture.assyrian on September 12, 1996 by nineveh@wwa.com.:

The following is a concordance I compiled based on the glossary contained in the book titled *State Archives of Assyria, Volume III: Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea* by Alasdair Livingstone, Helsinki University Press.

The Glossary contained approximately 1000 words. I went through this glossary and listed every word that is common to Modern Assyrian (neo-Syriac) and Ancient Assyrian (Akkadian). I did not include words that are also common to other Semitic languages, such as 'camel' (*Gamal*) and 'dog' (*Kalb*), because my intention was to show that Modern Assyrians are indeed descended from the Ancient Assyrians, and that this is reflected in their dialect of neo-Syriac.

Assyrians spoke Akkadian before switching to Aramaic. The switch to Aramaic was completed by 750 B.C., and the Assyrian empire fell in 612 B.C. (pooh!); This means that for 150 years, the Assyrians administered their vast empire in Aramaic, which, of course, is the parent language of Syriac and neo-Syriac. But the Assyrians did not disappear after the fall of their empire; they just continued to live on their land (to this day), and were the first to convert to Christianity in 33 A.D.

Of the approximately 1,000 words that I examined, I found 104 words that are common only to modern Assyrian and Ancient Assyrian. This is 10%. Also, the list does not show the nuances of pronunciation. The way Assyrians say these words, and the other words that are common to other Semitic languages, is much closer to the Akkadian.

Furthermore, these words are found ONLY in modern Assyrian and Ancient Assyrian. For example, in Akkadian, 'weapon' is *Kakku*; in

Edessan Syriac it is *Zaineh*, but in Modern Assyrian it is *Chekka*; this shows that even though the written Assyrian is based on the Edessan Syriac, the SPOKEN Assyrian is probably much older. There are many other such examples.

It is worthy to note [sic] that, even based on a cursory examination of a small sample (1,000 words), there is a significant body of Akkadian words in modern Assyrian. A thorough examination, on a more scientific basis, of the Assyrian Dictionary (published by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago), would, I believe, reveal the relationship even more so.

(nineveh@wwa.com 'Re: Akkadian Words in Modern Assyrian.' 12 Sept. 1996. soc.culture.assyrian 12 Sept. 1996)

A list of words follows the quotation given above. Suffice it to say that the list of 104 words is replete with those that have cognates in other Semitic languages, and the modern Assyrian word *Chaka* (*Chekka* is a tribal Jilwaya pronunciation) is, according to Maclean 1901, a borrowing from Kurdish. Furthermore, even if modern Assyrian were to have Akkadian words that no other Semitic language had, that would hardly prove that the modern Assyrians were the descendants of the ancient Assyrians, given that the Assyrian Empire officially used both Akkadian and Aramaic for several centuries, making borrowing between the two languages very likely.

Attempts by Assyrian nationalists to use lexical items to validate community claims to descent from the ancient Assyrians are only one way in which language has been important in the creation of Assyrian ethnic identity. The creation of a standardized written variety of Assyrian Neo-Aramaic, as well as of an oral Assyrian Neo-Aramaic koine,[5] has been another important aspect of identity-formation in the modern Assyrian community. Maclean (1895:xiii-xv) divides the dialects of Assyrian Neo-Aramaic into four major groups: (1) the greater Urmi dialects, including those of Solduz, Sipurghan, Gavilan, et al., (2) the Northern dialects, including those of Salamas, Qudshanis, Gawar, Jilu, et al., (3) the Ashiret dialects, including those of Upper and Lower Tiari, Tkhuma, Tal, Baz, Mar Bishu, Shamizdin, et al., and (4) the Southern dialects, including those of Alqosh, Telkief, Telesqof, Bohtan, Zakho, et al. These dialects are not all mutually intelligible, and speakers of the different dialects have traditionally identified with fellow members of an '*ashirat* (a tribe, virtually autonomous under the Islamic state), *millet* (a community, recognized by the Islamic state, which was organized in a Church and controlled in its internal matters by its own religious authorities), or geographical entity (plains, then rivers, then villages), that is, with speakers of the same dialect, rather than with any potential superordinate ethnic group (Heinrichs 1993). However, as Odisho 1988 and Muree-van den Berg 1995 have noted, a process of standardization of a written variety of Assyrian Neo-Aramaic based on the dialects of Urmi was begun in the 1840's by American Protestant missionaries working with Assyrian priests.[6] Attendance at Assyrian schools in which literacy

in the written variety was taught, along with access to a growing literature, secular as well as ecclesiastical, led to identification with a larger community, the *umta*, 'nation' or 'people'.

Today, Assyrian social and political associations throughout the diaspora promote literacy in Assyrian as a symbol of ethnic identity and a tool in community maintenance. The Assyrian Church of the East is active worldwide in promoting both literacy in Assyrian and Assyrian nationalism; in Detroit, the Chaldean community has established bilingual private schools in order to foster both literacy in the native language and a sense of ethnic identity in its children. In Iran and North Iraq, as part of their attempt to preserve their heritage, the Assyrian communities are maintaining their own schools, which use Assyrian as the medium of instruction. The importance which the Assyrian community places on literacy in Assyrian as part of ethnic-identity maintenance is also shown by the fact that Assyrians in diaspora have written and disseminated computer software packages and established numerous sites on the Internet to teach literacy skills to those Assyrians who, while fluent in Assyrian, are not literate in it.[7]

The importance of the written language in the creation and definition of Assyrian nationalism is also demonstrated by the controversies surrounding the compilation of dictionaries. For example, in 1996, the Assyrian Academic Society became involved in a project to compile a bilingual English and Modern Assyrian dictionary. Major disagreements arose among Assyrian participants in the project with respect to which dialect's pronunciations should be reflected in the transcriptions provided in dictionary entries, whether to include words from all dialects even if they were borrowings from other Middle Eastern languages,[8] and whether to include forms from Classical Syriac[9] not used in vernacular Assyrian Neo-Aramaic as replacements for borrowings into the vernacular from other Semitic languages. Another contentious debate arose over the desire of some Assyrians to include in the same dictionary both Assyrian Neo-Aramaic and Toroyo which are not mutually intelligible and are considered to be separate languages by Semiticists.[10] However, many Assyrian nationalists consider Toroyo speakers to be Assyrians and, therefore, wish to claim that Toroyo and Assyrian Neo-Aramaic are the same language.

The standardization process, which gave birth to a written standard language, also became the first step in the evolution of an oral Assyrian koine (Odisho 1988:20). This process, which was begun in Urmia in Iran and continued in Habbaniya and Baghdad in Iraq, still continues today in the Assyrian diaspora. Assyrian communities in countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia support radio and television programs broadcast in Assyrian. These broadcasts, for the most part, are not conducted in the various dialects but rather in a koine, so that they will be intelligible to a wider audience. Thus, they serve to link Assyrians throughout the diaspora and in the homeland as well. Furthermore, radio programs that provide standards for the oral language, for example *Mlr u La Mlr*, 'Say and Don't Say,' broadcast in Chicago, aid in the process of koine-

formation. The process is also furthered by columns dedicated to enriching peo-
ple's vocabularies found in newspapers and magazines, and in Internet publica-
tions such as the weekly Assyrian newsmagazine, *Zenda.*

The importance of the role that the Assyrian language plays as a marker of
ethnic identity and as a boundary-maintenance device, separating members of the
Assyrian ethnic group from others, may also be seen in the codeswitching be-
tween English and Assyrian found in American Assyrian communities. Even
those Assyrian bilinguals who are strongly dominant in English will frequently
use Assyrian words and phrases in conversations with other Assyrians to mark
their shared ethnic group membership and such codeswitching increases in situa-
tions where Assyrian nationalism is at issue.

> Assyrian-English codeswitching also occurs in the written channel.
> One important context in which it is found is the Internet. As Albert
> Gabrial notes in an article in the *Cultural Survival Quarterly* (Gabrial
> 1998),

Today, Assyrians are one of the most widely scattered indigenous peoples. Most
Assyrian families in the U.S. generally have relatives in Australia, Sweden, Leba-
non, Iraq, or Canada. For such a small nation scattered throughout the world, the
Internet is a dream come true.

Although the Assyrians do not have a nation-state, Gabrial states that by
1995 it was possible to build a home for the Assyrians in cyberspace and to es-
tablish a global community. Today, Nineveh On-Line, the global community that
Gabrial created, receives over 100,000 visitors per month. There are dozens of
Assyrian web pages, electronic magazines, chat rooms, and newsgroups.

The Assyrian language is one of the aspects of the Assyrian culture that is
emphasized on the Internet, despite the fact that it has no standard transliteration
and that technical problems make it very difficult to write extended messages on
the Internet in the Assyrian alphabets, such messages having to be handled like
graphics rather than by using ASCII. In addition to the sites that teach literacy in
the Assyrian alphabets, there are others that provide vocabulary lessons and give
English translations of the lyrics of songs written in Assyrian in order to provide
more material for learning the language.

Furthermore, one can see the way individuals affirm their Assyrian identity
by using Assyrian in chat rooms and in postings to newsgroups. In addition to
the occasional words and phrases used in the bodies of messages, greetings and
closings are very frequently written in Assyrian. For example, in one posting from
the newsgroup soc.culture.Assyrian, both a greeting and a closing are given in
Assyrian. The greeting is *Shlama Elokhon Bnei Umti,* 'Peace to you children of
the nation,' and the closing is *Hal d-Tapqakh Go Atour,* 'Until we meet in
Assyria.' Another common greeting is simply *Shlamalokhun,* 'Peace to you`, and
two common closings are *B-shena,* 'In peace` and *Push b-shena,* 'Remain in
peace.' In one posting, the phrase *la bshaina,* 'not in peace` and the phrase *llt*

shlama, 'there is no peace' occurred in an argument over ethnic identity. Both the writer of the message at issue and the author of the message to which he is responding agree that they are members of the same ethnic group, and that fact is tacitly acknowledged by the use of the Assyrian phrases in the text. What is at issue is the correct name for the ethnic group — Assyrian or Aramean.

Another written medium in which Assyrian-English codeswitching also oc-curs frequently is advertisements. Typically, the information reproduced in the two languages is not the same. In one example, the only Assyrian that appears is *Qala d-Aturaye,* 'Voice of Assyrians'. In another, an ad for a butcher shop, the Assyrian text informs the reader that there are special prices for Assyrian house-holds for meat for religious holidays, information which is not presented in the other two languages, Arabic and English, in which the advertisement is printed. Thus, we can see that the use of Assyrian in advertisements is motivated by sev-eral different factors — identifying the advertiser as a member of the Assyrian community, affirming pride in one's language and culture, demonstrating ethnic solidarity, and restricting the provision of certain information to members of one ethnic community. Wedding invitations and announcements for community lec-tures, dances, and other cultural activities are other contexts in which Assyrian is used. As in the case of advertisements, more information is typically provided in English than in Assyrian in such written materials.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined the relationship between language and iden-tity in the Assyrian diaspora. We have discussed the way in which Assyrian na-tionalists have constructed etymologies to support their assertions that their eth-nic group has always self-identified as Assyrian. We have also noted their at-tempts to use modern Assyrian cognates with Akkadian to support their thesis that the modern Assyrians are the descendants of the ancient Assyrians. We have shown how political concerns have created a desire to treat as one language dia-lects which linguists consider to belong to separate languages. We have also dis-cussed the importance of the standardization of a written language in the process of formation of Assyrian national consciousness and the continuing importance of literacy in ethnic identity maintenance. The importance of the formation of an oral koine in promoting ethnic group unity in diaspora has also been noted. Fi-nally, we have discussed the way in which codeswitching is used to affirm mem-bership in the Assyrian community and to establish boundaries between Assyri-ans and members of other ethnic groups. Clearly, for Assyrians in diaspora, the Assyrian language is a very important marker of Assyrian identity, since Christi-anity, which set them apart in the Middle East, does not serve that function in the West. The importance Assyrians give to their language is eloquently expressed in the excerpt from the poem 'Mother Tongue' by the well-known Assyrian writer Geewargis D-BetBinyamin given below.

Mother Tongue

Work for the nation without stopping:	like a son in the family
Not like a foreign employee:	hired for a daily wage.
If you wander through the whole world:	take your language with you
And take it as a part of the household:	for your Assyrian son.
If you lose your language:	with it you lose your name
And if your name is forgotten:	your seed will be wiped out.
As long as there is language in the mouth:	in the world you have a name
And you will continue to be called alive	like your Assyrian father.
As long as there is life in the body:	of a sick person without hope
Yet there is hope that the doctor:	skillful, will cure the patient.
Just in that way too the language:	that exists in the speaking mouth
If carried to the last day:	will live like a declaration.
One day there is no remedy:	again it will come to light
The Assyrian language:	the vernacular and also the literary
These for you an example:	true like the law.
That they be before your eyes a light:	burning by day and by night.
From today swear oaths:	that if you set out for other countries
That a foreign language you will not:	use like a family one.
(English translation by E. McClure)	

NOTES

[1] Indicative of the dissension within the community over this topic are two long threads on the Internet newsgroup soc.culture.assyrian. In the first, Gabriel Rabo, a member of the Syrian Orthodox Church, who considers himself to be an Aramean, engaged in a dispute with members of both the Church of the East and the Syrian Orthodox Church who consider themselves to be Assyrians. Replying to a message from Sabro Gabriel that contained the statements, 'I am a Syrian Orthodox Christian; my identity is of course Assyrian,' Mr. Rabo stated, 'That's right, your confession is Syrian Orthodox, but your identity is wrong … The true site of our history teach [sic] us: we are Aramean, and we speak Aramaic not Assyrian'(Gabriel Rabo. grabo@gwdg.de 'Re' Syrian Orthodox Christians are Aramaean' 11 July 1996. soc.culture.assyrian (11 July 1996)).

In the second thread, Matay Arsan, who identifies himself as a Syrian Orthodox Assyrian, states, 'I think we are the descendants of the Sumerians-Akkadians-Babylonians-Chaldeans-Arameans, and Assyrians' (Matay Arsan. 'JB.d.raadt'@student.scw.vu,nl 'Re: Difference in culturel?' 28 Jan. 1999. soc.culture.assyrian (29 Jan. 1999)). Esho Tower, in commenting on Matay Arsan's note, says, 'Don't forget to include the Israelites' [etower@cgocable.net 'Re: Difference in culturel?' 12 Feb. 1999. soc.culture.assyrian (13 Feb. 1999)]. Raman Michael, responding to Esho Tower's comment, denies that the Israelites have a place among the ancestors of the modern Assyrians: 'The fact that the majority of the 10 tribes were in Babylonia and not in Assyria proper does not support the theory that we are somehow descendants of these tribes' (erbil@wwa.com 'Re: Difference in culturel?' 12 Feb. 1999. soc.culture.assyrian (13 Feb. 1999)).

2 Although there is controversy with respect to the use of the term 'Assyrian' to denote the Christian population in question, Heinrichs 1993 endorses its use. In the introduction to his paper, he states, 'The perspective of the following paper is historical-onomastical. Its aim is to focus on the various acceptations of the name "Assyrian" during the course of history as well as on the various other names applied to the people presently carrying that name, the vantage point in all this being the present-day situation. From a review of these data, it will become apparent that, given the historical circumstances in which the Assyrians found themselves in the first two decades of this century, it was almost inevitable for them to readopt or reapply the term "Assyrian" as a national name for themselves; at the very least, it made good sense for them to do so' (1993:99).

3 Heinrichs 1993 notes, 'From the point of view of language and church tradition it would make sense for the Nestorians (plus offshoots) and the Chaldeans to join ranks as one Assyrian nation. But then there is the even larger range of application of the name "Assyrian" which would include the Western Syrians — and thus ideally, all groups whose church language is Syriac. This idea is espoused by most Assyrian nationalists' (1993:111).

4 The derivation of the term 'Suraye' is an issue that surfaces frequently within the ethnic community, and it is one that arouses strong emotions. The Assyrian nationalist position on the derivation may also be found in a journal article by William Warda 1994 and in numerous discussions on the Internet. In a thread on the newsgroup soc.culture.assyrian, which ran from January 22, 1999 until February 12, 1999, Matay Arsan mentioned two additional derivations that have been offered, namely that the term is derived from 'Sur' (Tyrus), a city in Lebanon, and that it is derived from 'Cyrus of Aginur', a king of a tribe in the region of Syria ('JB.d.raadt'@student.scw.vu,nl 'Re: Difference in culturel' 28 Jan. 1999. soc.culture.assyrian (29 Jan. 1999)).

5 It might, perhaps, be more accurate to refer to the creation of oral Assyrian Neo-Aramaic koines, since the koine created in Urmia is not identical with that created in Iraq, nor is either identical with the koines being created in the diaspora.

6 This process has yet to reach completion. Since the Assyrians do not have a nation-state, there is no national organization with the authority to establish standards for the language. Orthographic conventions differ across writers, as do morphology, syntax, and vocabulary.

7 More than half of the Assyrians for whom Assyrian is a first language are not literate in Assyrian because there have been many periods during which the governments of the Middle-Eastern countries in which they have resided have either discouraged or forbidden schooling through the medium of Assyrian.

8 While some participants wanted to exclude Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic, and Persian loanwords from the dictionary, no objection was expressed towards the inclusion of Greek and Latin loanwords or of those from modern European languages.

9 Classical Syriac and Assyrian Neo-Aramaic stand in a diglossic relationship to one another, Classical Syriac being used as the language of the church, and Assyrian Neo-Aramaic being used for all other purposes. The two are very closely related; the majority of their lexical items are shared. Whether Assyrian Neo-Aramaic is a direct lineal descendant of Classical Syriac is an issue that has not yet been resolved by Semiticists.

10 See above for a discussion of their classification.

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