

Saving Souls / Saving Languages: Writing Vernacular Aramaic

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Abstract: In 1835 the ABCFM (American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions), among its many language efforts worldwide, committed to paper, then print, a vernacular Aramaic dialect. To that point, among its native speakers, with rare exception, written Aramaic had appeared in classical Syriac, a language that held the same position as did Latin for Roman Catholicism. This move, by American Protestants bent on saving the souls of indigenous Assyrians, saved the spoken language of the community, for the time being. With some modifications, both this vernacular Aramaic and the shape of letters created during the 1840s have sustained the now dwindling amount of publication in Aramaic worldwide. The social impact, and unintended political consequences, of the revitalization of education in vernacular Aramaic proved so strong that the effort prevented the disappearance of a language even as 2/3 of the population disappeared. To sustain Aramaic as a living language, another effort needs to be mounted that is free of religious connections and international in nature.

Aramaic is the oldest continuously written and spoken language of the Middle East, spoken in several dialects over the past 3000 years. Worldwide, Chinese is the only language with a longer continuous record.

By the 15th century the forms of written and spoken Aramaic had diverged considerably, a fact that disadvantaged both. The diligent effort to document and teach the spoken language during the 19th century, spearheaded by American Protestant missionaries, marks a special phase in language preservation, based on the need to communicate a religious message in the indigenous language.

The manner in which American, British, Russian and French missionaries competed to promote language development in Aramaic speaks primarily to political and religious issues. The Bishop of Canterbury's Mission to the Assyrians, like the Russian Orthodox and French Lazarist missions to the Assyrians, was intertwined with the British, Tsarist and French competition for political influence in territories under the control of the Ottoman and Persian governments. The Americans initially entered the region without a political agenda, but with a heavy emphasis on the promotion of the Protestant vision of Christianity, a goal determined achievable through education. For this reason, the American presence, whether Congregational, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, or later Evangelical, engaged in the translation of the Gospels and the promotion of literacy to implement the reading of the Bible.

Missionaries and the Language Issue

In many regions of the world, particularly in the United States and Canada, Christian schools operated primarily to promote English (or another European language native to the missionaries), conversion to Christianity, and the devaluation of indigenous languages and cultures. This pattern applies throughout the 19th century and well into the first half of the 20th century. Currently the Canadian government and Protestant churches are engaging in financial settlements that attempt to compensate for the treatment of native children at mission schools. The activities of these schools are subsumed under the general category of abuse, much of it linguistic and cultural.

However, in the Middle East, especially among indigenous Christians, the story is somewhat different. While indigenous churches share an aversion to missionaries and condemn missionary activities of the 19th century, it is not for language reasons. It is because all the missionaries – French, American, Russian, German and Scandinavian (Swedish and Norwegian) – gradually and actively sought to convert indigenous Christians to reflect the doctrinal faith of the sponsoring missionary churches. The sole exception has been the British Christian mission that promoted education, even religious education, without the intent to divide local Christianity or form new congregations. While the matter of how the missions went about “saving souls” and affecting local social relations among Muslims and

Christians (or with indigenous Jews) has received some notice, the general effect of the missionary presence on language preservation, rather than language decimation, has received scant attention.¹

In this paper, I will present an overall view of how and why missionaries became involved in minority language issues, the effect of such involvement on Assyrians in particular, the struggle to continue language preservation and continuity, the present re-involvement of missionaries in the lives of the Assyrian minority of Iraq especially and why sustaining Aramaic as a living language requires its promotion as a World Heritage Language, divorced from religious association, and promoted by Middle Eastern states and international bodies.

Christian Outposts in Islamic Regions

Of the indigenous Christians of the Middle East, only two groups maintained their language into the 19th century. Most indigenous Middle East Christians, currently still living in the Middle East or scattered in diaspora over the globe, have adopted Arabic as both their spoken community language and as their liturgical language. This pattern applies to the major Christian group in the Middle East, the Maronites, who retain an occasionally reviving memory of their Syriac liturgical background, as well as to the “Rum Ortodoks” (Greek Orthodox) who long ago abandoned Greek for Arabic.²

The exceptions to this pattern are the Armenians and the Assyrians.³ The first group uses a

¹ John P. Ameer, *Yankees and Nestorians : the establishment of American schools among the Nestorians of Iran and Turkey, 1834-1850* (Harvard University PhD 1992).

² Converts to Christianity, a rarity, have adopted the national language of their resident countries and often merge with Protestant converts from among indigenous Christian groups who drop the native language in favor of the state language.

³ Pontic Greeks scattered along the southern coast of the Black Sea, Hellenes, and Georgians also formed part of the indigenous Christians of the Middle East with their own languages. But the Assyrians differ considerably both in terms of missionary penetration and current conditions.

language within the Indo-European family, supported by a state educational structure (the Armenian Republic) and the second a Semitic language – Aramaic – stateless for 2000 years. Both groups lived in rural agricultural enclaves within the Ottoman and the Persian Empires during the 19th century when western missionaries arrived among them. In the case of the Armenians, some urban presence among Arab, Persian and Turkish Muslims, gave them a larger role in both communal survival and language preservation through their own efforts. The case of the Assyrians presents one in which the preservation of the language came to depend exclusively on the intervention of western missions.⁴ The focus on the Assyrians in particular illustrates the heavy reliance on the missionary support for language retention.

As “people of the Book,” that is, a monotheistic religious community with a scriptural tradition, Armenians and Assyrians, together with Jews and Mandeans (Sabeans), as well as Zoroastrians, received a legally protected status within Muslim dominant societies. This protection allowed for tolerance of these select groups but chiefly at the pleasure of the local, regional and national rulers who took swift action to punish, move by force, pressure to convert, dispossess, and otherwise disadvantage these protected groups socially, culturally, and economically.

By the end of the 15th century, Assyrians had been driven from urban areas of Mesopotamia and the rubble of churches with strong Syriac traditions lay under mosques in towns like Tikrit and Kerbala.⁵ The re-urbanization of Assyrians in contemporary Iraq only began during the 1920s when large numbers began emigration to Baghdad, Basra and Kirkuk to work in the

Arabic speaking Christians – once a vibrant community where western mission work flourished – fall outside the scope of this study because their recent history does not entail language preservation issues.

⁴ The case of the indigenous Jews of the Middle East and their preservation of language in some respects follows the pattern of the Assyrians. The work of the Alliance Universelle Israelite became critical, especially at the turn of the 19th/20th centuries.

⁵ Zindamagazine.com 5 April 2004

petroleum industry and the peripheral commerce that the new wealth engendered.

The effect of such geographical disturbance on language has produced three major changes:

1. The loss of urban compactness and cultural institutions such as manuscript libraries, scribal creation of new books (poetry, history), and the preservation of spoken Syriac.
2. The dominance and development of a diversity of spoken Aramaic dialects in the clutch of isolated villages located in northeast Iraq, northwest Iran, and southeast Turkey, that lie more or less adjacent to each other in a latitudinal direction across the Taurus mountains and the Zagros foothills.
3. The adoption, with re-urbanization, of the institutionalized languages of Middle Eastern states, chiefly Arabic, but also Persian and Turkish through the public education system and for lack of their own educational facilities.

The missionary presence among Assyrians enters the picture during the pre-urbanization phase when most Aramaic speakers lived in villages, some large enough to count as small towns. Although the greatest impact on language comes through Protestant missionaries during the 19th century, preceding them were the Roman Catholic Carmelites and Lazarists, protected and promoted by French diplomatic missions. The Uniate branches of the two indigenous Syriac-based churches – the Chaldean and the Syrian Catholic – formed their divergent institutional hierarchies in 1551 and 1781 respectively. Nonetheless, these Rome affiliated churches remained within the Syriac liturgical traditions: in other words, the monastic and clerical language remained Syriac, a language as intelligible to the general Aramaic dialect speaking congregations as Latin was in a Welsh or Spanish village during the same period of time. Evidence for the urge to express the spoken language in writing comes intermittently as preserved from snatches of poetry written in the 18th century in the town of Alqush, located east of Mosul, on the Nineveh Plain.

The fact remains that until the arrival of American missionaries in 1835, no efforts were made to educate the general populace in a vernacular Aramaic, to print in such a language, to create some standardization among the myriad dialects, and very importantly, to educate girls. The few pious women who could claim any

literacy at all knew some Syriac which they learned as the sisters of a bishop or patriarch, or possibly within a monastic setting where they mainly served as domestics within the patriarchal system.

All this took a dramatic turn with the arrival of Protestant missionaries. Moreover, the success of the Protestant missionaries gave rise to the institution of Catholic run schools that ultimately have provided the main body of literate Assyrians during the mid-20th century, when for a variety of reasons, the Protestants abandoned nurturing Aramaic.

Impact of Educational and Press Networks

In 1885 when the American missionaries commemorated a half-century of endeavor based in the city of Urmiah (Rizaiyeh from 1927 to 1980), located in northwest Iran, the results of their work were apparent in the city itself, in the satellite villages in Iran, and among Assyrians living in Ottoman and even in Russian Tsarist lands. A network of primary schools functioned in every Assyrian village in the region numbering to nearly 100. These schools taught both boys and girls, essentially in one-room schoolhouses. In Urmiah itself and in at least one nearby town, Goetepe, secondary schools also functioned, although at the older level, most students were male. Both male and female boarding schools offered children from the mountain villages and those from farther villages, an opportunity to live at the schools, learn English, and learn such trades as printing, technical skills like accounting, and thus form the core of mechanics, drivers, and petroleum industry lower level white collar workers in Iran, especially through the 1950s when Muslim Iranian government school graduates started to take over the positions held by the trained religious minorities.

In Urmiah several kinds of schools had begun to function: a medical school (1879), a girls' seminary (1842), a boys' seminary (1839). The Urmiah schools provided the teachers, clergy and medical personnel for the entire region. Women graduates often taught in the village schools, the men filled the church pulpits and ran commercial enterprises (especially in retail trade and contracting), while physicians served the medical needs of the broader multi-ethnic community. Most of this educational effort was conducted in

the vernacular Aramaic, in English with a small amount of Persian.

At the 50th anniversary commemoration, an oft-repeated story illustrating the high level of educational achievement is one in which a local Muslim dignitary in attendance wonders why so many women have books in their laps at the ceremony. To his astonishment, 600 women stand to hold the hymnals to sing the multi-versed songs.

In fact, by the end of the 19th century, Assyrians had already begun crossing the Atlantic Ocean to pursue advanced studies in medicine and theology at various colleges in the United States itself. Most returned to their families in northwest Iran, established medical clinics in far flung towns where few or no Assyrians lived – as in the town of Salamas, Maragheh and Saujboulaq (present Mahabad) – and lived prosperously with their families.⁶ They acquired vineyards, orchards and grain fields, and some even purchased parts of villages. All this had been unheard of among Christians in the region prior to their acquisition of an education provided mainly through the network of American-run schools, with a smaller presence of an Anglican and French Catholic primary and secondary school system. The impact of the educational system was such that Assyrians, trained in the Urmiah medical school, provided the main body of native physicians in Iran for the period prior to World War I. Even after the devastation of the Christian community during World War I and the flight from Urmiah of the surviving one-third of their population, upon the return of their straggled remains to northwest Iran, both the government run secondary schools and the municipal hospitals relied on missionary trained Assyrian teachers and physicians to maintain the schools, although no longer as principals or directors.⁷

⁶ See especially the biographies of medical fathers written by their daughters and wives: Elizabeth Joel Campbell, *Yesterday's Children: Growing up in Persia* (Australia, 2000) and Youel Baaba, ed. *An Assyrian Odyssey: covering the journey of Kasha Yacoub Yauvre and his wife Mourassa from Urmia to the court of Queen Victoria 1879-1881 and the exodus of Assyrians from their ancestral home 1918*. Alamo, CA : Youel A Baaba Library, 1998.

⁷ The municipal hospital in Urmiah as well as the male and female secondary schools

The long term impact of the indigenous language education of Aramaic speaking Assyrians lies beyond the extensive educational institutions that flourished up through 1914. Rather the impact lies in the great variety of printed materials in the vernacular Aramaic that flew out of the American mission press and the alphabet shapes that have become nearly universal in the expression of vernacular Aramaic. Wherever Assyrian refugees settled after the first World War, whether in Armenia, Georgia, Moscow, or even Almaty or Baquba, Kirkuk, Mosul, Baghdad or parts of the United States, it was the Aramaic alphabet as developed by the American missionaries in northwest Iran during the 1840s that became the basis for vernacular book and periodicals publication. How did young men and women from New England's elite colleges – Williams, Amherst, Bowdoin, Mount Holyoke and the like – learn enough of the local language not just to run schools, but to translate and print?

Like writing of Aramaic prior to the explosion of literacy promoted by the missionaries, the missionaries too began with the study of classical Syriac upon their arrival in the region. As Justin Perkins, the first American to reside in Persia writes, he was grateful for a "Nestorian spelling book" that he received from missionaries in Malta who had with them a Chaldean (Catholic Aramaic speaker from the Uniate off-shoot of the Nestorian church) who helped in Malta with the production of this book of the Syriac language.⁸

Publishing works in classical Syriac has a 16th century pedigree in Europe. The interest stemmed from a theological interest in New and Old Testament Syriac versions. The earliest sources that the missionaries of all European extraction used were classical Syriac texts. Yet when they arrived in the field, they realized the need for the writing of the vernacular Aramaic

transferred to the Iranian government by agreement with the American missionaries whose presence in northwest Iran was terminated in 1934. Hasan Anzali, *Ūrmīyah dar guzār-i zamān* (Ūrmīyah : Anzālī, 1378 [1999 or 2000]), p. 325.

⁸ Justin Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia, among the Nestorian Christians : with notices of the Muhammedans*. (Saarbrücken : Fines Mundi, 2005, Rpt. 1843).p. 52

spoken by the people around them. Despite this fact, they continued to use the term “Syriac” for the written language that they developed – and to call the people either “Syrians,” in reference to their perceived language name, or to call them by their denominational appellation – “Nestorian.” Early on they did not associate the term “Syrian” with “Assyrian,” as Herodotus does.⁹ Although later in the 19th century they adopted the term Assyrian as well, for the people, the term “Syrians” gained much popularity and continues to confound language terminology. Suffice it to say, that with current understanding of the place of classical Syriac in its Edessan origins, the use of this western Aramaic language term for the northeastern dialects that survived and became written is inappropriate. Rather, for the language committed to writing and still extant to this day as a written medium of a large portion of literate Assyrians, the term Assyrian Aramaic is more accurate than Syriac.

The press began publishing in Urmiah in 1840 with small works such as the “Lord’s Prayer” in the local language. As early as 1836 Perkins voiced the need for a publishing arm for the mission and explained that he did not think that the Muslims would object to there being one in Urmiah in “Syriac,” since there already were already presses in Tehran and Tabriz for Persian.¹⁰ In November 1840 the American press was ready to produce its first real book, a classical Syriac edition of the Psalms. After experimenting with new typefaces, the American mission settled on a standard typeface (cast in the US), that remained in use well to the end of the century when a more modern press was purchased in 1910.

The early American missionaries tried to read in classical Syriac, and preach and speak in the vernacular. Gradually nearly all publishing occurred in the vernacular, full as it was with borrowings from aerial languages such as Persian and Turkish. Among the tracts and books that appeared were schoolbooks, grammars, anti-

⁹ Herodotus states in his Histories that the term Syrian is the Greek form of Assyrian, a fact proven most recently through the discovery of the Turkish site near Adana where the terms are attested in a 5th century AD inscription. See Robert Rollinger, “The Terms ‘Assyria’ and ‘Syria’ Again.” *The Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 2006, pp. 283-287.

¹⁰ Perkins, p. 246.

Catholic tracts, and of course Christian scriptural materials. Perhaps the most effective work, both promoting and witnessing to increasing literacy in the community, was the monthly vernacular Aramaic periodical, *Zahrira d-bahra* (Rays of Light) (1849-1918), the first general periodical to appear in Iran in any language.¹¹

As the missionary field in northwest Iran became crowded with many European groups as well as other American denominational representatives, other presses and other periodicals appeared to serve the Assyrian community. By the 1890s when Russians, the French and then Assyrians themselves established periodicals, the American developed alphabet shapes had gained in usage to such extent that subsequent presses adopted them as well, with slight modifications. This periodical press, reflecting as it does contemporaneous political, social and cultural conditions, is of considerable value in recreating the situation of the Assyrians, and conditions in that critical knot of territory adjoining Turkey, Tsarist Russia and the emerging oil fields of Baku prior to the genocide of WWI. Much effort has gone into gathering as complete a collection of the press as possible.¹² No full set of the earliest periodical is yet available although private libraries in St Petersburg still need to be tapped.

Nationalist Aspirations and the Language Vehicle

Much as the American presence fostered language revival, the political context of the late 19th century allowed the fostering of nationalist sentiments based on an increasing understanding of ancient history coupled with sentiments of ethno-nationalism. This is the period in which Arab nationalism begins, as does Turkishness and Armenian national sentiments. Bulgarians began agitating against Ottoman rule in this period following the example of Greeks who had waged a successful war of independence in 1828.

¹¹ For a review of the debt owed to missionaries for the Assyrian and Kurdish periodical press, see Naby, *The First Kurdish Periodical in Iran*,” *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, Vol. 20, nos. 1&2, pp.215-233.

¹² Rudolf Macuch, in *Geschichte der spat- und neusyrischen Literatur* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976) documents the last twenty years of the earliest periodical as well as others.

Assyrians arrived late to a sense of nationalism and without political experience or organization. Their political structures revolved around tribe, village and church hierarchy all of which competed for leadership of a nascent sense of overall Assyrianness. This divisiveness continues to rule the political life of the community despite the many political setbacks suffered as a result of disunity. Nonetheless, the vernacular language, as developed into a literary vehicle during the late 19th century, and nurtured by teachers from the Urmiah schools in refugee camps and diaspora settlements, has become a source of communication and cultural core value that enhances a sense of united political destiny.

Nor were the American missionaries oblivious to this developing sense of nationhood. Indeed, by their example of respect for the local language, and their reliance and support of Assyrians as Christians in a sea of often antagonistic Muslims, the missionaries encouraged Assyrian aspirations. This was more true for missionaries on location than the direction taken by Protestant missionary circles at home. There the tide was already turning against indigenous Christians.

Western Christian Abandonment of Aramaic

Western Christians had arrived in Muslim lands from India to Egypt with the original thought that they might minister to the masses of Muslims. Very soon they became disillusioned with this objective when faced with laws against apostasy so vigorously enforced in Islam throughout its history. Thus their attention turned to indigenous Christians with two possibilities in mind: 1) that their spiritual and cultural status might be improved, 2) that they might minister to Muslims.

On the first count, the missionaries, both the early Catholics and the later Protestant ones, achieved sporadic success. They ran into the antagonism of the indigenous patriarchates as well as the jealousies aroused by the success of one missionary group over another. Indeed, one common remark attributed to Assyrian youth was "Mister, how much will your give me to be your student?" Nonetheless, the Assyrian experience with missionaries not only allowed them to become literate in their own language, but also to learn enough European languages to advance their economic prospects as merchants and eventually as refugees. One Assyrian,

French mission trained, even served as Iranian ambassador to Paris under Nasruddin Shah Qajar (1848-1896).¹³

As surrogate missionaries, Assyrians in Iran appear to have been no more ready to risk inciting charges of promoting apostasy than were the foreign missionaries. Some worked with Lutheran (German, Scandinavian, American) missionaries among Kurds.¹⁴ But there are as many examples of Assyrian Christians converting to Islam in the late 19th century as there are Kurds or others becoming Christians.¹⁵ In the period of WWI, Assyrian women in particular were frequently forced into Muslim Kurdish households and raised Muslim children. These Kurdified and Muslim Assyrian women sometimes showed up in the medical clinics of Assyrian doctors in Urmiah later on.¹⁶

Therefore, the goals of the original missionary movement into much of the Middle East would have begun and ended with indigenous Christians like the Assyrians had the missionary movement not abandoned this direction. The shift away from fostering indigenous groups came in two stages: first, in Iran, the American mission base in the US took the decision to concentrate on the national language of Iran – Persian – rather than on Aramaic, Armenian or other minority languages. This decision would have been more vigorously implemented in 1915, as was decided, had WWI not interfered with communications and reorganization, as well as made demands on budgets to serve the great number of Christian refugees. After the settlements of the war – well after 1925 – measures became implemented to diversify the locale of missionary educational institutions and concentrate more directly on Tehran, the capital of the country. Likewise, elsewhere in the

¹³ See upcoming article on Nazar Khan by Florence Hellot-Bellier in *Encyclopedia Iranica*.

¹⁴ Naby, "The First Kurdish Periodical in Iran..."

¹⁵ A prime example, is the Chaldean Davud Khan, and another is the editor and publisher of the rabidly anti-Christian newspaper, *Tajadud*. See Edward G. Browne. *The press and poetry of modern Persia: partly based on the manuscript work of Mirzá Muhammad 'Alí Khán "Tarbiyat" of Tabriz*. Cambridge: University Press, 1914, p. 46

¹⁶ Dr. Lincoln Mado anecdote, San Jose, CA. Sept. 2004.

Middle East, educational establishments originating as American Protestant institutions shifted to serve national resources rather than intended to serve as Christian bases in the service of local Christian minorities: examples are the American University of Beirut, and Bogazici University in Istanbul.

Support of Aramaic publishing and schools ceased completely by 1934 when all missionary property was sold to the Iranian government in Urmiah. The printing press had already disappeared during the Kurdish occupation of the city during the early 1920s. No Assyrian printing occurred in Iran until 1946 when a slowly emerging lithograph printing system provided the first printing of the vernacular Aramaic since 1918. By the 1950s, the acquisition of a regular moveable type press in Tehran allowed the publication of regular periodicals, some of great literary value.¹⁷ Interestingly, the leadership of this re-emergence of an Assyrian cultural presence came not from among the Protestants so prominent during the pre-WWI period, but rather from among men trained by the Catholic educational missions in Urmiah and Salamas. Although the latter location disappeared when many priests and nuns were murdered, in Urmiah the Catholic Assyrian school continued to operate under the auspices of the church directly. Thus the language remained alive.

Without similar Protestant support for language and education, ever fewer Protestant children learned to read and write the language. Instead the post WWI generation became proficient in Persian learned at the government schools. By the 1970s existing Assyrian periodicals in Iran, when they appeared, published bilingually (Assyrian Aramaic and Persian), into the period after the Islamic Revolution.¹⁸

Saving Aramaic from Extinction

Today fully half of the Assyrian population in the world lives in diaspora outside the Middle East. No more than 10% live in the areas they

had called their homeland for centuries prior to WWI. The challenge of maintaining language in the face of such upheaval falls mainly to those living outside the restrictions placed on minority languages in Middle Eastern states from Turkey to Syria to Iran and now to Iraq.

Iran (1980) and Syria (1968) have gutted Assyrian community schools by insisting on bringing them into the sphere of the public school systems where they are supervised closely by non-ethnic or decidedly Muslim directors. The teaching of Aramaic in any form is limited to what the governments deem is needed to study religious texts. Cultural content outside religion is proscribed.

In Turkey, there are some glimmers of hope for the language in its classical Syriac form but only under the tutelage of the patriarchal Syrian Orthodox Church which can claim many monasteries visited by the diaspora and popular on the Turkish tourism board sponsored tours. But the number of native Aramaic speakers is no more than 30,000 in the entire country of which five to ten thousand live in Istanbul and only some live in the area serviced by monastic schools (Midyat in southeastern Turkey).

Most responsible for the destruction of the Aramaic communities of the pre-WWI period, and under pressure from the EU to better treat its minorities, Turkey may offer some hope for language support. This support needs to take the form of schools, presses, and cultural institutions as well as the promotion of Aramaic at the university level to promote both cultural research and language educational curriculum development. Such work, spearheaded at a Turkish university such as Dicle (Tigris) University in Diyarbeker, with the support of UNESCO, would help to revive Aramaic as a language of Middle Eastern prestige. Once Aramaic is divorced from its religious moorings, its acceptance as a language of ancient and medieval cultural transmission would stand a better chance of acceptance.

In contemporary Iraq, the situation is complicated not only by the systematic terror inflicted on Christians since August 1, 2004 when the bombing campaign against churches began (now nearly 40 churches have been destroyed), but also by the competition from Kurdish nationalism that by turns destroys Assyrian property and lives and patronizes cooperating members of the community.

¹⁷ The Tehran based *Gilgamesh* (1952-1961) remains the premier literary periodical in vernacular Aramaic language.

¹⁸ For a description of the Assyrian community in Iran as it emerged following the imposition of Shariah law after 1980, see Naby, "Ishtar: Documenting the Crisis in the Iranian Assyrian Community," *MERIA*, Vol. 10 (2006) No.4, pp. 92-102.

Diaspora supported schools in Iraq however, do function with a full twelve year curriculum in a dialect of Aramaic somewhat removed from the one fostered in Urmiah during the 19th century.¹⁹

Here lies another source of hope for the language. But the situation in Iraq is further complicated by the re-entry of American and European missionaries into the picture.

The entry of evangelical missionaries into Iraq, on the heels of, but not with the sanction of the American military or Department of State, has antagonized two sets of Iraqi constituencies: the traditional patriarchal churches and local Muslims. Evangelical Christians in Iraq see a new opportunity for conversion of Muslims. Their operative languages announce their intent: Kurdish and Arabic. They attract converts from among local Christians as well as from Muslims. The open calls to convert to Christianity, and the condemnation of indigenous Christians for NOT converting or “testifying for Jesus” gains Muslim animosity toward all Christians in the country, regardless of whether they are indigenous, foreign, or Muslim converts, and at the same time turns the beleaguered native churches into anti-evangelicals. Further, the use of Arabic and Kurdish by these zealous and well-funded foreigners forces indigenous churches, already beset by language preservation problems, to increasingly adopt Arabic and even Kurdish, for church services and many parts of liturgies. The problem is particularly difficult for the two Uniate churches – Chaldean Catholic and Syrian Catholic – the latter of which shifted to an Arabic medium during the last century and only preserves classical Syriac chants – written in Arabic letters.

The new Christian zealots, much like the recent South Koreans bent on the Christian conversion in war troubled Afghanistan, deliberately jeopardize local Christians while self-righteously comparing themselves to the early Christian martyrs. Unlike the 19th century American missionaries, they see no value in the preservation of Aramaic but rather regard the languages of the majorities as the vehicles of choice. Much as the American missionaries’ gradual secularization in Iran, Turkey, and Lebanon which gained them influence in the broader society through educational and medical institutions, the Evangelicals in Iraq also appeal

to the broader public while condemning and undermining local Christians.

Ultimately the future of Aramaic lies with the Assyrians themselves but to succeed they must have support from international cultural organizations. While continually supported by ever more significant archeological finds throughout the Middle East, Aramaic languishes waiting for a compact population base, and a champion to raise its status.

Aramaic, tied closely to indigenous Christianity, experienced a flowering in the 19th century that involved at times reluctant cooperation among several different missionary groups. Driven into diaspora by anti-Christian sentiments and by war, the chief speakers of Aramaic have been unable to maintain their language as a viable form of communication without a strong communal base in the Middle East and support from a particular state or international body. The abandonment of Aramaic by missionaries in the 20th and 21st centuries has lost to the community the sole means of institutional support in modern times. Unlike Armenian, the other Christian associated Middle Eastern language, Aramaic has not state basis and has not had any for 2000 years. In a global world, even with internet language learning possibilities, the future of the spoken and the written language remains uncertain even as classical Syriac continues to survive at a half dozen universities in Europe and the US (as well as at Kaslik University in Beirut). Unless the Aramaic language gains cultural status as a world heritage language of significance for all Middle Eastern cultures, its survival as a living language is in danger. Divorcing living Aramaic from its Christian base calls for an entirely new prism through which it can be viewed. Whether its status as the oldest continuously spoken and written language of the Middle East will convince cultural institutions to support the language remains to be seen.

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