

## Identity conflicts among Oriental Christian in Sweden

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Cultural diversity, Multilingualism and Ethnic minorities in Sweden

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Résumé de l'article

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## 'Cultural diversity, Multilingualism and Ethnic minorities in Sweden'

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### Identity conflicts among Oriental Christian in Sweden

DAVID GAUNT

**Abstract:** This article deals with the Assyrian, Chaldean and Syrian Orthodox immigrants to Sweden. They form a large group coming mostly from Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. From the start they have had complicated relations with the Swedish government and needed to navigate the country's ever changing immigration and integration policies. The demands of living in diaspora has also aided in splitting the group into two rival sections. One calls itself "Assyrians" and is basically modernist and secular in orientation. The other calls itself "Syrian" and is basically traditionalist and religious in orientation. This bifurcation has had many consequences for the ability of the group to make an impact on the surrounding Swedish society.

# **Cultural diversity, Multilingualism and Ethnic minorities in Sweden \* Kulturell mångfald, Flerspråkighet och Etniska minoriteter i Sverige \* Diversité culturelle, Multilinguisme et Minorités ethniques en Suède**

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## Identity conflicts among Oriental Christian in Sweden

David Gaunt

One of the most remarkable features of modern Turkish history is the nearly complete exodus of its non-Muslim inhabitants. Large tracts of eastern Anatolia that previously had a significant presence of unique Christian sects, is now literally empty of them. Instead the Christians have fled to Western Europe: to Belgium, Germany and Holland, but especially to Sweden. Entire villages and extended families have settled close to each other in new suburbs of the towns and cities of central Sweden. But one of the most puzzling aspects of this mass immigration is the extremely aggressive disagreement between the people over their identity, which hinders their collective integration into Swedish society. The disagreement is not only verbal, but also expresses itself in arson, physical abuse, and even deaths. As a tip-of-the-iceberg symbolism the immigrants have divided over what name they should call themselves – should it be “Assyrians” or “Syriacs”. And this split permeates choices of what church to attend, what name to call the language, what alphabet to use in writing, what TV channel to watch, what football team to root for, and so on. The feud has been going on since the 1970s and shows no sign of abating.

As the Swedish 2009 football season draws to a close, two second division football clubs from Södertälje have a chance to advance into the highest division. They are the Assyrisk FF founded in 1974 and the Syrisk FC founded in 1977, which have been running neck and neck in results. Both started as amateur immigrant clubs recruiting mostly Oriental Christians. This year as the rivalry grew intense Syrisk supporters turned to violence against the slightly more successful Assyrisk team, which now has the best chance to move up. First, their enormous flag (which is also the Assyrian national flag) was destroyed before a match between Assyrisk and Syrisk, then after an Assyrisk victory an arsonist torched the building of the Assyrian Cultural Association, and lately one of the Assyrian players was brutally assaulted by several persons when he stumbled into the wrong sports bar wearing his team-jacket<sup>1</sup>.

Since the late 1960s Christians from the Middle East have formed a large immigrant group in Sweden. From the start the Swedes called them Assyrians, but after a few years it became increasingly clear that that term was controversial, and newcomers vehemently insisted on being called Syriacs. The ethnic group concerned includes members of the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Church of the East (also known as Nestorian), the Uniate Chaldean Church, and Protestant and Catholic derivatives of these organizations. They share a common liturgy based on a variant of the

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<sup>1</sup> Press release October 28, 2009 from the Assyrisk FF.

classical Syriac language, a literary version of the once very widespread Aramaic language. Originally the members spoke in varying degree dialects developed out of this common linguistic root, but over time they have divided and distanced themselves from each other in kaleidoscopic fashion. While classic Syriac is now as dead a language as Latin, some subgroups have preserved local dialects such as Turkey's district of Tur Abdin (where the vernacular is known as Turoyo but termed by linguists neo-west Syriac) and Urmia (neo-east Syriac). Because of population displacement and the cultural influence of more powerful neighbors many have adopted Arabic, Kurdish or Turkish as their language of choice, and usually tradesmen and craftsmen are multilingual.

It is estimated that the Oriental Christian immigrants and their offspring born in Sweden number more than 50,000 persons. Swedish statistics only register country of origin, not religious belief, thus the total figure must be a guess. Most of them arrived from Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran, but some arrived after living for generations in Palestine and even Russia. The experience of living in different countries results in socio-economic differentiation. In-migrants from the Arab countries have as a rule better education and social conditions than the rural villagers from Turkey. But through sheer numbers the rural villagers with their unique Turoyo dialect form the core and the Arab-speakers have been slightly marginalized. Most came directly to Sweden, but very many had first settled in Germany as Gastarbeiter before finally moving to Sweden. Almost all of them reside in the larger towns and cities of central Sweden, where housing was readily available in the newly built suburbs. The largest single concentration in Sweden (and perhaps in Europe) is in the small industrial city of Södertälje (size about 80,000 and located 50 kilometers south of Stockholm), where they make up more than one fifth of the population and this proportion is swelling with a new wave of refugees from Iraq. They are concentrated in the districts of Ronna, Geneta and Hovsjö. Other large concentrations are in Botkyrka, Göteborg, Jönköping, Norrköping, Örebro, Västerås – and typically people from the same village or clan congregate in the same sector, street or apartment building. The churches are often large and usually have large assembly halls for wedding receptions and other community events. In several places there are separate churches for persons who speak Arabic or Kurdish. This sometimes gives the possibility of establishing a parallel community with little contact with Swedish society except in the marketplace.

With astonishing rapidity the Middle Eastern Christians established themselves in small business. They are overrepresented as the owners of dry cleaners and tailors, shoe repairers, corner grocery stores, hairdressers and barber shops, fruit and vegetable stands, candy stores, pizza, kebab and grill restaurants, and so on. Some who began in a very small scale have become

successful and own many enterprises. Typically, the stores and shops they own may be located far away, but they continue to reside in Södertälje<sup>2</sup>.

### *The phases of immigration*

There has been at least two phases in their immigration to Sweden. The first arrival was in 1967 after an appeal by the United Nations refugee commissioner and the World Council of Churches. From that date stateless refugees were taken by the hundreds from Lebanon as part of Sweden's comparatively small official refugee quota. They were taken over in four or five groups of several hundred. They included many persons belonging to the Syriac Orthodox Church and a very few who adhered to the Nestorian Church. The authorities spread the refugees throughout the country, but very early on secondary migration led to a concentration to Södertälje, where a Syriac Orthodox parish was set up in 1971. A Nestorian parish was established 1976 in Jönköping. In this first phase the term Assyrian was universally in use. In phase two, from the mid-1970s, the collective acceptance of refugees stopped and was replaced by spontaneous in-migration of individuals and families coming directly from Turkey or from Germany (which initiated a visa regime). Sweden attempted to limit the in-migration of Turkish Christians in February 1976 by also introducing a visa regime. At the same time all Turkish Christians who were waiting decision on asylum, and even who had been rejected, but were still in the country, were allowed to stay. Swedish law allowed the reunification of relatives to persons who already had a residency permit, and through this loophole many persons arrived in Sweden despite the official negative attitude. From this time on the identity conflict grew and divided the community.

Phase one coincided just after a major turn-about in Swedish immigration policy. While Sweden accepted and even encouraged the immigration of hundreds of thousands of people during the period from World War II up to the late 1960s, the new policy greatly limited the possibility to immigrate in principle only to really deserving political refugees and the size of this quota was strictly regulated. The Swedish climate of opinion was relatively negative to all other sorts of immigration and the media and politicians debated whether or not arriving peoples were "true" refugees or whether they were coming for "economic" reasons, or merely to live a better life. An often-heard argument both then and later was that the government and police must clamp down on "uncontrolled immigration" because otherwise there would be great risk that xenophobia and racism would increase<sup>3</sup>.

The phase two mass arriving of the Oriental Christians from rural Turkey took place precisely during the time when the harshest attitude predominated, and they were met with skepticism as

<sup>2</sup> Pripp, Oscar, *Företagande i minoritet: om etnicitet, strategier och resurser bland assyrier och syrianer i Södertälje*, Stockholm, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Ylva Brune, *Flyktingfrågorna i pressen 1985-1988*, Stockholm: Delegationen för invandrarforskning, 1990.

being not qualified as refugees. Even though they spoke of persecution and ethnically inspired violence, they were often not believed, particularly it was doubted that the entire group was at risk. This skepticism was reinforced by the negative reports of some Swedish diplomats stating that they were not a persecuted minority inside the Republic of Turkey, but were either simulating persecution or merely caught up in the general chaos of eastern Anatolia. Often the Swedish government rejected the applications for asylum of those who were Turkish citizens and made plans to expel them collectively. In the end, however, no mass expulsions took place and in order to find a "bureaucratic-technical" way of accepting them, they were classified as "type B" humanitarian refugees. Although they could stay in the country, this classification meant that their claim to being politically discriminated was never acknowledged, and they were not granted asylum. Whereas many politically oriented Swedes actively engaged themselves for left wing refugees fleeing from military coups in Chile and Argentina. This engagement was not the case for the Turkish Christians who were coming from a formal democracy and the governing party was in the international socialist movement. In Sweden their main sympathizers came from a few free churches and minor right of center political parties. While working for the cause of the Oriental Christians was humanitarily correct, it was quite simply not politically correct.

### *Segregation*

From a geographic or sociological perspective they came to form Sweden's probably most segregated immigrant community. Mass migration to Europe has challenged the community's coherence – which even in their homeland was fragile at best. In the Middle East they formed a long-established native minority living in the area since before the rise of Islam. Although in modern times discriminated and persecuted, they knew the limits of the surrounding society and they developed a collective culture that served as a defense against this hostile environment. This gave them a self-evident unquestioned traditional sectarian identity even though their everyday lifestyle and popular culture differed very little from that of their Muslim neighbors. In contrast, in Europe they confront a society that is complex, changing and confusing, particularly as the level of education is low and includes many adults who can neither read nor write, nor even know their date of birth. Particularly village families were reluctant to send their children to the Turkish schools where the teachers were all Muslims. In Sweden their contentious ethnic and religious identity is little recognized. In response they have worked at establishing a new identity, but this effort has rather split the group instead of uniting it. A primary reaction has been to recreate the collective based on family and clan and the pattern of settlement reflects the success of these efforts. An investigation of 730 Oriental Christian households living in Södertälje in 1976 showed

that they were joined to ten large clans and 15 extended families. The biggest clans numbered between two and three thousand individuals<sup>4</sup>.

Endogamous marriages within the patrilineal kinship and "honor" culture aided the process of collecting relatives from abroad by arranging marriages between young people who had grown up in Sweden with relatives living abroad in Germany or who remained in the Middle East. Occasionally girls as young as 14 years-old were married (the legal age in Sweden is 18) and this resulted in the church's loss of its right to marry. The girl was still in grade school and tried to hide the fact that she was married from her Swedish mates<sup>5</sup>. However, Sweden did recognize marriages that took place in foreign countries, thus it was possible to travel to the Middle East, bribe local authorities and wed two under-aged children who could return to Sweden as husband and wife.

The traditional culture built on extended families living in the same household and clans living in the same residential area. There was a strict separation of sexes and girls were under constant surveillance as their behavior was seen to reflect the family's "honor". A cult of female virginity contrasts to great freedom given to boys. "A woman is very dependent on her husband, her family and as a rule her kin. The extended family network has given security and protection against loneliness and isolation. But our family structure has great disadvantages, such as the clear dominance of men. The Assyrian woman had – compared to other ethnic groups – greater freedom in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Lebanon. Despite this, one cannot say the situation of Assyrian women was not influenced by the prevailing attitudes towards women in these countries. These societies had a discriminating approach to women and excluded women from public community. This approach meant that women lost their political, social, cultural and human rights<sup>6</sup>." In most immigrant groups, integration into Swedish society has been positive for women. They have greater freedom of movement, possibilities to earn money, and for those who are young access to schools and employment outside the home. This, however, is debatable in the case for the Oriental Christian women, particularly those who grew up in Turkey because of their lack of schooling. While 78 percent of adult Swedish women in Södertälje in 1981 worked outside the home, only 26 percent of the Oriental Christian women worked.

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<sup>4</sup> *I utlandet Sverige. En presentation av kristna flyktingar från Mellersta Östern och Turkiet*. Socialstyrelsen redovisar, 1979:6, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> *Invandrarkvinnor – kvinnans situation i några invandrar – och minoritetsgrupper*, Norrköping, SIV, 1982, p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> According to the Activity report of The Assyrian National Association for 1979-1981. Cited in *Invandrarkvinnor – kvinnans situation i några invandrar – och minoritetsgrupper*, Norrköping, SIV, 1982, p. 53.



### *Modernization versus traditionalism*

The major conflict within the community is how to approach to Swedish society. As with any uprooted immigrant group there are varying attitudes towards the host country. In the case of Sweden, this was compounded by the cold and skeptical reception. Thus the immigrants perceived the need for finding some new forms of rooting in the new environment as well as proving themselves worthy of full refugee status. These forms went in different directions. One went toward educating the Swedes about the victimization in their homelands and their historical experience of genocide. In another direction went a desire to revive and maintain traditional culture. In many aspects this latter became a nostalgic response expressing itself as a symbolic return to certain remembered features of the distant past. This nostalgic symbolism distorts history, but gratifies the individual and group. Unfortunately, there was no agreement over this memory work and this played on existing divisions within the group.

The main disagreement was over naming. Some argued for "Assyrian" and connected with the mighty and ferocious Assyrian Empire and thus interpreted their misfortunes as stemming from being perceived as a threat by their neighbors. From history, they emphasized the Ottoman massacres of 1895, the genocide of World War I, the 1933 massacres in Iraq, and the "betrayal" at the Paris Peace Conference that did not give them the state they believed they had been promised. The use of Assyrian is normally explained as an umbrella term for ethnic national identity regardless of sect or dialect.

Others argued for "Aramaic" identity and connected with their early adherence to Christianity and the probability that Jesus spoke an Aramaic dialect. Thus they interpreted their modern misfortunes to belonging to a religious minority in a Muslim world. The use of this symbolic term, however, does open for union between the various sects, because it argues that all originally spoke the same language.

Those who insist on "Syrian" or "Syriac" identity connect to the territory of the modern state of Syria, where the Syriac Orthodox patriarch resides, and at the same time it rejects solidarity with similar ethnic groups that belong to other sects. They maintain that the Greek geographic term "Syria" was a translation of the Old Testament "Aram". They also maintain that once the Christian church was established, the word "Syrian" changed to mean Christian pure and simple<sup>7</sup>. At the same time they argue that there can be no continuity with the ancient Assyrians since they had all died out. Instead they claim that Assyrian was a term invented by the British in order to form the Christian youth into colonial troops in order to support British imperialism in mandate Iraq<sup>8</sup>. The

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<sup>7</sup> Ishak Akan, *En kort introduktion av syrianerna/araméerna och syrisk-ortodoxa kyrkan*, Stockholm, 1995.  
André Dupont-Sommer, *Araméerna*, Göteborg, 1997, originally *Les araméens*, Paris, 1949.

Syriac group plays down its misfortunes and accentuates a continuity of orientation with the Middle East.

Historians do not find it surprising that nations have myths about the past. All nations have some sort of imagined historical community that cannot be proved, and has to be believed. But in the Oriental Christian identity conflict much time and effort is also dedicated to destroying the rival group's myth of national origin, which naturally can be easily questioned, since some of the aspects are more than three thousand years old. All nostalgic myths are paradoxical. They have a positive side because the symbolic remembrance gives a pleasing identification, but at the same time the rival forms of remembrance conflict with each other and all of them contain distortions of reality exposing them to attack from the rival interpretation. Broadly generalizing, using the term Assyrian symbolizes a decidedly politicized secular and national outlook. But using the term Syriac symbolizes a non-political outlook building on a specific religious base with an interest in the past, and preservation of language and culture. The main thrust of the Syriac critique is that Assyrians have territorial ambitions and aim at establishing their own state. In response, the Assyrians accuse the Syriacs of being under the thumb of traditional clan chiefs who keep their underlings in a state of ignorance<sup>9</sup>.

Movement to Sweden opens up a new world. On one side, are those who can take advantage of new opportunities – the more successful businessmen, professionals, and intellectuals. These make up a new “modernizing” Assyrian self-made-men social stratum. Their claim to speak for the people is based on voluntary organizations in which the leadership is democratic. Thus they were the first to see the benefit of the modernizing opportunities in multicultural Sweden for economic support for activities of foreign immigrants. On the other side, are those Syriacs who attempt to preserve their traditional inherited leadership roles from the Middle East as clan or village headmen and higher clerics. Historically, one or two leaders of a large clan would function as the sole intermediaries between their group and the Ottoman or Turkish authorities. For this purpose a few boys from good families would learn Turkish and have some schooling, and would “represent” their people in relation to the rulers. These make up a “traditional” social structure that filters contacts with the outside society and rejects assimilation and supports segregation. To a certain extent the traditionalists have an ingrown advantage since the entire group is accustomed to surviving in isolation within a society in which discrimination is widespread and where the state often turns a blind eye to persecution.

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<sup>8</sup> See for instance an article from 1952 by the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Ephrem I Barsoum, *Den syrianska nationens namn*, in *Bahro Suryoyo*, vol 24:10, 2003, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Atman, Sabri, *Assyrier-Syriener*, Norsborg, Assyriska kulturcentrum, 1996.

France also has a significant Oriental Christian community. But in the French case the split over integration is not so predominant. There are several reasons. First, the plurality is Catholic and thus there is no difference from the dominant religion. Second, the earliest communities were established many generations back, at the time of the First World War. Third, France had many cultural contacts with them through missionaries. Many professionals, military and priests knew the French language. Fourth, a large number had served France as soldiers in mandate Syria and had helped to open up sparsely populated areas in the northeast provinces. The French mandate authorities had even made political promises of autonomy in return for this military service. Fifth, most of the immigrants to France came from Nestorian or Chaldean communities that had no problem with identifying themselves as Assyrians – these were groups originating in the Hakkari Mountains of Turkey or Urmia district of northwestern Iran. Sixth, the immigrants are spread over France and there is only one place with a concentration: that of several thousand Chaldean Catholics who moved after 1970 to the Paris suburb of Sarcelles. All of this differs from Sweden, where the Lutheran religion differs greatly from the Orthodoxy of the Syrians, there was little previous cultural contact, and no previous connection to the Swedish state.

Previously, Sweden had had very little contact with the Syriac Orthodox population of Turkey. However, they had had contact with the Nestorian Church of the East for some time through missionaries who were based in the Caucasus provinces of Russia and in northwestern Iran. The Lutheran mission made some converts among the Iranian Nestorians in the district of Urmia and some of them visited Sweden in the period just before World War I<sup>10</sup>. The Nestorians had for centuries been identified by Europeans as "Assyrians" and used that term for them when addressing an international audience<sup>11</sup>. The core of the Nestorian Church was in Turkey's isolated Hakkari Mountains where they lived in tribes led by a combined religious and secular head, the Mar Shimun. There were also many Nestorians living just across the border in northwestern Iran. In the early modern era the Nestorian Church split and one group united with the Roman Catholic Church to form the Uniate Chaldean Church. Both adopted the label Assyrian, usually in the hyphenated form "Assyro-Chaldean"<sup>12</sup>. During World War I many Nestorian tribesmen fought as

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<sup>10</sup> Hultvall, John, "Mission och vision i Orienten. Svenska missionsförbundets mission i Transkaukasien-Persien 1882-1921." in *Studia missionalia Uppsaliensia*, no. LIII., Stockholm, Verbum, 1991. Zeki Yalcin, "Svenskar och assyrier/syrianer kring sekelskiftet 1900", in *Multiethnica*, 29, 2003, 24-28.

<sup>11</sup> Surma D'Bait Mar Shimun. *Assyrian Church Customs and the Murder of Mar Shimun* (reprint New York, Vehicle Editions, 1983). Werda, Joel E., *The Flickering Light of Asia or the Assyrian Nation and Church*. The author, 1924.

<sup>12</sup> Yacoub, Joseph, *La Question Assyro-Chaldéenne, les Puissances Européennes et la Société des Nations (1908-1938)*. 3 volumes (unpublished) Ph. D. thesis, Université Lyon II: UER des Sciences Historiques et Géographiques, 1984.

allies of Russia and Britain and vague promises were given of independence. During the fighting the Assyrian tribes were forced out of their mountain homelands with great loss of life and were scattered in refugee camps after the war. The League of Nations and Britain tried various schemes to find a new home for the Assyrians, but these failed and when Iraq became independent in 1933 its army massacred several Assyrian villages and the town of Simele. The memory of this massacre is commemorated in the beginning of August each year. All of the trials and tribulations of the Assyrians were covered in the international press and there were parliamentary debates in Britain as well as deep internal discussions at the League of Nations. Eventually, they were relocated to the Khabur River valley in mandate Syria.

### *Tur abdin*

By far the largest proportion of the Oriental Christians in Sweden is that of those originating in the Tur Abdin district of Turkey's southeast province of Mardin along the border to Syria. Until recently this district made up a nearly compact Christian enclave inside a province otherwise dominated by Kurdish Muslims. The main town of Tur Abdin is Midyat, which is a commercial and administrative center serving an agricultural upland of farm villages. Traditionally there were dozens of largish Christian villages each with one or more churches<sup>13</sup>. Now there are very few Christians left and only one really large village, Midun, remains Christian.

The modern history of the Tur Abdin is grim. Widespread persecution in the late Ottoman Empire culminated in general massacres during 1915, know as the year of Sayfo (the sword)<sup>14</sup>. The Assyro-Chaldean delegation to the Paris Peace Conference calculated that 250,000 had been killed during the war and a large part came from the Tur Abdin where villages were systematically destroyed. The survivors continued a hard life in the new Republic of Turkey, which pursued a radical Turkish nationalist policy and has never recognized these Christians as a specific national minority. Instead they have had to withstand efforts to classify them as "Semitic Turks". Out-migration began in the 1960s as part of the general movement of guest-workers to Western Europe. Many Christians had craft trades in the production of textiles and tailoring, and many got jobs in the south German confection industries.

The first out movement coincided with a large Muslim demonstration and a commercial blockade against Christian shops in Midyat in 1964. This was sparked when NATO warned Turkey not to intervene in the Cyprus crisis, which caused great anti-Christian opinion in Turkey. The

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<sup>13</sup> Anschütz, Helga, *Die syrischen Christen vom Tur 'Abdin. Eine altchristliche Bevölkerungsgruppe zwischen Beharrung, Stagnation und Auflösung*. Würzburg, Augustinus Verlag, 1985.

<sup>14</sup> Gaunt, David, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors. Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I*, Piscataway, Gorgias Press, 2006.

demonstration was organized by local public servants and included military in civilian clothing. Posters were printed saying: "This shop belongs to a non-Muslim" and "Turks, don't shop here"<sup>15</sup>. The anti-Christian sentiments grew into a mass movement in the wake of the escalating Turkish-Greek conflict over Cyprus, the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war 1975, and the declaration of martial law in the military campaign against the PKK guerilla, the military coup of 1980 - all of which intensified the latent Muslim-Christian friction. An attempt to inventory the murders of Assyrians came to 62 during the period from 1976-2004, of which 12 murders took place in 1990 and 10 in 1993. The victims included six village headmen<sup>16</sup>. On January 13 1993 members of Hizbollah, a group that cooperated with the Turkish military in the war against the Kurdish PKK, stopped two minibuses owned by Christians and machine-gunned 13 people among them 5 Assyrians. This led to demonstrations and a hunger strike in central Södertälje against the "mass murder of Assyrians in Turkey." Strangely, there was very little Swedish media attention and the Assyrian community expressed great disappointment<sup>17</sup>. The editor of *Hujådå* commented that the lack of attention was a form of collective punishment: "Assyrian youth has begun to lose faith in Swedish democracy, and feels insulted, abandoned and deeply disappointed."

### *Name question*

As mentioned the few Swedish early contacts with Oriental Christians had been with the Nestorians, who were also the first sect to adopt Assyrian identity. When large numbers of Oriental Christians arrived in Sweden, it was thus understandable that they were identified as Assyrians and there actually were some in the first stateless refugee group from Lebanon. This was a mixed group of 205 with some Nestorians coming from the Arab countries, but with a majority of Syriac Orthodox originating in Turkey and living "illegally" in Lebanon.

The original choice of the name Assyrian was natural. Since World War I news of widespread atrocities against them was well known. They were also notorious as an insoluble refugee problem for the League of Nations in the 1930s. Thus the adoption of Assyrian by all of the Oriental Christians increased their credibility in the eyes of the Swedes as true political refugees as there was history of persecution in several countries. In addition, there was a political movement for union of all Oriental Christians. One of its major figures was Naum Faik who was born in Diyarbakir (as a Syriac Orthodox) but emigrated to New Jersey and joined the many Iranian Nestorians already there. He published a journal called "Union" which aimed at creating a political

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<sup>15</sup> "Förföljelserna i Turabdin 1964", in *Hujådå*, 26:2, February 2003, pp 8-9.

<sup>16</sup> Mirza, Abrohom, *Dokumentation über Ermordungen und Verfolgungen der assyrischen Christen in der Türkei 1976-2007*. Wiesbaden, Assyrian Democratic Organization, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Barbasso, Ilhan, "Politiskt fiasko men moralisk seger", *Hujådå*, 16:3, March 1993, p. 4.

movement free from the constraints of religion. Once he arrived in America, Faik changed his self-identification and urged all brothers to unite under the Assyrian umbrella. "These brothers are Nestorians, Chaldeans, Maronites, Catholics, Protestants... I remind these groups that their pasts, their race, their blood and flesh, their tongue... We must work to exalt the name of the Assyrians... Our primary goal is to secure the rights of the Assyrians<sup>18</sup>".

But very soon a conflict arose in Sweden over identity when the mass migration of rural villagers made its impact. At first everyone had accepted the designation Assyrian, as it was practical and had an international recognition. Adherence was particularly strong among persons with a secular political orientation. However, growing numbers of immigrant families coming from a traditional rural village environment in Turkey continued to be bound to their church, their priest, the religious calendar, and cleric led rites. According to oral history, the name conflict began in Germany in the 1960s when high religious leaders protested against the use of the word Assyrian, but instead insisted on the term "Aramaic", on the basis of continuity of language from Biblical times. This conflict then spread to the other diaspora. But it turned out that even the term Aramaic was problematic.

The patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox church traveled from Damascus to Sweden in 1977 and proclaimed that no true believer should ever use the term Assyrian or Aramean, but only the name they used back home, namely Suryoyo. Plans were made to excommunicate 60 persons who publicly termed themselves Assyrians, but this was stopped in the final moment. Street demonstrations and fist-battles took place several times over the name question, and one leading Assyrian was murdered<sup>19</sup>. The patriarch pushed for the use of the word Suryoyo as an identity, and while it was used for a few years it never gained much currency in Swedish. Instead the neologism "Syrianska", took hold as an adjective.

There is now a network of rival national organizations, and each has many local associations. Organizations in the Assyrian network are older as the mother organization was formed in the 1950s as a parallel to and reaction to Pan-Arabism in the Middle East. From the beginning it had a political goals and was secular, or at least worked to overcome the division caused by the rival churches. Intellectuals who had fled from Turkey and who were critical to the church leadership started the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO) in 1957 in the Syrian town of Qamishli. The Swedish national Assyriska Riksförbundet was established in Sweden 1977 as a union of 13 local associations. This union publishes the journal *Hujådå* (Union), which is a continuation of the journal founded by Naum Faik during World War I. Associated to the Assyrian network is the

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<sup>18</sup> Murat Fuat Çıkkı, *Naum Faik ve Süryani Rönesansı*, Istanbul, Belge, 2004, p. 67.

<sup>19</sup> Andersson, Stefan, *Assyrierna. En bok om präster och lekmän, om politik och diplomati kring den assyriska invandringen till Sverige*, Stockholm, Tiden, 1983.

Assyrian-Chaldean-Syriac Association (ACSA) which has a website and a weekly TV program *Qolo Hiro* (Free Voice). There are also branches linked with, the Assyrian Liberation Party (GFA, also known as *Furkono* whose Swedish branch was founded in 1995), Bethnahrin's Patriotic Revolutionary Party (DMB founded 1986-88), and the Assyrian Universal Alliance (1968).

One network tries to position itself in the middle, namely the Syriansk-Assyriska Riksförbundet which was relatively recently founded by persons who had belonged to the small armed revolutionary groups in Mesopotamia. The association strives to unite what it terms the "Chaldean.Syriac-Assyrian" people. It publishes in Sweden the journal *Renyo Hiro* (Free Thought). It established an international TV satellite channel Suroyo Tv in 2004. In the same year the European Syriac Union was formed in order to represent the group on the level of international politics.

The Syriac network is younger, and many activities appear to have been a reaction to Assyrian initiatives. As just mentioned it even took some time to establish a common name since Suryoyo proved too strange and the patriarch had also rejected Aramaic. Even the term Syrian Orthodox was complicated since it associated with the state of Syria. In 2000 the church officially changed its English language name to Syriac Orthodox. The Swedish national union is the Syrianska Riksförbundet (which started 1978 under the name Suryoyo Riksförbundet). It publishes the journal *Bahro Suryoyo* (The Syrian Light). After the initiative of American and Swedish groups a Syriac Universal Alliance was formed in 1983. In general the Syriac associations are very close to the Syriac Orthodox Church and has fewer activities or expressions of opinion with a political nature. Inside this network is now a satellite TV channel Suryoyo-Sat.

Even though the patriarch pronounced against the term Assyrian, there are even some clergymen who use it, but as a term for ethnic belonging. The religious involvement raided a theoretical curiosity into an everyday problem. Those who seem to have suffered the most are the young generation born in Sweden<sup>20</sup>. One can only speculate about the degree to which the identity problems of the second generation contribute to the many serious youth problems played out in Södertälje.

The Swedish authorities were taken by surprise by the intensity of the name conflict. Several scientific investigations were commissioned in order to explain the differences. Linguists would trace the terms Assyrian and Syrian back to the ancient Greeks as a general word for peoples who

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<sup>20</sup> Freyne-Lindhagen, Marianne, *Identitet och kulturmöte – syrianska kvinnors exempel*, Sociologiska institutionen, Lunds universitet, 199. Deniz, Fuat, and Perdikaris, Antonios, *Ett liv mellan två världar. En studie om hur assyriska ungdomar som andra generationens invandrare i Sverige upplever och hanterar sin situation*, Örebro universitet, Forum för migration och kultur, 2000.



lived in regions between the Persians in the east and the Greeks in the west<sup>21</sup>. They are thus synonyms. Further investigation dealt with the differences between the version of modern Aramean spoken in Tur Abdin and the version spoken by the Nestorians and Chaldeans in Iran's Urmia district, which are far from mutually understandable. Other reports treated the differing theology of the Syrian Orthodox and Nestorian churches and the historical reasons for their mutual antagonism and isolation. By the early 1980s the Swedish authorities had stopped their exclusive use of the term Assyrian, and in most cases adopted the term Syrian or used the hyphenated "Assyr/Syrian".

### *The Church conflict*

The main cause of concentration to Södertälje was that this was the first place where the Syriac Orthodox church opened a parish in 1971. A few years later the town became the seat of a bishop for "Sweden and the rest of Scandinavia". The churches became the center of the community and their assembly halls were used for family celebrations, community meals and even profane music events. Belonging to a church became very important. However, divisions between immigrants were used to exclude persons deemed unworthy through excommunication. Thus banning persons became a weapon in the clash between Syriacs and Assyrians. The bishop resigned in 1987 after long conflicts with the church's board of governors. This can also be seen as a conflict between modernists and traditionalists, but with a surprising twist. The modernizing bishop argued for democratic elections of members of the board of governors and equal treatment of all parish members irrespective if they called themselves Syriacs or Assyrians. But the board itself was made up of Syriac traditionalists who were associated with powerful clans and who wanted to excommunicate all persons who belonged to "Assyrian" associations.

The Patriarch appointed a new bishop Mar Julius Abdullah Gallo Shabo to become "Archbishop of Sweden and the rest of Scandinavia". Even this new bishop came into conflict with the clan-run board of governors on the issue of democratizing the church's internal structure and lifting the exclusion of "Assyrian" members. The bishop dissolved the board of governors and suspended parish priests who refused to serve "Assyrians". In turn the suspended priests and the former governors accused the bishop of abusing his authority and they initiated a legal trial to regain their positions and eject the bishop from his residence. The board succeeded in this trial. In May 1990 an arsonist set fire to the bishop's residence while he was inside.

The various conflicts and the trial split the Syriac Orthodox Church in Sweden into two factions – one supported the bishop, the other the governors. A synod was summoned in 1991 to resolve

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<sup>21</sup> Knutsson, Bengt, *Assur eller Aram – språklig, religiös och nationell identifikation hos Sveriges assyrier och syrianer*, Norrköping, Statens invandrarverk, 1982.



the problem and this decided in favor of the bishop. However, the displaced board of governors continued to pressure the patriarch and in an unprecedented move he appointed Mar Benjamin Atas as "bishop vicar" in 1996. Significantly, bishop Abdullahad did not attend the initiation ceremony. Benjamin received immediate support from the Syriac faction, while by default Abdullahad sought and got the Assyrian faction's support. Thus the town now has two separate bishops who are not on speaking terms and they use their sermons to preserve and deepen animosity. Most of the 40 odd parishes in Sweden continued to adhere to the first appointed bishop, but some do adhere to the "vicar bishop"<sup>22</sup>.

This split was primarily over the social control over the local community. The secular board of governors and bishop Benjamin were associated with the largest Tur Abdin clans and wished to use the church to exclude the Assyrian modernists who also stood for democratization of the immigrant community. Bishop Abdullahad grew up in Syria and though his ancestors came from a Tur Abdin village, they were in opposition to the leading clans. The church itself did not, in the final analysis, know which faction to support, so the compromise became two rival bishops belonging to the same religion both residing in Södertälje. This move, as well as the preceding struggle between the board and the bishop, of course, weakened the authority of the church in relation to the outside community. However, the parish church because of its many services for marriages, baptisms, funerals, memorial gatherings and religious holidays remains the center of local social life.

### *The cultural conflict*

One can add other difficult problems. Swedish school law gives families the right to have their children taught at least some hours in their "home language". In this case, it should have been Turoyo, the vernacular spoken in Tur Abdin, but through the influence of the clergy, this was instead the classical Syriac of medieval religious texts. Classical Syriac also has a unique and difficult alphabet. Thus the children were being taught a different language, unintelligible to their parents under the guise of being the home-language. Some teachers ignored this and taught in the Turoyo vernacular, even though there was no recognized standard grammar, and this was one of the major issues over which the Assyrian and the church-loyal Syriac fractions clashed.

The lack of resolution of the name question spilled over into media communications broadcasting. A telling example is the attempt by the Syriac Association to stop the Swedish radio foreign language broadcasting aimed at the Oriental Christians. The program, at first named *Shlomo* (Hello) and then *Qolo* (Voice), began in 1985 using the Turoyo dialect. Gabriel Afram,

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<sup>22</sup> Deniz, Fuat, *En minoritets odyssé. Upprätthållande och transformation av etnisk identitet i förhållande till moderniseringsprocesser. Det assyriska exemplet*, Uppsala, Department of Sociology, 1999, pp. 402-404.

journalist and poet, was the anchor and he had once been chairman of the Assyrian Association. He is also the compiler of the only Swedish-Turoyo dictionary<sup>23</sup>. In scheduling the Turoyo program was billed as being in the Assyrian language. The Syrian Association engaged lawyers and petitioned that the billing be changed arguing that there was no such thing as an Assyrian language. They proposed "Turabdingska" instead, which is in effect simply a Swedish translation of Turoyo<sup>24</sup>. This petition was rejected, but the process itself indicates how even trivial matters are blown up and incorporated into the on-going feud. Further, the factions do not hesitate to appeal to the Swedish authorities for intervention in this confusing fight.

In general those who reject the term Assyrian try to follow a customary life style. A very few are engaged in Swedish politics, as a rule inside the small right-wing Christian Democratic Party. It expresses intellectual interest in the early church, and the medieval Syriac theological literary renaissance (Michael the Syrian, Barhebraeus and others) and keeps its profile low in political situations. The "Assyrian" group is somewhat more "modern" and regularly engages in secular issues such as the commemoration of the World War I Ottoman Turkish genocide and the Simele massacre in Iraq in August 1933, and have as hero the writer Naum Faik, humanitarian issues for non-Muslims in the Middle East, and so on. There are politicians among them. Two belonging to the Social-Democrat Party are members of parliament. One of them was formerly Minister of Education and now serves as party secretary.

Among the Assyrian group are those who would modernize the language instruction by abandoning the centuries old Syriac alphabet any replace it with Latin letters, and also print books in Turoyo<sup>25</sup>. Another Assyrian linked group is the Sayfo Center, which has the single issue of getting the World War I genocide politically recognized and it has organized hearings in the Swedish parliament and gives lectures on the subject. The Assyrian-Chaldean-Syriac Association is known for its radical secular orientation and it runs a weekly one-hour TV program and it supports research and publications dealing with modern history.

What can be termed a war of citations marks the various books, pamphlets and journals published by the Oriental Christians. Through the selective use of citations from the Bible, classical Greek authors, cuneiform tablets, inscriptions on mosaics and so on, authors try to prove a connection to Aram (meaning Syria) or to the Assyrian empire. Usually the articles are not much more than a string of citations, which fail to convince anyone who is not already a true believer<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Afram, Gabriel, *Svensk-assyrisk ordbok, Sfar mele swidoyo-syryoyo*, Skärholmen, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Afram, Gabriel, "Matebonwotho" (*Reports*). Väsby, Dolabani kulturförening, 2006, pp. 21-32.

<sup>25</sup> Betsawoce, Jan, *Svensk-nyvästsyrisk lärobok*. Swedi-Şurayt, Nsibin, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> For a critique see Afram Barryakoub, *Brokig historia. En bok om assyrierna från forntid till nutid*, Arjovi, 2008, p. 73-74.

Recently there was great political confusion over a proposed public-financed monument over the victims of the 1915 genocide. The problem was – what was to be the inscription? If it said Assyrian genocide, then the Syrians would not agree. If it stated Assyrian/Syrian, then the Chaldeans and others would feel left out. No group, however, could risk being seen as against the memorial. In the end the proposed monument had the text in a circular form (so that no group could be perceived as coming first) with the term “Syrian Chaldean Assyrian” with no comma or hyphen between the names.

In several ways the feud in Sweden appears to be the continuation of conflicts that existed in Turkey. This preservation was made possible because of the mass nature of the migration, since entire clans, families and villages were involved and they opted for living in close propinquity. Many of the rural immigrants had very little education and quite often women had no schooling at all<sup>27</sup>. The family structure was patriarchal with many generations living under the same roof and with a strict separation of male and female spheres. Couples were usually very young at marriage and had many children. Marriages were arranged and the couples were often cousins. In towns and villages families were associated into clan-like structures and these clans have survived the transfer to Sweden.

The Christian clan structure in Turkey is similar to that of the Kurds<sup>28</sup>. In themselves all Middle Eastern clan structures tend to be fertile growing ground for division and conflict. Usually the basic conflict revolves around who should lead the group and it is fought out between rivals, who are also close kin. The winner expects what van Bruinessen calls “primitive loyalty”, that is unquestioned. Clan loyalty can be inherited over the generations and can even be used so that a member acts in a way that is contrary to his or her best interest – that is to say it can have a political aspect. But rivalry between the various clans (in any one place there are usually two dominant groupings) makes it impossible for the community to unite for a single cause. Total loyalty to a leader is usually not important in times of peace and harmony. Instead, clan leaders actually need to create a conflict with other groups in order to show the necessity of his leadership and the wisdom of total loyalty. Thus the conflict over the Assyrian identity is on one level a result of power play within the immigrant community, and if the name issue did not exist, a similar conflict might have emerged in its place. In some ways the fight between Assyrianism and Syriacism is an opposition between modernity and tradition (more or less) and this can be found in any immigrant group, but it has reached a most vicious level stage among the Oriental Christians in Sweden.

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<sup>27</sup> *Assyrier – vilka är de?* Forskningsrapport 45, Göteborgs universitet, sociologiska institutionen, 1977.

<sup>28</sup> Bruinessen, Martin van, *Agha, Shaikh and State. The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*. London, Zed, 1992.