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Hostages in the homeland, orphans in the diaspora : identity discourses among the Assyrian/Syriac elites in the European diaspora

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Hostages In The Homeland, Orphans In The Diaspora

Identity Discourses Among The Assyrian/Syriac Elites In The European Diaspora

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Various images of pupils and teachers at the Assyrian Orphanage in Adana, 1919-1921. Source: Modern Assyrian Research Archive.

Map of the 'Homeland'. Source: Malik Yaqo d Malik Ismael (1964).

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HOSTAGES IN THE HOMELAND,
ORPHANS IN THE DIASPORA

IDENTITY DISCOURSES AMONG THE ASSYRIAN/SYRIAC ELITES IN THE EUROPEAN DIASPORA

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van
de graad van Doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,
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Prof. dr. H. Teule

Dr. W. Hofstee

To my parents Seyde and Barsaumo

To Yauno and Soner

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Preface

Ever since my parents settled in the Netherlands, I grew up with the 'name question' of 'my people' hovering in the background. At a different level, this topic confronted me even more starkly during my study at the Free University of Amsterdam in the mid-1990s. This was also the period in which I began to have access to the Internet, of which I enjoyed making use with the greatest excitement, especially because it offered the opportunity to communicate with 'community members' elsewhere in the world, through both e-mail and Internet forums. Although this time my confrontation with the 'name question' was at virtual level, I experienced it more intensely. Perhaps because individuals from different parts of the world had something to say about this topic; the extent of the boundaries was therefore unlimited.

The 'name question' was articulated in the symbolism and texts produced on Internet websites, in private e-mails but first and foremost in the Internet forums where the different discourses of individuals and institutions met and engaged in a burning debate, or so it seemed. It was in this period that I began to think actively about the 'name question' and to participate in the discussions taking place, especially at virtual level. Intellectually, I experienced it as a challenging question; the lively debate revealed the diverse dimensions and the difficulties in finding a clear cut solution for something which has been experienced as a central question in the life of Assyrians/Syriacs in the modern era. When my MA thesis supervisor, Joost van Loon, asked me why I was not pursuing a PhD, it was easy for me to choose the topic. Ever since I made that choice, I began to engage in this topic at a different level; I wrote a preliminary research proposal and tried to find funding but without success. In the mid-1990s, there were no universities in the Netherlands interested in this question and Assyrian/Syriac institutions did not have the financial means to fund such a project, although they expressed their moral support. This changed almost a decade later, when researchers at Leiden University planned two different projects in relation to this question. Heleen Murre-van den Berg contacted me about writing a research proposal and participating in a project based on this topic which she had planned but could not take place. It was through her that I got in touch with Bas ter Haar Romeny who had begun a broad

project with a more historical focus for the purpose of studying identity formation among the members of the Syriac Orthodox Church. He invited me to join in and add a modern component to the PIONIER research project 'The formation of a communal identity among West Syrian Christians' which has been directed by him and made possible by the Dutch Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). I would like to thank Ter Haar Romeny for the freedom with which he entrusted me in developing this research project. The fieldwork was made possible by a generous grant from the *Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions* (LISOR) and also a grant from the *Leids Universiteits Fonds* (LUF). I would like to express my gratitude to them for their financial support. The *Amsterdam School for Social Science Research* (ASSR, University of Amsterdam) provided an inspiring learning environment during the period in which I attended several courses there. In this context, I would also like to acknowledge the pleasant involvement of Ernestive van der Wal in the early period of my research. I am very thankful to Rosemary Robson who has put great efforts into the English correction of this work and I have valued her personal involvement and moral support.

Here I also would like to mention the late *juffrouw* Ida Kormelink (Enschede) who taught me in Dutch classes with great love and dedication during my first year in the Netherlands. Joost van Loon (Free University of Amsterdam) also gave his lectures with great dedication and inspired me wonderfully. And, was it not he who asked me the question: 'Why don't you pursue a PhD?' Had he not done so, I would never have thought about such an opportunity. Thank you Joost! I should also like to remember a pleasant and talented colleague who passed away too early as the consequence of a tragedy, the sociologist Fuat Deniz (Örebro University). I enjoyed the short period we worked together. It was a bitter moment in my life when I heard the news that my colleague Fuat was no longer with us. Fuat, your memory will live on among us.

I wish to thank various individuals and organizations which have been supportive in the process of conducting my research and writing my thesis. I started off doing research in three countries: the Netherlands, Germany and Sweden. In the Netherlands, I wish to thank the *Assyrische Mesopotamische Vereniging Enschede* (AMVE) and *Platform Aram* for opening their doors to me when I wished to attend their activities.

In Germany, I would like to mention the organizations *Aramäer Gutersloh*, *Mesopotamien-Verein Gutersloh*, *Tur Abdin Gutersloh, Föderation der Aramäer in Deutchland* (FASD) and *Zentralverband der Assyrischen Vereinigungen in*

Deutschland (ZAVD). My deepest gratitude goes to Helga Anschütz and her husband Boulos Harb who welcomed me to study their visual archive. Furthermore, I am very thankful to my *qarito* Shmuni and her husband, Habib Gabriel, with whom I stayed during my fieldwork in Gütersloh. They offered me a warm home and their friendship: *taudi sagi*! I am also grateful to some other friends with whom I stayed during shorter visits.

I spent most of my fieldwork time in Sweden and owe much to the organizations and people there who have been supportive of my research in several ways. I wish to thank the following organizations for their co-operation: *Assyrian Democratic Organization*, *Assyrien Kulturcenter i Botkyrka*, *Assyriska föreningen i Södertälje, Assyriska fotboll föreningen, Assyriska kvinnoförbundet, Assyriska riksförbundet i Sverige, Assyriska ungdomsförbundet, Syrianska/Arameiska akademiker förbundet, Syrianska Assyriska akademiker i Sverige, Syrianska föreningen i Södertälje, Syrianska fotboll Club, Syrianska riksförbundet, Syrianska ungdomsförbundet*, *Syriac Universal Alliance*, *Suroyo TV* and *Suryoyo SAT*. I would like to express my special gratitude to the *Assyriska riksförbundet* for the access it provided to its archive and Tomas Beth-Avdalla and Hanibal Romanos for their kind help in providing me with material from the *Modern Assyrian Research Archive* (MARA). Last but not least, I am deeply indebted to Jan Beth Sawoce (Mesopotamian Library, Södertörn University) who has been of immeasurable help throughout the period of my research. He has always been there whenever I needed any material from the *Mesopotamian Library*, which he set up with tireless efforts. I admire his dedication and hope that he can continue doing this work for future researchers.

In the Stockholm area, specifically in Södertälje, many people have been hospitable and helpful during the course of my research for which I am very grateful. I would like to mention some of them and thank them for their enormous effort and support. To start with, my cousin Saro and her husband, Esmer Aras (Tumba,) with whom I stayed during the whole of my fieldwork period and during shorter visits to Sweden afterwards. They offered me a warm home and a pleasant environment even in the coldest and darkest days of the year in Sweden: *taudi sagie*! I am much indebted to my friend Hanne dbe Yahqo (Södertälje) for his great help, inspiration and the humour with which he introduced me to the field and for reading some early writings. My colleague and dear friend Mariam Garis, with whom I stayed in Gotenburg, has been an important support in various ways. *Taudi* Mariam!

Two families whom I would like to thank for their hospitality in Jönköping are *malfono* Eliyo Dere and his wife, Fehima, and *malfono* Simon Barmano and his wife, Samira. In Örebro I would like to thank *malfono* Hanna dbe Asmar and his wife, Bercin, for the several times I was able to stay with them and for their support during my fieldwork in this city. Many thanks are also owed to *malfono* Hanna dbe Asmar and Bahcat Barsom who opened their archives to me.

This book could not have been accomplished without the help of all my respondents, whom I cannot mention by name for reasons of confidentiality. They know that I spoke to them and they know the value of the conversations we had, which I have enjoyed tremendously. *Taudi sagie* from the bottom of my heart for your kind co-operation.

The writing process has been the most challenging. Therefore I am enormously grateful to Abdulmesih Bar Abraham, Febroniya Atto, Jean Fathi, Hanibal Romanos and Soner who have read and commented on a concept of the whole manuscript. I also owe a debt of gratitude to several friends and colleagues who read earlier concepts of my chapters: Jan van Ginkel (Ch. 4 and Appendix 1), Francio Guadeloupe (Ch. 10), Chris Nierstrasz (Ch. 3 and 4), Basna Beth Yuhanon (Bethzero) (Ch. 3 and 4), Tycho Walaardt (Ch. 4), Mariam Garis (Ch. 4, 8-10), Han Vermeulen (Ch. 8), Nicolien Montessori (Ch. 1 and 2) and Ton Zwaan (Ch. 1 and 11). I am also very thankful to *malfono* Aziz Tezel with whom I have communicated about the meaning of specific words in *Suryoyo* (*Surayt*) and greatful to my brother Simon Atto who helped me with the translation of *Suryoyo* and Syriac texts whenever I needed greater clarification. Many thanks also to those friends in different parts of the world who read shorter pieces or who could answer questions of mine at whatever stage.

I would like to thank a few friends and colleagues more specifically. Jan van Ginkel with whom I have spent much time at Leiden University and who has been a great friend. Chris Nierstrasz, Ton Zwaan and Joop for making space in their diaries and offering me the support needed to continue my work with joy.

My deepest gratitude goes to the members of my family who have functioned as the essential, strong foundation for completion of this thesis. My father Barsaumo, who passed away in 1987, has not been able to witness the progress his eight children have made after they settled in the Netherlands. His absence threw the engagement and dedication of my

mother Seyde to the upbringing of her children in the context of the diaspora into even sharper relief. Although illiterate, they stimulated their children to complete their education and created a warm loving space with the straightened means they had at their disposal in their new country. Over time, my mother seems to have understood my research project. Many times I have had conversations with her about the life in *Tur 'Abdin*. She has been able to give me new insights and I realized that indirectly, by asking my questions, I was teaching her the importance of historical material. Often she would say: 'Our old people used to talk a lot in the old days, but we never paid much attention, because we did not realize its importance.' With enormous pride, upon the completion of this thesis, I reflect on the process my mother has passed through in her development during the thirty years of her life in the Netherlands. Although she has taken little part in the broader social life, she has managed to learn from and develop herself by absorbing all the knowledge her children and grandchildren have brought back home, her base from where she has dedicated her life to them. I shall bear it with me as a great example for life.

My siblings have been a source of love, inspiration and dedication to life. They have encouraged me continuously, borne with me at the most intense moments and spoiled me in compensation for my work in isolation. I thank them for financing the visual equipment which I used during my research and for financing the several assistants I worked with for the translation of Swedish texts with me. My nephews, Nisho and Yamo, and my nieces, Babel and Izla, were born during the time of my research. My phone calls with them and the short visits to Enschede have been an inspiration to continue writing with great pleasure.

In the last stage of writing, Soner came into my life. I am grateful to him for his unconditional, loving support which has brought me to where I am now. He has borne with me during the tensest period of writing, read the whole manuscript carefully and helped me technically with the layout. And above all he has kept reminding me what is most important in life. A few months after the completion of this work, our dearest son Yauno was born who has since then introduced me to a whole new dimension of a beautiful part of life.

List of Abbreviations

ACSA	Assyrian Chaldean Syriac Association
ArDO	Aramaic Democratic Organization
ADM	Assyrian Democratic Movement (ZOWAA)
ADO	Assyrian Democratic Organization
AMS	Arbetsmarknadsstyrelsen (Labour Market Board)
AMU	American Maronite Union
AMVE	Assyrische Mesopotamische Vereniging Enschede
ANSA	Assyrian National School Association. It has been renamed the Assyrian Orphanage and School Association of America.
ARS	Assyriska riksförbundet i Sverige (Assyrian Federation in Sweden)
ASALA	Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia
ASSR	Amsterdam School for Social Science Research
Assyriska FF	Assyriska Fotboll föreningen
AUA	Assyrian Universal Alliance
AUF	Assyriska Ungdomsförbundet (Assyrian Youth Federation)
AUK	Assyriska Ungdomskommittén (Assyrian Youth Committee)
CHP	Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (People's Republican Party)
CPSOK	Central projektgrupp för den Syrisk ortodoxa kyrkan (Central Project Group for the Syriac Orthodox Church).
DKP	Devrimci Komünist Partisi (Revolutionary Communist Party)
DT	Discourse Theory

ACE	Assyria Council of Europe
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council of the United Nations
EIFO	Expertgrupp för invandrarforskning inom Arbetsmarknadsdepartementet (Swedish Expert Group on Immigration Research)
ESU	European Syriac Union
GFA	Gabo d-Furqono d-Assyria (Assyria Liberation Party; also known as *Furqono,* meaning 'Salvation'.)
HAS	Huyodo Suryoyo d-Almanya (Föderation Suryoye Deutschland)
ISDP	Iraqi Sustainable Democracy Project
KFUK-KFUM	Kristliga föreningen av Unga Kvinnor - Kristliga föreningen av Unga Män (The Swedish YWCA and YMCA)
LISOR	Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions
LUF	Leids Universitair Fonds
MARA	Modern Assyrian Research Archive
MED	Midyad El'Aziz Diyarbakır (Cultural Association)
MEZO-DER	Mesopotamia Solidarity Association
MHP	Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (Nationalist Action Party of Turkey)
MSP	Millî Selamet Partisi (National Salvation Party)
NMG	Nineveh Music Group
NWO	Dutch Organization for Scientific Research
PKK	Partiya Karkeran Kurdistan (Workers' Party of Kurdistan)
SAAF	Syrianska/Arameiska Akademiker Förbundet (Syriac/Aramaic Academic Federation)
Saais	Syrianska Assyriska Akademiker i Sverige (Syriac Assyrian Academics in Sweden)
SAEYC	Syriac Aramaic European Youth Committee
SDO	Suryoye Democratic Organization
SEERI	St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute

SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SIOS	Samarbetsorgan för etniska organisationer i Sverige (Co-operative Group for Ethnic Organizations in Sweden)
SIV	Statens Invandrarverk (Swedish Immigration Board)
SOKU	Syrisk Ortodoxa Kyrkans Ungdomsförbund (Syriac Orthodox Church Youth Federation)
SOU	Statens offentliga utredningar (Swedish Government Official Reports)
SRF	Syrianska riksförbundet (Syriac National Federation)
SRFUS	Syrianska riksförbundet Ungdoms Sektion (Youth Section of the Syrianska riksförbundet)
SUA	Syriac Universal Alliance
SSNP	Syrian Social Nationalist Party
SSV Edessa	Suryoye Studenten Vereniging Edessa
SUF	Syrianska Ungdomsförbundet (Syriac Youth Federation)
SAUF	Syrianska-Arameiska Ungdomsförbundet
Syrianska FC	Syrianska Fotboll Club
TMS	Terraki Medresse Süryaniye (Progressive Suryoyo School)
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
UNPO	Unrepresented Nations and People Organization
VPK	Vänsterpartiet Kommunisterna (Swedish Communist Party)
TKP/B	Türkiye Kommünist Partisi/Birlik (Communist Party of Turkey/Unity)