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Arabic and Aramaic in Iraq: Language and Syriac Christian Commitment to the Arab Nationalist Project (1920-1950)

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Chapter 3

Identifying as Assyrians: printing Syriac and Neo-Aramaic

In Chapter 1, I discussed the struggle between different factions among the Assyrians. One group, the “party of Mar Shim‘un,” named after the Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, opposed integration of the Assyrians as citizens of Iraq, while another party had more positive feelings towards the state of Iraq. However, what brings these two parties together is that both groups identified as Assyrians, and therefore explicitly as being part of a different national group than their Arab and Kurdish neighbors. The dominance of the Assyrians in Iraqi political historiography makes that they are often seen as the quintessential opponents of Arab-Iraqi society.

In this chapter, I show that Assyrian literature and education gives a more nuanced view of the Assyrians’ supposedly negative attitude towards Iraqi society. Most Assyrian literature does not express hostile feelings against the state of Iraq, while educational activities usually actively stimulated integration into the Arab-dominated society by stressing the study of Arabic in the school curriculums. However, an important difference between the Assyrians and the other Syriac Christian groups that I discuss in this dissertation is their identification as an ethnic group. This important aspect is clearly visible both in their preferred way of literary expression—by publishing printed

books—and in their educational activities. I start with the group around Joseph de Kelaita and their printing press. After that, I turn to Assyrian education.

19th-century beginnings: written Neo-Aramaic and the rise of Assyrianism

The beginnings of self-identification as Assyrian and the establishment of Northeastern Neo-Aramaic as a written language happened roughly at the same time with the same group of people. Both developments are largely intertwined, and are fundamental for the understanding of the activities of Assyrians in early Iraq. There is evidence for a considerable role of Western missions here, specifically the American Protestant mission, which started in 1834, and continued until World War I.

The first dated attestations of Neo-Aramaic texts are from the 16th or 17th century,¹ but it would take another two centuries for the language to be used at a large scale. Today, the writing of Neo-Aramaic, most often a northeastern dialect and usually called Sureth, Swadaya or (Modern) Assyrian, is well developed and common among communities who speak this language, especially in Iraqi Kurdistan.² The developments that led to this consolidation mainly happened in the 19th-century Urmia and Hakkari regions, where a Northeastern variant called Swadaya was spoken. Users of written Neo-Aramaic in 20th-century Iraq drew upon this legacy.

¹Alessandro Mengozzi, *A Story in a Truthful Language: Neo-Syriac Poems by Israel of Alqosh and Joseph of Telkepe, North Iraq, 17th century*, volume 1: *Introduction and translations* (Louvain: Peeters, 2002), 20.

²Northeastern Neo-Aramaic is often abbreviated as NENA. The other Neo-Aramaic groups employed by Christians are Central Neo-Aramaic, best known in its appearance as Tūrōyō or Sūrayt, spoken by the West Syriac Christians of Tur Abdin and the diaspora in Syria, Lebanon and outside the Middle East, and Western Neo-Aramaic. The latter group has few speakers and stands out, as it belongs to the Western group of Aramaic dialects, and not to the Eastern group, to which Classical Syriac also belongs. For the interplay of dialects of Northeastern Neo-Aramaic in Iraq since World War I, see Edward Y. Odisho, “Bilingualism and Multilingualism among Assyrians: A Case of Language Erosion and Demise,” in *Semitica: Serta philologica, Constantino Tsereteli dicata*, ed. Riccardo Contini et al. (Turin: Silvio Zamorani, 1993), 189–200.

There is evidence that the local dialect of Neo-Aramaic in the region of Urmia was written on a limited scale from the early nineteenth century.³ Right from the start of the American mission, in 1834, it was decided that the local vernacular language was to be used in writing for their missionary purposes, which was common practice among Protestant missionaries at the time. The absence of a strong writing tradition forced the missionaries to set this up themselves, which they did with help from assistants among the local clergy. The dialect of Urmia was chosen as the fundament of the literary language, because it was considered a well-understood dialect.⁴ In 1840, a Syriac printing press was established and the next year the first texts in Neo-Aramaic were published, including texts translated from English and original works by the missionaries.⁵ In the following decade, the press published numerous tracts and books, a translation of the Old and New Testament, and the journal *Zahrir d-Bahrā* (Rays of Light) from 1849. At the end of this decade the language had largely standardized.⁶ In this period, most, though not all, original texts were written by the missionaries, but from 1870 there is evidence that the literary language started to be employed by the Assyrians themselves on a larger scale, with the same linguistic features as the texts composed by the missionaries.⁷ The end of the nineteenth century saw a sharp increase in the writing of Neo-Aramaic by Assyrians, who also started to publish their work at other places than the American missionary press.⁸ In this way, the new literary language, or Literary Urmia Aramaic, had gradually become a new tool that could be used independently by Assyrians to write in their native language. The American missionaries evidently had a highly stimulating, if not foundational role to this effect.

The missionaries used East Syriac script for Literary Urmia Aramaic and the orthography that was developed was roughly based on that of Classical Syriac, a practice that is in line with the (so-

³H.L. Murre-van den Berg, *From a Spoken to a Written Language: The Introduction and Development of Literary Urmia Aramaic in the Nineteenth Century* (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 1999), 88.

⁴Ibid., 93–6.

⁵Ibid., 97–8.

⁶Ibid., 101–2.

⁷Ibid., 106–8.

⁸Ibid., 110.

cio)linguistic connection between the two languages.⁹ In some cases, it is hard to distinguish the difference between written Neo-Aramaic and Classical Syriac at first sight, even in cases where there is a dramatic difference in pronunciation. This happens mainly for short texts such as title pages of books.¹⁰ While the writing of Neo-Aramaic on a large scale is a 19th-century phenomenon, the principle of basing the written language on the practices of Classical Syriac appears to be in fact a relatively old tradition. While other writing practices are attested, such as using Arabic script,¹¹ the earliest known Christian texts in Neo-Aramaic show a strong influence of Classical Syriac in the orthography.¹² Interestingly, but not surprisingly, early Jewish Neo-Aramaic texts show similar influence of Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic,¹³ and another parallel can be drawn with writing practices of Neo-Arabic dialects.¹⁴ It is not known if the American missionaries were influenced by earlier writing tradition of Neo-Aramaic,¹⁵ but in texts of the late nineteenth century the principle to base orthography on Classical Syriac had even increased, which is visible in a tendency to base the orthography of more words on etymology.¹⁶

⁹While from a linguistic point of view the Neo-Aramaic dialects cannot be regarded as a direct continuation of Classical Syriac, apart from being both in the eastern group of Aramaic dialects, the connections are tight on other fronts, such as continued mutual influence in terms of vocabulary and grammar, but also because of the common group of users. The idea that Neo-Aramaic dialects are often seen as variants of Classical Syriac is supported by the fact that Neo-Aramaic is sometimes referred to as Modern Syriac.

¹⁰This is similar to the situation of Ottoman Turkish versus Arabic, where the large amount of Arabic words are written in the same way as in Arabic.

¹¹Geoffrey Khan, *The Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Qaraqosh* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 8.

¹²For a discussion of the influence of Classical Syriac in Neo-Aramaic poetry from Alqosh, see Mengozzi, *A Story in a Truthful Language*, 21–4.

¹³Alessandro Mengozzi, *A Story in a Truthful Language*, volume 1, 20.

¹⁴This situation can be compared to orthographies of the spoken varieties of Arabic where Arabic script is used, which does not usually reflect differences in phonology, facilitated by the absence of short vowels in writing. For instance, the Arabic word الجديد *al-jadīd* “new,” normally pronounced as /ældʒædiːd/ in Modern Standard Arabic, is pronounced as /ɜːdiːd/ in Moroccan Arabic, but usually written in the same way. Especially in short written phrases the difference between Standard Arabic and a spoken variety is not distinguishable.

¹⁵Murre, *From a Spoken to a Written Language*, 95–6.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 109.

It was in the same time that a sense of nationhood became common in the Hakkari and Urmia regions, which was eventually to develop into Assyrian nationalism as we know it today. In the late nineteenth century, an increasing differentiation is visible between a religious and national identification. Adam Becker cites as one of the reasons for this differentiation a fragmentation of these Syriac Christians into different religious groups. A new national identification was advocated to unite all these groups. According to Becker, foreign missionaries amplified this development in two ways: first because the missions caused a greater religious pluralism,¹⁷ and second because the idea of a distinction between religion and nationhood was advocated by the American missionaries.¹⁸ The result was not nationalism in the sense that there was a pronouncement of territorial claims, but rather the idea that the Assyrians belong together as a nation. This shift to a national identification is visible in a gradual shift in terminology: where the word *ṭāyepā*, a word derived from Arabic *ṭāʾifa* and used to differentiate between Christian sects, was preferred in the early period of the American mission, the word *mellat* took over in the late nineteenth century.¹⁹ While the latter is a cognate of the well-known Ottoman Turkish word *millet*, which was used for religious groups, in this context it rather corresponds to its Persian version, *mellat*, which started to refer to national communities from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, a meaning that it gradually received in Neo-Aramaic as well.²⁰

¹⁷In 1871, the Protestant Church formally separated from the Church of the East, while the original plan of the missionaries was to reform the church from within. Murre, *From a Spoken to a Written Language*, 67. The divisions that were caused by ambitions and rivalries of missionaries have incited scholars to critically comment on this role. See Murre, *From a Spoken to a Written Language*, 86, and Becker, *Revival and Awakening: American Evangelical Missionaries in Iran and the Origins of Assyrian Nationalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 280.

¹⁸Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 296–7.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 108–12.

²⁰Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 110. Becker stresses that *melat* meaning “national community” was a new development, and that the original meaning “religious community” prevailed alongside its new meaning. For the Church of the East, the applicability of the *millet* system in a legal way is uncertain, but that does not alter the fact that *millet* could also be used in a social way. See Kai Merten, “Gab es im Osmanischen Reich eine nestorianische Millet? Annäherungen an eine ungelöste Frage,” in *Zur Situation der Christen in der Türkei und in Syrien: Exemplarische Einsichten*, ed.

Throughout the nineteenth century, however, the Christians of Hakkari and Urmia continued calling themselves “Syrians” (*Suryāye*, or the vernacular form *Surāye*). Consistent usage of “Assyrian” only started from the end of the 1890s, and was facilitated by numerous factors that were already present for much of the 19th century.²¹ In 1895, the connection between “Syrian” (*Suryāyā*) and the Assyrians (*Ātorāye*) was explicitly noted for the first time in *Zahrīre d-bahrā* (Rays of Light), in a citation from Ruben Duval’s Syriac grammar that was translated from French. In the citation, the word *Suryāyā* is explained as coming from the geographical Syria, which in turn comes from Assyria.²² From then on, the connection was made more often, and interest in the ancient Assyrian language, culture, and archaeology grew. Becker mentions as a forerunner in this respect the Chaldean archbishop of Urmia Thomas Audo, who in 1906 wrote that as East Syrians they “descend from the aforementioned Assyrians,” they “are Assyrians by nature,” asking: “[W]hy are we called and call ourselves Syrians?”²³ After the turn of the century these ideas culminated in a mature form of Assyrian nationalism, with an increase in voices expressing the push for unification through a common language, literature and historiography, even if short of demands for an independent homeland. Some West Syriac Christians took this over, resulting in the start of *umthonoyutho*, or the idea that all Syriac Christians belong to one nation, even though this did not yet lead to collaboration among the West and East Syriac Christians (see the Introduction).

For both the development of the written vernacular language and Assyrian nationalism a considerable role is attributed to the Protes-

Martin Tamcke (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013), 59–72. However, Adam Becker makes it clear that the idea of classification according to religious affiliation also applied to them, including the use of the word *tāyepā*. Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 108–12.

²¹These reasons were laid out by Wolfhart Heinrichs in 1993, who mentions factors such as the contact with Armenians in Tbilisi who used the word *uwnph asori* for Syriac Christians, and the use of the word “Assyrian Christians” by Anglican missionaries, which they had chosen on the basis of their location in the lands of the ancient Assyrians. Wolfhart Heinrichs, “The Modern Assyrians – Name and Nation,” in *Semitica: Serta philologica, Constantino Tsereteli dicata*, ed. Riccardo Contini et al. (Turin: Silvio Zamorani, 1993), 99–114, especially 102 and 107.

²²Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 318.

²³*Ibid.*, 322.

tant American missionaries. What interests us here, however, is not so much how these two developments came about, but rather the fact that they are specific for the East Syriac Christians of the Hakkari and Urmia regions, and that these two factors were imported to Iraq after their forced emigration to the south. Writing in Neo-Aramaic was limited among the Syriac Christians who were in Iraq already before World War I (see Chapter 2), and the same is true for identification as Assyrian (see for this Chapter 5). Both phenomena are therefore strongly connected to the Assyrians from the Hakkari and Urmia regions. In this chapter, I want to show how these phenomena developed in postwar Iraq, and to what extent other Syriac Christian groups got involved into it.

Joseph de Kelaita and Syriac and Swadaya printing

The manuscript production of the Assyrian Church of the East had come to an almost complete standstill before World War I. Literary production of the Assyrians of Hakkari and Urmia before World War I was largely limited to the printed publications in Neo-Aramaic discussed above, such as the journal *Zahrîre d-Bahrâ*. After the arrival of the Assyrians in Iraq, they had to start anew, without remaining centers of manuscript production, and without a printing press. Before World War I, the Dominican missionaries possessed a printing press in Mosul, the place where their headquarters were based. The printing press was capable of printing multiple scripts, including Latin, Syriac and Arabic, and was used for various types of religious publications, such as liturgical books and catechisms.²⁴ However, in 1914 it was seized by the Ottoman government, and after the war the missionaries were not able to reestablish a printing press that was able to handle

²⁴Mannès Brelet, *Deux siècles de mission dominicaine à Mossoul* (Mosul: 1950), 21. Bibliothèque du Saulchoir, Paris, Mosul mission archive, Z-11.; Coakley and Taylor, "Syriac Books Printed at the Dominican Press, Mosul": 72–75.

Syriac script.²⁵ There was a gap to be filled in, and the Assyrians were quick to fill in this gap.

The first to bring a printing press suitable for Syriac script to Iraq after World War I was the well-known deacon and later priest Joseph de Kelaita (Yawsep d-bet Qlaytā, 1880–1952).²⁶ He was born in 1880 in the village of Mārbishoʿ, between Hakkari and Urmia, and was educated in Urmia in the episcopal school and became deacon in the Church of the East. Between 1910 and 1918 he was in England and the United States, where he learned the craft of printing, without experiencing World War I. In 1920, he went to Thrissur in India,²⁷ accompanying his cousin Mar Timotheus, the bishop of Malabar who had earlier opposed the election of the eleven-year-old Eshai as patriarch Mar Shimun XXI (see Chapter 1). There he was supposed to help his cousin to set up a printing press in Thrissur, but when most of the types were complete he decided to go back to Iraq to use them for himself.²⁸ In 1921, he went to Mosul, where he was ready to establish the Assyrian printing press. He was entangled in a conflict with the Patriarch, who opposed his ordination as a priest by Mar Timotheus,²⁹

²⁵See Coakley and Taylor, “Syriac Books Printed at the Dominican Press, Mosul.” There is some confusion about the ability of the Dominicans to print Syriac after World War I. An article that speaks about French influence in Iraq from 1920 mentions that the only printing press in Mosul was the Dominican press, which “imprime en français, en arabe, en chaldéen, [et] en syriaque,” referring to the eastern and western Syriac scripts with the last two languages, but while it is not surprising that the Dominicans indeed had a Latin and Arabic printing press, it seems improbable that they were capable of efficiently printing in Syriac script. Probably it refers to occasional use of collotype for printing phrases in Syriac script, as I have found no evidence for books or considerable amounts of Syriac texts printed by the Dominicans after 1918, contrary to the period before the war. This view is supported by Coakley and Taylor, who write that after World War I, the Dominican Syriac press was not reestablished, even though some books are claimed to have been published “chez les Pères Dominicains.” Henri Froidevaux, “La nouvelle organisation de l’Empire Ottoman,” *L’Asie française* 1920: 84–86.

²⁶A basic biography of him can be found in Macuch, *Geschichte der spät- und neusyrischen Literatur*, 279.

²⁷Contemporary sources give Trichur, as the city was officially named until 1990.

²⁸Mar Aprem, “Mar Narsai Press,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 78 (1996): 171–2.

²⁹Coakley, “The Church of the East Since 1914,” 184. The American missionary R.W. McDowell, who staunchly supported the Assyrian Patriarch, wrote the following about the opposition against him in 1932: “Antagonism [against the Patriarch] centers about one individual, a Kasha Yosep Kalaita, whose opposition is based

which was possibly related to the latter's opposition to the Patriarch's consecration.

There is no reliable comprehensive bibliography of works printed at the press, but some lists are available at the end of the books and at other places.³⁰ Unfortunately, it seems that these lists are not complete, as they do not include works that were printed by the press for other organizations than the Assyrian Church of the East.³¹ The printing press operated from 1921 to 1931, in which period at least 15 books were published. The great majority of these books are liturgical, being editions of medieval and ancient texts in Classical Syriac (*Suryāyā*), sometimes with a translation in Swadaya. Some of these editions are still used by scholars using reprints.³² The other main categories of books are liturgy books and books about languages: textbooks, grammars, and lexicons, concerning Syriac, English and possibly also Swadaya.

The text editions printed at the Assyrian press were edited by Joseph de Kelaïta himself. These books were prepared entirely in Classical Syriac. De Kelaïta's critical edition of 'Abdisho' of Nisibis' *Paradise of Eden* (*Pardaysā d-Den*) was published in 1928 at the press

largely on his selfish purposes." It is not clear what these "selfish purposes" might be. It must be noted that the other American missionaries were less enthusiastic about the Patriarch at this point. Presbyterian Historical Society, RG89-1-11 (1932), 30-11. Letter from Mr. McDowell to Speer, January 13th, 1932.

³⁰Daniel Benjamin, "Assyrian Printing Presses in Iraq During the 20th Century", *ARAM Periodical* 21 (2009): 154. An almost identical version of this article is also available online: <http://www.meltha.dk/AssyrianPrinting-Eng.pdf> (accessed May 4th, 2016). Benjamin lists 15 books from this period, but at least one book that I came across is not part of the list.

³¹An example of such a work is a grammar of Classical Syriac by the Paul Bētdarāyā (or Pawlos d-Bēt Dar), a Chaldean priest affiliated to the Priest School of St. Peter, which he published in 1924 at Joseph de Kelaïta's press. The title of the grammar and its contents do not contain the word "Assyrian," but the title page indicates that it was printed at the "press of the Assyrians of the Ancient Church of the East. Pawlos d-Bēt Dar, *Turāṣ mamllā qafisā d-leshānā suryāyā Kaldāyā* (Mosul: Ṭab'ā d-Ātorāye d-'Idtā 'atīqtā d-madnhā, 1924). Accessed at the Bibliothèque Orientale in Beirut.

³²For instance, de Kelaïta's 1928 edition 'Abdishō of Nisibis' *Paradise of Eden* was recently republished by Gorgias Press. Abdisho of Nisibis, *The Paradise of Eden*, ed. Joseph E. Y. De Kelaïta (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2009).

after he published it earlier in Urmia in 1916.³³ Its title page, reproduced by Daniel Benjamin, contains the name of the work, its author, its printer (De Kelaita is not credited as the editor), and details of the printing press. It also mentions that it is the second print, probably regarding the 1916 edition as its first print. The title page resembles Syriac manuscripts in many ways: it is decorated with complex borders that are often found in Syriac manuscripts, and printed in the colors black and red, a common feature of both Western and Eastern manuscript production. Except for the parts of the text printed in a large font size, all the text in Syriac is completely vocalized. While the title page features the year of publication in Arabic (Western) numerals, the line that mentions that De Kelaita was “founder of and teacher in the Assyrian school of Mosul, 1921–1928” gives these years in traditional Syriac numerals, with the addition of *l-māran* “of our Lord,” i.e. according to the Christian era. The book also features a title page in English.

Another publication from 1928 is De Kelaita’s edition of Narsai’s *Exposition of the Mysteries* (*Pūshāq rāzē*).³⁴ It is not surprising that De Kelaita’s press, which was connected to the Assyrian Church of the East, printed a work by this famous fifth-century East Syriac author and founder of the School of Nisibis. The *Exposition* gives valuable insight into the liturgy of the early Church of the East. What interests us, however, is the way this edition of Narsai’s text came about. The edition appears to be based on its first (and to date only) critical edition, which was brought out as part of a collection of part of Narsai’s hymns by Alphonse Mingana in 1905.³⁵ At the time, Mingana was still in Mosul and in good understanding with the Chaldean Church and

³³ See the description of Gorgias Press’ reprint on the publisher’s website: <https://www.gorgiaspress.com/the-paradise-of-edén>, accessed September 2, 2018.

³⁴ This edition was recently republished by ATOUR Publications. This edition contains a curious anonymous translation, which appears to be a reproduction of R.H. Connolly’s translation, published in 1909. Narsai, *The liturgical homilies of Narsai*, translated by R. Hugh Connolly, part of *Text and studies: contributions to biblical and patristic literature*, volume 8, no. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909). The book was republished using a self-publishing service—details can be found here: <http://www.lulu.com/shop/mar-narsai/an-exposition-of-the-mysteries/paperback/product-177484.html> (last accessed: 17 May 2016).

³⁵ Mingana’s edition was accompanied by an introduction in Latin. Narsai, *Narsai doctoris Syri homiliae et carmina*, two volumes, ed. Alphonse Mingana (Mosul: Typis Fratrum Prædicatorum, 1905).

the Dominican missionaries. His relationship with the Chaldeans and the missionaries was to deteriorate later,³⁶ but in 1905 he was still able to publish his edition with the Dominican missionary press in Mosul.

Critics unanimously consider the *Exposition of the mysteries* as the most important of Narsai's homilies that Mingana edited,³⁷ but also the only one of which Narsai's authorship is contested. Mingana himself noted that according to some authors the homily was written by the thirteenth-century 'Abdisho' of 'Ilām.³⁸ Already in 1909, the text was translated into English by Hugh Connolly, who for internal reasons concluded that the text was probably authentic, but F.C. Burkitt was more skeptical.³⁹ De Kelaita shows that he is aware that there might be another author than mentioned on the book's title page, by adding a footnote on the first page of the text of the homily: "There are people who say that [this text] was composed by Mār 'Abhdishe' of 'Ilām."⁴⁰ Mingana's edition is notorious for the fact that certain passages from the text were removed or altered in order to hide its references to Nestorius, to make it acceptable for usage by Chaldean Catholics. Mingana was frank about this, and mentions the two omissions and the one alteration in footnotes, while giving the correct text in the introduction.⁴¹ De Kelaita, who worked in service of the Assyrian Church of the East, had no reason to censor the explicitly dyophysite passages. Comparing his edition to Mingana's, De Kelaita reintroduced the first omitted passage, and repaired the text where Mingana had removed the name of Nestorius. At the same time, he did not reintroduce the second omitted passage, for unknown reasons. An innovation of De Kelaita is that he added an excerpt at the begin-

³⁶Mingana published the edition while he was working at the Dominican Syro-Chaldean seminary (see Chapter 1). In 1910, Mingana had a conflict with the Chaldean Church, and in 1913 he emigrated from the Middle East to Britain (see also Chapter 2).

³⁷See Connolly's introduction: Narsai, *The liturgical homilies of Narsai*, xii, and F.C. Burkitt, "The mss of 'Narsai on the mysteries,'" *Journal of Theological Studies* 29:2 (1928): 269.

³⁸Narsai, *Narsai doctoris Syri homiliae et carmina*, volume 1, 28n.

³⁹Burkitt, "The mss of 'Narsai on the mysteries,'" 269–75. Mingana's edition of Narsai's work caused a controversy about his integrity because of accusations of forgery, but the accusations concern another part of his edition. See Samir, *Alphonse Mingana*, 8–10.

⁴⁰Translation is mine.

⁴¹Narsai, *Narsai doctoris Syri homiliae et carmina*, volume 1, pages ٤٤٦ and ٤٤٧.

ning of the book from the *Expositio officiorum ecclesiae*, presumably written by the tenth-century author George of Arbil (or Mosul).⁴² This work was earlier identified by Connolly to be similar in contents and of interest for the study of this homily. It seems that De Kelaita used Connolly's edition of the work, which had appeared in the well-known series of critical editions *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* in 1913. Another interesting aspect of the edition of Narsai's work is that it is accompanied by a translation into Swadaya. Throughout the book, the Classical Syriac text appears on the right (verso) side, with the translation parallel to it on the left (recto) side. Each page of the translation is headed by the word *Swādā'it*.

There are three issues to be discussed about this and other text editions. First, what does it mean that De Kelaita used an edition of Alphonse Mingana for producing a book for his printing press? Second, why was De Kelaita so interested in the production of text editions of classical authors, without an apparent immediate need for use in the church or elsewhere? And third, what was the reason to include Swadaya translations of some of his works, including Narsai's *Exposition*?

The use of Mingana's edition of Narsai's work is interesting, because there is no known connection between De Kelaita and the Dominican missionaries, where Mingana's work was published. De Kelaita could however have had access to Mingana's edition through one of his Chaldean contacts. After Mingana's conflict with the Catholic Church, he had certainly become a controversial figure among the Catholics in Iraq, or at least among the Dominican missionaries,⁴³ but the fact that his Syriac grammar was still in use at the Syro-Chaldean seminary in 1946 shows that this did not imply an absolute boycott. Another possibility is that he received access to Mingana's edition during his trip to the United Kingdom or the United States. As the early adoption of Mingana's edition by scholars such as Chabot and Con-

⁴²Anonmi auctoris (ascribed to Georgio Arbelensi), *Expositio officiorum ecclesiae*, part 2, ed. R.H. Connolly, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, scriptores syri*, series secunda xcii (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1913), 81–3.

⁴³A document in the Dominican missionary archive about the history of the Syro-Chaldean seminary, where Mingana was a student and later a teacher, notes that he has “une triste célébrité en passant à l'anglicanisme.” Mannès Brelet, *Histoire de la mission de Mossoul (jusqu'en 1914)*, Bibliothèque du Saulchoir, Mosul mission archive, Z-9, 29.

nolly shows, it quickly found its way into European and North American libraries.

De Kelaita's interest in text editions certainly needs explication. Part of the books printed by Joseph de Kelaita's press was printed for use in the church, which possibly functioned as a replacement for manuscripts. The grammars and other books about language also had a direct function for the community and could be used as an aid in education or for self-education. But there is little reason to assume that the text edition of classical Syriac religious works served an religious or educational purpose. As an alternative, it can be seen in the light of Assyrian nationalism as it was developing in the early twentieth century. In his monograph on Assyrian nationalism, Becker notes that creating a national literature was an important means by early proponents of an Assyrian identification to bring about their goal. Often with help of missionaries, especially the Dominicans, who were interested in making accessible Syriac patristic literature, and often drawing upon the work of earlier Orientalists, they produced numerous editions and collections of medieval Syriac works. Part of this was published by Thomas Audo in his journal, *The Star*.⁴⁴

Last, De Kelaita's books are partly in Classical Syriac and partly in Swadaya. Most of the works in Swadaya are original works, but a few of his classical text editions are accompanied by a Swadaya translation. Given the history of the strong development of the Swadaya written language before World War I, it is likely to have been the language of choice of the Assyrians in Iraq for the sake of being understood by a large amount of people. Still, it might come as a surprise that De Kelaita felt the need to add a translation to classical text editions. This may be explained by a wish for the texts to be understood by a larger audience than the usual readers of these classical texts. However, another possibility is that he did this for ideological reasons. Having these texts translated into Swadaya could increase the number of important texts in this language, and thereby the status of a national Assyrian literature. At the same time, the texts cannot be interpreted as Assyrian nationalist texts. The books contain no nationalist elements, and, more in general, there is nothing that suggests that De Kelaita supported the Assyrian nationalist acts of the Patriarch—

⁴⁴Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 330–7.

whom he was in conflict with—or others who did not accept integration into the Iraqi state. However, the fact that the books were written in Neo-Aramaic and therefore only accessible by the Assyrians makes that they can still be taken as an example of an Assyrian identification, which is relevant in the light of what the other Syriac Christian groups in Iraq do.

Assyrian education

The lack of state education during the first years after World War I was addressed by a multitude of private teaching activities, at scales ranging from small informal study groups to large city schools of long-standing high reputation. Part of this education was specifically directed at Syriac Christians, and organized by members of the communities themselves or by one of the two Western missions. Most of the lasting educational initiatives undertaken by Syriac Christians came from the side of the Assyrians. A comprehensive overview was provided by Robin Shamuel, who succeeded in obtaining first-hand information about these schools by conducting interviews with former students—a valuable undertaking, given the lack of known archival materials about these schools.⁴⁵

The Assyrian community had two important schools. One was the Assyrian School in Baghdad, founded by the American United Mission in Mesopotamia in 1921, which is dealt with at the end of this section. The second school was the Assyrian School in Mosul, ran by Joseph de Kelaita, who founded the school in 1921. A diploma from 1926, with the text in English, Arabic and Syriac gives as the official name of the school “The Assyrian school of Mosul” in English and Arabic (*al-madrasa al-athūriyya bi-l-Mawṣil*), whereby the English text had an additional line saying “for the revival of the Ancient Church of the East,” absent in the Arabic text. This link to the Assyrian Church of the East is even more explicit in the Syriac, where the name of the school is cited as “the Assyrian school of the Ancient Church of the East in Mosul” (*madhrashtā āturāytā d-’itā ‘atiqtā d-madhnḥā b-Mawṣil*).

⁴⁵Robin Shamuel, “The Private Assyrian Schools in Iraq During the 20th Century,” unpublished master’s thesis, Leiden University, 2008.

In the early years, the school seems to have followed its own curriculum, free from government interference that was to strongly influence private and religious education in later years. The 1926 diploma mentions “Holy Scriptures, Church doctrine, Arithmetic, Geography, Map drawing, English, Elementary Arabic, and Syriac” as the subjects of examination. Syriac, for which the Arabic and Syriac used, as expected, respectively the words *Suryāniyya* and *Suryāyā*, did probably refer to Classical Syriac, as this was also used on the diploma.⁴⁶

The diploma itself is interesting as well, as it features the three languages English, Arabic and Classical Syriac. The diploma is signed in threefold, for each language, by both Joseph de Kelaita as the school’s director and two teachers with their names. Interesting here is that Joseph de Kelaita signs successively with his name in Latin, Arabic and Syriac characters, while the two teachers write their names in one script only all three times: one in Syriac script, the other in Arabic script. This suggests that the teacher who signed in Arabic script did not know Syriac script and was probably a teacher of Arabic at the school from outside the Assyrian community, while the teacher who signed in Syriac script might not have known Arabic. If this is true, it shows a situation that is well thinkable in 1926, where a teacher from outside the community is appointed to teach Arabic to children in order to facilitate a good future in the country they lived in, while at the same time keeping the Assyrian community together by establishing an educational institution specifically for them.

After the Simele massacre in the summer of 1933, the school could not continue in its existing form, as its Assyrian identification became problematic. Two narratives exist about the continuation of the school. One says that after the summer of 1933 the school was renamed to *Madrasat al-Falāḥ*, which is probably related to a neighborhood called al-Falāḥ in Mosul. The formerly private school was subsequently taken over by the government, but Joseph de Kelaita remained active as a teacher of Syriac and religious education. The other narrative was reported by Daniel d-Beth Benjamin to Robin Shamuel, who says that the school was closed down completely, but that Assyr-

⁴⁶<http://web.archive.org/web/20150911032852/http://aina.org/mosulschool/school.htm>; this page contains information about the school curriculum in 1921–1924 according to Deacon Yosip Zia, who attended the school at that time.

ian education continued in a semi-informal way on a smaller scale.⁴⁷ Whatever the truth is, the most important period of the school was undoubtedly the time before 1933, as there are almost no sources available for the later period, nor is there any evidence that the school educated people in this period who became well known later in their lives. One source reports that the school continued operating until 1945, but without any indication about the form.⁴⁸

The Assyrian community had three more schools in this period. One was the Assyrian and Armenian Union School, which operated from 1924 to 1944. This school was located in Hinaidi (Arab. *Ḥinaydī*), the most important air base of the Royal Air Force, not more than ten kilometers from Baghdad.⁴⁹ Except for the British servicemen and their families, a large number of Levies were based in the camp, especially Assyrians and a smaller number of Armenians from the Ba'qūba refugee camp. The school was a project of Ya'qūb d-Bet Ya'qūb (1896–1988), who had an Armenian father and an Assyrian mother and was born in Urmia. Next to Swadaya, Armenian was taught at the school as well. Ya'qūb founded the school at a relatively young age in 1924 and remained responsible for it until its closure in 1944. In 1938, after a closure of one year, the school moved together with the British military activities to the British air base of Habbaniya, named after the city of al-Ḥabbāniyya in central Iraq. It continued in this form until 1944, when the school was put under government control.

The second school was the Assyrian School of Kirkuk. Robin Shamuel reports that it was founded by a group of Assyrian nationalists, most of which were refugees from the area of Hakkari and Urmia. Its leader, however, was the priest Ishāq Rīḥāna Kārdin, who was an Assyrian born in Istanbul in 1909. The group founded the school in 1928. The school's founder was arrested in 1933, after the Simele massacre, and deported to Cyprus together with the Assyrian Patriarch.⁵⁰ However, the school itself was not closed and even allowed to

⁴⁷Shamuel, "The Private Assyrian Schools in Iraq," 28–9.

⁴⁸See "The Assyrian School of Mosul Project" (link above).

⁴⁹Solomon Solomon, "The Assyrian Levies Move to Hinaidi, 1928; The Assyrian Levies and the 1933 Crisis; The Assyrian Refugees of 1933," *Nineveh Magazine* 21:3 (1998): 18. Accessed online on September 7th, 2018: <http://www.marshimun.com/new/pdfs/RK-SKo2.pdf>.

⁵⁰Shamuel, "The Private Assyrian Schools in Iraq," 46–7.

continue under the same name.⁵¹ Only in 1974, the school was taken over by the Ministry of Education and was renamed *Madrasat Anastās al-Karmalī*, after the well-known Syrian-Iraqi Christian author (see Chapter 5). Under government control, it could not continue as an Assyrian school. The nationalization was a general measure for all denominational and private schools in that year.⁵²

Finally, there was an Assyrian school in the village of Sarsink, around fifty kilometers northeast of Duhok. Despite being a village school, the description that Robin Shamuel offers—mainly derived from interviews—paints the picture of a remarkably big and well-organized school. The school can be seen as a personal project of the Assyrian priest ‘Awdisho‘ Eskharyā. It was linked to the Assyrian School of Mosul in the sense that its curriculum and organizational ideas were based on those of Joseph de Kelaita.⁵³ A visit of King Faisal to the school in 1932 suggests a good relationship between the school and the Iraqi authorities. That this was indeed the case, is confirmed by Zaki Odisho, the son of the school’s founder. In an interview with Robin Shamuel, he describes that his father “[t]hrough his loyalty to his country, people and Church ... managed to have the approval of all the governmental officials,” and that he had “warm friendships with Iraqi authorities such as King Faisal I, the Prince Abdul’ilah and Nuri Sa’id.”⁵⁴ The Assyrian school of Sarsink still exists. It was transformed to a government school in 1952, but it retained the teaching of Syriac. Now it is one of the state-sponsored schools in the Kurdish Autonomous Region that uses Neo-Aramaic as its language of instruction.⁵⁵

In the beginning of this section, I mentioned the Assyrian school in Baghdad. The foundation of this school is closely connected to the

⁵¹ It is indeed still listed in the *Iraq Directory* of 1936 as the Assyrian primary school for boys in Kirkuk. *The Iraq Directory: A General and Commercial Directory of Iraq with a Supplement for the Neighbouring Countries, 1936* (Baghdad: Dangoor’s Printing and Publishing House, 1936), 421.

⁵² Osman, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 187.

⁵³ Shamuel, “The Private Assyrian Schools in Iraq,” 72.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 72; there are some recent references to this school on the Internet, such as Shlīmūn Dāwud Awrāham, “*Madrasat Ūrhuy al-Suryāniyya al-asāsiyya al-mukhtaliṭa fī Sarsink tuḥriz al-markaz al-auwal fī thalāthat al’āb*,” *Ishtar TV*, December 13th, 2011, <http://ishtarTV.com/viewarticle,39738.html>.

American mission, and it gives a valuable insight in both the ideological differences of the Assyrians among each other and the developing policies of the American missionaries. This case shows a rigid determination from the side of the missionaries to strictly implement its principles and strategies. This school was set up by the American mission in 1921, but was later run independently by the Assyrian Evangelical congregation of Baghdad, which was operating under the name "Assyrian Evangelical Church." The American missionaries were unrelenting in their decision to limit and later cancel their subsidy to an Assyrian school in Baghdad. The school was open to non-Protestants but was specifically meant for the Assyrian population: the school was open to "boys and girls of all the denominations among the Assyrians,"⁵⁶ meaning Protestants, those belonging to the Church of the East and possibly also Chaldeans among the Assyrian refugees. In 1931 it had 170 students and provided primary and secondary education, largely following the obligatory government curriculum.⁵⁷ Despite the fact that they had set up the school, in 1931 the American missionaries were not happy with the idea of subsidizing "a foreign language group," and decided to reduce the subsidy:

The Assyrians have never adapted themselves to the life in Iraq but have continued their school and their church in their original language. The Government is desirous of having them absorbed into the Iraqi nation. The Mission feels that its primary purpose is to evangelize the Arabs. Consequently, it felt that it could not continue paying out money to a non-Arab community.⁵⁸

In 1936, the subsidy for the related Assyrian Evangelical Church was stopped as well, and this decision was met with considerable

⁵⁶ A letter from Khendo H. Yonan, who was a pastor in the Assyrian Evangelical Church but also active for the American mission, indicates that upon closure "97 percents of the Assyrian refugee youths will be out in Baghdad streets," praising the school for that "boys and girls of all the denominations among the Assyrians, are prepared for Christian life." Presbyterian Historical Society, RG89-1-10, letter from Rev. Khendo H. Yonan to Robert E. Speer, dated April 17th, 1931.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Presbyterian Historical Society, RG89-1-16, "Memorandum on conversation with Mr. Willoughby regarding the Assyrians in Baghdad and his comments on a letter from Mr. Khendo H. Yonan with regard to the situation there" (1937).

protest from the side of the Assyrian Evangelical community. The reverend Khendo H. Yonan responded saying that they were “by far more Iraqis in spirit and in every way than the other sects among the Assyrians here in Baghdad.”⁵⁹ The missionaries’ uncompromising attitude can be seen as part of a wider tendency of the American mission to focus more on the Muslim majority and less on accommodating Christian minorities, culminating in an explicit decision in 1938 to focus almost exclusively on mission work in Arabic, because “[e]mphasis on Arabic and upon work for the majority seems of particular importance at this time when the Mission needs to identify itself strongly with the national development and to secure a permanent open door for work in Iraq.”⁶⁰

The shift in focus of the American mission did however not mean the complete end of missionary support for the Assyrians. In late 1938, the Assyrian church and school in Baghdad asked for money for new accommodation. When they once again sent a letter asking the missionaries for money to buy land and establish new buildings for the school, the church and the pastor’s residence, the mission refused this at first. The reasons for the refusal are not only a lack of money, but also a strong rejection of the idea of an Assyrian school:

The Mission has never felt that it was responsible for the school and especially at this time it seems to be a needless expense since there are good Government schools and your children would not lose out educationally if you dropped the idea of conducting a school. You possibly feel that you must teach the Syriac tongue to your children, but is this the wisest course? The language of your country is Arabic and we feel that you should put emphasis on your children learning this language. This would be one way of identifying yourselves with the people of this country if you intend to remain citizens of Iraq.⁶¹

⁵⁹Presbyterian Historical Society, RG89–1–15, letter from Khendo H. Yonan to Dr. Coan, August 6th, 1936.

⁶⁰Presbyterian Historical Society, RG89–1–17, “Executive Committee Report from Minutes of the Sixteenth Annual Meeting of the United Mission in Mesopotamia,” October 25, 1938.

⁶¹Presbyterian Historical Society, RG89–1–17, letter from B.D. Hakken (secretary of the mission) to Khendo H. Yonan, November 1st, 1938.

Moreover, the need for religious education was not considered a valid reason for continuing the school, as “this matter could be taken care of in the same way as is done in America by the pastor conducting Bible classes at stated times during the week.”⁶² Nevertheless, the Assyrians did not give up and tried again with a letter to the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions in New York City, which eventually decided to help financially.⁶³

The five above-mentioned schools are similar in the sense that they all had the word “Assyrian” in their name, linking themselves explicitly to support of an Assyrian identification.⁶⁴ All founders were indeed Assyrians, and most of them came from the region of Hakkari and Urmia as refugees, or had relatives there. Furthermore, all five schools were founded in the twenties, not long after the establishment of the state of Iraq and the arrival of the Assyrian refugees. As Assyrian schools, they did not only provide education for these refugees, but they also contributed to the development of Assyrianism. Putting “Assyrian” in a school’s name, however, did not automatically mean a negative attitude towards the Iraqi state or the Arabic language, as the example of the Assyrian school in Baghdad shows.

Conclusion

The Assyrians were in many ways different from the other Christians of the country. The large majority of them were uprooted from their homeland during World War I and had refugee status until the early 1930s. They were the only group of Christians in Iraq that was confronted with large-scale violence in the first half of the twentieth century. Their tribal way of life including carrying arms, the temporal leadership of their Patriarch, and the participation of many of them in the Levies caused unpopularity and fear among the rest of the population of Iraq. The writings and other intellectual endeavors of the Assyrians add to this image of difference with the other Christians, as

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Presbyterian Histoire Society, RG89–1–18, letter from Potter to B.D. Hakken, June 29, 1939. No reason for reinstating the support is given here.

⁶⁴For Robin Shamuel, the use of the word “Assyrian” in the name of the schools was the criterion to include them in his work, as he was interested in schools that had explicitly chosen for an Assyrian identification.

they show features that are unique in Iraq: an efficient way of printing Syriac script, a fully developed writing tradition in Neo-Aramaic, and the existence of schools of general education that were only open to members of the group.

The word that was used for the self-identification of this group was without exception “Assyrian,” or *Athūrī* in Arabic or *Āturāyā* in Syriac. This word was added to the names of all institutions and understood as self-understandable without further clarifications. From the way it was used, it is clear that the word did not refer to a church: it was most often used by adherents to the Assyrian Church of the East, but not exclusively. Rather, the term “Assyrians” was used to refer to a community consisting of multiple religious groups. The director of the Assyrian School in Baghdad clarifies this further when he writes about the of Evangelical Assyrians as one of the “sects of the Assyrians.” The discourse about and from the Assyrians before their arrival in Iraq, in which the words “nation” and “race” are frequently used, shows that we may assume a national or ethnic identification here. Despite the strong Assyrian identification, there are no signs of an aspiration of unity with the other Syriac Christians in Iraq. The Assyrians who were in the process of settling in Iraq thus retained their identification from the time that they were located in the regions of Hakkari and Urmia.

The Assyrians are not known for their willingness to integrate into the Iraqi state, as a large part of the Assyrians kept hoping for a return to a situation with autonomy or a transfer out of Iraq. A political form of Assyrianism, or Assyrian nationalism, is however not visibly present for most of the Assyrian intellectuals discussed in this chapter. Joseph de Kelaita printed religious texts, many of which could be used in the church, but these texts did not contain any nationalist elements. His creation of the Assyrian school in Mosul cannot be seen as a nationalist act, either, and his opposition to the Patriarch may be related to this. The leader of the Assyrian school in Baghdad even stressed his loyalty to Iraq in his correspondence with the American missionaries. Having said that, a strong Assyrian identification remains visible among all actors in this chapter: being loyal to the state of Iraq does not mean a rejection of this identification. Given the prevalent anti-Assyrian feelings in Iraq, the fact that many Assyrians felt comfortable enough to hold on to their identification and to express it, even after 1933, is significant. They stood up against the stricter variants of

Arab nationalism in Iraq, which requested assimilation from all non-Arabs. For similar reasons, the fact that many Assyrians were hesitant about integration into Iraq is by all means understandable: even Assyrian Iraqis who were loyal to the state, but without identifying as Arab, could not be counted as “real Iraqis” according to Arab nationalist ideology.

Looking at the language use of the Assyrians discussed in this chapter, we can draw the same conclusions. The printing press of Joseph de Kelaita consistently used Classical Syriac and Swadaya (Neo-Aramaic), which was different from what the other Syriac Christians did. The fact that these printed books were mainly for usage in church suggests that they can simply be seen as a substitution for the manuscripts that the other churches used. On the other hand, the large amount of language textbooks and reference works shows that the printing press also had a function in the preservation of Syriac and possibly Swadaya. The Assyrian schools, too, all had a function in the preservation of the communal languages. However, the use of Syriac and Swadaya by the actors in this chapter can hardly be seen as an Assyrian nationalist act. Most of the endeavors discussed in this chapter took place in the early years after World War I, when the possibilities of return or autonomy of the Assyrians were still high on the agenda and the preservation of the communal language was not more than logical. The teaching of Arabic, from the mid-1920s at the latest, shows that the schools already facilitated integration into Iraq when citizenship of the Assyrians was not even spoken of. Like the turn to Classical Syriac in the Bartallah manuscripts, the use of Syriac and Swadaya in the printing press of Joseph de Kelaita is a conscious choice, and—especially considering the fact that these texts were printed and not handwritten—a modern development. While there are no signs of direct influence from the Arabic *nahḏa* here, the phenomenon is similar to what we see in Bartallah.

In the next chapter, we move away from Classical Syriac and Neo-Aramaic while staying close to the Syriac Churches: the two religious journals that we will look at now were completely written in Arabic.