

Note on the Modern Assyrians

Teaching in Los Angeles, with a large immigrant community, I get students from all over the world, with especially large contingents from Latin America, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East. Among the Middle Eastern students from Iraq, Iran, and Turkey are those who call themselves "Assyrians." This is an interesting and important group of people. They are a remnant of the **Aramaic (or Syriac) speaking Christian community** of northern Iraq, eastern Turkey, and western Iran, which had meant nearly *everyone* there in **Late Antiquity**, but is now a group almost vanished in a sea of Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish, and Persian speaking Moslems. Indeed, they have been persecuted in Turkey and in Iraq, both for cooperating during the years of the British Iraqi Mandate (1920-1932) and simply for not fitting in, religiously and linguistically, to modern nationalist identities. The Iraq of Saddam Hussein has regarded them officially as Christian Arabs, not as a national minority. The community in Iran has recently encountered similar difficulties from the Islâmic Revolution there.



Religious Communities in Iraq, 1995		
Muslims	19,293,300	97%
Chaldeans	390,300	2.0%
Assyrians	87,700	0.4%
Syriac Catholic	55,500	0.3%
Syriac Orthodox	37,200	0.2%

Another community of Christians in the area is a group that calls themselves "Chaldeans." These are Syriac speaking Christians who have entered into doctrinal communion with the **Roman Catholic Church**. The term "Chaldean" was recognized in 1445 by Pope Eugenius IV. It seems to have been used earlier with other, interchangeable terms for the Christians of Mesopotamia. The actual "Chaldeans" were Aramaeans (though some now question this) who settled in southern Iraq, forming the basis of the Neo-Babylonian revival of the X (or XI) Dynasty of **Babylon**. The expression "Ur of the Chaldees" is

anachronistic when applied to the original **Ur** of the **Sumerians**, who had nothing to do with the Chaldeans and were long gone before the Chaldeans were anywhere near even existing. As descendants of real Aramaeans, the modern Chaldeans are more likely to be related to the real Chaldeans than anyone else, but there is no documentary or historical connection that can be traced after the age of Nebuchadnezzar, when the ethnic Chaldeans had blended into the older Babylonian population, and **Aramaic** began to be spoken by everyone. The Patriarchs Assyrian and Chaldean Churches (originally the "**Patriarchs of the East**") are give elsewhere at this site.

The Assyrians and Chaldeans are not the last people speaking descendants of Aramaic. There was an Aramaic speaking Jewish community in Kurdistan, but they now all, apparently, have moved to Israel [cf. Robert D. Hoberman, *The Syntax and Semantics of Verb Morphology in Modern Aramaic, A Jewish Dialect of Iraqi Kurdistan*, American Oriental Society, New Haven, 1989]. A confusing factor is that the cultural boundary does not follow the linguistic boundary. Speaking dialects closely related to those of the Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Jews (Eastern Aramaic) are other Orthodox Christians who religiously are affiliated with the Western Syriac tradition. Culturally, they were in Roman territory (upper Mesopotamia), and looked to the Patriarchate of Antioch, rather than to the Church of the East, originally on **Sassanid** territory, whence the Assyrian and Chaldean communities derive. These Christians tend to see



themselves as Syrians or Aramaeans. What remains of actual Western dialects of Syriac/Aramaean is only to be found in three villages near Damascus, in the Anti-Lebanon Mountains on the border between Syria and Lebanon. Stories about them turn up occasionally right before Christmas, with the plausible hook that this is the surviving language that would be the closest to the language actually spoken by Jesus -- who used a dialect of Aramaic, not Hebrew, for daily life. There is little hope for the survival of this community of Syriac speakers, however. At the same time, the Western Syriac alphabet sometimes is used to write **Arabic** by Lebanese **Maronite** Christians. This used to be characteristic in the Middle Ages: Whatever language you speak, you write it in the alphabet of your religion. Thus, Moses Maimonides wrote Arabic, Ashkenazic Jews wrote German (Yiddish), and Sephardic Jews wrote Spanish (Ladino), in Hebrew letters. In India, Moslems wrote Hindustani in Arabic letters (becoming *Urdu*) and Hindus wrote it in the [Sanskrit Devanagari](#) letters (becoming *Hindi*).

Self-identified Chaldeans and Aramaeans are frequently *called* "Assyrians" by Assyrian nationalists. This is deeply resented by many or even most in those communities, who do not want to be identified, wholly or even partially, with the ancient Assyrians, or with modern Assyrian nationalism. This has led to intense dispute, for instance, over census categories in the United States and about statements in the press referring to the ethnic communities in Iraq. Thus, press reports sometimes even say that the Christian community in Iraq speaks "Assyrian," a language that disappeared in ancient times (though many Assyrians do believe they are speaking ancient Assyrian). Some Assyrians even reject their ancient Christianity and wish to revive the worship of Assyrian gods, like Ashur. This would not be tolerated most predominantly Islamic countries.

[The Semitic and Other Afroasiatic Languages](#)

Ethnic Nationalist Mythologies -- further Comments on the Modern Assyrians, Strange Claims about the Greeks, and about India, and Note on "Afro-Centric" Egypt

It has not been uncommon for modern nations and ethnic communities to develop inflated ideas of their own importance to a deceptive and, especially when dealing with other communities, sometimes unhelpful level. These ideas may be over relatively trivial issues. In Egypt, people from the Coptic Christian community may claim that the Greek alphabet (which is used to write Coptic) was derived *directly* from ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, ignoring the the fact that the Greek alphabet was borrowed from the Phoenicians, whose own alphabet had been derived much more indirectly, if at all, from Egyptian [cf. p. 28, *Who Are the Copts?*, by Rev. Fr. Shenouda Hanna, Cairo, 1967]. Similarly, modern [Greeks](#) stoutly and famously maintain that the Modern Greek language, the lone surviving descendant of Classical Greek, is pronounced in exactly the same way as Classical Greek was 2500 years ago [[note](#)]. Such a thing is actually impossible (who has the "real" pronunciation of Latin? Italians? Spanish? Portuguese? Romanians? -- actually *none*); but if challenged, modern Greeks like to say, "We should know." They would know, in fact, if someone among them is more than 2000 years old and can actually remember the ancient pronunciation (there being no audio recordings from back then). Otherwise, they are not exempt from the obvious and

natural drift in pronunciation that affects *all* languages. The *proprietary* claim, that members of a ethnic, national, or racial group have the right to say whatever they want about themselves, uncontradicted by others, is less paradoxical but morally far nastier [[note](#)].

Editorial Note

What followed here was my critique of various claims made by modern Assyrians about themselves, about their language, and about the ancient Assyrians. This critique was hotly disputed and regarded as "anti-Assyrian" by many Assyrians, which it was not. Many people interpreted the criticism as denying that modern Assyrians are descended from ancient Assyrians at all, which it did not do. People also seem to have taken the idea that I thought they should not call themselves "Assyrians." I never thought so or said so. Strong exception was also taken to the language, which morally condemned ethnic mythmaking and made various negative judgments about the practices of the ancient Assyrians. Once e-mail protest letters began to be received by *The Proceedings of the Friesian School* and by [Valley College](#), complaining about the treatment, that section of this page was withdrawn, without prejudice, for reconsideration, in the hope of defusing the conflict. Now some Assyrians say that the page should have been left up, and they simply want to debate it. However, the charge has been made that page would promote the persecution of the Assyrians. For that reason, it has not been restored. Further details of the ongoing controversy can be found under [Correspondence](#).

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