

Appeal to our (spiritual and cultural) leadership:
Please contribute to the preservation of our beloved Syro-Aramaic legacy!

Johny Messo (2002)

In the early part of the 20th century the Syro-Arameans were (reluctantly) divided among the new born countries Syria, Turkey and Iraq by the contemporary Western superpowers. After, and even before, the horrible year of the (Islamic) *sayfo* ('sword'), many Arameans fled to Arab countries because of, softly put, uneasy circumstances; some even moved to Western countries, such as the U.S.A., Australia and South-America. The second immigration wave from the Tur-'Abdin regions, of whom the majority fled to Europe, was that of the 1960s onwards. They were rapidly followed by our people from Syria and Iraq until the present-day. Thus, in a sense the Aramean people are reunited in the Diaspora.

As we recall from the testimonies of our grandparents and parents, the establishment of cultural and political unions, renovations of our churches (let alone building new ones) and the education of our heritage and language were all forbidden in our homeland; terms such as 'freedom' and 'democracy' were actually foreign to them. Note that these basic elements are, in fact, substantial means to preserve ones identity; the intentions of those who imposed these prohibitions and restrictions upon our (grand)parents, are therefore not difficult to understand. Despite the many damages, our ancestors managed to keep our rich heritage and language alive for at least thousands of years. A divine miracle indeed!

To date, the vast majority of the Aramean population worldwide lives in the *golutho* (Diaspora)! At least this is true with respect to the people who originally come from Tur-'Abdin. *More than 90%* of the original 'Turabdinians' live currently in the Diaspora!

Although it has its bad side, the Diaspora offers our people also new perspectives. For instance, the freedom and the gamut of possibilities which it presents allow us to establish dozens of unions; to renovate and yet even to found new churches; and also to create ways to preserve and teach our heritage and language to the next generations. Indeed, all these are common means to conserve ones identity. Especially are they important for a people without a home(land) that lives dispersed all over the world.

As noted above, in a sense many descendants of those who lived together, say, before the early 20th century when the Arameans were divided among the new born nations in the Mid-East, have been reunited today in the Western Diaspora. A big problem is, though, that in many ways they are now getting (more and more) alienated from each other. In particular because each group that lived within its own sphere of influence, be it Arabic, Turkish or Kurdish, has been affected in a destructive way. However, ethno-culturally, linguistically as well as religiously, the Aramean people differ totally from the Arabs, Turks and Kurds.

This estrangement manifests itself, for instance, in Syriac-Orthodox church masses where priests continue to keep their sermons and some of the holy prayers in (particularly) Arabic and where deacons (sometimes purposely continue to) chant in Arabic. Further on our cultural parties foreign singers are invited and non-Aramaic music is being played (only the latter phenomenon is heavily extant in Europe). During meetings, the language in which people can express themselves at best is also being preferred to above Aramaic. Especially Aramean patriots and those who only understand Aramaic are discontent in these circumstances; and they have the full right to complain about it.

Observe furthermore that all these everyday events are at the expense of our very own language. Moreover, these simple examples are threatening not only the future existence of our language, but also of other components of our rich identity; and in the end, also the Aramean people as a whole who, in fact, already *are* at the edge of becoming history soon.

It is, therefore, in this painful Diaspora that we have come to understand that *today* one of the biggest threats to our legacy is no one else except ourselves. Yea, you, *me* and our families! We cannot blame outsiders anymore for aiming at our extinction. Hence it is truly grieving to realize that we have become our very own enemies in the present conditions.

How regretful it is thus not to convince our very own leaders – those who in fact need to convince us, youngsters, and those who in fact have the responsibilities (!) of protecting our heritage – of the importance of safeguarding our identity in the broadest sense of the word. For one, if we loose our identity and forget our language, what will make us a people (let alone a *nation*)? Moreover, what, then, can and will keep us united? It is, therefore, really sore to understand why there are people who willfully (I can't put it otherwise) give up the language of their forefathers at the expense of the language of those who tried (and still try) to exterminate us. Why is it actually that we so easily relinquish our mother language and our invaluable legacy?

Instead of promoting and defending the holy language of the Arab people and their prophet, we actually ought to promote our beloved language in which our Lord Jesus and His disciples preached and taught the Gospel. Unions need to be established and governed by people driven by love for their precious Aramaic legacy. And our churches need spiritual minded leaders, teachers and deacons to admonish us, the laity, when we even try to introduce foreign languages into our churches. During our parties, Aramean singers need to be invited who can make our hearts filled with passionate love for our sacred language with their beautiful Aramaic songs. Our meetings should be held in our holy mother tongue. What we therefore need, is new and fresh blood. A totally new generation that is fond of its Aramaic heritage! Above all, we need honest and brave patriots who dare to stand up when our priceless legacy is in danger; even against their own people, yea, to dare to raise their voices against the leaders too when it is urgent.

Our parents and leaders often state that the youth is the future. This is true, of course. Yet we notice them not *realizing* their frequently repeated statement. Even though we, youngsters, are not able to speak Aramaic as fluently as our parents and leaders do, we nevertheless realize one thing: we know who we are, we know our roots, we know how to appreciate our wealthy heritage and language in this modern world, we know our responsibilities, and last, but certainly not the least, we *realize* that we are the future and how to shape our future as well as that of our children. So it is us, the youth, now who essentially need to take action before it might be too late.

We have learned from history that one determines the future today; not tomorrow or the day after! So let's not waste more time than we already did and still do...!