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From religious to ethno-religious: Identity change among Assyrians/Syriacs in Sweden¹

Recent developments in the field of social sciences suggest a gradual tendency towards a revival of interest in the issue of religion and identity (Oppong, 2013). Waves of migrants have brought a new religious diversity to Europe. Sweden, with a population of 9.6 million people, has one of Europe's most liberal immigration policies. From the early 1970s, the reasons for migration have been mostly due to refugee flows and family reunification, although some migrants have also been motivated by education and employment opportunities. In 2010, 14.3% of the inhabitants of Sweden were foreign-born (Vasileva, 2011). In 2014 ca. 81,000 people emigrated to Sweden, the majority of whom came from Syria, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Iraq (The Swedish Migration Board, 2015). For many of these new immigrants in Sweden, religion is an important component of their cultural heritage and in some cases it is even the most crucial factor in the formation of an ethnicity and, in turn, a nation.

In this paper, my intention is to explore the identity processes among one particular community living in Sweden, namely Assyrians/Syriacs, who sometimes use emic terms *Suroyo* and *Suryoyo* when referring to themselves (Cetrez, 2011). The complex identification patterns of this Christian minority originating from the Middle East has already drawn considerable academic attention (Björklund, 1981; Knutsson, 1982; Andersson, 1983; Deniz, 2001; Pripp, 2001; Gunner and Halvardson, 2005; Nordgren, 2006). However, the topic has by no means been exhausted. We still lack a more nuanced description of the process of identity construction among the Assyrians/Syriacs in Sweden. How do they define themselves and how do they differentiate their own culture from the Swedish one? How do they connect with the past? What exactly is the role of religion in this? With social sciences offering us new tools and more precise definitions of such terms as ethnicity, nation, and identity, there is room to study this subject further.

This paper is concerned with a micro-analytical, predominantly ethnographic approach. It starts out with a theoretical argument, which examines and clarifies some dominant concepts and perspectives. Thereafter follows a background of the Assyrian/Syriac people and their situation in Sweden. Finally, the ethnographic section provides an analysis of the role of actors involved in constructing the Assyrian/Syriac identity in Sweden, the methods used in achieving their goals, the relations and reactions between the two groups, the influence of Swedish society, the role of the media and banal nationalism. The collected data

¹ This paper was written as a contribution to the 'Defining and Identifying Middle Eastern Christians in Europe' collaborative project (<https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/dimecce/>) and it has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement no 291827. The project Defining and Identifying Middle Eastern Christian Communities in Europe is financially supported by the HERA Joint Research Programme (www.heranet.info) which is co-funded by AHRC, AKA, BMBF via PT-DLR, DASTI, ETAG, FCT, FNR, FNRS, FWF, FWO, HAZU, IRC, LMT, MHEST, NWO, NCN, RANNÍS, RCN, VR and The European Community FP7 2007-2013, under the Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities programme.

supports the main argument that an ethno-religious identity has been constructed by elite actors within this community.

Concepts revised: Identity, Ethnicity, Nation, Diaspora

Some central concepts and theoretical perspectives need to be defined and clarified, as this establishes the framework for analysis and conclusions at the end of the paper.

There is still a group of scholars who stress the importance of what they call 'primordial attachments' which are thought to stem from the 'givens' or assumed 'givens' of social existence: kin, religion, language, and social practices. Social interaction is not important as these attachments flow from a natural or spiritual affinity (Geertz, 1993: 255-310). This point of view is held by followers of the often-quoted Huntington (1996) who believed that ethnic conflicts are fought along the 'fault lines' of a few civilizations, the identities of which are determined, to a large extent, by their religion. This 'primordialist' or 'essentialist' approach has been criticized by those who defend positions denoted as 'constructivist'. They believe that communal and ethnic identities are not static entities, but social constructs. In addition, language and culture are the product of actions and identifications. Therefore, communal identities reside in people's perceptions and ideas, and ethnic communities are imagined communities, according to Benedict Anderson (1983). Ernest Gellner's notion that in order to survive, nationalism requires a certain degree of homogeneity (1983) implies that it is a political intelligentsia that truly 'imagines' the nation (Donabed, 2012).

The lack of explanatory power of the primordialist approach is especially visible where ethnic change is at stake. Cultural studies and critical anthropology have shown that the processes of identity are about '*becoming* rather than *being*: not *who we are* or *where we came from*, so much as what we become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we represent ourselves' (Hall, 1996: 4). In a process, identities always undergo constant transformations and fragmentation. Although fragmented, they still strive for a closure, a sense of eternity (Frith, 1996). Manuel Castells defines identity as 'a people's source of meaning and experience' (1997: 6), and sees it as being formulated socially in relation to collectives of others whose features are of particular salience (Ursell, 2004).

The classic statement against primordialism was written by Fredrik Barth who had in mind people who change their ethnic identity (Barth, 1969, 1994). What Barth did omit was the ethnic durability and the persistence of elements of an older social structure and culture. He defined groups as units of ascription and self-ascription, focusing on the boundary that defines the group, but forgetting that there is usually some continuity with the past (Eriksen, 1993). Myths, memories, and symbols which are passed from generation to generation now receive more attention from social scientists and historians (Armstrong, 1982; Smith, 1986) as they play a very important function in unifying a group and ensuring its continuity. In other words, some elements of an identity can be old while others can be more recent.

Although the concept of 'nation' as a product of modern times, brought about by industrialization and the complexity of modern-day society has been promoted for the last thirty years by the followers of Gellner and Anderson, sociologists and historians do not agree that nationalism always precedes the nation. They point out that long before the modern era,

processes of community building took place. Ethnic communities, linked by shared myths of origin, memories of past events, as well as common values and symbols, could sustain themselves for many centuries. Armstrong notes that new nations do not emerge from a void but are transformations of earlier ethnic communities, while Anthony Smith speaks of the 'ethnic origins of nations' (Romeny, 2009).

The role of media and banal nationalism in diaspora

I decided to focus on issues of identity and forms of self-understanding in the context of what Assyrians/Syriacs have come to call their 'diaspora' (Armbruster, 2001). Diasporic identities are constantly producing and reproducing themselves along itineraries of migrating, but also re-creating the endless desire to return to 'lost origins' (Hall, 1994). As cultures are uprooted from particular places, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become even more important (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992). Diaspora members, living on cultural borderlands or interstitial zones, cluster around actual or imagined homelands (Yu Shi, 2005). The network societies created in the Internet have become increasingly powerful (Castells, 2000).

The media constitute an interstitial zone, playing a constitutive rather than a reflexive role (Hall, 1996b). For displaced subjects, the media provide points of identification by marking symbolic boundaries, fulfilling the desire for memory, myth, search, and rediscovery. The media also generate collective diasporic imaginations, which highlight the shared aspects of individual identities in terms of common culture, geography, and history, binding many subjects into an 'imagined community'. Some scholars have recognized the political nature of community formation on a diasporic context and the role of the media in this process (Yu Shi, 2005).

The utilisation of the media is one of the ways to 'flag' a nation according to Michael Billig. At the heart of Billig's concept of banal nationalism is the view that there is a 'continual *flagging*, or reminding, of nationhood through the daily reproduction of ideological habits' (1995: 6-8). The symbolic and the everyday dimension of a nationalistic discourse have been called 'flag waved' and 'flag unwaved'. Examples of banal nationalism include the use of flags in everyday contexts, sporting events, national songs, symbols concerning money, popular expressions, and the use of terms such as 'our team'. Many of these symbols and phrases are most effective because of their constant repetition, and almost subliminal nature. Although Billig writes about well-established nations, his notion could also be applied to communities which are nations *in statu nascendi*, such as Assyrians/Syriacs.

Assyrians/Syriacs in their homeland

Originating from the lands which are today's Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria, they were among the first people who accepted Christianity. For years, they were identified and identified themselves in ecclesiastical terms as Jacobites², Nestorians³, and Chaldeans⁴.

² Jacobites: 'followers' of Jacob Baradaeus, who was accused of monophysitism which was deemed heretical at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The church was called the Assyrian Apostolic (later Orthodox) Church of Antioch during the 1950s in the United States and by the close of the decade had become Syrian Orthodox. In

However, in modern times the first two appellations are considered to be misnomers, with only Chaldean still in broad use. Not every person within these ecclesiastical designations refers to him/herself as Assyrian. Some prefer the term Chaldean or Syrian, or more recently Syriac or Aramean depending on the perspective on a common culture and ancestry. In general, they use the endonym/autonym Suroyo/Suraya to refer to themselves and their native tongue Surayt/Sureth. These terms have been historically translated as ‘Syrian people’ and ‘Syrian language’, while more recent scholarship prefers ‘Syriac people’ and ‘Syriac language’ respectively in order to avoid confusion with the Syrian state and its citizens (Donabed, 2012).

The most popular theory suggests that the Assyrian cultural and ethnic identity of the Chaldeans, Jacobites, and Nestorians is a romanticized Western archeological notion based on Sir Austin Henry Layard’s rediscovery of the ancient cities of Nimrud and Niniveh between 1845 and 1848. The discussion of the Assyrian identity has been predominantly based on John Joseph’s chapter on the Assyrian identity in *The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East* (2000), and J.F. Coakley’s *The Church of the East and the Church of England* (1992). In most cases, scholars have refuted the modern Assyrian claim of descent from the ancient Assyrians of Mesopotamia, and their succeeding the Sumero-Akkadians and the Babylonians as one continuous civilization. Nevertheless, the Assyrian nationalism, or Assyrianism, increased in popularity in the late 19th century in a climate of increasing ethnic and religious persecution of Christians in the Middle East. The aim of this ideology has been to unite all Assyrians (also known as Chaldeans and Syriacs) from northern Iraq, northwestern Iran, southeastern Turkey, northeastern Syria (which were the lands of ancient Assyria and Mesopotamia), and the diaspora communities that had left these areas. Its main proponents at the beginning of the 20th century were Benyamin Arsanis, Fraidon Bet-Oraham, Baba Parhad, Ashur Yoseph, Naum Faik, Youseph Malek, Mar Toma Odo (De Kelaita, 1994).

Following the terrible atrocities which happened during the First World War, especially in 1914 and 1915, a period that people today refer to as ‘Seyfo’ – the year of the sword, a delegation of the various endangered communities attended the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Their petition for a national homeland, *The Claims of the Assyrians as Presented to the Paris Peace Conference of 1919*, was later published and defined the Assyrians as including the following: Nestorians, Chaldeans, Jacobites, Persian Assyrians, Assyrians in Russia, a Maronite element, and even a Muslim Assyrian group (Donabed, 2012).

The Simele massacre committed by the armed Iraqi forces during a campaign that systematically targeted the Assyrians of northern Iraq in August 1933, marked the parting of the ways between the Assyrian Church of the East and the Chaldean Church. Perceiving Assyrians as ‘uncouth’, the Chaldeans began to distance themselves and identify solely with their religious community, and later as Iraqis, Iraqi Christians, or Arab Christians, rather than with the Assyrian community as a whole. This is also true of the Syriac Orthodox Church,

the past ten years the term, Syriac Orthodox, has been more frequently utilized. Syrian Catholics were mostly converts from the Jacobite-rite.

³ Nestorians: ‘followers’ of Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, whose ideas (Nestorianism) were deemed heretical in 431 at the First Council of Ephesus. Today called the Assyrian Church of the East.

⁴ Chaldeans: Nestorians who converted to Catholicism, a process which began in 1552.

which, prior to 1933, considered itself part of the Assyrian people (Donabed & Mako, 2009: 108). The Assyrian Church of the East, which was mostly engaged in promoting an Assyrian identity, was weakened by the exile of its patriarch to the United States and another split – during the latter half of the 1960s, the Ancient Church of the East was created with its own patriarch in Baghdad under the watchful eye of the Ba‘th regime (Donabed, 2012).

Although the religious element was always dominant in the identity of the adherents of all the above-mentioned churches, it was not the only one – the cultural traditions of pagan empires such as those of the Assyrians and the Aramean kingdoms were gaining importance. Therefore, the ‘Assyrian’ label would be understood as a reference to the glorious past of the pre-Christian Assyrian civilization of which present-day Assyrians would be its Christian continuation. Among other arguments, this faction would give examples of two celebrations – 7th August as an official national holiday, commemorating the massacres in Simele, along with the first of April (Kha b-Nissan), the Assyrian New Year – as an implicit recognition by Kurdish leaders of the legitimacy of a form of Assyrian nationalism in Kurdish territory. However, according to oral history, in the 1960s high religious leaders protested in Germany against the use of the word Assyrian (Gaunt, 2010). The label Assyrian sounded ‘too Nestorian’, and reminded these religious leaders of the long Christological controversy and mutual accusations of heresy. In addition to this, from an ethnic point of view, the Syriac Orthodox consider themselves as Aramaic rather than Assyrian (Teule, 2011). Soon the name conflict escalated and proliferated across the world.

Assyrians/Syriacs in Sweden

The Assyrian/Syriac emigration from the Middle East to Sweden started in the late 1960s and continues to this day. The number of Assyrians in Sweden is difficult to calculate, as immigrants in the Swedish statistical demographics are not categorised in terms of ethnic belonging. According to SST [The Swedish Commission for Government Support to Faith Communities] in 2012, the Assyrian Church of the East had 6,112 members and two Syriac Orthodox Churches had 50,396 members. However, the internal figures point to 120,000 (BetBasoo, 2013). The total number of Assyrians/Syriacs in the city of Södertälje, which is their unofficial capital, in 2013 was about 25,000 representing slightly more than a quarter of its total population (Södertälje Kommun Statistics, 2013).

The majority of Assyrians/Syriacs in Sweden come from a small mountainous and rural area in south-east Turkey called Tur Abdin, and most of them are members of the Syriac Orthodox Church. Sociological and anthropological studies point to the central historical role of this Church in the cultural life of its adherents, as for centuries they constituted a part of the Christian Millet under the Muslim Ottoman Empire. Thus, they were defined solely in terms of their religion and represented by their Patriarch at the imperial court in Istanbul, a situation that *de facto* also remained unchanged within the modern Turkish nation-state (Deniz, 1999). The Church was both a place of worship and an institution that participated in its members' social issues. (Freyne-Lindhagen, 1997). Migration to Western countries has changed this role. People living in the diaspora have built social and political organisations, increased ethno-national awareness, gained a higher educational level, and increased gender equality. Consequently, the Syriac Orthodox Church has been unable to meet the changing needs of the

community in Sweden as well as in other countries in Europe (Freyne-Lindhagen, 1997; Deniz, 1999).

The first non-religious organisation, the Assyrian Society (Assyriska Föreningen), was established in Södertälje in 1971. Soon after, an identity conflict developed within the community. While a largely secular elite within the diaspora along with the Swedish authorities perceived the role of Christianity as rather divisive and preferred the 'Assyrian' (*Assyrier*) name, others found the name problematic. The official reasons were two-fold: firstly, because of its referring back to the ancient Assyrian empire, and secondly, because of the way this non-religious label seemed to neglect all those Christian traditions that for two millennia had been tied to the Syriac Orthodox Church (Rommel, 2011). Unofficially, there was also some rivalry between a few powerful Tur Abdin tribes which also influenced the church's politics.

In 1976, the Assyrian Society split due to the name conflict, and the Syriac Society (Syrianska Föreningen) was founded (Deniz, 1999). A year later, the patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox church travelled from Damascus to Sweden and proclaimed that no true believer should ever use the term Assyrian or Aramean, but only the emic name Suryoyo. There were plans to excommunicate 60 people who publicly called themselves Assyrians, but the process was stopped at the last moment. However, one leading Assyrian was murdered and street demonstrations and riots took place several times (Andersson, 1983). The word Suryoyo as an identity was used for a few years and, although Gaunt (2010) claims differently, it gained certain popularity in the Swedish context in addition to neologism *Syrianska* (Syriac).

Since the 1970s, the community has been split as the conflict of names has persisted and, as a consequence, parallel institutions have developed across a whole range of fields. In addition to Assyrian and Syriac Federations (Assyriska Riksförbundet and Syrianska Riksförbundet), which have 7,400 and 17,059 members respectively, there are a number of national youth organisations – three Syriac: Syrianska-Arameiska ungdomsförbundet (4,890 members), Syrianska/Arameiska akademikerförbundet (1,576 members), Syrisk ortodoxa kyrkans ungdomsförbund (6,117), one Assyrian, Assyriska ungdomsförbundet (2,196 members) and one mixed, SOUF, Syrisk ortodoxa ungdomsförbundet (2,768 members) (the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, 2013)⁵. Moreover, the Syriac Orthodox Church has two bishops in two separate churches which are situated in proximity⁶. Last but not least, there are three football teams (Assyriska FF, Syrianska FC and Södertälje team) and three TV stations (Suroyo TV, Suryoyo SAT and online Ashur TV).

Judged by overall figures, Assyrians/Syriacs make up a small contingent of immigration in Sweden. They are generally seen as Middle Easterners, or Turks, by those Swedish who have little regard for distinguishing between these groups. From an Assyrian/Syriac perspective, however, their community in Sweden is not only distinct, but

⁵ Swedish data points to Syriacs outnumbering Assyrians in Sweden by least two-to-one. However, according to the chairman of the Assyrian Federation, Assyrians constitute more than half of the whole community, and they are as active as Syriacs, although less inclined to acquire official memberships of the organisations (interview, 6 March 2014).

⁶ The official names of the churches are the Syrian Orthodox Archdiocese of Sweden and the rest of Scandinavia with Archbishop Mor Julius Abdulahad Gallo Shabo (Assyrian) and the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchal-Vicariate of Sweden with Archbishop Mor Dioskoros Benyamen Atas (Syriac).

also the largest in Europe (followed by Germany) as well as being one of the most successful (Södertälje Kommun, 2008).

Methodology

The study is based on quantitative and qualitative research – the findings from two electronic surveys (2010, 2014) and fieldwork conducted in 2014 in Stockholm and Södertälje. The first survey, consisting of two sub-surveys targeted at Assyrians and Syriacs/Arameans respectively, was conducted from March 2008 to May 2009, with the results being analysed in 2010. The Assyrian sub-survey was completed by 490 people (64% men, 36% women, average age 35) and the Syriac/Aramean sub-survey by 306 respondents (63% men, 37% women, average age 26) from all over the world (Wozniak, 2014). The second survey was conducted from December 2013 to December 2014 and analysed in 2014. As it was targeted at several Middle Eastern Christian communities in UK, Denmark and Sweden, only answers of the Assyrians/Syriacs living in Sweden were selected for further analysis. Out of 224 respondents 55.5% were men and 44.5% were women, with an average age of 30.5. Fieldwork consisted of participant observation and 30 semi-structured interviews conducted in English or Arabic (each lasting from 1 hour to 2 hours) with actively involved community members: 18 Assyrians (10 men and 8 women) and 12 Aramean (only men). In addition, there were three focus groups of five to six people (Assyrian only, Syriac only, and a mixed Assyrian/Syriac group) in which more females were included. The interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed using the NVivo program. The interviews provide the most valuable material, while online surveys are treated as complementary sources of information due to their constraints – methodological limitations associated with the non-random sampling, non-coverage and non-response errors that inhibit valid inferences to the general population. The online data collection can be employed when indicative rather than generalizable data is needed (Kalogeraki, 2012).

Identity of interviewees

A part of each interview was a ‘card exercise’ which involved arranging chosen cards with names of different national, ethnic, and religious identities from top to bottom – from the most important to the least important, with the possibility of putting the cards in one line to manifest their equal importance. The point was to make participants reflect upon their own, often very complex, identities – and present them in a new revealing way.

Interestingly, among the Assyrian group, the Assyrian card was always on the top, 8 out of 18 times without any other card deemed equally important. 6 out of 11 ethnic Syriacs put the Syriac or Syrian card at the top, the same number as those who chose the Aramean identity as the most vital. In four cases, Aramean and Syriac were regarded as equally important. Other top choices were: Christian, Middle Eastern Christian and Swedish. 10 interviewees included the Syriac Orthodox identity, with one interviewee putting it in first position. This contrasts with 11 out of 18 Assyrians who also mentioned Syriac Orthodox, others choosing Assyrian Church of the East or no denominational identity at all (religiously lapsed or paying no attention to this aspect of their identity). 14 Assyrians used the Swedish

card as did five Arameans. 12 Assyrians would not have an objection to being called Suryoye, as was the case with eight Arameans.

The same exercise was conducted at the end of the focus groups when all participants were to negotiate their shared identity. The Assyrian group chose two names, Assyrian and Suryoye, to be ‘umbrella’ terms for many others (they included “Syriac” but regarded this as less relevant). The Syriac group put several identities on the same top line, namely Syriac, Suryoye, Assyrian, Chaldean, Syrian, Iraqi, Maronite, Lebanese, Swedish. The Assyrian/Syriac mixed group agreed to use Aramean, Syriac, Suryoye, Assyrian and Chaldean. Therefore, the purely Assyrian group seemed to have a more exclusive approach, the purely Syriac group a more inclusive approach, and the arrangement worked out in the mixed group occupied the middle ground between these two approaches.

Although the discussed sample is very small, it does show some tendencies. Among Assyrians, their preference is for an ethnic identity rather than a denominational one with their eagerness to identify themselves with the host country also worth noting. On the other hand, there is hesitation among Syriacs with regards to word choice: whether to stick to the Syriac (or Syrian) name or to embrace an Aramean identity. The latter has recently been promoted by their umbrella organization, the World Council of Arameans (Syriacs), founded in 1983 as SUA (the Syriac Universal Alliance)⁷. The names of sub-organisations of the WCA⁸ vary as well⁹ – with the majority choosing a double name (Syriac/Aramean) and the minority selecting just one of these options. Syriacs are also more eager to use the Suryoye name, although many Assyrians have nothing against it either. These results are not surprising in the light of more than 150 years of Assyrian nationalism and the promotion of the Assyrian name, contrasting with the more recent Syriac/Aramean movement.

In the question about ethnic identity the results of the 2014 survey are as follows: 121 Syriac, 112 Suryoye, 79 Aramean, 68 Assyrian. In five cases Assyrian and Aramean identity go together but despite this they exclude each other. Again, far from being representative, these outcomes show auto-identifications of some of the most active members of the Assyrian/Syriac community. Similarly to the Swedish statistics on membership, Syriacs outnumber Assyrians by two-to-one. However, Syriacs also tend to name their ethnic identity as Aramean or Suryoye, while Assyrians more often keep only one name. It needs to be remembered though, that this situation occurs in the Swedish diaspora, not necessarily in other diasporas – for example the vast majority of Assyrian respondents to the 2010 survey came from USA, where the patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East resides and Assyrianism is stronger and more deeply rooted.

⁷ The name change was officially motivated by the patriarch’s opinion that “The Syriac language is the Aramaic language itself, and the Arameans are the Syrians themselves. He who has made a distinction between them has erred”. The Syriac Orthodox Patriarch H.H. Mor Ignatius Zaka I Iwas, *The Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch at a Glance*, 2008, <http://ixoyc.net/data/Fathers/161.pdf>.

⁸ Interestingly, this acronym does not include the letter “S”, also the word “Syriac” which appears on the website is noticeably smaller than the “Aramean” term. WCA, *Name change: SUA to WCA*, <http://www.wca-ngo.org/about-us/name-change-sua-wca>.

⁹ The Syriac Federation of Sweden, Syriac Association of Australia, Aramaic Association of America, Aramean Federation of Belgium, Syriac Association of Vienna, in Austria, Aramean (Syriac) Federation of The Netherlands, Aramean (Syriac) Federation of German, Aramean (Syriac) Federation of Switzerland, Aramean Association of the United Kingdom. WCA, *WCA Members*, <http://www.wca-ngo.org/about-us/member-federations>.

Although the Aramaic language¹⁰ is one of the most important indicators of both the Assyrian and Syriac identities, in light of the 2014 survey only half of the respondents in Sweden claim to know it at a communicative level; around two fifths use it while in their parents' house. The number of those who understand liturgical Classical Syriac (Kthubonoyo) is even smaller – one third. Unsurprisingly, in 2010's survey, almost three quarters of both Assyrian and Syriac respondents stated that forgetting their mother tongue is the biggest threat to their identity. This fear was shared by almost all interviewees in Sweden (Wozniak, 2014).

Swedish identity and society's influence

The data from the internationally based World Values Survey has repeatedly demonstrated that Swedish culture deviates from the cultures of most other societies. The characteristics of the Swedish culture are apparent through the unparalleled high scores Sweden has on the index for emancipative freedom values. This orientation index includes among other things horizontal social trust (59.2% in Sweden), tolerance of social minorities (92.3%), and strong democratic view (41.2%) (Pettersson and Esmer, 2007). The Swedish culture is also marked by very high scores on the index of secular–rational and non-traditional values. It means that such value authorities like 'God', 'Family' and 'Nation' are not held in high esteem which can be seen as a result of globalisation and late modernisation in a general sense (Pettersson and Esmer, 2007). Moreover, Sweden shows relatively low scores for traditional values and religious engagement: only 10.7% of Swedes regarded religion as very important, while God is very important for 11.8% (Cetrez, 2011)

Despite this, in 2014's survey more than 80% of Assyrian/Syriac respondents felt positive or very positive towards Sweden, and more than 60% perceived their encounters with native Swedes as positive. However, the recurring topic is the Swedes' alleged coldness and immorality. Some of the interviewees distanced themselves from such opinions, while others seem to share them:

[Typical Swedes] are cold, analytical, that they are morally and ethically deprived, and you can't trust them actually. For example if a Swedish woman marries, after 3-4 years she might say she's tired of you, while with Syriacs marriage is holy. They have a huge sexual experience before they get married. This and also that they have children with others before they marry, they make a family before they marry. Those things make them not trustworthy. (Syriac man, 40s)

The second most common remark is that Swedish weak family bonds contrasted to loving Assyrian/Syriac families and close relations even with distant relatives:

I have many Swedish friends and there are many different types but one thing is different between the Swedish people and Assyrian people is that we have a family. Good family relation, good strong family relation and the Swedish don't have that type of family relation. (Assyrian man, 30s)

The Swedish preference for safety, a love of nature and physical activity is sometimes quoted:

¹⁰ In the Swedish diaspora most Assyrians would call Neo-Aramaic language Assyrian to avoid any connotations with Syriacs/Arameans.

For me Swedishness is safeness, calmness. Swedes love their nature, you know, the wild park. Going out to the woods is not what I would do but... Skiing is also another Swedish thing. (Syriac man, 30s)

More interviewees enumerate other positive aspects of Swedish identity:

Democracy, I think, is very Swedish, being open, integrity, solidarity, the thought of solidarity. That's a good thing which I share. (Assyrian man, 30s)

Several voices stress that Assyrians/Syriacs are positively influenced by the Swedish identity, with gender equality and more opportunities for Assyrian/Syriac girls especially attributed to Swedish society:

So we are seeing something that the Syriacs have learned from the Swedish society. To respect women and to give them much more opportunity so they could study (...) And being an equal in law and respect. (Syriac man, 30s)

Secularization is sometimes perceived as a threat:

As Christians in Sweden we have a huge problem. The main problem is that, you know, the politicians are atheists. And what they are doing is that they are changing the whole Swedish culture and adapting it to multi-culture which makes me think, you know, that they're not proud of their culture. (Assyrian/Chaldean man, 30s)

However, it could also be connected to modernity and prosperity, especially in the perception of the Assyrian faction:

If I compare the evolution of the Suryoye community with other communities, Suryoye communities in other countries, I can see we have reached quite good level and we are maybe more secular in Sweden. That doesn't mean that we do not believe, we still have the belief but we have left some old traditions which do not fit in the new system, so we are adapting the new ways. (Assyrian man, 30s)

The consciousness of being partly Swedish has been experienced strongly by the younger generation, brought up in Sweden, once they have visited their parents' homeland:

If I identify myself as Swedish? I think when I go to see my people in Turkey, Assyrians in Turkey, I realise how Swedish I am. In Sweden I am not so Swedish. (Assyrian woman, 30s)

The last opinion is not very popular, as most interviewees draw a separation line between their community and wider Swedish society, but it is worth citing due to its frankness in acknowledging the assimilation that happens in a diaspora:

We have to stop struggle to say we are not Swedish, we are eating Swedish food, we hearing Swedish speech, we are going to Swedish schools, we are developing everything Swedish. (Assyrian woman, 30s)

Secular and religious leadership

As the elites, and especially the leaders, are the creators of mass identities, the interviewees were asked whom they consider to be the leaders of their community. Most

participants mentioned the Syriac Orthodox Church (patriarch or priests) but thought that their role was limited. The names of secular leaders were few as the national movement has been relatively small (Romeny, 2009). More Assyrians mentioned Assyrian secular organisations than Syriac ones, however, both groups were almost equally critical towards their leadership. There is a sense of historical appreciation for the role of the Church but coupled with the knowledge that there are secular organisations which plays a major part in the community's leadership:

The community... the whole community... we have the church, it's very important so you may say the archbishop, if you see it that way, in the religious way because it's very important for Assyrians. But in the other way, there is a lot, I think Afram Bar Yakoub in ARS [Assyrian Federation in Sweden], he is one of them, but there is a lot who work outside so I don't think... Before it was only the church that was maybe the strongest one, but it's not like that anymore. (Assyrian man, 20s)

Most young interviewees were very skeptical towards leadership and show a more individualistic approach which could stem from the influence of the individualistic Swedish culture:

I do not see anybody in our community as our leader. I understand the priests have a leadership role but I do not see them as my leaders. So I do not look at anybody. (Assyrian man, 30s)

The idea of separating religion from certain aspects of society, which has been one of the most fundamental principles for modern Western societies, was also explicitly expressed by some Assyrians:

I think personally they should separate the church and the nationality and the organisations. I think so (...) the church has an important role, maybe the priests are some kind of leaders... spiritual leaders in some sense (...) I don't know (...) I can't see any specific leaders. (Assyrian woman, 20s)

There was also a feeling of being kept in a kind of ghetto by short-sighted secular leaders who try to influence people with their speeches – reinforcing common roots, importance of mother tongue, solidarity. Such talk does not have a significant impact though:

I think that we have leaders who don't believe in their leadership, they don't believe in the vision of the Assyrian. I don't know, there is a lack of competence. We are living in a globalized world (...) We cannot live in our bubble and just talking about, about... "Yes, you should talk Assyrian, we are people, we are the same people, we have to support each other". (Assyrian woman, 30s)

As for Syriac respondents when they mentioned the patriarch, they added that he was only a spiritual leader:

For me it's like the patriarch... I am the member of the Syriac Orthodox church, for me he's a spiritual leader. Nothing more, no worldly leader. (Syriac man, 30s)

On the other hand, some claim that there are many Syrians who follow the Church almost blindly. There is tension between the religious and ethnic identity regarding church attendance:

And you know, people... people that never took any chances in life. They were born into the Church. They were brought up in the Church. They will die in the Church. They did only what the Church said. They worked within fields accepted by the Church (...) It's not to judge others, you know? It's very good. I congratulate them. But they cannot judge me being less Syriac if I go to church once in a month and not every week. (Syriac man, 30s)

A few Syrians resembled Assyrians in the sense that they openly wanted secular organisations to gain prominence over the Church:

For me the leader of our people is and should be the secular one and secular one we have, it's like an umbrella organisation, The Council of Arameans and Syrians with the leader Johny Messo, you know... then it's how I see and how I would like it to be 'cause I think the church is a very important institution, very important religious center of people. I respect the religion... religious leaders also but I think their time has come, they should step back and make space or room for the secular organisation for the civil persons. (Syriac man, 30s)

There were also voices claiming that a few powerful families have been in power for decades which had not been good for the broader community:

There is a structure with grey eminence – somebody is pulling the strings from behind. There are different families and members in families that have influenced politics and so on. We know the names, and this can maybe be a problem because often it's the same people who are in charge. The same faces, names who have ruled. (Syriac man, 40s)

It was interesting to compare these interviews with statements of leaders who were mentioned in them. Generally, priests and some deacons claim that secularization and political ambitions are destroying the community from the inside, while leaders of secular organisations perceived the role of Church as problematic – a stronghold of tradition and language on the one hand, but on the other hand, an obstacle to creating a more conscious community and develop it into a fully-fledged nation.

A good example of how secular leaders try to shape the identity of the people is by liaising with academicians who write about them. In the introduction to her book, Naures Atto admits that she had to change the Suryoyo name into Assyrian/Syriac in order to be able to finish her research (Atto, 2011: 11-12). There were attempts to also influence the DIMECCE research by either persuading us to use certain names or literally banning the use of others. The Syriac leadership asked me not to use Assyrian/Syriac term in order to avoid any associations with “these Nestorians” – from their perspective it would be more proper to speak about Arameans and Assyrians as separate entities. On the other hand, the Assyrian leadership insisted on using the Assyrian term only, or Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac in ‘the worst case scenario’, but did not accept the Suryoyo term. This might look surprising if we remembered that many Assyrians use this word to describe themselves but this peculiar ban can be interpreted as a will to draw clear demarcation lines between those who identify themselves primarily as Assyrians and others, and also to ensure that the Assyrian name will be used in an English-speaking international context.

The community name issue has its continuity in baby names. Many Assyrians choose names which remind them of a glorious past such as Sargon, Ashur, Niniveh, while Syriacs prefer to give their children Christian names with English or French spelling (Emanuel, Johnny, Jean, Robert). In the 1980s, when the conflict between the Assyrian and Syriac factions in Sweden was at its height, some Syriac Orthodox priests did not agree to give children “Assyrian” names as they did not want to reinforce an ethnic identity which was frowned upon by the Church. One of the interviewees mentioned such a situation and revealed her father’s intention to find a name which would be appropriate in both contexts – Assyrian and Swedish – which is a sign of integration tendencies:

I was born in the early 1980s and what my mother and father and family told us is that there were clashed in the early 1980s (...) My mother told the priest: “I would like to baptise my daughter as Nineveh” and he said “Oh, it’s not appropriate, you shouldn’t choose Nineveh” (...) he said to my mother that it is not an appropriate name, maybe you should think about another name. My father was already thinking about another name, he didn’t listen to the priest, it wasn’t that, in his mind he was like “I am trying to find a name that is appropriate in both Assyrian and Swedish”. So my father chose my name. (Assyrian female, 30s)

The relations and reactions between the two groups

Although during my research, I encountered a whole spectrum of attitudes towards the ‘other’ faction, my interviewees, maybe because most of them were young and involved in the life of their community, presented themselves as supporters of cooperation. They often remarked on ‘tensions’ or ‘problems’, especially in Södertälje but did not want to discuss the reasons behind them or to blame one particular side:

Here in Södertälje there is so much problems and tension from the Syriac side and from Assyrian side. (Assyrian female, 30s)

The interviewees stressed that ‘people are tired’ of this conflict and wished it could be solved. Two possible ways were suggested: either unity or separation, anything to escape the present situation:

You have the Assyriska and Syrianska here in Södertälje and the rivalry between the two, they have two churches and two televisions. But the majority of the people either they are on this side or this side are tired of this dispute. When you talk to people, they are really tired of this. (...) There are two ways, one way is to come together and unite around something, or you have a clear separation. What they are doing now is trying to put etiquettes that are uncomfortable, if I am Syriac and say you are Assyrian as well and want to put an Assyrian etiquette and vice versa it’s kind of a battlefield. (Syriac man, 40s)

I have also encountered organisations, also connected to the Church, which accepted members of both factions, Assyrians and Syriac. Indeed, friendships occurred between the members of this organisation despite their different ethnic identification such as the case of this Assyrian interviewee whose best friend considered himself to be Christian first and Syriac second:

Because maybe there is someone who defines themselves as Suryoyo, Aramaean, he would may be offended by this. So in our organisation everyone is welcome. Doesn’t matter if you are Aramaean, Suryoyo, Assyrian. But I would have hoped for more, you know, incorporation. (Assyrian male, 20s)

The role of the media

According to the 2010 survey, three fifths of Assyrians watched television which they considered to be Assyrian, and almost half read Assyrian magazines. Three quarters of Syriacs watched Syriac channels, and one fifth read Syriac magazines. More than half of Assyrians watched Suroyo TV, more than two fifths Ishtar TV, one quarter Suryoyo Sat, and one seventh Ashur TV. Four fifths of Arameans watched Suryoyo SAT and two thirds Suroyo TV. The most popular Assyrian newspapers were Zinda and Hujådå, with the online AINA (Assyrian International News Agency) also having a noticeable audience. Syriacs mentioned mainly Bahro Suryoyo and Mardutho d-Suryoye (Wozniak, 2014).

While it was clear that Hujådå had an Assyrian profile and Bahro Suryoyo a Syriac profile, the picture was more complex with television. Suryoyo SAT for its close link to the Syriac Orthodox Church and its youth organisation is definitely aiming to create a Syriac identity, while Suroyo TV had ambitions to unite all Assyrians/Syriacs/Chaldeans with maybe a slightly more Assyrian agenda but under a common Suroyo name. At the time of conducting the survey, online Assyria TV did not exist – it was created in 2011 by young secular activists to give the Assyrian Federation in Sweden a voice and help to strengthen the Assyrian identity.

The 2014 survey indicated that the Internet is twice as important as television for these Assyrian/Syriacs in Sweden who look for information about their community (81% versus 41%). This result may be accurate if we only consider the younger generation. Tendencies discovered by the 2010 survey were confirmed by the qualitative data: Assyrians in Sweden mentioned Suroyo TV and Hujådå, while Syriacs pointed to Suryoyo SAT. Younger respondents often claimed that their parents were the ones who watch these media but they prefer to search for information on the Internet or watch Swedish channels. Young Assyrians noticed the appearance of a new online Assyrian television service – Assyria TV:

My favourite media is Hujådå, and Suroyo TV, Assyria TV, media like that. It's there I got information about my people because the Swedish don't send so much about the Assyrian people. (Assyrian man, 20s)

My parents watch mostly Arabic channels but also Assyria TV online and Suroyo TV (...) Sometimes we get secondary information, Hujådå. I think it's reliable and then sometimes, AINA. Yeah. The big ones. (Assyrian female, 20s)

You have the Suryoyo SAT, you have the channel. I don't watch it so much but my mother for – she talks about it. She's a Suryoyo viewer. (Syriac man, 30s)

The importance of these broadcasting services also extends to Neo-Aramaic channels, especially for the older, sometimes illiterate people. Similarities between the two main competitors, Suroyo TV and Suryoyo SAT, were noted by a Syriac deacon:

[About Suryoyo SAT] it's more of an inclusive channel that tries to cover all the aspects or the different subjects in the Syriac community, from political to religious, to integration and so forth. So it has a great role actually. (...) Before these Syriac channels, many of our older and many of our members, they watched Swedish news. But when these channels came, they switched. So many of them just watch these channels. And of course it's good but also that it's a great responsibility (...). Well, we have Suroyo TV. Suroyo TV is in many, many ways broadcasting almost the same as Suryoyo Sat. You can in some sense see them as complementary to each other. (...) With all respect to Assyria TV and to different... In my understanding, what I've seen from my place is that they focus on the Assyrian identity and Assyrian cultural identity. (Syriac man, 30s)

The interviews conducted with representatives of all three TV stations showed that Suryoyo TV, which was once the most popular channel and tries to accommodate Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs, has been losing its audience. This is in contrast to both Suryoyo SAT and Assyria TV which have been gaining viewers who identify themselves as Syriac or Assyrian respectively. It is a sign of both a growing polarization and a necessity to take a particular side.

The role of banal nationalism

The 2010 survey proved that there are different sets of Assyrian and Syriac symbols, with Assyrians recognising several more than Syriacs. One third of Assyrian respondents mentioned *lamassu*, a winged bull, one fifth the Assyrian star (which appears on Assyrian flag), almost as many of god Ashur, and one tenth of his wife – the goddess Ishtar. Ten per cent also stated that the cross is an Assyrian symbol despite its general Christian character. Two fifths of Syriacs gave an example of an Aramean eagle, and almost one third of an Aramean flag. As a matter of fact these last two symbols are one and the same symbol whose design is based on that of a relief of a ‘winged sun-disk’ excavated in Tell Halaf – in ancient Gozana outside Hassake in Syria (Dag, 2013). A quarter of Syriac respondents said that the cross was an Aramean symbol. Some Syriacs mentioned Assyrian symbols such as *lamassu* and Ishtar, though no Assyrian selected any symbols chosen by Syriacs (Wozniak, 2014).

Participant observation gave me an opportunity to discover the presence of certain symbols in the private and public spaces connected to Assyrians/Syriacs in Sweden. I saw copies of ancient reliefs depicting *lamassu* or Assyrian kings hunting in Assyrian homes, associations and wedding halls, Syriac flags, portraits of patriarchs and bishops in priests’ offices, crosses, figures of the saints and holy icons in Syriac houses, Assyrian and Syriac flags as well as gadgets connected to Assyriska or Syrianska in cars belonging to their supporters. Many Syriacs, especially women, wore golden crosses around their necks, quite a few Assyrian young people had either tattoos in Neo-Aramaic or were wearing bracelets made of beads which formed a slogan “Free Assyrian” or “Free Suryoye”. To complete these observations I asked interviewees about the everyday use of Assyrian/Syriac symbols and the importance of them for stressing ethnic belonging. Many Assyrians spoke about the Assyrian flag and about clothes which they buy in special shops like Assyriska next to the football stadium. They also mentioned wearing crosses:

We have the flag. We have the winged-bull. And at the preschool they are very aware of, like different cultures and so on, so they put up the Assyrian flag amongst all the other flags there. And we’ve written our kids’ names in Assyrian letters and so on. (Assyrian woman, 30s)

Not every day but before I had one Assyrian flag here around my neck or a cross. But a cross is not typical. I had no problem with showing that I’m Assyrian. I’m really proud of it and I have many Assyrian t-shirts, sweaters, many things like that. (Assyrian male, 20s)

I know my family they have picture of Ashur... I have small thing but my eldest son, he has a big Assyrian flag in his room, in his own room, but I don’t have anywhere in the house, any pictures. I have a cross but you know many Assyrians use the cross. Many of them have many crosses and statues of Virgin Maria and Jesus. (...) My youngest son (...) he has a tattoo of Assyriska and he has the flag and the cross. (Assyrian woman, 50s)

Young nationalistic Syriacs were also buying some special clothes but most people used only a cross and sometimes kept holy icons at home:

I have a T-shirt with... but I don't wear it, maybe sometimes. If you come home to me, that's the only thing I have. I don't have any ethnic symbols, but I have religious symbols. (Syriac man, 40s)

[I have] only a cross. And icons at my home. Like Mar Charbel, Mar... – all these. But the saints in our tradition are not... They are far from being saints or recognized as saints in Sweden. Maybe they are known to the priests but they are not in Swedish homes. So in that sense my home is not so Swedish. (Syriac man, 30s)

I can have a cross visible, like if I have a shirt unbuttoned, and they [the Swedes] can still ask "Do you eat pork?" (Syriac man, 30s)

If this 'banal nationalism' layer was to be analysed, the Syriac group would be placed further towards the religious end of the religious-ethnic identity scale and the Assyrian group further towards the ethnic end. While Syriacs manifested their Christian identity by wearing crosses, Assyrians were less eager to do this, although it was not completely unheard of. Assyrians were also more likely to have their flag displayed in their homes or workplaces. Both groups used flags extensively during football matches in Södertälje when Assyriska or Syrianska play. The derby between these two on May 31, 2009 (Rommel, 2011), was a pretext for *flagging* both subgroups in Billig's understanding.

Conclusions

In the last decades of the twentieth century, Aramaic-speaking Christians formed diaspora communities in Europe. Among their members, the communal identity has been hotly debated and one may risk the statement that despite all the disagreements, Assyrians and Syriacs are in the final stages of forming an ethnic community (Romeny, 2009). The 'name conflict' that divides Syriacs and Assyrians in Sweden is about the historically most correct way to narrate common history. For the Syriac elites, who claim to be descendants of the Aramaeans, pointing to the fact that their language is Aramaic, the history of the people is mainly the history of the Syriac Orthodox Church, which maintained Aramaean cultural heritage during the centuries of Muslim rule. By contrast, Assyrian activists point to the time of the Assyrian kingdom in the pre-Christian era as their golden age. Both elites' ultimate goal is to transform their community into a fully-fledged nation.

In light of the presented quantitative and qualitative data, at this point, the Assyrian ethnic identity is a relatively stronger and more consistent one than the Syriac identity. The latter has been slowly evolving into an Aramean identity – less connected to the Syriac Orthodox Church, and more ethnic. As a matter of fact, Syriac secular leaders are following in the steps of their Assyrian counterparts in their willingness to promote a distinct national identity and build structures independent from the Church, however, total separation of 'religion and state' is neither desired, nor possible. The power of the Syriac Orthodox Church, which has been promoting ecclesiastical identity but also defending the ethnic profile (with a

few exceptions – Syriac/Aramean against Assyrian), has been declining with non-religious actors gaining more importance and authority.

Both Assyrians and Syriacs face similar problems in the diaspora, namely assimilation into Swedish society, which, although criticized for its individualism, secularism and lack of respect towards traditional values, appeals to the younger generation who make use of freedom of speech and opportunities to educate themselves. In the foreseeable future, even a ‘temporary closure’ in the conflict between Assyrians and Syriacs in Sweden cannot be foreseen (Rommel, 2011). The media which support overtly one side will become more popular in comparison to those trying to appeal to everybody. The influence of Swedish society will be even stronger over time. As a result, the majority of young people will develop and strengthen two different hybrid identities – Assyrian-Swedish and Syriac-Swedish – with a minority attempting to overcome this split.

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