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## “The Ethnic, Linguistic and Cultural Identity of Modern Assyrians”

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## The Ethnic, Linguistic and Cultural Identity of Modern Assyrians\*

To be the native of a land for more than three millennia and yet to have the authenticity of one's nativity questioned or even denied is the most flagrant violation of one's human rights

### 1. Introductory Remarks

The historical and cultural connection between ancient Assyrians and modern Assyrians [hereafter to be designated as *connection*] has remained a highly controversial problem because there are few, in fact, very few non-Assyrian scholars around the world who believe in the connection and attempt to substantiate it scholarly, objectively and scientifically.

The question of connection is truly academically challenging for those who care about scholarship. I seriously experienced this challenge early in 1984 when I embarked on writing my book, *The Sound System of Modern Assyrian (Neo-Aramaic)*. It took six months to write the nine linguistic chapters, but approximately three years were needed to write the first chapter which was, more or less, a history-based one. Not being a historian, it was so intimidating an experience to risk writing a chapter on the history of the modern Assyrians and trace it back to the ancient times of the Mesopotamian civilizations, peoples and nations. To make the writing of the chapter less daunt-

ing of an enterprise, I had to conduct a quick but extensive survey of most of the major civilizations, peoples and nations that either emerged on the greater Mesopotamian theater or had an impact on it through invasions, occupations or mere adjacency. It was immediately concluded that the problem encountered was not just a historical one, but rather a complex civilizational one whose complexity was further compounded by the number of the variables that had to be invoked and considered in order to finalize a reasonable solution. Consequently, the need to develop the sketch for an approach to solve the problem became inevitable. Gradually and convincingly, it became clear to me that no feasible solution to this problem can be envisaged without the investigation of as many aspects of the problem as possible such as political, cultural, linguistic, religious and ethnic. Any monodimensional and narrow perspective to the solution, such as the exclusive dependence on the historical narration of political events, tends to regurgitate those

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\* I wish to express my deep gratitude to Professor Simo Parpola for inviting me to attend the Symposium and conduct this presentation. Despite the last minute invitation, I managed to overcome the requirements of travel because of my academic interest in discussing the con-

roversial problem of connection between the ancient Assyrians and modern Assyrians. This is a connection that Parpola, unlike many writers, strongly believes in and affords strong and concrete evidence to substantiate it.

events again and again and end up with the same rhetorical conclusion such as the one drawn by Will Durant and summarized here as follows:

Nineveh was laid to waste....The population was slaughtered or enslaved...At one blow Assyria disappeared from history.. Nothing remained of her except certain tactics and weapons of war... Not a stone remained visible of all the temples... (Durant, 1942: 283-84)

Durant's conclusion, among others, implies the total annihilation of the ancient Assyrians, whereas other historians such as Diakonoff who is more intimately associated with the Middle Eastern civilizations counters the annihilation notion and states:

The Assyrian people was not annihilated; it merely merged with the mass of Near eastern Arameans, for as a result of the numerous deportations carried out by the Assyrian kings, Aramaic had long become the lingua franca of the ordinary people all over the Assyrian empire. (Diakonoff, 1985:124)

However, neither Diakonoff nor other historians who reject the notion of the annihilation of the ancient Assyrians carried the issue further so as to establish a connection between the ancient Assyrians and the modern Assyrians.

At an earlier stage in dealing with the

connection and the multidimensional approach to tackle it, the objective was not to substantiate the connection as much as it was to counter the views of those who without any valuable evidence bluntly denied the connection. The study remained hidden in my book until recently when Parpola's views and writings were brought to my attention.

He, for instance, states,

Quite apart from the importance of this issue to the identity of the modern Assyrians, the question is of scientific importance, too ... the speakers of Neo-Aramaic languages are the ethnic/cultural/linguistic descendants of ancient Assyrians ... this connection is supported (and can be proven) by a large set of data attesting to the continuity of Assyrian culture and national identity in upper Mesopotamia until the advent of Islam. (Parpola (a), 1999)

In a more recent presentation, Parpola, as an Assyriologist, brings forth very significant pieces of evidence to reinforce and substantiate the connection (Parpola (b), 1999). This is why Parpola's academic stand in this regard is so significant. He is the only Assyriologist that I know of who is not only interested in rejecting the annihilation notion, but is also ardently trying to objectively and scientifically establish the connection.

## 2. A Spectrum of Views Relevant to the Connection

The views relevant to this connection fall into three primary categories: political, nationalistic and academic.

### 2.1. Political View.

This has been typically represented by Iraq since its inception as a political entity after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the

signing of the international treaties of Sevres (1920) and Lausanne (1923) in which some rights of the ethnic minorities including the Assyrians were recognized. Iraq has always feverishly attempted to deny the connection with the intention of denying the Assyrians a natural and legitimate eligibility to citizenship with all the privileges that ensue. Once Iraq became independent and the majority of the Assyrians ended up

settling within its political boundaries, the denial was systematically publicized. All the official documents in the Iraqi governmental offices and textbooks in schools identified the Assyrians, and still do, as *refugees who moved from Iran and Turkey and settled in Iraq after the First World War*. Most importantly, they stress the claim that the modern Assyrians are not the descendants of the ancient Assyrians. Such a total denial of the connection by the Iraqi government is part of a political campaign of exclusion and distortion of the identity of the ethnic minorities.

## 2.2. Nationalistic View.

This is the view of virtually all of modern Assyrians, both educated and uneducated, initiated and spearheaded by the traditional scholars – or *Rabis* for more accuracy – of what I identify as the modern Assyrian Reawakening extending from the middle of the nineteenth century up to the 1960s. All modern Assyrians emotionally espouse the connection as a pillar and extension of their national and historical identity in the form of a nationalistic movement known today as *Aturayuta* (Assyrianism). Of the other Aramaic-speaking communities, the older generations prefer to be known as Chaldeans and Syrians. Those of them who have lost the Aramaic language and have been heavily acculturated by the Arabic culture claim Arabic ethnicity. However, the middle and younger generations of Syrians, and more recently of Chaldeans, manifest a deep passion for the connection with the ancient Assyrians or, perhaps more accurately with a blend of Assyrian/Babylonian/Aramean connection. In fact, the present leadership and rank-and-file of the Assyrian Democratic Movement – the most popular, best-organized and politically mature organization ever among the modern Assyrians –

– is the best example of such a trend.

## 2.3. Academic View.

This view is represented by a wide variety of individuals both Assyrian and non-Assyrian. Among the Assyrians, including the leaders of the so-called Assyrian Reawakening, there is hardly any scholarly investigation of the connection. Most of the available literature is premised on the presumption that the connection is undisputed. During the last few decades, a few works appeared dealing with the connection, namely by Joseph (1961), Matveef (1990) and Odisho (1988). These authors conducted extensive research to document and support their views with regard to the connection. Joseph struggles to negate the connection while Matveef and Odisho attempt to substantiate it.

As for the non-Assyrian writers, one has to distinguish between the authors of general history textbooks and the authors of genuine research works. The majority of the former, state that Assyria and the Assyrians disappeared with the downfall of the Assyrian Empire in 612 BC or soon afterwards. Most such statements are not necessarily based on serious research and substantiation; they are rather reproductions of some statements about Assyria and the Assyrians available in the Biblical and classical literature such as the prophecy and vision of the prophet Nahum. As for the focused researchers, there are very few who handled the connection as a serious issue. Among such modern non-Assyrian scholars, I know of only Parpola who believes in the connection and substantiates it. Others opt to gloss over the history of modern Assyrians and identify them as the remnants of the ancient Aramaic/Syriac-speaking civilization without either avering the Assyrian connection or denying it.

The interest in the pursuit of the connection has never been, never was and will never be a nationalistic or a sentimental urge on my part for a blood connection. As a human being and an intellectual, I am proud to belong historically to the greater Mesopotamian land and to any of its ancient civilizations be that Sumerian, Assyrian, Babylonian or Aramean. Rather, the interest in investigating this connection rests on three drives. Firstly, it is a legitimate human right for everyone to know and authenticate one's historical lineage and identity. Secondly, it is only a practice in self-defense to maintain one's identity against any distortion or denial; besides, any denial should be

subject to proof. Thirdly, the pursuit of the connection was to set an example of scientificness, scholarship and objectivity in passing judgement with regard to sensitive human issues of identity.

Looking at myself as an individual with an Assyrian name, an Aramaic language, a Christian religion and a Mesopotamian culture, I began to contemplate on my hybrid identity. My hybrid identity haunted me for a while until it evolved into an academic challenge worthy of being researched and solved as objectively as possible. There were several assumptions to be made to shape the approach.

### 3. The Assumptions

#### Assumption 3.1.

That massive cultural, religious and linguistic shifts and conversions are not unfamiliar in the history of peoples and nations. The fact that the majority of the natives of Britain lost their Celtic languages and picked up a Germanic language to be known later as English; the fact that the natives of Egypt lost their ancient Egyptian language and gradually embraced Arabic; and the fact that the natives of Central and South America who were never Latinos in language, Hispanics in culture and Catholic in religion are now predominantly Spanish-speaking and overwhelmingly Roman Catholics all attest to such massive conversions.

#### Assumption 3.2.

That the downfall of a political system regardless of how extensive its political domain had been does never imply the sudden

disappearance of its people, language and culture. Political systems may be brought down by *coup d'etat*, emperors and kings may be assassinated or suddenly die with a heart attack or stroke, but peoples, cultures and languages are not entities that disappear suddenly and do not perish with the swiftness of human strokes or heart attacks.

#### Assumption 3.3.

That any positive or negative judgement with regards to a controversial issue requires substantiation and proof to be credible. Thus, any approval of the connection requires substantiation; likewise, any denial requires substantiation without which the approval or the denial is judged as subjective and/or bias.

With those three assumptions in mind, I proceeded to flesh out the approach to the solution.

#### 4. The Approach to the Solution

In light of the above three assumptions, the approach to the solution of the connection controversy was developed in terms of three drastic changes in the life and history of the ancient Assyrians and all the neighboring inhabitants of ancient Mesopotamia.

##### 4.1. The Political Reshuffle.

The argument here is primarily premised on assumption 3.2 in that the downfall of Assyria in 612 BC, or immediately thereafter, should never be envisaged as the total destruction of the Assyrian people. *It is unreasonable to interpret the collapse of a political system in the sense of the instantaneous disappearance of its citizenry.* Nothing of this sort happened to the peoples of the Byzantine, Roman or Ottoman empires. In each case, it was the political machine that collapsed and the territory under its jurisdiction split into smaller countries, states or provinces that survived under the same or different names. This has to be so, and cannot be otherwise, because those who perish with the collapse of the political system represent the minority while the majority outlives the collapse though frequently undergoes various political, religious and linguistic changes. Based on common sense and the evidence from the political history of past empires and nations, the sudden annihilation of a political system or empire should not entail the annihilation of its peoples, languages and cultures. It is appropriate here to draw an analogy with World War II. In the recorded history of humanity, there has been no worse catastrophe than this War. Berlin was destroyed, millions of soldiers and civilians did perish and the Nazi war machine and regime did disintegrate, but the German people and Germany survived though in two parts and with many

small parts being annexed to the neighboring nations. Incidentally, the most recent example to support the line of thinking espoused here is the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nothing disappeared except the politico-economic system, whereas the peoples not only regained their political freedom but also embarked on reaffirming their ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity. I, therefore, have no hesitation whatsoever to adopt Diakonoff's view cited above and completely reject Durant's description of the total annihilation of the people of Nineveh and Assyria. It is true that Nineveh, as a capital, fell. It is true that Assyria, as a political system, collapsed. It is quite conceivable to talk of tens, or even hundreds of thousands of casualties. But none of the above facts should be construed as the total annihilation of the Assyrians (Odisho, 1988:8)

Perhaps of equal political significance is the appearance of an entity under the name of *Athura* a short time after the downfall of Assyria which seems to stand for a reduced form [or *satrapy*] of Assyria. The *Athura satrapy* is mentioned in the Behistun royal inscriptions of King Darius, 558-486 BC (Rawlinson, 1859; Olmstead, 1948; Cook, 1983 & 1985). Later in history, the name *Aturia* emerges as a reference to Assyria or *Athura*. (Jouguet, 1928:31; Herzfeld, 1968: 305) There is certainly far more historical and political evidence to support the continuation of an entity representing the ancient Assyria, its people and its culture (for more details see Odisho, 1988).

##### 4.2. The Linguistic Shift.

In order to understand the nature of this shift and the manner in which it is relevant, the following five points are worthy of con-

sideration:

4.2.1. Before and after the downfall of the Assyrian empire there were no clear-cut political or geographic boundaries between the Assyrian and Aramean provinces. There was always a great deal of territorial overlap between the two entities. For instance, the cities of Nisibis, Orhai and Harran, which were centers of Aramaic language, had been regions within the Assyrian Empire (Rogers, 1915; Oppenheim, 1967). In fact, those cities alternately belonged to the Assyrian Empire and the Aramean states.

4.2.2. The Aramaic language became the *lingua franca* of the Middle East. According to Rosenthal (1974:6),

During the second millennium BC various Aramaic dialects are likely to have been spoken at the borders and within Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent. But it was the dialect used by the Arameans settled within the confines of Assyria that from the eighth century BC on supplanted all other dialects.

This is such a well-established fact that it hardly needs any further citations and elaborations.

4.2.3. The dominance of Aramaic as a *lingua franca* was not confined to the oral form; its literacy instrument in the form of the Aramaic alphabet system was equally pervasive in replacing the logographic and syllabic systems of writing.

From its inception, the Aramaic alphabet, in a sense, had to fight a duel with the cuneiform system of writing. It was a long struggle – it lasted until the commencement of the Christian era – between the complicated theocratic system of writing accessible only to certain privileged classes and the simple democratic system accessible to everybody; at the end of the seventh century BC, all Syria and the great part of Mesopotamia became thoroughly Aramaized. (Diringer, 1968:200; cf. Toynbee, 1947:19).

4.2.4. The above conversion in both oral and literacy forms is not too surprising to occur since both Assyrian and Aramaic are cognate Semitic languages whose underlying linguistic systems should not be envisaged as drastically different. It is not unreasonable to assume that most Semitic languages, especially those adjacent to each other, developed some sort of a “common language” and had at one time maintained a reasonable degree of mutual intelligibility. For instance, “the late Babylonian language is largely characterized by Aramaic syntax with Babylonian words.” (Lambert, 1973: 181) Besides, the knowledge of more than one language would have been very likely in ancient Mesopotamia where speakers of different languages came into extensive and extended authentic contact. Hence, it is quite conceivable to think of Mesopotamia as an extensive bilingual and even multilingual community where people became vulnerable to language shift first and language disappearance later. It is in those terms that the shift from Sumerian to Akkadian and from Akkadian to Aramaic and later from Aramaic to Arabic had taken place.

4.2.5. Etymologically and even onomastically, the jumble of names to identify the modern Assyrians as *Asuristanyi*, *Athuraye*, *Aturaye*, *Suraye*, *Suryaye*, *Athuri*, *Ashuri*, *Asuri*, among others, could all be traced back to the same root taking into consideration some reasonable and legitimate phonetic and morphological modifications according to language-specific rules (Odisho, 1988). This trend of cross-language morphological change is also too common and too well established as a linguistic fact to be controversial.

### 4.3. The Religious and Cultural Conversions.

With the advent of Christianity, most of Mesopotamia's religious rituals, traditions and practices started to disappear. Even though it is difficult to think of the pre-Christianity Mesopotamia as a strikingly heterogeneous religious entity, it is yet easier to think that Christianity enhanced the religious homogeneity of the whole region and helped to obliterate much of the religious inconsistency and create religious and cultural uniformity in the region. In other words, when Christianity became the dominant religion of the region, the early conversions included Arameans, Assyrians and Babylonians, among others. Consequently, Christianity ironed out many of the ethnic and nationalistic, linguistic and cultural differences among those populations. A major corollary to the religious conversions was the further spread and consolidation of Aramaic at the expense of other languages especially Akkadian (Assyrian-Babylonian) since Aramaic, and especially its Syriac version, became the language of eastern Christendom. Gradually, all the religious, cultural and linguistic attributes among the Christians of the Middle East were expressed in the form of Suryaya, Suryaye or *Suraya*, *Suraye*. Another concomitant change related to religion and culture was the change in the proper names which, in itself, is a significant ethnic and national marker that can conceal the linkage between two eras in the history of an ethnic group or nation. The Biblical and other Christian names swept the entire region and erased almost all the ancient Assyrian-Babylonian names.

Mesopotamia, is one of the smallest regions in the world which has been the cradle for so many successive civilizations; it is a region that has experienced radical and massive ethnic, linguistic, religious and

cultural changes and conversions. The present dominance of Arabic where Aramaic was unrivalled and the spread of Islam where Christianity had its earliest citadels clearly sums up the history and the extent of the linguistic, cultural, ethnic and cultural conversions in the region.

It is true that during the recent centuries, especially the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, the most common ethnic names for today's Assyrians have been: *Athuraye*, *Athurnaye*, *Suraye* and *Suryaye*. It is also true that their association with the Anglicized appellation 'Assyrian' emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century and was firmly established afterwards as the predominant appellation and accepted by the Assyrians as their indisputable nationalistic name and their historical linkage to the ancient Assyrians. However, this nineteenth century attachment of the Anglicized appellation 'Assyrian' to an ethnic group formerly known as *Athuraye* or *Suraye* should, by no means, be confused with Joseph's statement that

...while the name Chaldean was appointed to the Uniats, the illustrious twin name Assyrian was in time applied to the Nestorians and that they accepted and used it from the end of the nineteenth century. (Joseph, 1961:13)

Joseph's intention from his above statement was to prove that the so-called 'modern Assyrians' have nothing to do with the ancient Assyrians both historically and ethnically. I am totally opposed to Joseph's views inasmuch as the connection is concerned for several reasons. Firstly, names do not always represent a reliable index to historical, ethnic or nationalistic origin. Egypt is historically known to its natives as *Masr*, perhaps from its much earlier name of *Mudaraya*, not as Egypt which has been popularized in the Western World through Greek. Secondly, the name 'Assyria' or 'Assyrian' is the English rendition of the Greek name based on 'Ashshur' 'where the

double 'sh' was orthographically rendered by the Greeks as double 's' [i.e. sigma] since the Greek alphabet does not have a symbol for 'sh.' If the Greeks had opted to base their coinage on the Aramaic equivalent of 'Ashshur' which is 'Aththur' then we would not have had the English coinage 'Assyrian'; instead, the coinage might have been *Aththurians* or even *Aththurites*, an appellation that is far more consistent with the modern Assyrians' identification of themselves as *Athuraye* and bears a stronger sense of historical continuity. In fact, in many Middle Eastern languages, it is the root *ATHR* which is more commonly used as the base for the coinage of the name for the Assyrians. In languages whose phonological systems do not have the interdental fricatives [θ] and [ð], the [θ] of *Aththur* has been replaced by a [s] as is the case in

Turkish, Kurdish and Armenian. Thirdly, Joseph accepts the connection of the modern Assyrians to the Arameans or Syrians, but rejects their connection to the ancient Assyrians although both the ancient Assyrian and Arameans were historically affiliated with the same regions which the modern Assyrians have inhabited as far as their history is traced back. Joseph's repeated insistence on the lack of ethnic and nationalistic connection between modern and ancient Assyrian is mainly attributed to his exclusively historical approach to solving a problem that is too broad and complex for a monodimensional perspective. It is unlikely for any author to arrive at a reasonable solution to this problem of connection without a serious consideration of the linguistic, cultural and religious conversions that had swept the region.

## 5. Present Status of the Assyrians

### 5.1. Ethnic Status.

Today the Assyrians do not know themselves other than Assyrians and are also so known by many others. They do not have a problem of self-identification; in fact, any attempt at substantiating the connection is considered by most of them as redundant and unwarranted. Their largest population concentrations were in Iraq and Iran, but are now much smaller in size due to political turmoil and wars in the Middle East leading to massive immigration and displacement. Presently, the largest contingent of Assyrians is, ironically enough, in the United States and Chicago is the city with the largest Assyrian population. Some unofficial figures put the population at 80,000 which is not unreasonable. People are very aware of their ethnic identity; however, they, at the same time, are extremely conscious of

the very speedy language and culture erosion as a serious threat to their ethnic and historical identity.

Since their massive displacement after World War I, they have never had a well-organized national or political movement with a long-term vision and strategy. Only recently and as a reaction to the dictatorship of the Ba'th party, a younger fairly educated generation of Assyrians launched the Assyrian Democratic Movement with nationalistic and political goals. The movement has gained momentum since its inception in late 1970s. Inside Iraq, and especially in the self-rule zone in the north, the movement is part of the governmental and ruling coalition; it has both cabinet and parliamentary representations. Outside Iraq, its popular support is increasing rapidly to the extent that no previous Assyrian organization has ever enjoyed.

## 5.2. Linguistic Status.

Due to the status of the Assyrians as minorities in all the countries they inhabit, it is very rare to find Assyrians who are monolinguals. Most of them are bilinguals or multilinguals. Most of the Assyrians identify their language as Assyrian not knowing the linguistic/historic difference between Assyrian and Aramaic. Some ultra-Assyrianists are reluctant to accept Aramaic or Syriac as a name for their language. Only very few Assyrians recognize the fact that they are entitled to claim the Assyrian lineage and ethnicity, but the language, with both eastern and western dialects, is a descendant of Aramaic rather than of ancient Assyrian.

Before the arrival of the Christian missionaries among the Assyrians towards the beginning of the 19th century, the language of the Assyrians was in the worst condition suffering from serious erosion and high level of mutual unintelligibility. This was attributed partly to the high level of illiteracy and the drift of spoken language from the literary language and partly to the drastic divergence among regional and tribal dialects. After long years of work, the missionaries and the few literate Assyrians succeeded in reducing the dialect of Urmi to writing and later creating a modern Standard Written Language. In simple words, this attempt represented a resurrection of the language in a modern version. Since then this variety of modern Assyrian has been the tool of literacy and linguistic leveling of dialects among the Assyrians. In other words, it has created a form of *Koine* dialect (Odisho, 1988) at both the literacy and oracy levels. The more the Assyrians intermingle, the more uniform the *Koine* and the written modern Assyrian become. However, it is very unfortunate to point out

that almost two centuries after the resurrection of modern Assyrian, the language once again faces its worst threat of erosion and disappearance due to three major reasons: the rise of the Ba'th regime in Iraq, the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War. All three jointly and severally led to the worst displacement and immigration movement among the Assyrians since their displacement after the First World War. Their strong hinterland in the north of Iraq and the communal enclaves in several cities of Iraq and Iran suffered severe sparsity. Most of those people moved to the European and North American countries where they are even in greater danger of losing their native language. In the United States in particular, the language is eroding very severely. Without new waves of immigrants, the language can hardly survive beyond three or four generations to come (Odisho, 1993; 1999). Other than a miracle, the only hope for the maintenance of the language is the remaining settlements of Assyrians in the north of Iraq led by the Assyrian Democratic Movement and its serious initiative in Assyrianizing the elementary and secondary educational curricula. The local educational system is conducted primarily through the medium of Assyrian as the native language together with Arabic, Kurdish and English as second and foreign languages. If the geopolitics of the twenty-first century bestow on the Kurds the right of autonomy or independence, and if the Kurds, in turn, bestow on other minorities in the region the privileges of ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity, the Assyrian language will have yet one more opportunity for further survival. If, however, the Kurds were denied their autonomy or failed to practice democracy towards others, then the Assyrian language will highly likely be doomed to extinction.

### 5.3. Cultural Status.

Like any other minority in the Middle East, the Assyrian culture shares much of the cultures of the majorities such as Arabs, Turks and Persians. Certainly, their bilingual or multilingual status naturally implies a bicultural and multicultural status, too. However, there are still other aspects of culture which distinguish them from other ethnic minorities or majorities. Foremost of those aspects is their Christian religion most notably as followers of the Church of the East. Another aspect is their Aramaic language which served as the first and native language of Christianity and still serves until this very day as the medium of their daily communication, literacy and Church services. Historically and culturally, the Church of the East is the only church that commenced its services in Aramaic and still maintains it.

With the modern Assyrian reawakening in the 19th century, a new and important aspect of culture was resurrected to high-

light the connection with the ancient Assyrians and their culture. A pervasive wave of name-changing swept the whole Assyrian community. Names such as Ashur, Sargon, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, Atur, Shamiram were used side by side with the post Christianity names of Ishu, Abd-Ishu, Yuhannan etc. They also began to celebrate the ancient Assyrian feasts and festivals together with the Christian ones. This reawakening has been the cornerstone on which their modern spirit of Assyrianism is premised. Today, although most of the Assyrians harbor an intense sentiment of Assyrianism, the nationalistic sentiment is not matched with savvy long-term political strategy, organizational sophistication and economic strength. In a world in which they have hardly any geopolitical weight left, the realization of their political ambitions in independence or even autonomy are only remotely likely though nothing is impossible with the geopolitics of the new world order. Today's geopolitics is a large hat under which much magic is worked.

## 6. Conclusions

By any stretch of reality or imagination, the ancient history of Mesopotamia represents the best panorama of intense civilizational contacts where languages, religions and cultures intermingled, co-existed, clashed, succumbed or survived. These cross-civilizational contacts have obliterated many of the distinctive ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural boundaries and markers. However, since this controversy of connection is heavily entangled in linguistic-cultural webs, the use of synchronic probing techniques of the available diachronic data is indispensable. The techniques become most effective when consideration is given to the

extent and intensity of the linguistic-cultural contacts. It is this consideration that determines the dynamics of change, erosion, survival and/or disappearance of languages and cultures. These dynamics should be thoroughly understood and seriously differentiated from the dynamics of the emergence and collapse of political systems. It is quite conceivable to accept the sudden downfall and the disappearance of the Assyrian Empire as a political system, but it is utterly inconceivable to apply the same principle of sudden disappearance to a people in its entirety or to its language and culture. All those non-political aspects take

centuries to vanish. This trend is crystal-clear in the number of centuries taken for the linguistic conversion from Sumerian to Akkadian, from Akkadian to Aramaic, from Aramaic to Arabic. In the latter case, Aramaic is still surviving in one form or another even after the total and pervasive domination of Arabic and Islam in the region for over one millennium. If a language or culture is doomed to surrender to other languages and cultures due to civilizational confrontation then the surrender tends to be usually effected through a century(ies)-long transition in the form of bilingualism and biculturalism. Thus, for any serious and comprehensive probing of any controversies in the history of Mesopotamia, the linguistic-cultural context of the controversy is indispensable. In other words, those long transitional periods of bilingualism and biculturalism should be an integral part of any research in the history of any region that had experienced serious contacts between and among languages and cultures. In fact,

any long-term project for a comprehensive survey of the cultures of Mesopotamia, such as MELAMMU, has to grant serious consideration to those lengthy transitions of bilingualism and biculturalism and the dynamics that governed them. We should all remember that it was through the help of bilingual and multilingual pieces of evidence such as the *Behistun Monument* and the *Rosetta Stone* that archeologists and linguists were able to decipher the codes of the ancient languages and illuminate their civilizations.

Finally, this study was a practice in scientific research aimed at making judgements that are fairer and more objective. Today, I am much happier because other scholars who are more intimately associated with the theme under discussion are producing further scientific substantiation. I specifically would like to acknowledge Professor Parpola's honest efforts in searching for the truth in the ruins of great Mesopotamian civilizations.

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