

The Identity of the People Described in the Writings of Gabriele Yonan

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1. Yonan & three of her books reconsidered

“*The Assyrian-Suryoyo people are the most ancient people in the Middle-East.*”¹ These were the opening remarks of a “*report compiled*” by Gabriele Yonan, “*which was distributed to all members of the EU Parliament*” in 2000.² Who is Gabriele Yonan and who are, in fact, these ‘Assyrian-Suryoyo people’ whom she normally calls ‘Assyrians’ in her publications?

Dr. Gabriele Yonan is a scholar who utilizes her academic position for ‘Assyrian’ political affairs;³ from my viewpoint, though, not quite objectively. She is of German origin, but used to be married to a ‘Nestorian’.⁴

Since 1978, Yonan has made herself popular by publishing *Assyrer heute: Kultur, Sprache, Nationalbewegung der aramäisch sprechenden Christen im Nahen Osten* [*Assyrians Today: Culture, Language, National movement of the Aramaic-speaking Christians in the Near East*]. Then, in 1985, *Ein vergessener Holocaust: Die Vernichtung der christlichen Assyrer in der Türkei* [*A Forgotten Holocaust: The Extermination of the Christian Assyrians in Turkey*] was published, followed by *Journalismus bei den Assyrern: Ein Überblick von seinen Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* [*Journalism by the Assyrians: A Survey from its Beginning until the Present*] in 1989. Hereinafter cited as *Assyrer*, *Holocaust* and *Journalismus* respectively.

It is not my intention to offer the reader a critical review here of any of Yonan’s contributions. Neither do I hope to leave the impression that I decry her valued books. Rather, the present purpose is to scrutinize Yonan’s reliability regarding the identity of the people she has portrayed in her mentioned books and whom she commonly terms ‘Assyrians’.

For those who are lacking contextual knowledge, we may recall the early 20th century born ideology known as ‘assyrianism’. This nationalistic, political idea has divided the Syriacs⁵ or Arameans (both terms represent the same people) this past century. The Syriac-Orthodox community is but one of the few Syriac communities who have suffered under the pressure of secular minded ‘Assyrianists’⁶ the past decades. Especially its clergymen, who both officially

¹ “Who are the Assyrian-Suryoye?”, accessible at <http://www.atour.com/news/national/20001110a.html> [last visited May 27, 2004], November 10 (2000).

² Ibid.

³ Reviewing her own book *Holocaust* in *Journal of the Assyrian Academic Studies* [JAAS] 10/1, Gabriele wrote about herself in 1996: “Her motivation is more than mere historical research.” She describes her publications “as a concrete way of helping the socially discriminated ethnic minorities in the Near East” with special attention to the “Assyrians” (p. 100). Her participation in the political arena thus reveals her Assyrian-leaning agenda.

⁴ After a schism took place within the ‘Nestorian Church / (Old) Church of the East’ in 1968, the group that adopted the new calendar was finally about to change its former official name into the ‘**Assyrian** Church of the East’ in 1976. Thenceforth both its religious followers and their neo-Aramaic dialects were, more than before, bestowed the historically unfounded designation ‘Assyrian’ by writers and the media alike.

⁵ Since 2000, by approval of a Syriac-Orthodox synod, the word ‘Suryoyo’ is translated with ‘Syriac’ instead of ‘Syrian’ in reference to both the linguistic and the ethno-cultural identity of the Syriacs in the English language. The rationale is easy to understand: the ‘Suryoye’ do not want to be associated with ‘(Arab) Syrians’ from Syria. Moreover, when the Syriac Universal Alliance was established in 1983 the Syriac-Orthodox Patriarch already gave his blessings to this recognized Non-Governmental Organization to use the English translation ‘Syriacs’.

⁶ A name I use for Assyrian minded ‘Suryoye’ (‘Syriacs’, n.5) who uphold the conviction that they are the direct descendants of the ancient Assyrians. Accordingly, they call themselves and the Aramaic language ‘Assyrian’.

and practically took an official stance against assyrianism and its followers from around the 1950s until the present day, have time and again been pressured by many Assyrianists.

Nationhood

“*Die Nation der Assyrer*,” introduces Yonan her Assyrer-readers, “*führt ihre Existenz auf die altorientalischen Völkerschaften der Assyrer, Chaldäer und Aramäer zurück*” (12). This very same sentence was repeated twice in the first pages of her following books to describe both the nationhood as well as the ethnic descent of the people she is narrating about. Striking is that she does not refer to any historical fact(s) that can validate her opening words, whereas in all other issues she attempts to provide facts to substantiate her expressions. Furthermore, she interprets the nature of the people being described in her writings in terms of ‘nationhood’ (cf. esp. *Assyrer*, 9f.). Hence “*die heute existierende Assyrische Nation*,” she explains on p.12 of *Assyrer*, is essentially subdivided into “*vier SYRISCHEN KIRCHEN – Nestorianer, Jakobiten, Chaldäer, Syrisch-Katholische*.” In this context it is worth mentioning that she does not refer to, among others, the Maronites; whilst Assyrianists usually consider these Christian Arameans from Lebanon, too, as members of their imagined ‘Assyrian nation’.

Yonan obviously felt the need to highlight that the Syriac churches do not only belong to the ‘Assyrian nation’; compare her exemplified view on the ‘socio-political notion’ (*Assyrer*, 9) of a ‘nation’. She also indicates that there exists a direct link between the Assyrians of antiquity and the Syriac Christians (*Assyrer*, 12).⁷ This becomes especially clear from her *Holocaust*, which appears to be replete with ideas not alien to assyrianism; in fact, all three of her publications reveal her enthusiastic promotion of the ‘Assyrian cause’.⁸ In this book, one repeatedly finds expressions such as “*die syrischen Christen (Assyrer)*” (25), “*nestorianischen Assyrern*” (115), “*die Chaldäer (ostsyrische Nestorianer im Union mit Rom)*” (290), “*katholischen syrer (Assyrer)*,” “*assyrischen Jakobiten*” and “*Syrer (Assyrer)*” (291). Yonan seems even bold enough to add to quotations from autonomous sources, which she integrated in her book; e.g., when she has J. Lepsius († 1926) saying, “*Es sind auch christliche Völker, Armenier und Syrer (Assyrer), die...*” (256). Even references to the Syriacs in statistics from documents seem not to be safe for her anymore; e.g., another document taken from J. Lepsius (1916) is being rewritten to “*Syrer (Assyrer)*” (267). This, it has to be said, is definitely not the appreciative attitude the objective scholar has to earn.

Being a member of a political nation is one thing and the membership of a religious or an ethno-cultural community is quite another. Needless to say, a nation does not necessarily need to consist of a group that shares a common ethnic background only. A nation can also exist of various peoples with different ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds (e.g., the U.S.A.). However, people usually unite into a ‘nation’ *after* they recognize their common shared history, culture, ethnicity and language. “(N)ationalists, wrote Smith, “*have a vital role to play in the construction of nations*,” but “*to succeed in their task they must meet certain criteria. Their interpretations must be consonant not only with the ideological demands of nationalism, but also with the scientific evidence, popular resonance and*

⁷ Many experts, though, have rejected this idea. Some have even devoted a detailed academic research to this controversial topic. Cf., e.g., J. Joseph, *The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East: Encounters with Western Christian Missions, Archaeologists, and Colonial Powers* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000), pp. 1-32. This historian, himself being a member of the ‘Assyrian Church of the East’ community, has neatly discussed the whole matter.

⁸ Cf. n.3; the quoted report in n.1 serves as a vivid example.

patterning of particular ethnohistories.”⁹ It is indeed inappropriate, and even incorrect, when ‘das Nationalgefühl’ will overrule objective research or take precedence over historical facts.

Strictly speaking, the Syriac people are still in the nation-building process. In political terms, the Syro-Arameans do not even form a ‘nation’ (yet). And as a matter of fact, an ‘Assyrian nation’ does not exist either. Not in practice, that is, only in the imagination. Frankly, it is a ‘virtual Assyria’ (‘Utopian Assyria’) that exists in the minds of many and which is still being proclaimed by Assyrianists today. In truth, this idea has only resulted in confusion and division and it keeps endangering the future existence of the people who were known for centuries as ‘Suryoye’ and ‘Sur(y)aye’ (both tr. *Syriacs*) in their native Aramaic vernaculars.

Language/dialects

Let us turn to the question of the name for the language of the Arameans. I do not know of any serious expert in Aramaic Studies who considers (*classical*) Syriac/ *kthobo(no)yo/ lishana ‘attiqā*, or any of the dialects spoken by the Syro-Aramean communities, as a direct offshoot of the ancient Assyrian tongue. There are scholars, however, who have adopted the term ‘Assyrian’ simply to refer to particular Aramaic dialects of the *East-Arameans* (primarily those of the ‘Nestorians’). In *Assyrer* (e.g., p. 21), Yonan acknowledges that all the spoken dialects by the Syriac communities are variants of the Aramaic language; nonetheless, she brands the modern Aramaic speech of the East-Syriacs as “*aturaya*” (tr., *Assyrian*) on p.21.

In *Journalismus*, she reveals a tendency to admit to her sympathetic feelings. In this volume, it looks as if she has found a scholar (K. Tsereteli,¹⁰ p. VII) who has opened her eyes for a rationalistic justification to call the modern Aramaic dialects ‘Assyrian’. Yonan writes: “*Die modernen Assyrer bezeichnen heute ihre Schrift- und Umgangssprache als Assyrisch, eine sozio-linguistische Analogiebildung zu ihrer Volksbezeichnung, die ihnen niemand das Recht hat abzusprechen*” (1). Here it actually becomes cloudy for the reader. For whereas in 1978 she restricted the use of ‘Assyrian/Aturaya’ to the idiom of the East-Arameans, it suddenly seems justifiable that from 1989 onwards *all* those who prefer to call themselves ‘Assyrians’ can call both their written and spoken language ‘Assyrian’. Whether this is in agreement with the historical truth or not (in *Holocaust*, p. 8, she reaffirms it is not), is not a matter of debate; at least not to Yonan, that is. This practice of calling the Aramaic language/dialects ‘Assyrian’ is defended by her, because she sees it as a ‘socio-linguistic analogous construction’ to their national name. In other words, after alleging that the Syriacs are ‘Assyrians’ (itself an unconvincing assertion), she declares that ‘Assyrians’ can identify their language/dialects as ‘Assyrian’ too. Moreover, ‘no one’ has the right to take this away from them, Yonan argues.

⁹ A.D. Smith, “Gastronomy or geology? The role of nationalism in the reconstruction of nations,” in *Nations and Nationalism* 1:1 (1994), p. 19.

¹⁰ His grammar (1964) was translated from Russian into German and published in 1978 (Leipzig). See his *Grammatik der modernen assyrischen Sprache (Neuostaramäisch)*. The first subtitle in this book strikingly starts with: “Die gegenwärtige Verbreitung **der Aramäer und der aramäischen Dialekte**” (11). This scholar calls the modern *East-Aramaic* dialect ‘Assyrian’ simply because its speakers are occasionally known as ‘Assyrians’. But it is really Assyrianists who pressure objective scholars to refer to them and their language as ‘Assyrian’. The speakers of these modern *East-Aramaic* dialects, Tsereteli further averred on p. 13, “sind als Syrer, selten als Aramäer (ausschließlich in der wissenschaftlichen Literatur) sowie als Assyrer bekannt.” From late 18th century Georgian archives, Tsereteli (“Die Assyrer in der Korrespondenz des Königs Irakli II von Georgien,” in *Oriens Christianus* 80 (1996), pp. 167-176) noted several years later that *East-Syriacs* who moved to East-Georgia in the 18th and 19th centuries, were called ‘Assyrians’ in *Georgian*. Alas, these six documents from 1769-70 are not available in Aramaic, the native language of this émigré group; for their patriarchal titles before 1769 A.D., cf. particularly Joseph (*op. cit.*, n.7), p. 4 n.19, pp. 6f and p. 7 n.28. It is not inconceivable that this *Georgian* name can be discussed similarly as Joseph (*op. cit.*, n.7), p. 20, explained the resembling name in Armenian. Moreover, these records and the deductions drawn from them ultimately pertain to this émigré group.

There are many objections to such reasoning. The foremost demur is perhaps the given fact that not all the people whom she labels as ‘Assyrians’ do consider themselves ‘Assyrians’, let alone calling themselves or their language thus; the present writer is only one example out of many. What is more, historical injustice is done to the *Aramaic* heritage.¹¹ Still, Assyrianists have readily welcomed this kind of rationalization by hushing their own conscience. They even go so far as to invent new names, such as ‘Assyriac’, for the Aramaic idiom originating from the Edessan milieu, thereby crossing all boundaries of the historical truth. Are there, in fact, any limits at all on what Assyrianists would allow as ‘Assyrian’? (Cf. below.)

2. Yonan & the names ‘Aramean’ and ‘Syriac’

In *Assyrer*, Yonan clearly voiced the view of (modern) assyrianism in which the term ‘Syriac/Suryoyo’ generally finds no place as an *ethnic* appellation, but rather (derogatively) as a *religious* name. On p. 173, Yonan republished a short article of hers that appeared in the *Berliner Sonntagsblatt* 11-12-1977. Already a year before the publication of *Assyrer*, she stated in this German newspaper: “*Von dem Sprachnamen hat sich auch eine ihrer Volksbezeichnungen abgeleitet, SYRER war nach der Annahme des Christentums ein Synonym für Christ.*” In *Assyrer* (12) this is yet even much clearer articulated by her: “*Die hier entstandene Kirche, deren Zentrum Antiochia war, wurde bereits vor ihrer Trennung und Aufspaltung von der byzantinischen Staatskirche als SYRISCHE KIRCHE bezeichnet, den SYRER war Synonym für Christ geworden, während ARAMÄER nun vorchristliches Heidentum bezeichnete. Über eine ethnische Zugehörigkeit sagt der Begriff SYRER in diesem Zusammenhang nichts aus, vielmehr ist er eine kulturgeographische Bezeichnung.*”

There are crucial errors embedded in these few lines, which at first sight do not seem harmful. Keep in mind that upon these *historical errors* Yonan has founded her convictions.¹² **A)** It is true, under influence of Jewish usage the appellation ‘Aramean’ came to mean ‘heathen, pagan’ in the early centuries B.C. as well as A.D.; this does not mean, however, that the Arameans ceased to exist before or yet even after the Christian era, on the contrary. This usage was about to be assumed by the early Christian converts, Jews *and* non-Jews alike; it was even inherited by the Ethiopians. Thus it is not all surprising that the newly converted Christian Arameans could no longer carry their native name in an environment in which it had received an unfavorable impression.¹³ Consequently, the Arameans themselves adopted the

¹¹ In the journal of the Syriac-Orthodox diocese of Europe, *Kolo Suryoyo* (1985) Vol. 44, pp. 9-11, Prof. Dr. Otto Jastrow, the doyen of Neo-Aramaic Studies, publicly objected to such assyrianization attempts; the German text was followed by a Turkish translation. P. 9: “Man muß jedoch immer wieder erneut auf die wissenschaftliche Tatsache hinweisen [*sic*], daß die heutigen ‘Assyrer’ nichts mit den Assyrern der alten Geschichte zu tun haben; weder sind sie deren Nachkommen, noch ist ihre Sprache eine moderne Form des alten Assyrisch...Die heutigen ‘assyrischen’ Dialekte stammen jedoch von einer anderen semitischen Sprache ab, nämlich dem Aramäischen. Es gibt keinen ernstzunehmenden Sprachwissenschaftler, der dies bestreitet.” On the same page Prof. Jastrow wrote about the term ‘Assyrian’: “so sehe ich doch keinen Grund, ihn auch auf die **aramäischen** Christen des Tur Abdin anzuwenden.” Nearly 20 years later, these concerns of this devoted scholar are still up to date.

¹² Following is based on my “Suryoye en Oromoye/Arameeërs: synoniemen! [Suryoye and Oromoye/Arameans: synonyms!]” in [the magazine for Aramean students in Holland] *Infodessa* (December, 2001), pp. 23-41. A great deal of historical evidences is also available from the booklet of the late Syriac-Orthodox Patriarch A. Barsaüm (†1957), *The Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch: Its Name and History* (Hackensack New Jersey, *prob.* 1952).

¹³ This ‘Namenswechsel’ (i.e., from ‘Arameans’ to ‘Syriacs’) can very well be illustrated by the translation of the word ‘Suryoyo’, which frequently has been avoided by the ‘Suryoye’ themselves since the early 20th century. It translates ‘Syrian’, but nowadays is connected – by outsiders at least – with (Muslim) Arabs from Syria (cf. n.5). Hence assyrianism could be constructed on fertile soil, because there were (are) not many ‘Suryoye’ who wanted (want) to be identified as ‘Syrians’ in Western countries. ‘Assyrian’ thus offered a good alternative. It has to be stressed that only after World War I this term was increasingly and primarily used for, and by, the ‘Nestorians’.

originally *Greek* term ‘Syrians’ with which the Greek-speaking world already designated them since approximately the fourth/third centuries B.C.¹⁴ Not only the name of the people, but everything else formerly known as ‘Aramean’ (e.g., the name of their language and culture) was about to be renamed and identified with ‘Syrian’ (for ‘Syriac’, see n.5).

B) When the multitudes of Christian Arameans finally adopted the appellation ‘Syriacs’ as a self-designation, this newly acquired name soon obtained the connotation of ‘Christians’. But it was not synonymous to ‘Christians’, in that both words were interchangeable.¹⁵ The term ‘Suryoye/Syriacs’ rather marks a true *ethno-cultural* identity. Yet, in the case of the Syriac community from India this might be an exception;¹⁶ perhaps here we could accept that it has a ‘cultural geographical designation’ (cf. C, below). It is also noteworthy that the former pagan identity, history, culture and language of the converted Arameans, who finally became to be known as ‘Syriacs’, had been *Christianized* by the Arameans, or Syriacs, themselves. It also must be remembered that the Christian Arameans were always very much aware of their *Aramean* descent. And from time to time they still called themselves and their language ‘Aramean’, until at least the age of the renowned polymath Bar ‘Ebroyo (†1286). This statement applies equally to the early scholars of the Syriac-Orthodox church as well as those of the ‘Assyrian Church of the East’ (see n.4): “*The Suryane of Nestorian Iraq*,” as two scholars observed, “*quite frequently speak of themselves and their language as Aramean.*”¹⁷

C) As soon as Yonan reduced the meaning of ‘Syriacs’ to ‘Christians’, another misleading theory pops out. ‘Syriacs’ is mistakenly depicted as a kind of ‘collective term’ (in her words: “*eine kulturgeographische Bezeichnung*,” *Assyrer*, p.12) to symbolize the descent of various Mesopotamian ethnicities, particularly of Assyrians, Chaldeans and Arameans (*Assyrer*, p.1). Thus she renounces what Th. Nöldeke¹⁸, the great German expert in Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic Studies, evinced a few decades *before* the idea of assyrianism was even yet to be born. His profound researches regarding the terms ‘Syria’ and ‘Assyria’ demonstrate that the Arameans underwent a ‘Namenswechsel’, a transformation of their name (*not* their identity, a sociological notion which constantly evolves and adapts itself through time; this is also how the Christianization of the pre-Christian Aramean identity has to be viewed). Certainly, the Arameans collectively adopted the term ‘Syriacs’ in the *post-Christianization* era after they had chosen to accept this nomenclature to identify their people and their language with.¹⁹

The case of the early converted Arameans was a similar one when they were forced by *external* factors to adopt the Greek name ‘Syrians’ at the expense of their native name, which had acquired an unpleasant connotation.

¹⁴ Cf. the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (‘Septuagint’); probably completed in the third century B.C.

¹⁵ This can be illustrated by the name ‘Arabs’ which connotes ‘Muslims’. Both terms are clearly no ‘synonyms’.

¹⁶ Educated Syriacs from India, though, seem to be aware and equally proud of their Aramaic or Syriac legacy. The Most Rev. Dr. B. Mar Gregorius wrote in *The Harp* of 1989 (pp. 99ff.) that “it is a matter of great sorrow and concern that the Syrian Christians themselves are not sufficiently aware of their heritage.” Subsequently, K. Hermes wrote in *The Harp* of July 1995 (p. 335): “There are two movements that are currently active in the Syrian Churches of St. Thomas,” viz. one of “Syrianization” and one of “Indianization.” To the former movement, evidently belongs Prof. T. Koonammakal from Kottayam. See his “The Semitic Dimension of Christian Tradition,” in *The Harp* Vol.X, No. 1-2, March 1997 (p. 71): “What happened to the **Semitic Aramaic heritage** of early primitive, original, apostolic Christianity of the first half of the first century? We observe that it **was inherited mainly by the Christian Aramaic or Syriac Christianity** that flourished in and around Edessa, Nisibis, Adiabene and similar pockets before 200 A.D.”

¹⁷ P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism. The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 196 n.149. Joseph, *op. cit.* (n.7), p. 27 n.94, quoted from a personal letter written by P. Crone (dated June 11, 1997), wherein she reemphasized her and Cook’s view as expressed in *Hagarism*, twenty years before: “**Of course the Nestorians were Arameans.**” For ‘Nestorians’, see n.4.

¹⁸ E.g., “Assyrios Syrios Syros,” in *Hermes, Zeitschrift für Classische Philologie* 5, pp. 443-468 (Berlin, 1871) and “Die Namen der aramäischen Nation und Sprache,” in *ZDMG* 25, pp. 113-131 (1871).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Another group of Assyrianists, though, admitting that ‘Syriac’ does denote an ethno-cultural identity, claims that there is no difference in meaning between these two appellations. These Assyrianists trace the origin of the name ‘Syria’ back to the word ‘Assyria’ and readily regard ‘Syria’ as an abridged form of ‘Assyria’; this hypothesis remains yet to be proven (cf. below). After having overlooked the etymological, chronological and geographical settings of both terms in history, they eagerly assert that ‘Syriacs’ is an evolution of ‘their’ old Assyrian name.

3. Yonan & Assyrianists

Citing missionary G.P. Badger in 1842 (who published *The Nestorians and their Rituals*, 2 vols. in London, 1852) that the East-Syriacs (i.e. ‘Nestorians’ and Chaldeans; cf. n.4) were “*die einzigen überlebenden Reste von Assyrien und Babylon*,” Yonan further explains: “*Die westsyrischen Jakobiten dagegen werden von einigen Forschern dieser Zeit als ‘Aramäer’ angesehen [sic]. Als allgemeine Bezeichnung kann als gesichert angesehen werden, daß die Namen ‘Christen’ (mshihaye) oder dessen Synonym ‘Syrer’ (Suraye,²⁰ suriani) innerhalb aller Syrischer Kirchen verbreitet waren*” (19-20). As previously stated, the term ‘Syriac’, the ‘common name’ of the Syriac church communities, is not synonymous to ‘Christian’ (at least not with respect to the Syro-Mesopotamian Syriacs). Further, it is worth accentuating that Yonan writes that there were researchers in the 19th century who considered the West-Syriacs as *Arameans*. She continues: “*Der Name ‘Assyrer’ wurde also von außen herangertragen*” (sic) (20). A bitter statement for Assyrianists, indeed. It is even more explicitly stated by Yonan that the name ‘Assyrian’ was given by Westerners first to the ‘Nestorians’ on p. 154, where we read: “*Der nunmehr zur Nationalbezeichnung gewordene Name ‘Assyrer’, war ja zuerst den nestorianischen Christen von Missionaren, Archäologen und Reisenden gegeben worden.*” If truth be told, this statement is widely accepted in academia.

Most Assyrianists, however, reject the fact that the name ‘Assyrians’ was reinvented in the 19th century by Westerners. They also repeatedly deny that the term was originally applied to the ‘Nestorian’ community and that only since the late 19th and early 20th century on this label was adopted by a handful of individuals from the other Syriac communities; the latter is true, but due to infection of assyrianism.²¹ Furthermore, many ardent Assyrianists even fiercely reject their Aramean heritage. This is ironical, because their very own forefathers, the ones who were *not* affected by assyrianism, “quite frequently” (see 2B, above) boasted of their Aramean identity in the pre-19th century era.

As a matter of fact, many Syriac teachers still educate their students with the notion that in the books of their ancestors, their genealogy is traced back to Aram, the son of Shem, and that they were previously known as Arameans. Note, for instance, the statement of Mor Michael (†1199), one of the greatest Syriac-Orthodox historians ever. One of the appendixes to his impressive chronicle he introduced as follows: “[... t]he kingdoms which have been established in Antiquity by our race, (that of) the Aramaeans, namely the descendants of Aram, who were called Syrians [Suryoye/Suryaye].”²²

²⁰ This actually still is the self-designation among many East-Arameans and simply means ‘Syriacs’ (cf. n.5), not ‘Christians’. Its equivalent in Tur ‘Abdin Aramaic, however, is ‘Suryoye’ (singular ‘Suryoyo’). We further emphasize that in the Aramaic idiom of Tur ‘Abdin, ‘**suroye**’ (sing. ‘suroyo’) is, in fact, a *synonym* for ‘Christians’! Cf., e.g., O. Jastrow, *Lehrbuch der Turoyo-Sprache* (Wiesbaden, 1992), pp. 145 and 149f.

²¹ The birth and the development of this romantic idea were elegantly portrayed by (e.g.) J. Joseph, *op. cit.* (n.7).

²² Quoted and translated by L. van Rompay, “Jacob of Edessa and the early history of Edessa,” in G.J. Reinink & A.C. Klugkist (eds.), *After Bardaisan: Studies on Continuity and Change in Syriac Christianity in Honour of Professor Han J. W. Drijvers* (Groningen, 1999), p. 277.

Due to their irredentist views, 'Assyrian' jingoists habitually consider all the regions in (northern) Mesopotamia, including Tur 'Abdin, as the original heartland of ancient Assyria. It naturally speaks for itself that this is a blatant distortion of historical facts. For the "*central Assyrian homeland...was a very small country. It was no bigger than...Wales, or Palestine [sic]...Basically Assyria was the land along the middle Tigris. Its northern limit was just north of Mosul*";²³ we are not interested here in the evolution of the city of 'Ashshur' into a country 'Assyria' that finally annexed foreign lands to become a large 'Assyrian' empire. Although Yonan does not mention anything explicit concerning the core land of Assyria, from the context one may nevertheless understand that even Tur-'Abdin and its so-called "*syrisch-orthodoxen Assyrer*" (Assyrer, 13) originally did belong to the central homeland of Assyria.

4 **Rudolf Macuch: a Great Scholar, her "verehrter Lehrer" (Journalismus, p. IV).**

Yonan described herself proudly as a student of the great scholar Rudolf Macuch (1919-1993) to whom she dedicated her *Journalism* in 1985. In her other book, *Holocaust* (1989), Macuch himself even wrote a preface. Macuch was indeed one of the leading authorities of the past century in Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic Studies. He mastered many languages, among which the dialect of the East-Syriacs. In my opinion, Yonan simply used the status of Macuch in order to give her books more credibility. As great as this scholar was, yet the pupil does not share the contrasting convictions of her master on the historical identity of the Syriac people.

The long-life researches of Macuch have not only led him to conclude that the appellation 'Assyrian' in reference to the Syriacs is a modern invented one; along with other scholars,²⁴ Macuch, too, did use the term sometimes for the sake of convenience with respect to the 'Nestorians'. To Macuch, the Syriacs unequivocally trace their lineal origins back to the ancient Arameans. About six years before his death, he wrote²⁵ that the names 'Chaldeans' and 'Assyrians' displayed an "*artificial nature*" (817). "*The development of the modern concept of 'Assyrians' among these people themselves,*" Macuch continued, "*began with Botta's excavation of the palace of Sargon II in Khorsabad (1843), followed by Layard's discovery of Nineveh. This research opened the eyes, not only of the West, but also of the ethnically nameless Aramean population in these regions which had been satisfied to identify themselves by religious denominations*" (818). Regarding the frequently mentioned linguistic theory of Assyrianists, viz. that the term 'Sur(y)aye/Syriacs' purportedly derives from 'Aturaye/Assyrians',²⁶ this expert in Semitic linguistics remarked: "*This simple philological equation is doubtful*" (818). "*This misleading term [sc. 'Assyrian'],*" Macuch concluded, "*is also applied to the literature*" (822). And even to the (spoken) Aramaic language in general, including both the modern dialects and '(Classical) Syriac', as we have shown above. Moreover, just recently we could read in the media that many Assyrianists even dared to call the reconstructed Aramaic used in "The Passion of the Christ" movie 'Assyrian'.

Very few scholars can claim to have put so much efforts in researching the modern writings of the present-day 'Assyrians' as Macuch did. His book *Geschichte der spät- und neusyrischen Literatur [History of the Late and Modern Syriac Literature]* (Berlin, New

²³ H.W.F. Saggs, *The Might That Was Assyria* (London, 1984), p. 2.

²⁴ Even well-known experts like J. Joseph and J.F. Coakley can be mentioned in this regard.

²⁵ "Assyrians in Iran" [first two sections], in E. Yarshater (ed.), *Encyclopedia Iranica* Vol. IV (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London and New York, 1987), pp. 817-824.

²⁶ Cf. J. Joseph, "Assyria and Syria: Synonyms?" in *JAAS* 11/2 (1997) and my "Assyria and Syria: Synonyms?" in [the Swedish magazine] *Bahro Suryoyo* Nos. 1-3 (2001); both refuted an article of Prof. R.N. Frye (see n.29).

York: Walter de Gruyter, 1976)²⁷ remains hitherto a true gold mine for scholars, students and laymen alike. Already in this book we can hear Macuch admonishing his readers that just as ‘Phoenicians’ would be an inappropriate name for the modern Lebanese people and their Arabic dialect, ‘Assyrians’ likewise does not suit the Syriacs and their language “*Neusyrisch/sureth*” either (90). Macuch also provides us with conclusive proofs that shortly after World War I attempts were being made by the “*zunehmenden Nationalbewegung*” to transform the name of the people and their language. That is, from “*mellat suryeta/ Syriac millet*” to “*umta atoreta / Assyrian nation*,” and from “*lishana suryaya/ Syriac language*” to “*lishana atoraya / Assyrian language*” (e.g., pp. 89, 206 and 233). Indeed, serious efforts to rewrite the history of the Syriacs, or Arameans, followed soon and, evidently, still continue until the present day.

Macuch²⁸ furthermore utilized expressions such as “*Syro-Aramean Christians*” (89) in his writings. In the very same quoted work, he stated that “*Tur ‘Abdin has a history of one and a half millennia before the conversion of its Aramean inhabitants to Christianity and is mentioned in several Assyrian records, such as Adadninari I (1305-1274) and Salmanassar I (1274-1244), in which wine regions, especially the good wine of the Mount Izala [Turo d-Izlo], a name still used for the southern part of Tur ‘Abdin, is mentioned*” (92).

5. Concluding remarks

I reiterate that it is not my intention to smear anyone. Neither is the objective of this paper to disparage the otherwise fine books published by Gabriele Yonan. On the contrary. As long as they are put in their proper context, I even recommend them. By contrast, I am of the opinion that scholars like Yonan²⁹ should, and even have to, understand why these kind of apologetic papers originate: having read her books, I felt morally obliged to produce the present writing.

The purpose of this article was to criticize the views of Yonan pertaining to her historical portrayal of the Syriacs and their identity in accordance with the academic consensus. Indisputably, the Syriacs can trace their origins back to the Arameans of old. The few scholars quoted in this paper, and there are many others which have been left out, claim that the connection between the Syriacs and the Assyrians of antiquity is artificial and unsubstantial.

To date, it remains the challenge for scholars to prove the (large scale) continuation of the Assyrian *people* after the fall of their empire in 612(-605) B.C. until the early centuries A.D. Only after this has been done sufficiently and successfully, experts could investigate a possible linkage, in all its dimensions, between the pagan Assyrians and the Christian Syriacs.

In my opinion, scholars such as Gabriele Yonan do not give justice to the objective history and identity of the Syriacs.³⁰ Despite the lack of historical references, Yonan is determined to speak about a ‘nation’ that traces its origins back to the Assyrians, Chaldeans and Arameans. Yet, she seldom, if ever at all, speaks or writes about ‘Chaldeans’ or ‘Arameans’! It is to be noticed that she writes almost exclusively about ‘Assyrians’ (e.g., ‘*Assyrian nation*’) and only rarely she utilizes an ambiguous compound name, like in ‘*Assyrian-Suryoyo people*’.³¹

²⁷ Cf. S. Brock’s “Review Article” of this book in *Journal of Semitic Studies* 23 (1978), pp. 129-138.

²⁸ “Tur ‘Abdin Through the Ages,” in *Abr-Nahrain* (1991) Vol. 29, pp. 87-105.

²⁹ Regrettably, other academics are Harvard Professor in *Iranian Studies* R.N. Frye (note that he is married to an ‘Assyrian’ scholar; *pace* Frye, see the articles cited in n.26) and S. Parpola, Helsinki Professor of *Assyriology*.

³⁰ Did not Yonan herself appeal to her readers that “history must respect objectivity and objective information; **it must not be abused ideologically**” (see her own review of *Holocaust*, *op. cit.* [n.3], p. 101)?

³¹ Not to mention one of the primary objectives of Assyriologists, viz. the struggle for recognition of the ‘*Assyrian Genocide*’, another theme that repeatedly recurs in *Holocaust* as well as in many of her other contributions. Also,

Finally, this ‘nation’ she is talking about exists of people who are *still* known in their *Aramaic* vernaculars as ‘Suryoye/Sur(y)aye’: an appellation which Yonan acceptably translates with ‘Syrrer/Syriacs’, but erroneously equates with ‘Christians’. The name truly reflects an ethno-cultural identity, the very basic *Aramean* identity of the ‘Suryoye/Sur(y)aye’ respectively.

Post Script

It remains the question concerning the future course of the Syriacs that is intriguing. Due to the Arab and Muslim associations of the modern meaning of ‘Syrians’, the Syriac-Orthodox Church has already opted for ‘Syriacs’ as a self-designation in English (cf. n.5). The Chaldean Church promotes the ‘Chaldean’ name, while the ‘Nestorian’ Church cherishes ‘Assyrian’.

But a few out of many central questions are: do the Syriac people want to be(come) a *nation*? If indeed so, what transcending, *unifying* name will they decide to adopt for their future nation? Based on which determining identifying factors (e.g., ethnic, cultural, linguistic or perhaps even ideological) will they build their nation? Let one thing be clear at least. Individuals do not have the right to create a nation without the consensus of the people that are being nationalized. Sadly, the vast majority of the common people do not even have the foggiest idea regarding the things that are published about them in the books and in the media.

Gellner³² wrote:

1. *Two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating.*
2. *Two men are of the same nation if and only if they recognize each other as belonging to the same nation. In other words, nations maketh man.*

‘Suryoye/Sur(y)aye’ share enough binding elements and there are adequate identity markers that can unite them. If Assyrianists and Syriacs desire to become one *nation*, whether under an Aramean, Assyrian, Chaldean or Syriac umbrella, it is really about time for a serious dialogue. If each group persistently continues its own nation-building project, accompanied with self-invented theories propagated through different channels (to which apologetic critiques as the present article can be expected); at best we either will end up as three *distinct* political entities or, in the worst scenario, the extinction of the identity of all three groups will only remain a matter of time. So let us *all act* wise and decide our *common* future today!

Addendum:

After I finished my critique, my attention was drawn to an article, which affirms my concerns. See Paul Menebröcker’s “Die Syrisch-Orthodoxe Kirche und die Assyrische Universalallianz: Kritische Anmerkungen zum Werk Gabriele Yonans ‘Assyrer heute: Kultur, Sprache Nationalbewegung der aramäisch sprechenden Christen im Nahen Osten’,” published in 1979. Republished at <http://wwwuser.gwdg.de/~grabo/assy/menebroecker-syorth.htm>.

the official recognition of the rights of the Syriacs or Arameans is distorted into an exertion for ‘Assyrian rights’. The fact that these and other goals, which in themselves are noble and just, are unfairly appropriated by a relatively small, political minded fraction that claims to speak on behalf of a whole ‘nation’, is quite disturbing; cf. my post script.

³² E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 6-7.