

The Aramean Identity of Tur ‘Abdin and its Native Population

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Tur ‘Abdin, which basically denotes “the mountain of the servants [*sc.* of God]” in [Aramaic](#), is the local name of an erstwhile densely populated Christian region in Southeast-Turkey.

The vast majority of its indigenous citizens have, [for obvious reasons](#), migrated to Western countries in recent decades and the emerging demographic vacuum was swiftly filled by myriads of infiltrating Kurdish tribes from the periphery and beyond.

In their new diasporic reality these Tur ‘Abdinians were confronted with identity questions in a challenging way. For some avidly claimed a pre-Christian Assyrian ancestry, while others defended a connection with the Aramean heritage; still others decided not to take sides.

Being a member of this community and familiar with its history, I see no reason to doubt or even to repudiate its Aramean roots. On the contrary, its Arameanness can be substantiated. Therefore, *verifiable* arguments (albeit in brief and with occasional recognized references) will be advanced in favor of the Aramean patrimony of the original children of Tur ‘Abdin.

Let us first touch on a rational aspect of the matter. One may reason: “Whence this certainty about their Arameanness?” In all fairness, this query should be dealt with – indiscriminately – by all people who appeal to a specific national heritage. But it goes without saying that the response needs to consist of logical and persuasive arguments supported by indisputable facts. We can further ask: “What kinds of people reject the Aramean descent of the Tur ‘Abdinians and what are their motivations?” Here, one can distinguish essentially two kinds of people.

First, there are those who are, or prefer to stay, ignorant (derived from ‘ignore’). Hence, some may judge out of ignorance. Others, however, may not grasp the very idea of a direct link with an ancient people that appeared on the political scene in the late second millennium B.C. Tur ‘Abdinians who endeavor to prove their claims, often encounter a lack of concern in their history and in the end their identity may be questioned anyway.

Second, there are people whose system of beliefs (or ‘ideology’, ‘world-view’) will not accept the recognition of the Aramean identity. Many Turks, who govern Tur ‘Abdin politically and Kurds, who populate and rule this area demographically, may stand as an example. Frankly, there are even Tur ‘Abdinians who adhere to an ideological viewpoint that rejects the Aramean identity at the expense of a politicized ‘Assyrian’ one; it is a truism that this group has affected, e.g., reporters, writers, politicians, human activists, etc. Besides, there are the neutrals who, while obviously desiring to abstain from a political standpoint, in effect deny the historical and ethnocultural identity of the Syriac people.

It follows from this that the resistance to the acknowledgement of the Aramean identity is, in my view, mostly due to a person’s (ideological) background. In most cases, the rejection itself has little, if anything, to do with the actual issues at stake. Let us, therefore, focus on some of the prime arguments that really matter to this *historical* debate on the Tur ‘Abdinian identity.

1.) **History / Geography.** The ancient [Arameans](#) were native to Mesopotamia and historians, Assyriologists included, affirm the Aramean roots of Tur ‘Abdin. Current Aramaic toponyms, some of which date back to the Neo- and the Middle Assyrian epoch, also point to this fact.

(Cf. my “The Indigenous Origins of the Arameans of Upper Mesopotamia,” in an earlier *Bahro Suryoyo* issue.) Although Kurds and, to a lesser degree, Turks have deeply penetrated into the area of Tur ‘Abdin, both of these nations are originally foreign to this countryside; this fact is widely accepted, also among their historians. I would further argue that the tribal structure of the Tur ‘Abdinians is a *continuous* tradition of the typical Aramean society in Antiquity. E.g., in Tur ‘Abdin Aramaic it would be natural to refer to the family of this writer as ‘*b(ē)*-Messo’; my father’s grandfather, Israel *b(ē)*-Messo, inherited his family name from his great-grandfather. This ‘*b(ē)*’ is a linguistic development from ‘*bēth*’ (lit. ‘house of’), a so-called construct state of ‘*bayto*’ (‘house’); the form ‘*bēth*’ is still preserved in [Edessan Aramaic](#). This long-lasting practice is reminiscent of the way ancient Aramean states were styled by means of ‘*bēth*’ + a personal name, usually the name “of an ancestor or prominent member of a dominant family within the kingdom”;¹ e.g., *Bēth* (Akkadian: ‘*Bīt*’) *Zammāni*.² Unlike the Arameans, their neighbors from Assyria, for instance, “were not basically tribal, and beliefs about descent from a common ancestor played no part in uniting Assyrians.”³

2.) **Language / Culture.** [Aramaic](#) developed as an indigenous language of the Tur ‘Abdinian plateau.⁴ Tur ‘Abdinians have maintained *two* centuries-old Aramaic dialects. The first one, a living speech which is not standardized yet, is commonly called ‘[Turoyo](#)’ or ‘modern Syriac’; I think ‘Tur ‘Abdin Aramaic’ is more accurate. The other one emerged as the literary dialect of the Edessan locale and is usually called ‘(Classical) Syriac’; I opt for ‘[Edessan \(Aramaic\)](#)’. Thus the linguistic Aramean identity of the Tur ‘Abdinians is indigenous and goes back to a period *prior* to the internationalization of Aramaic; it would be difficult to presume otherwise, given the fact that centuries before the tongue of the Arameans would become an international language the Tur ‘Abdin region was clearly depicted as ‘Aramean’ in Assyrian sources.⁵ Even though the idiom of Tur ‘Abdin’s citizens, obviously, further developed in its long history, they have never relinquished their original language.⁶ Hence their Aramaic mother tongue, which they were able to retain, can be regarded as serious evidence of their Aramean lineage.

¹ A. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000–330 BC* Vol. II (Routledge: London & New York, 1995), p. 394.

² These and similar resemblances remain largely unnoticed in the literature. E.g., E. Lipiński, *The Arameans: Their Ancient History, Culture, Religion* (Peeters, 2000) appears, at times, all-too-enthusiastically looking for similarities between the ancient Arameans on the one hand and modern Arabs and Bedouins on the other, while disregarding the existing analogies with the present-day Syriacs, the true progeny of the Arameans of Antiquity. Also note that the “two important verbal roots expressing” concepts that mark the Aramean ‘economy’ (p. 515), have subsisted in Tur ‘Abdin Aramaic in their original meanings: *zbn* (*zbd* must be a typo!) which “signifies the act of purchasing as well as the act of selling” and ‘*bd*’ that still conveys meanings like “to work” and “to serve.” In contrast, a scholar well-familiar with the Syriacs, Andrew N. Palmer, *Monk and Mason on the Tigris Frontier: The Early History of Tur ‘Abdin* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 15, rightly remarks on Tur ‘Abdin: “Not only are several of the village names still in use, even these types of farming and the same skill in metalwork are characteristic of the ancient Aramaic stock of Christians who are the hereditary inhabitants of the plateau.”

³ H.W.F. Saggs, *The Might That Was Assyria* (Sidgwick & Jackson: London, 1984), p. 125. Should the quest of the Syriacs to an eponymous ancestor (whether ‘Aram’ or ‘Ashur’) also be understood as an Aramean trait?

⁴ Cf. J.C. Greenfield, “Arameans and Aramaic in Anatolia,” in *XXXIV. International Assyriology Congress 6-10/VII/1987 – Istanbul* (Ankara, 1998), pp. 205f.; G.M. Schwartz, “The Origins of the Aramaeans in Syria and Northern Mesopotamia: Research Problems and Potential Strategies,” in O.M.C. Haex *et al.* (eds.), *To the Euphrates and Beyond: Archaeological Studies in Honour of Maurits N. van Loon* (Rotterdam, 1989), p. 284.

⁵ E.g., A. Malamat, “The Aramaeans,” in D.J. Wisemann (ed.), *Peoples of Old Testament Times* (Oxford, 1973), p. 137f. (cf. map on p. 136); G.M. Schwartz, *op. cit.* (n. 4), pp. 277-279; K. Jaritz, “The Problem of the ‘Broken Obelisk’,” in *Journal of Semitic Studies* 4:3 (July, 1959), pp. 210-212 and 215.

⁶ Cf. O. Jastrow, *Laut- und Formenlehre des neuaramäischen Dialekts von Mīdin im Tūr ‘Abdīn* (Wiesbaden, 1985³), p. V. This doyen of Neo-Aramaic Studies, who regards the Syriacs as Arameans, is lucid in his analysis. He affirms that ‘in Tūrōyo we encounter a highly developed, capable of expression and vital language...without its Aramaic basic stock became affected.’ He would further declare that notwithstanding the diachronic changes, ‘He who hears Tūrōyo or reads and analyzes Tūrōyo-texts, experiences always anew the fascination to perceive the ancient-old Aramaic language material shimmering through the structures of the contemporary language.’

The concept of ‘language’ is one of the most significant identity markers. While experts are still debating the degree to which languages determine someone’s identity, they agree on other points. One’s *mother tongue* is seen as more than merely a communicative medium. In fact, it is the most efficient and primary carrier of a people’s culture and identity. Hence living languages have sometimes been portrayed as the ‘soul’ or the ‘heartbeat’ of vital nations. Conversely, *language death* has sometimes been interpreted as the disappearance of a people. The historian Georges Roux,⁷ for example, saw the prelude to the ultimate assimilation of the Assyrians in the loss of their mother tongue, Akkadian. Although there are exceptions to this idea, it is generally agreed that when a people forgets its *native mother language*, it will be deprived of one of the major assets and *natural* manifestations of its national cultural heritage. In addition, (politicized) languages have frequently been used as *the* main criterion by which nations have identified themselves with; Europe contains a sufficient number of examples.

3.) **Religion.** Some 2,000 years ago, the Tur ‘Abdinians were polytheists and pagans before their early conversion to Christianity in massive numbers. Even though their faith was (is) universal, after the 5th-6th centuries A.D. the ‘Syriac-Orthodox’ church would soon evolve into an ethnic or national church. Indeed, as monotheists they remained, *in varying degrees*, distinguishable from the Jews, the other church communities (e.g., Copts, Greeks, Armenians) and, from the seventh century on, the Muslims. Chiefly their native tongue (see 2, above), their ethnicity (see 4, below) and their peculiar Christian faith with their own hierarchy, their Aramaic Bible and their saints reinforced the awareness of cultural *differences*.⁸ But with respect to their identity, the most powerful and lasting impact of their submission to the Gospel brought about a change in the self-designation of their identity. That is to say, while the Greek-speaking world already applied the originally *foreign and Greek* name ‘Syrian’ to the Arameans before Christianity (cf. the Septuagint and Posidonius), the people themselves still continued to utilize their *local and Aramaic* name ‘Aramean’ in the early centuries A.D. The Arameans themselves, too, finally adopted the alien appellative ‘Syrian’ as a self-ascription for their people, tongue and culture somewhere between the 3rd-5th centuries A.D. for reasons unimportant here (also consult some prominent grammars of Aramaic dialects).⁹ The point to stress here is that this ‘name change’ was facilitated, if not directly caused, by their acceptance of the Gospel, which generated a deep and lasting impact on the Arameans.

4.) **Ethnicity.** Following the useful definition of one modern scholar, we consider ‘ethnicity’ here as “the expression of a consciousness of collective identity.”¹⁰ This very concept “both includes and excludes. It creates a boundary between an in-group and an out-group.”¹¹ Thus ethnic identity dichotomizes between the ‘self’ and the ‘non-self’, between ‘we’ and ‘them’. The key issue in this regard, then, is the self-perception of a given people. Or, in our context: how do Tur ‘Abdinians call themselves and how have they done so in the previous millennia?

⁷ *Ancient Iraq* (Penguin History, 1992³). Cited by Joseph (see n. 27, below), p. 29. In light of the interpretation of the Assyrian language as an important “unifying feature” among the Assyrians (H. Saggs, *op. cit.* [n. 3], p. 125) and the strong assimilation potential of the Aramaic language (comparable to the Arabic language in later times), this view is not surprising considering that the Assyrians adopted a foreign language, Aramaic, and lost theirs. For more on the Aramaization of the Assyrians and their empire, see (e.g.) H. Tadmor, “The Aramaization of Assyria: Aspects of Western Impact,” in H.J. Nissen and J. Renger (eds.), *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn: Akten des XXV RAI* Vol. II (Berlin, 1982), pp. 449-470; A. Malamat, *op. cit.* (n. 5), p. 147f.

⁸ In this vein, we should also recall the later division into ‘millets’ or (semi-)autonomous religious communities.

⁹ Cf. S. Schiffer, *Die Aramäer: Historisch-Geographische Untersuchungen* (Gütersloh, 1992²; 1911¹), pp. 160f. Also refer to my “The Identity of the People Described in the Writings of Gabriele Yonan,” §2, published in recent issues of *Bahro Suryoyo* (based in Sweden) and *Mardutho d-Suryoye* (based in Germany).

¹⁰ E.C.L. van der Vliet, “The Romans and Us: Strabo’s Geography and the Construction of Ethnicity,” in *Mnemosyne* 56/3 (Brill Academic Publishers: Leiden, 2003), p. 258.

¹¹ *Ibid.* My paper is not interested in ‘absolute’ definitions of identity; it only depicts a few markers of identity.

The original people of the Tur ‘Abdin district, for convenience’s sake called ‘Tur ‘Abdinians’, are part of the Syriac people. In their Aramaic parlance they identify themselves as ‘Suryoye’ (singular ‘Suryoyo’),¹² pronounced with a regular *s*, meaning ‘Syrians’ (not to be confused with the Arab Muslims of Syria, the somewhat artificial name ‘Syriacs’ is being used instead). And if we study the early literary works composed in Edessan Aramaic, it appears that the Syriacs of Mesopotamia have used this name as a self-reference for the past 1,700 or so years. However, there is more to highlight. In the previous paragraph we had already observed the adoption of the appellative ‘Syrian’ at the cost of their former name, ‘Aramean’. Interestingly, the early Syriacs themselves, both from the West- and the East-Syriac tradition, were very much aware of this name change (cf., e.g., the lexicon of the East-Syriac lexicographer Bar Bahlul [d. 963] from Baghdad under ‘*Sūrya/Syria*’). However, the difference was that they thought that this shift took place centuries *before* their ancestors embraced the Christian faith, while today we know that this rather came about shortly *after* their large-scale conversion. Moreover, there are copious references to early manuscripts wherein the authors deliberately utilize their former self-designation ‘Aramean’ as an equivalent of ‘Suryoyo’. In fact, for the early Arameans their new name ‘Suryoye’ basically signified their being *Christian Arameans*; indeed, the appellation ‘Suryoye’ came to symbolize their Christianized Aramean identity. Let us now turn to Tur ‘Abdin and its vicinity and take a *brief* chronological look at the data and examine how the greatest Syriac scholars in this ancient Aramean milieu¹³ saw themselves.

It is truly fascinating to discover that Ephrem (d. 373), who was born in *Nisibin* (whence he fled to *Edessa* in 363), “speaks of Aram as ‘our country’ in a number of places.”¹⁴ It has been further confirmed that “Ephrem himself uses the word ‘Aramaic’ to describe his language.”¹⁵ “But the Philosopher of the Syrians,” as Ephrem derided the Edessan intellectual Bar-Daisan (d. 222), “made himself a laughing-stock among Syrians and Greeks.”¹⁶ Oddly, the English translation rendered the actual name ‘Arameans’ in the text twice with ‘Syrians’ here! These ‘Arameans’, explicated an authority on Ephrem, “sind die orthodoxen Syrer von Edessa.”¹⁷ In a metrical homily, Jacob of *Serugh*¹⁸ (d. 521) writes about Ephrem: “He who became a crown for the people of the Aramaeans [*armāyūthā*], (and) by him we have been brought close to spiritual beauty.”¹⁹ Perhaps a closer translation of the Aramaic word ‘*armāyūthā*’ would here be ‘Arameandom’ (cf. German ‘Aramäertum’). Also notice the synonymous use of the name ‘Suryoye’ two lines further in the same couplet: “He who raised up the horn of the Syrians everywhere, (and) from him henceforth we have learnt to sing to the Lord with sweet songs.”

¹² Sometimes they call themselves ‘Suroye’ (singular ‘Suroyo’), pronounced with a rather sharpened *s*, which simply has come to mean ‘Christians’; hence this appellation could (can) also be applied to any Christian people, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds. I posit that ‘Suroyo’ is derived from ‘Suryoyo’ and linguistically to be explained as a *haplogy* (i.e., a sound or syllable which can be swallowed when this recurs in a given word). A similar development occurred among the East-Syriac tribes who use ‘*Suraya*’ (with regular *s*) as a self-reference. However, the difference is that ‘*Suraya*’ retained its original meaning ‘Syrian’ and did *not* change *semantically*.

¹³ See esp. E. Lipiński, *op. cit.* (n. 2), pp. 109-117 for Nisibin and the southern region of Tur ‘Abdin and pp. 135-161 for the Aramean state of Bēth-Zammāni (capital: modern Diyarbakir), ca. 150 km northwest of Tur ‘Abdin. Cf. *passim*, like in p. 54 where the very origin of the name ‘*Ārām*’ is also located “at the foot of the Tūr ‘Abdīn.”

¹⁴ S.H. Griffith, “Christianity in Edessa and the Syriac-Speaking World: Mani, Bar Daysan, and Ephraem; the Struggle for Allegiance on the Aramean Frontier,” in *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 2 (2002), p. 20 n. 76.

¹⁵ A.N. Palmer, “Paradise Restored,” in *Oriens Christianus* 87 (2003), p. 3 n. 3.

¹⁶ See “Against Bardaisan’s ‘Domnus,’” in C.W. Mitchell, *S. Ephraim’s Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan. Transcribed from the Palimpsest B.M. Add. 14623 Vol. 2* (1921), pp. 7f.

¹⁷ E. Beck, “Ephräms Rede gegen eine philosophische Schrift des Bardaisan, übersetzt und erklärt,” in *Oriens Christianus* 60 (1976), pp. 32f n. 26.

¹⁸ Jacob of Serugh (*sc.* Turkish *Suruç*, ca. 35 km southwest of Edessa) was a native of Kurtam on the Euphrates.

¹⁹ S.P. Brock, “St. Ephrem in the Eyes of Later Syriac Liturgical Tradition,” in *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 2:1 (January, 1999), §12; accessible at <http://syrcm.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No1/HV2N1Brock.html>.

We conclude by citing two other eminent writers from just a few centuries later. A native of today's *Malatya* (Turkey), Jacob Bar-Salibi ended his clerical career as Metropolitan of modern Diyarbakir from 1166 on; here he died and was buried in 1171. "As to us Syriacs," he specified to an Armenian audience, "we descend racially [sic] from Shem, and our father is Kemuel [the] son of Aram,"²⁰ and from this name of Aram we are also called sometimes in the Books by the name of 'Arameans'.²¹ Like Bar Salibi, Michael the Elder (d. 1199) was born in *Malatya*. During his Patriarchate (1166-), he completed a voluminous chronicle in 1195. In this work, the Aramaic pages 7, 17²² and 748ff. are of particular interest to those concerned with the historical identity of the Syriacs. His explication of Gen. 10:22 (cf. above and n. 20) on p. 7 is captivating: "The sons of Shem (are): the Assyrians, the Chaldeans, the Ludians, the Arameans who are the Syrians, the Hebrews and the Persians." On p. 748, Michael appended a highly interesting exposition on the pre-Christian history of his people to his Chronography. It commences thus: "[... 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."²³

We have just seen that a few of the most celebrated scholars of Syriac Christianity, and there are also others like them, were indeed very conscious of their ancient-old Aramean identity. As Christian Arameans, or Syriacs, they continued to view themselves as the sons of Aram – their legendary ancestor; frankly, to the best of my knowledge, there exist no pre-19th century manuscripts in Edessan Aramaic wherein 'Ashur' surfaces as the self-professed forefather. If the Syriac intelligentsia *thought and believed* they were (the heirs of the) Arameans, how much more would the common folks and the masses have cherished this conviction?²⁴ I want to elaborate a little more on this issue, for I do not think that we can ever overrate the *explicit and indisputable* written evidence of the self-testimonies of the intellectual forefront of Syriac society, which clearly appeared to thrive from Ephrem's century on. In fact, this argument of self-perception – to my mind, the most cogent of all – still goes largely unnoticed by many experts and scholars not familiar with Syriac-Aramaic Studies. Small wonder, then, that historians claimed that the Arameans were also lost in the mists of history. Unfortunately, this part of history is even unknown to the bulk of the Syriac people. Thus it was chiefly for them that their rich and unique, but 'buried', legacy was revealed and charted by scholars in *The Hidden Pearl: The Syriac Orthodox Church and The Aramaic Heritage* (Rome, 2001).

²⁰ Scholars aver that the Bible contains two traditions with respect to the eponymous ancestor of the Arameans. The first "Aram" is the son of Shem (Gen. 10:22f.), while his namesake in Gen. 22:21 is the son of Kemuel ("the father of Aram"). So is the remark of Bar-Salibi, as Mingana contended in a footnote, an "error [that] is also committed by the Syrian lexicographers" likely due to a confusion with Gen. 10:22, where "Aram" does duty as a son (of Shem)? Or should we understand this phrase in the sense of Kemuel being a (distant grand)son of Shem, thereby complying with other Syriac writers (e.g., Michael the Elder [d. 1199] and Bar 'Ebroyo [d. 1286]) who understood the Aram of Gen. 10:22-23 as their legendary progenitor? For Kemuel was the son of Nachor, Abraham's brother (Gen. 22:20), and therefore a distant grandson of Shem (Gen. 11:10-29). However, in one of his works the East-Syriac bishop Yeshu'dad of Hadītha (d. 853), some 200 km northwest of Baghdad, explained unambiguously that the Syriacs, or "Arameans of Mesopotamia," descended from Aram, the son of Kemuel.

²¹ A. Mingana, *The Work of Dionysius BarSalibi Against the Armenians* (Cambridge, 1931), p. 54.

²² In a future writing I hope to present an analysis of this page, which seems incompatible with the other pages.

²³ As per the translation of 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.

²⁴ Even the historian and traveler from *Iraq*, 'Alī ibn al-Husain al-Mas'ūdi (d. 957), also titled the 'Herodotus of the Arabs', "mentions that in Tūr 'Abdīn remnants of the Aramaeans still survive." See the entry 'Tūr 'Abdīn' in P.J. Bearman *et al.* (eds.), in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* [revised from the German edition of 1934] Vol. X (Leiden: Brill, 2000), p. 666. The first author (M. Streck) and the recent reviser (W.P. Heinrichs) further stated: "In the early Byzantine period and the first centuries of Islam, Tūr 'Abdīn was probably inhabited almost entirely [sic] by Christian Aramaeans. Later, more and more Muslims (mainly Kurds) settled there."

The Proper Name. As we stated above, Tur ‘Abdinians who ended up in a Western Diaspora were increasingly faced with questions pertaining to their history and identity. One of them is the issue of the proper designation of their people and language. Nowadays ‘Syrian(s)’, as we mentioned earlier, is a displeasing self-identifier in the eyes of most Tur ‘Abdinians due to its inevitable association with the denizens of the ‘Syrian Arab Republic’. Thus alternatives have been put forward in the past,²⁵ but to this writer the next three names gain the most support.

A. **Syriacs.** Until fairly recently, the appellation ‘Syriac’ was still solely in use as an *adjective* that designated a language. However, after this meaning has been extended to refer to the name of the people as well, a comprehensible, but admittedly factitious, term was created. As of late, it is evident that this new usage is extensively in use in the English-speaking world. Still, the academic world continues to use and translate ‘Syrians’ wherever it is to be expected. Thus, to some people the term ‘Syriacs’ clearly lacks a firm historical foundation.

B. **Ancient Syrians.** The adjective ‘ancient’ provides some clarification. For this compound name implies that the ‘Suryoye’ antedate the modern-day ‘Syrians’ from Syria and need to be differentiated from each other. The idea is not new, though. The concept has existed for centuries and via the Arabic language it entered the Turkish vocabulary. Moreover, it seems as if the Turkish form gave rise to the creation of the artificial name ‘Syrian’ in Swedish. As far as I know, Swedish is further the only other language that similarly discerns a ‘Syrian’ (i.e. ‘Suryoyo’; plural ‘Syrianer’) from a ‘Syrier’ (i.e., a resident of Syria; plural is also ‘Syrier’). In translating Aramaic texts, one could well insert the adjective ‘ancient’ in square brackets, viz. ‘[Ancient] Syrians’, and write about the ‘Ancient Syrians’ instead of the ‘Syrians’ *sec.*

C. **Arameans.** There is an irony here. The forefathers of the ‘Suryoye’ were forced by external factors to drop their native name and adopt a foreign one that was in use at the time. Today, however, they once again seem to be driven by outside pressures to seek a solution for the connotations attached to the translation of their self-reference, ‘Suryoye’ (i.e. ‘Syrians’).²⁶ Would it not be wise for the present generation to consult its intellectual legacy for solutions? The strong and conscious belief in the Aramean ancestry is what the early Syriac society actually and really believed. Moreover, even the early Syriacs were aware that before they were known as ‘Suryoye’ their native name was formerly ‘Arameans’. I suggest, therefore, that the Tur ‘Abdinians – nay, all the Syriacs²⁷ – call themselves and their language ‘Aramean’ and ‘Aramaic’ respectively. These names are not new, nor are they strange to the world community. They are widely familiar thanks to the Bible, which shows, for instance, how the ancestors of the Jewish people are explicitly identified as ‘Aramean(s)’, that certain portions were penned in ‘Aramaic’ and that Jesus and His apostles communicated in Aramaic. But above all, the resuscitation of their former native name would demonstrate an undeniable and historically well-founded *continuity* with the convictions of their intellectual ancestors.

²⁵ The late Syriac-Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Ephrem I Barsoum, *The Syrian Church of Antioch: Its Name and History* (N.J. Hackensack, ca. 1952; repr. in 1983), for instance, proposed in the early 1950s a compound name. He advised his flock (p. 22) that in the Western languages, “the present ambiguity [*sc.* regarding the name] would disappear if we add ‘Aramaic’ to the Syriac language, and ‘Aramean’ to the Syrian Church.”

²⁶ The present writer disagrees with those who wish to leave the appellation ‘Suryoyo’ untranslated, however sincere their intentions may be. Although I concur that all people are entitled to their own self-determination, I do not think that the nations in the West are eager to welcome another vague, unclear and untranslated term.

²⁷ Including, of course, the East-Syriacs. Those groups in Iraq, who are propagating the appellative ‘Assyrian(s)’, would do well to learn how their very own forefathers perceived themselves. “The Suryane of Nestorian Iraq,” two scholars noted, “quite frequently speak of themselves and their language as Aramean.” P. Crone & M. Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 196 n. 149. J. Joseph, *The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East: Encounters with Western Christian Missions, Archaeologists, and Colonial Powers* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000), p. 27 n. 94, referred to a personal letter written by Patricia Crone to Joseph (dated June 11, 1997), wherein she reiterated and stressed her and Cook’s view expressed in *Hagarism*. She was quoted as saying, among other things, that “Of course [*sic*] the Nestorians were Arameans.”

The appropriation of the ‘Syrian’ name by the ‘Syrian Arab Republic’ might thus lead to a re-adoption of the previous self-designation of the ‘Suryoye’, viz. ‘Arameans’ and ‘Aramaic’. And this, I think, surely would be an irony of history.

In sum, in this study we attempted to substantiate the Aramean roots of the autochthonous people of Tur ‘Abdin from different perspectives. The Tur ‘Abdinians have lived for centuries in Tur ‘Abdin and, as we remarked, the ancient Arameans were historically indigenous to the geographical landscape of Upper Mesopotamia, which includes Tur ‘Abdin. We further noted that despite the logical linguistic changes over time, the Arameans of Tur ‘Abdin have always kept their original Aramaic mother tongue alive. In their case, we contended, their Aramaic vernacular was like a cord that kept a remnant together and provided it continuity with their forbears, in that their language functioned as the guardian of its speakers’ history and of their Christianized identity. For the polytheistic Arameans converted in considerable numbers to Christianity. But as time went by, these monotheists stayed distinguished from their neighbors. Their being Christian thus brings us straight back to a pre-Islamic civilization. Moreover, because they accepted the Christian Gospel as the truth, they distanced themselves from their heathen countrymen by accepting, under outside pressures, the foreign name ‘Syrian(s)’ as a self-reference. We demonstrated, however, that they *never* forgot their roots. They remained cognizant of the fact that their original name was ‘Aramean’ and they even used it in their writings – either alone or they mentioned it in one breath with their new name. Furthermore, they upheld the belief in an eponymous ancestor, viz. ‘Aram’, and ventured to endorse this with Biblical authority. Lastly, it was suggested that the undesired associations attached to their identity in Western languages can be solved when the Syriacs (incl. Tur ‘Abdinians) return to their original name. For such an irony of history could become the example *par excellence* of a true and well-founded historical continuity with their forefathers.

In conclusion, therefore, we might ask: “Whence this certainty about the Aramean ancestry of the Tur ‘Abdinians?” The indigenous people of Tur ‘Abdin and its vicinity, we will reply, are (the offspring of the ancient) Arameans, because their Arameanness can be corroborated – historically & geographically; linguistically & culturally; religiously; and, finally, ethnically.

I would like to end with two quotes. The late Professor Rudolf Macuch²⁸ (1913-1993) stated: “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 Adadnari I (1305-1274) and Salmanassar I (1274-1244), in which wine regions, especially the good wine of the Mount Izala, a name still used for the southern part of Tur ‘Abdin, is mentioned.”

In spite of the westward expansion of the Assyrian empire in the 9th century B.C., Professor Edward Lipiński,²⁹ who authored a detailed book on the Arameans (n. 2, above), noted: “The area around the Tūr ‘Abdīn remained a main centre of speakers of Aramaic through centuries, and it is no hazard that Nusaybin and Mardin, to the south of the mountain, and Amida, to its north, were later important centres of the earliest Christian literature in Aramaic.”³⁰

²⁸ R. Macuch, “Tur ‘Abdin Through the Ages,” in *Abr-Nahrain* 29 (1991), p. 92.

²⁹ E. Lipiński, “The Linguistic Geography of Syria in Iron Age II (c. 1000-600 B.C.),” in *Ancient Near Eastern Studies – Supplement* 7 (2000), p. 136.

³⁰ The author wishes to express his thanks to Francis Sarguis for his editorial suggestions.