

The Armenian term *Asori* and its misinterpretation

By: David Dag (2013)

Sometimes you can hear and read assyrianists (Assyrian nationalists) using the argument, that the Indo-European Armenians have always called the Aramean (Syriac) people by the name “*Asori*” in the Armenian language.

They draw such conclusion based simply on their personal interpretation of the Armenian *exonym* nomenclature *Asori* for the Aramean (Syriac) people (without any knowledge in the Armenian language itself). They simply think that it reminds one phonetically of the term “*Asuri*” in Turkish, and “*Ashuri*” in Arabic and that hence this proves that we are “Assyrians”. In other words they are drawing a bold groundless and dangerous conclusion based on phonetics only, without viewing history as it is and simply accept it as such.

Their argument is amongst others a quotation of the assyrianist Nestorian William Warda, from his article “*Assyrians from the fall of Nineveh to Present*” where he wrote:

“Edward Odisho quotes Konstantin Tseretely that “Assyrians who live in the Soviet Union call themselves and their mother tongue Assyrian, an appellation which occurs in the 18th century Georgian documents.” Tseretely further writes; “In correspondences between the Georgian King Irakli II and Mar Shimoun in the years 1769 and 1770 Mar Shimoun refers to himself as the “Assyrian Catholicos” and the King identifies Mar Shimoun’s people as “Assyrians.”

According to another source the Georgian king Irakli II in 1770’s established contacts with the Yezidies and used the Assyrian Archbishop Ishaya as mediator. Irakli II sent a letter to the Yezidi leader Choban-Agha in which he proposed a none-Muslim coalition of the Yezidies, Armenians and Assyrians against the Ottoman Sultan.”

William Warda’s sources are from a Kurdish website:

(Lamara Pashaeva, “*Yezidi Social Life in the common wealth of Independent States*” Kurdishmedia.com, Nov. 2004)”

Warda begins to mention that the assyrianist Nestorian Edward Odisho, who in turn quotes Konstantin Tseretely. So in other words Warda takes a shortcut through Odisho indirectly to Tseretely, instead of going to Tseretely and his sources directly.

Konstantin Tseretely and Mar Shimun

Konstantin Tseretely mentions a nestorian catholicos-patriarch of the Church of the East named Mar Shimun, who is supposed to have presented himself to the Georgian king Irakli II as an “*Assyrian catholicos*”. Note that that this is nothing more than a misinterpretation from Tseretely’s perspective.

According to the list over East-Syriac "Nestorian" patriarchs of the "Church of the East" it's none other than Mar Yonan Shimun XVIII (patriarch 1740-1820) which Tseretely is referring to.

Have in mind that Mar Shimun and Iraki II communicated with each other either in Georgian or in the Eastern Neo-Aramaic vernacular known as *Sureth* either through a translator into Georgian and vice versa. This means that Mart Shimun wrote something like "*Catholicos Asori*" or "*Asori Catholicos*" in the Georgian documents which similar to the Armenian "Asori" don't mean Assyrian but simply Syrian (in Armenian and Georgian as well).

Notice that St Ephrem the Syrian is called "*St Ephrem Asori (Surp Yeprim Asori)*" both by Armenians and Georgians. This means that the arguments of Odisho, and Tseretely is are flawed as evidence in the whole "name issue". In other words this argument is totally useless and I will entail why.

Important to bear in mind

We know that some East-Syriac Nestorians in modern times (not all of them just an "elite") since the end of the 19th century called themselves "*Aturaye*" (Assyrians) in the *ethnic* sense. In this case one can mention a certain Feridun Bet Oraham (also known as "*Feridun Aturaya*")

<http://www.betnahrain.net/Biographies/fraidoon.htm>

<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~rwbaker/ancestry/aturaya.htm>

<http://www.edessa.com/profiles/freydun.htm>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urmia_Manifesto_of_the_United_Free_Assyria

Anyhow, it is known that there existed a sort of resistance against the Assyrian name and the Assyrian nationalistic ideology within the East-Syriac (Nestorian) group during this time period if one studies the nationalistic atmosphere of those days.

A clue in that direction would be the name shift of the Church of the East (also known as East Syrian Church) into the "*Assyrian Church of the East*", as late as 1976 .

This is confirmed in John Josephs book: "[*The Modern Assyrians of The Middle East – encounters with western Christian missions archeologists & colonial powers*](#)"

¹¹ The preferred usage since 1976 has been The Assyrian Church of the East. While the hierarchy of the Church has followed the laity in choosing a "national" name, there has been at times a clash over this subject of names in the West Syrian (Jacobite or Syrian Orthodox) Church; the "national" and historical name preferred by the hierarchy is Aramean while a minority among the laity opt for Assyrian. For details, see chapter by Wollhart Heinrichs entitled "The Modern Assyrians—Name and Nation," in *Festschrift Philologica Constantino Tsereteli Dicta*, ed. Silvio Zaorani (Turin, 1993), pp. 103, 111–12. See also below, pp. 9–10; 32n.113.

Nestorians and Chaldeans Proclaimed Remains of Nineveh and Assyria

When the Assyrian excavations revealed the remains of Nineveh to the wondering eyes of the world, the Nestorians and their “Chaldean” brethren in the environs of the ancient Assyrian capital and beyond attracted special attention. The hero of these excavations, Austin Henry Layard, hastened to proclaim these historic, linguistic, and religious minorities to be “as much the remains of Nineveh, and Assyria, as the rude heaps and ruined palaces.”⁵⁹ In the midst of this excitement, J.P. Fletcher wrote that “the Chaldeans and the Nestorians” are “the only surviving human memorial of Assyria and Babylonia.”⁶⁰

While the name Chaldeans was already, as we have seen, appropriated by those Nestorians who had embraced Roman Catholicism, the illustrious twin name ‘Assyrians’ was eventually adopted by the Nestorians as a name for themselves. Interestingly, Layard and Hormuzd Rassam continued to use the older and more familiar name Chaldean and applied it to both the Chaldean Catholics and “Nestorians.”⁶¹ Coakley notes a dispute that Rassam had with Arthur J. Maclean of the Anglican mission in Qochanis in 1889 over the names “Syrians” and “Assyrians,” when Maclean argued against the term “Assyrians”—“Why should we invent a name when we have such a very convenient one, used for centuries, at our hand?” It was

understandable, he agreed, that someone living so close to the ruins of Nineveh, “should have a fit of enthusiasm of Old Assyria,” but “is it common sense to cast aside the name used by the people themselves [*Suraye*] and to invent another for them of very doubtful applicability?” Rassam’s position was that “Syrian” was wrong; the correct form was “Assyrian,” but preferred, “Chaldean.”⁶² Layard always referred to the Nestorian as “Chaldeans” or as “Nestorian Chaldeans” in order to distinguish them from those united with Rome.⁶³ Only a few years prior to the Assyrian excavations, as already noted, one of the bishops of Urmiah had emphasized that the Nestorians were as Chaldean as any Catholic renegates.⁶⁴

Prior to World War I, the Anglican mission to the Nestorians gave the Assyrian nomenclature a new impetus. Formally known as "The Archbishop of Canterbury's Assyrian Mission," it re-enforced, no matter how unintentionally, the linkage between the Nestorians and the ancient Assyrians.⁶⁵ "Assyrian Christians," which originally had only meant "The Christians of geographical Assyria," soon became "Christian Assyrians."⁶⁶ By the late nineteenth century, a few of the educated and politically conscious among the "Nestorians," especially those who had immigrated to America, began using *Aturaye* [Assyrians] in their writings.⁶⁷

The assumption that the Nestorians were the descendants of the ancient Assyrians found a great advocate in the Anglican missionary W.A. Wigram, who in his post-World War I books, *The Assyrians and their Neighbours*, and *Our Smallest Ally*, popularized the name Assyrian and familiarized the world with the tragedy that had befallen these "descendants of Shalmaneser."⁶⁸ During the interlude between the two world wars the world heard a great deal about these modern Assyrians through newspapers and from the forum of the League of Nations, a subject covered at length below. In their own language, the people gradually began, vocally, to call themselves "Aturaye" (Assyrians) during the inter-war years; until then it was as natural for them to speak of themselves as *Suraye* as it still is for the Syrian Orthodox to call themselves by that name, *Suroyo*. . . .

⁶⁵ Layard, *Nineveh*, I, 5.

⁶⁶ J.P. Fletcher, *Notes from Nineveh and Travels in Mesopotamia, Assyria, and Syria* (Philadelphia, 1850), p. 188. Fletcher was Badger's lay companion sent by the Archbishop of Canterbury to begin work among the Nestorians in 1842.

⁶⁷ See above, pp. 3ff.

⁶⁸ The correspondence between Rassam and Maclean was carried on through one of the administrators of the Anglican mission in England; for details see Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England*, pp. 147-148.

⁶⁹ See his *Nineveh and Its Remains*, *passim*.

⁷⁰ See above, p. 8.

⁷¹ Isabella L. Bishop, *Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan* (London, 1891), II, 237. See also Aubrey R. Vine, *The Nestorian Churches* (London, 1937), pp. 179-180. Cf. Coakley, p. 366 n. 12.

⁷² An appeal by Archbishop Tait published in 1870, was entitled "Appeal on behalf of the Christians of Assyria, commonly called the Nestorians." The text of the appeal spoke of "this request from the Assyrians," and "From that moment 'Assyrian' replaced 'Nestorian' in the formal Anglican vocabulary," writes Coakley, the historian of that mission. *Op. cit.*, p. 65. See also Rufus Anderson, *History of the Missions of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to the Oriental Churches* (Boston, 1872), ii, 83, where he points out that in 1840, the American missionaries used the designation "Assyria Mission" in reference to their apostolic work among the Christian sects in Mosul.

⁶² Daniel P. Wolk's recent research shows that even the Urmiah Christians in America, in their own language, continued until after World War I to refer to themselves as *Suryaya*. In his reading of some of their major publications from 1907 to 1920, Wolk found that the first ethno-nationalist organization established in Urmiah, *Khayada*—Unity—was a *Suryaya* organization. Chicago's newspaper *Mashk-hiddana Suryaya*—Suryaya Herald—first published in 1915—changed to *Mashk-hiddana Aturaya* only in 1920, when the nationalist discourse had come of age; the title in

English was *Assyrian American Herald*, most probably because "Syrian" in the United States stood for the more numerous Arab Christians from geographical Syria. See Wolk's "The Emergence of Assyrian Ethnonationalism: The Discourse Against the *Hachagaqe* ('Thieves of the Cross')," paper presented at the Middle East Studies Association Conference (MESA), Chicago, December 6, 1998. For the growth of Assyrian nationalism, quickened during the war years, and the presence of an Assyrian American delegation at the Peace Conference in Paris, see below, pp. 156-157.

⁶³ Maclean and Browne, p. 6. See also Coakley, p. 147, where he quotes Maclean saying "there is really as far as I know no proof that they [the Syrian Christians] had any connection with the Old Assyrians. One of the few Anglicans who did use the term Assyrian was the Archbishop of Canterbury Benson, "but that is a fad of His Grace, as no one else does," wrote one of the missionaries quoted by Coakley. See also Ficy (1965), pp. 149-151.

Daniel P Wolk's investigation is very interesting. But what I don't accept in the footnote of John Joseph about Wolk is that, he wrote that, the Arameans (Syriacs) of Syria are "Christian Arabs"

Jean Maurice Ficy, did also shed some light on Anglican and American missionary work and its nomenclature in his article from 1965 "[Assyrians or Arameans](#)". In it he wrote the following about Rufus Anderson on page 6 of the article:

Similarly, *The History of the Mission of the American Board : Churches of the East*³⁴, by R. Anderson, contains several chapters on the mission to the Nestorians. One of the chapters³⁵ is titled The Mission to Assyria, but the author hastens to specify³⁶ that the Mission of Assyria has been so called for geographic reasons. And we see that, in fact, the mission was concerned about other Christians besides the Nestorians. Four chapters of this book are devoted to Nestorians³⁷ and takes us up to 1870 without the author mentioning the name of Assyrians for a single time. At this date, the Mission is transferred to the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions and named Mission to Persia, because henceforth it limits itself to the region of Urmia.

How did the Armenians differentiate between the nomenclatures "Assyria", Assyrian(s)", "Syria" "Syrian(s)" and "Syriac" and the Armenian language?

One can read about this in among others the article of Johny Messo "[Assyria & Syria: synonyms?](#)" against the specialist on the history of Iran, Richard Nelson Frye's article with the same title, but without a question mark.

Assyria	<i>Asorestan/Norshirakan</i>	*sometimes <i>Asorestan = Mesopotamia</i>
Assyrians	<i>Asorestantji/Asorestans'i</i>	
Syria	<i>Asorik</i>	
Syrian(s) and a Syriac person	<i>Asori (singular)</i>	<i>Asoriner (plural)</i>
Syriac (Aramaic)	<i>Asoreren</i>	

"Asori in Armenian

We further read about the Armenians in whose language classical Syriac [khtobonoyo] is known as "the **Asori** language" This case, too, leads Frye to believe that "The general terms 'Assyrian' and 'Syrian' were regarded as synonyms not only in early times" (JNES, 1992:283).

Asori, as was long ago cogently argued by [John] Joseph, does not mean 'Assyrian', but 'Syrian'.

[21] An Assyrian, however, is designated in Armenian literature as **Asorestants'i**. Last year, Prof.

Joseph reiterated that the "Armenian name **Asori** referred to the people of geographical Syria, the Aramaeans; it was the name of Aramaeans wherever they were found." [22]

In other words, Arameans both in and outside the geographical boundaries of Syria were called **Asori**."

Even John Joseph criticized Frye before Johny Messo did in his article "[Assyria & Syria: synonyms?](#)" Where he wrote the following on page 39 and 40:

"We are told that "**Asori**" in Armenian refers to "**Classical Syriac**," a dialect of Aramaic; but Aramaic, "called Syrian by the Romans," is called "Assyrian by the Armenians," an obvious misreading of **Asori**. What is missing from the above statement is that in the Armenian language 'Syrian' and 'Assyrian' both start with an initial A [the vague "prefixed a-" above], and the two words are distinguished from each other: **Asori**, singular, refers to a '**Syrian**' [Aramean] person (as in Suraya/Suroyo)--**Asoriner** is the plural. Syriac language [Aramaic] in Armenian is **Asoreren**. The word for 'Assyrian' in Armenian is **Asorestants'i**. The names for geographical Syria and Mesopotamia are also distinct in the Armenian language and both start with an initial A. **Asorik**', wrote Professor Sanjian in a letter to this writer [John Joseph], is "the traditional Armenian term for Syria," and **Asorestan** "for Assyria." [7]"

"The "Area of Assyria" was known in Armenian as **Norshirakan**, apparently a borrowing from the Partheans; '**Asorestan**' in Armenian refers, according to the Table, to the "Area of Mesopotamia." [8]"

[21] John Joseph "The Nestorians and their Muslim Neighbors", (Princeton 1961), s.15. Konsultera även de tre armeniska (etymologiska) uppslagsverken – eller vilken annan armenisk uppslagsbok – nämnd av Joseph i hans 53:e fotnot på samma sida. Se även min [John Joseph] i fotnot fyra nämnda artiklar, samt Wolhart P Heinrichs "Modern Assyrians – Name & Nation" s. 107.

[22] John Joseph, *The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East Encounters with Western Christian Missions, Archaeologists, & Colonial Powers* (Brill 2000) s.20, footnote 69.

("Richard Nelson Frye "[Assyria & Syria. Synonyms](#)" p..35

(John Joseph – "*The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East – encounters with western Christians missions archeologists and Colonial Powers*", Brill 2000 page 19 and 20)

Another argument that is used by some assyrianists to prove that we viewed ourselves as Assyrians before the archeological excavations of Austen Henry Layard during the mid 1800s is, the argument that the American missionary cleric Horatio Southgate who was touring the Middle East in 1843 and visited the Syriac Orthodox communities in Ottoman Turkish ruled Anatolia and Asia Minor (modern Turkey), and that he would have called our people Assyrians. They usually quote him on page 80 in his book "*Narrative of a Visit to the Syrian [Jacobite] Church*", (published in 1844):

"I observed that the Armenians did not know them under the name which I used, SYRIANI; but called them ASSOURI, which struck me the more at the moment from its resemblance to our English name ASSYRIANS, from whom they claim their origin, being sons, as they say, of Assour, (Asshur,) who 'out of the land of Shinar went forth, and build Nineveh, and the city Rehoboth, and Calah, and Resin between Nineveh and Calah; the same is a great city"

This source is invalid because Southgate observed that the Armenians of Harput (outside modern Elazig) didn't know our people under the Arabic or Turkish name "Syriani" (correct: *Suryani*) but they (the Armenians) called our people in Harput "Assouri" (in Armenian) and that's why Southgate in turn misinterpreted this "Assouri" as a phonetic equivalent of "Assyrian" in English. And as a missionary he thought about the book of Genesis and the mythical father of the ancient Assyrians namely *Ashur* the son of Shem the son of Noah (spelled *Assur* in English Bibles).and of the city of Assur (Ashur) the old Assyrian capital together with Nineveh and Calah (Kalhu) etc.

But as I have already proven, this Armenian nomenclature is confusing for those who don't know the difference between Asori (Syrian) and Asorestantsi (Assyrians). Notice that the Armenians said Asori and not Asorestansi. In other words, this doesn't prove that we were Assyrians, but was rather a misinterpretation and a misunderstanding from Southgates' perspective in this case and that this error gives birth to other errors among pro-Assyrian individuals who use Horatio Southgate as mandate source in their argumentation concerning the "name issue".

This must be a reason – because of the coexistence between our people and the Armenians, as to why our people in Harput, just as Southgate – must have simply misinterpreted the *exonym* nomenclature *Asori* as Assyrian and can as well be one of many contributing factors as to why the Assyrian movement was founded in the first place.

This kind of kinship between Armenians and Arameans (Syriacs), was even noticeable in cities such as Omid (Diyarbakir), Adana and even in Urmia in northwestern Iran, which were also cities where the Assyrian movement existed and was active in among an elite only during the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

Many Arameans (both Syriac Orthodox and Nestorians in this case) could speak Armenian (polyglot or multilingual) because they had Armenian neighbors

John Joseph wrote the following about Horatio Southgate on page 5 in his above mentioned book:

Horatio Southgate, who was touring the region in the early 1830s, wrote that the Nestorians “call themselves, as they seem always to have done,” *Chaldeans*; indeed, “Chaldean” was their “national name,” he stressed. Interestingly, after Southgate became aware that it was Grant’s firm position that the Nestorians did not use the name Chaldean in reference to themselves, and that they were the descendants of the Lost Tribes of the Old Testament, he (Southgate) became more self assertive. He wrote that “undoubtedly” these *Syrians* were “descendants of the Assyrians and not of the Jews.” His source: “Those of them who profess to have any idea concerning their origin.” According to that same source, the “Jacobites” were descendants of the Arameans—“the Syrians whose chief city was Damascus.”²¹

Here we see that Southgate thought that the Syriac Orthodox (Jacobites) were the descendants of the ancient Arameans while the Nestorians according to him were descendants of the ancient Assyrians.

This of course, goes against the truth. In fact both the Syriac Orthodox and the Nestorians are heirs of the ancient Aramean and Aramaic heritage. And both have a literary tradition, where the nomenclatures *Suryoye/Suryaye* and *Oromoye/Aramaye* were used synonymously before the establishment of both the Aramean (Syriac) as well as the Assyrian nationalist movements.

At the same time, we find out that Southgate called the Nestorians by the name Chaldeans and stressed that this was their national name (which of course isn’t true). He argued against Asahel Grant who wrote the book “*The Nestorians or the Lost Tribes*”, where Grant claimed that the Nestorians would be the remnants of the ten lost tribes of Israel.

Southgate visited the Nestorians already during the early 1830s and he wrote the following about them:
“*These Syrians were ”descendants of the Assyrians and not of the Jews”*”

²¹ Horatio Southgate, *Narrative of a Tour through Armenia, Kurdistan, Persia and Mesopotamia*, 2 vols. (New York, 1840); vol. 2, pp. 182–183. Cf. Coakley, *op. cit.*, p. 367 n. 12, and Heinrichs, *op. cit.*, p. 110, n. 20. See also Asahel Grant, *The Nestorians, or The Lost Tribes*, (London, 1841), pp. 198–199; Justin Perkins, *A Residence of Eight Years in Persia among the Nestorian Christians* (New York, 1843), p. 4. For more on Grant and his thesis on Nestorian origins, see below, p. 37.

As wrote earlier, Southgate had erred regarding our people. First he said that the Syriac Orthodox are Arameans and later he contradicts himself and wrote that they are Assyrians based on the misinterpretation and erroneous assumption of the Armenian *exonym* nomenclature *Asori* .

He used the term Arameans about the Syriac Orthodox in his book “*Narrative of a Tour through Armenia, Kurdistan, Persia and Mesopotamia*” which was published in two volumes in New York 1840.

And the book where he mentions us Syriac Orthodox as Assyrians is known as “*Narrative of a Visit to the Syrian [Jacobite] Church*”, published 4 years after the former one.

I guess Southgate got the name Kurdistan from the local Kurds who used it orally although Kurdistan has never existed at all. The first Kurdish source to mention a fictitious coined Kurdistan was in fact a Kurdish poet known as Ehmedê Xanî also known as Ahmad Khani (1651-1707).

Harput (outside modern Elazig in Turkey)

The town of Harput had a mixed, Armenian and Syriac Orthodox population. This means that our people who lived there could even speak Armenian (just in the same way the people in Tur Abdin could speak more or less Kurdish, Arabic, and Turkish). As I mentioned earlier, this must have been a contributing factor as to why the Assyrian nationalist movement was established there among an elite, just like in Adana in Cilicia and Omid (Diyarbakir) etc.

The interesting thing about Harput, is that it has a Syriac Orthodox Church dedicated to Virgin Mary , which according to tradition dates back to 179 AD, according to the French Orientalist Jean Maurice Fiey in his “*Pour un Oriens Christianus Novus*”, on page 216–217. In the same source he even mentioned that Harput was a See for Syriac Orthodox bishops as early as during the 11th century. It was known as Hisn Ziyad (Hesno d-Ziyad in Aramaic) and later as Harput. The last Syriac orthodox bishop in this area was Mor Qurillos Mansur (Cyril Mansur) who was killed together with many other Christians in the town during the Genocide (Seyfo) 1915.

This topic made me think of the 1700 year anniversary of St Ephrem the Syrian, that took place in Stockholm University in Sweden, where many scholars were invited from the entire world to hold lectures about him. Among these scholars there was a Georgian woman who called Ephrem the Syruan, by the name *St Ephrem Asori*. This in turn had many attending listeners think that she claimed him to be Assyrian. But that was not the case. And as I’ve mentioned before he is called *Asori* in Armenian books as well

The sources of William Warda:

- Edward Y. Odisho, *The Sound System of Modern Assyrian (Neo-Aramaic)*. Otto Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden, 1988.
- Konstantin Tseretely *The Modern Assyrian Language*. Moscow NAUKA Publishing House, 1976.
- Konstantin Tseretely *The Journal of Assyrian Academic Society*, Vol. VIII, 2, 1994.
- Wolfhart Heinrichs, *The Modern Assyrians: Name and Nation*, *Semitica, Serta philologica Constantino Tsereteli dicata*, 1993, Torino. Page 99.