

Virtual Assyria

Dan Lundberg

(The content of this [site](#) is based on data collected 1996-1997)



Illustration: Ann Ahlbom Sundqvist

Introduction (2010)

Some comments on the re-publishing of this study of Assyrian cultural activities on the Internet – more than 10 years later.

This study is based on fieldwork and other data collections that I conducted during the second half of the 1990s. I can truly say that I was impressed by all the web enthusiasts that were striving to create a transnational Assyrian community – a "cyber nation" on the Internet. However, the development has been incredibly fast during the last decades and today (2010) it is hard to imagine the almost science fictional impression that ideas about cyber communities gave back in the nineties. When looking

back at the development of the Internet it seems as if the "cyber space" that was announced on the home page of Nineveh On-line 1997 has become less virtual over the years. Today we are living in both worlds – using the Internet for shopping, reading, finding information, communication, playing, dating, etc, etc. The boarder between virtual and real often appears to be diffuse and in fact, not so important any more.

Svenskt visarkiv shut down this website in 2008 because we felt we could no longer guarantee that all links were relevant and functioning. The lifespan of articles online can sometimes be quite short. However, we have received many requests to publish it again, an indication that the content is still regarded as important. This new edition has some corrected links and dead links have been deleted, but otherwise the text has not been changed at all. I urge all readers to regard this as a historical document (in our rapidly changing world) and an example of how the Internet could be used by Assyrians in the Diaspora in the late 1990s.

Technical developments have always changed the conditions for communication. Today in the era of mobile telephones, nobody needs to keep a meeting place or an exact time in mind. "I call when I arrive", is usually good enough. We take it for granted that the person we are meeting will have his/her mobile on. "I am at the central station. Going down the escalator. Where are you?" Times are changing, our behaviour changes with it and modifications often follow the new means of communication.

It is possible to be Assyrian without a geographically defined country. It is therefore possible to live in a local context in Turlock, California in the USA and at the same time feel a strong affiliation with persons in Södertälje in Sweden, the common denominator being the idea of participating in the same community. This gives new meaning to the concept of nations.

Stockholm in July 2010,

Dan Lundberg

Preface (1997)

In discussions on today's multicultural societies, we often use terms that imply that a person or thing belongs to, or originates from, a certain ethnogeographical region. "The homeland" is regarded as a centre or source of cultural flows: "they do that because they come from there, and we do this because we're from here". There is a strong conviction, both among minority groups in exile and among the majority society, that cultural activities emanate from already existing patterns. In *Subcultural Sounds. Micromusics of the West* (1993), the ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin discusses the terms "homeland" and "mother country". Slobin points out that from a cultural point of view many groups do not have a homogeneous "homeland". Due to various circumstances – political, social, economic etc – cultural flows often take completely new paths. In addition, owing to new means of communication, not least electronic networks, there

are greater opportunities than ever before to build up communities that are not governed by national boundaries.

This case study within the research project MMM (Music Media Multiculture – Lundberg, Malm & Ronström 2003) examines the community which is being established among those people with Middle Eastern origins who call themselves Assyrians.

Assyrians do not have a geographically based centre for their cultural activities. Like a large proportion of the Assyrian people, Assyrian culture lives in exile. Internet has provided Assyrians with a unique opportunity to create a virtual "homeland", a centre for cultural activities and information.

The term "diaspora" has been used to describe the situation of this type of "scattered" religious groups. The most obvious example is the Jews, who were forced to live in the "diaspora" outside Palestine until the state of Israel was formed. But an important difference between the lives of the Jews and the Assyrians in the diaspora is that for the Assyrians no such symbolic or actual centre exists of the same dignity as the Jews' "home" Jerusalem. The old ruined towns of Mesopotamia are long since deserted, and most Assyrians are well aware that their lives in the diaspora are permanent, at least for the foreseeable future.

My intention with this study is not primarily to throw light on the Assyrian group as such. My aim is rather to give an example of how a group of people can establish and maintain a cultural community across national boundaries with the help of present-day technological means of communication.

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The Assyrians as an example



When we discuss the role of music as a symbol of identity, the Assyrian immigrant group in Sweden is particularly interesting in several respects. Above all, the Assyrian group differs from most other ethnic groups in Sweden in three essential areas:

- For Assyrians there is no "homeland" to return to. The dream of the old Beth Nahrain, or Mesopotamia, seems like an utopia to most of them. They realise that life in Sweden is not of a temporary nature and that they will probably continue to live here for several generations. In addition, the uniting national concept of an origin in the ancient Assyrian Empire is in itself far from unproblematic.
- They have deliberately chosen an ethnic identity as Assyrians rather than the Syriac identity which has religious associations. When we in Sweden distinguish between Assyrians and Syrians, we do so on grounds that have never applied in the surroundings that these people come from. The term Syrian alludes to the Syrian Orthodox church, while Assyrian refers to an ethnic kinship with the inhabitants of the ancient Assyrian Empire. (In the Swedish language the distinction is more obvious since there are two terms for the English "Syrian": *Syrier* = native of Syria, and *Syrian* = Christian from the Middle East)
- Within the group the Assyrians themselves have actively worked to establish and cultivate ethnic distinguishing marks, in particular language and music.

Basically, the Assyrian/Syrian group is far from homogeneous. People differ from each other in language, ethnicity and religion, depending on which part of the region they come from.

In this complex situation in permanent exile and with no great hopes of ever being able to return, a strong nationalistic movement has burgeoned, based on the idea of a common Assyrian identity. What means are used in the attempt to create an Assyrian "we" – a sense of community built on an ethnic and cultural foundation?

All the interviewees have pointed out the important role that the so-called "national music" plays for the Assyrian identity. But what do they mean by national music? For the Syrian Orthodox believers, no specifically Assyrian music existed outside the church until after the First World War.

Today Assyrians are scattered over virtually the whole world. The Assyrian electronic newsletter Zenda quotes the following population figures for 1996 in descending order:

The majority of Assyrians live in their ancestral homeland, which is now part of Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Here is a geographical breakdown.

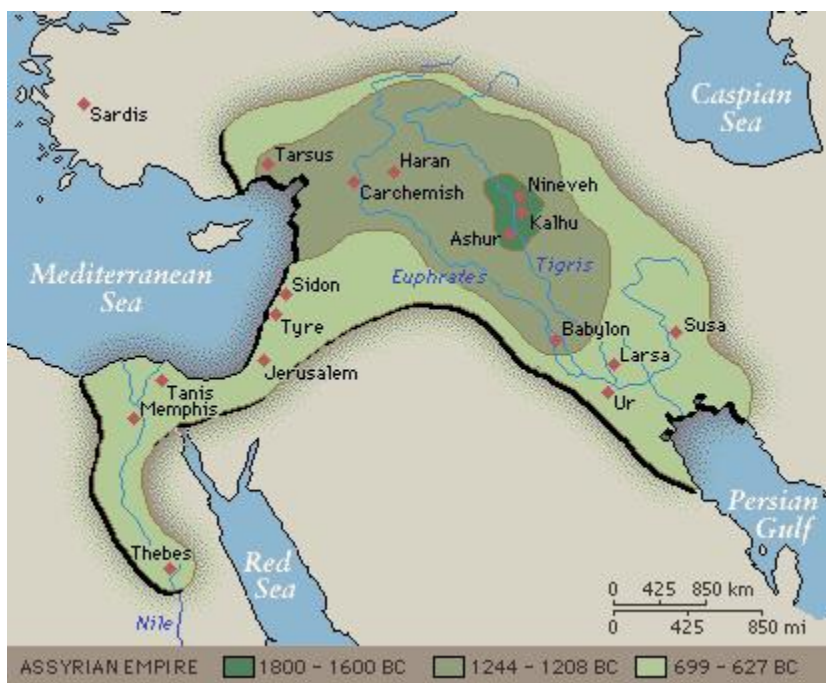
Iraq	2,000,000
Syria	700,000
USA	300,000
Brazil	80,000
Iran	50,000
Lebanon	40,000
Russia	35,000
Sweden	35,000
Australia	30,000
Germany	30,000
Turkey	20,000
Canada	20,000
Armenia	15,000
France	15,000
Georgia	14,000
Holland	10,500
England	8,000
Austria	7,000
Greece	5,000
Belgium	5,000
New Zealand	3,000
Switzerland	3,000
Italy	3,000
Other	100,000

Total: 3,432,000 (Zelda nr 10 1996)

Assyria – your land in Cyber Space

Where is Assyria? When we talk about nations we usually think in terms of geographical regions. But you won't find the country of Assyria in any present-day atlases – you might find it in a historical atlas of ancient Middle Eastern high cultures.

History books tell us that the Assyrian Empire existed between ca. 2000 B. C. and 612 B. C. This means that Assyria ceased to exist more than 2,600 years ago. Assyria was one of the most powerful empires of that period, with a nucleus which stretched from the Nile in the west to the region between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea in the east.



Historic map of the Assyrian Empire

Source: Assyrian Picture Archive

According to Assyrian historical writings, the Assyrian Empire was established in 4749 B. C. by a Semitic folk group which captured the region between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. Present-day Assyrians/Syrians who speak Aramaic use the name *Beth Nahrain*, "The Two-River Land" for the Assyrian Empire. The Greeks used the name *Mesopotamia* for the Assyrians' land, which means "The land between the rivers".

Today some Assyrians want to use an alternative calendar, which starts from the foundation of the first Assyrian Empire. At the time of writing, the present year (1997) is therefore the year 6747. New Year's Day falls on the 1st April and is celebrated by Assyrians all over the world.

Originating in the town Assur (Ashur, with East Assyrian spelling, on the map above) on the Tigris in what is now Iraq, the Assyrian high culture gradually expanded with highly

developed commerce, architecture and literature. The Assyrians used cuneiform script, inscribed on clay slates and other durable material, which is why we have so many written sources documenting commerce in ancient Assyrian times (2000-1750 B. C.). In the Assyrian Empire dialects from the [Akkadian language](#) groups were spoken. The written languages were Babylonian and Sumerian.



The Assyrian king Ashur II

Source: Assyrian Picture Archive

View a [complete list of Assyrian kings](#) (presented by [Assyria Online](#))

Nineveh (the capital city at that time) was captured by the Babylonians and Medes in 612 B. C. and the former great power Assyria became part of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. The Akkadian languages were replaced by another Semitic language, namely Aramaic, which is still spoken in this region today.

Assyria as a political power was dissolved, the language disappeared and was replaced by a new language, the old religion with Ashur as the highest god was superseded by the Christian and Muslim faiths – Assyria appeared to have been irrevocably wiped out.

However, in the 1900s – and above all during the last twenty years – a new Assyria has come into being; not as a geographically defined nation (never before have the Assyrians been scattered all over the world to such an extent as they are now), but as a virtual reality – a *Cyberland* – a community which exists through societies and networks throughout the world.

Assyrians/Syrians in Sweden

The migration of Christians from the Middle East to the Western world has been going on for about a century. At the turn of the century groups of East Assyrians migrated to the United States, as well as some groups of Syrian Orthodox Christians, albeit far fewer in number. During the 1950s West Germany started to import a massive influx of manpower from Turkey. In addition to ethnic Turks, these groups of immigrants also included a number of Kurds and Christians.

The first Assyrians/Syrians to arrive in Sweden were part of a group of ca. 200 Christians from Lebanon who were allowed into the country as the result of a request from the World Council of Churches and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. The group was gradually spread out over about fifty places in Sweden. However, Södertälje (20 miles south of Stockholm) soon became a kind of centre for the Assyrian/Syrian

immigrants. Between 1972 and 1976 four more groups of refugees from Lebanon were admitted. A certain number of family reunions were also permitted during this period. In 1970 the first Syrian Orthodox congregation was formed in Södertälje.

Between 1974 and 1978 the migration of Christians from Turkey increased enormously. One reason for this was the conflict in Cyprus which raised the level of tension between Muslims and Christians in Turkey. The increased immigration into Sweden was also due to the fact that West Germany had stopped immigration from the Middle East and Turkey and had also sent guest workers back to their homelands. Many Assyrian/Syrians then chose to apply to come to Sweden from Germany. In 1978 it was estimated that there were ca. 7,000 Assyrians living in Sweden.

During the 1980s and early 1990s immigration was dominated by Assyrians/Syrians from Syria and Lebanon. In the Swedish Immigration Board's statistics these Christian immigrants who mainly come from Lebanon are classed as stateless citizens. During the years 1989 to 1990 this group numbered nearly 5,000 people.

Today, in 1997, it is estimated that there are ca. 50,000 Assyrians/Syrians living in Sweden. This number includes both first generation and second generation immigrants but is very difficult to determine exactly. Population figures produced by Statistics, Sweden (SCB) are primarily based on nationality and are not easily applicable to Assyrians/Syrians. In SCB's statistics the Assyrian/Syrian immigrants are an unidentifiable part of the total group of immigrants from Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Iran.

Organisations

The Assyrian/Syrian group in Sweden is represented by two national federations: *The Assyrian National Federation* which was formed in 1977, and the *Syrian National Federation* which was formed in 1978. Both national federations have local organisations throughout Sweden. In 1996 ca. 8,300 Assyrians were affiliated to the Assyrian National Federation and ca. 12,000 Syrians were affiliated to the Syrian National Federation. Both federations issue monthly magazines; the Assyrian National Federation's Hujådå has a circulation of 2,000 copies, while Bahro Suryoyo, which is issued by the Syrian National Federation, has a circulation of 1,300 copies.

The Immigrant Department at the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation broadcasts news and cultural features in Turoyo [in the programme Qolo](#).

Cyberland – Music Nationalism & the Internet



Welcome to Assyria, "Your land on the Cyber Space", the [Nineveh On-line](#) greets us on its home page on the 5th June, 1997.

Does Assyria exist? Is it a country, a nation, or an organisation? Well, what is a nation, exactly? What does it mean when some people call themselves Assyrians – a people?

"Cyberland Assyria". It sounds like a vision of the future, or possibly a video game. With the opportunities that global electronic networks put at our disposal, our experience of reality is changing. The "real" world now has a rival. Through virtual realities, such as "The Internet World", we are forced to consider the question: what actually is a nation, a community, a union, etc?

Well then, does Assyria exist? Yes, but not as a nation in the old sense, where we imagine a country with geographical borders – a specific region inhabited by people who call themselves Assyrians. Certainly, the ancient Assyrian Empire – "the land between the rivers" – *Beth Nahrain* or *Mesopotamia*, can still be pointed out on a map. But for more than 2,500 years the region has been in the hands of other nations.

[Click here to view a historical map of the Assyrian Empire](#)

When the creators of Nineveh On-line's home page welcome us to Cyber Space it is obvious that they are referring to something very different from a specific geographical region.

Obviously Internet exists, and Nineveh On-line's home page exists. And through this and many, many other knowledge banks and information banks, Assyria also exists.

In the new debate on mobile, displaced, fragmented life worlds, media technologies have an important explanatory power. Through them we can dissolve the boundaries of time and space. In the future we will live in media worlds and fantasy landscapes which lack a concrete, systematic foundation. We surf the net and zap between channels (Löfgren 1995).

The ethnologist Orvar Löfgren presents an ironic picture of how postmodern man is portrayed in sociological literature. But the Assyrian virtual reality should not be described in terms of "homelessness" and "transitoriness". Maybe the 1990s' Swedish zappers and surfers can be seen as homeless nomads in a timeless and spaceless media world, trying to escape from life's reality. What the Assyrians are doing is just the

opposite: in an unstable existence in exile round the world, Internet web sites and home pages can truly be seen as a kind of virtual home – a fixed point where common values and common culture can be established and shared with others.

Using Alta Vista to search the World Wide Web on the 24th June, 1997, the search term "Assyrians" generated 2023 hits on the net while "Assyria" generated 3663. Nineveh (the name of one of the ancient capitals) generated 2203 hits. The Swedish spelling "Assyrien" generated 115 hits, mostly on Swedish and German web sites.



<http://www.nineveh.com>

Assyria can be found on Nineveh On-line. The home page offers hyperlinks to another 26 Assyrian home pages.

What does it require to establish and maintain an organised community of the kind that a nation represents? Well, a large proportion of the work is concerned with creating homogeneity. "One language, one people, one culture" was the recipe for European nationalism. Nationalism in Europe emerged during the Romantic era, taking as its starting point the ideas of thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and German philosophers such as Johann Gottfried von Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte.

Idealism regarded history as the realisation of a plan from a higher power to attain a state of perfection in the world. A well-known example is Hegel's historic scheme of how the "soul of the world" (God) step by step realised his plan through the special missions of different nations throughout history (Larsson 1994:151).

A nation was seen as a collective whole. Each nation had its own language and way of being – its own *national character*.

This national character did not always show itself spontaneously, but it was assumed to be present as a hereditary characteristic in people of the same nationality. It was up to the intellectuals to capture or possibly even awaken the "soul of the people", which was manifested in the language and in the popular culture.

"Now we have created Italy, then we have to create Italians", an Italian statesman is reported to have said in the 1860s. At that time there were also many resolute utopians in the North who wanted to remould their country's inhabitants into a people with a common language and a common culture – the conditions were different but the goal was the same. These visionaries particularly emphasised the key role of archaic popular customs. Folklore collectors and ethnologists of every sort and description were therefore credited with special authority and legitimacy. By collecting and analysing artefacts, myths, folk tales, folk tunes, songs and much more besides, these folklore archaeologists endowed the nations with form and content. They gave their finds to museums and archives to preserve and display. Thus the museums and archives also took over part of the mission of portraying the nation to the populace. This mission is still one of their most important functions (Ronström, Malm & Lundberg 1997).

From a global perspective it is easy to see that most nation-states seem to have been cast in the same mould. Nationalism, quite simply, is a very international phenomenon. We can toy with the idea of introducing a Do-It-Yourself Nation Kit onto the market (cf. Löfgren 1989:7ff). What would we actually need to include in such a kit? Folklore collections, libraries and museums are only part of what is needed to achieve community and homogeneity on a national level.

The D.I.Y. Nation Kit.

Our "D.I.Y. nation kit" could take the form of a filing cabinet with four different compartments. In two of the drawers we find people's *lived reality*, in the other two we find their *oral reality* (lived and oral reality, cf. Ronström, Runfors & Wahlström 1994). In one of the drawers for lived reality we find such fundamental elements as language, manners and customs etc. The second drawer contains models for various activities that bring people together. What the contents of both these drawers have in common is that they exist without our having to think about them. Our language and our way of being also provide the basis for other cultural, scientific and political activities. In the remaining two drawers we find models for people's oral reality. This is where *theories about lived reality* and documentation of our common culture belong, as well as ideas about how or why a specific culture is, and ought to be, a certain way. It is in one of these drawers that we find libraries, archives, research centres etc. The last drawer, which provides the finishing touches to our D.I.Y. nation kit, contains the political, philosophical and ideological tools which are essential for the creation of a "national ideology".

1. [Language and practices](#)
Based on language, manners and customs (clothes, food etc.). Also includes the establishing of national symbols, legends, folk tales and heroes.
2. [Common activities](#)
Includes cultural practices (music, dance, theatre etc.) sports activities (clubs, associations, teams, national sports etc.), participating in the same cultural sphere – reading the same magazines, listening to the same radio programmes, watching the same TV programmes, sharing the same religion and religious practices.
3. [Historic/scientific documentation](#)
Research into a common history and origin, establishing one's own libraries, archives and museums etc. A common history of popular heroes, kings, champions of liberty etc.
4. [National ideology](#)
Making people aware of the nation's common demands for the above. Creating one's own information net, mass media. Establishing one's own cultural institutions and sports institutions etc.

For a Swedish citizen or a citizen of another Western "nation", many of the above items are institutionalised, self-evident phenomena. We have a common Swedish language and we hardly need to reflect on how or why it came into being. We talk of a Swedish cultural life, even if it is difficult to state precisely what such a thing consists of. We

base our Swedishness on historic heroes and the works of national poets, composers and artists. We don't have to prove that we have a historically based right to call ourselves Swedish and to live in Sweden. Much of this established Swedish identity is due to the fact that we have schools, libraries, archives etc, which are based on a national concept, through which the Swedish language and cultural heritage is preserved and protected.

Since Assyrians lack this type of nationally unifying institutions (due to the fact that they do not live in a state of their own), the construction of an international network has enormous significance. Internet has now made it possible for groups other than states to build up "national" information banks. Throughout the world Assyrian idealists are putting in a tremendous amount of work, writing articles and producing link sites and publishing music, literature and pictures.

East and West Assyrians

As we saw in the section on [Christians from the Middle East](#), there is a sharp dividing line between East Assyrians and West Assyrians. The differences are most apparent in their religions and languages. Since people from both regions now call themselves Assyrians, there is a considerable risk of confusion. Among those who call themselves Assyrians in Sweden today, an overwhelming majority are of West Assyrian origin, i.e. they speak Turoyo and belong to the Syrian Orthodox church. In America, on the other hand, the majority of Assyrians speak Aturaya and belong to the Church of the East. At the present time the flow of information via Internet concerning Assyrians is dominated by American East Assyrian sources. By using the terms "East Assyrians" and "West Assyrians" whenever possible, I hope to minimise the risk of confusing these two folk groups. At the same time there is no doubt that East Assyrian web sites are read by many West Assyrians, and vice versa (the predominant Internet language is English, of course). However, it is important to remember, particularly where information about language (articles, language courses etc) is concerned, that we are talking about two very different dialects (languages) and that individuals from one language group do not normally have a complete understanding of the other dialect. The linguistic situation is perhaps the most decisive difference between the Assyrians' lived reality and the oral reality. In the lived reality we find a colourful diversity of English, Swedish, German, Turkish, Arabic, Turoyo etc. In the oral reality, on the other hand, "Assyrian" in its different variants reigns supreme, but while it has a common symbolic value, its potential as an international means of communication is poor.

In this study, a part of the research project [Music Media Multiculture](#), an attempt is made to follow the process by which a "virtual Assyria" is being built up with the help of modern electronic networks. The project focuses on the role of music as an organisatory factor in multicultural societies. In this case study we can see how music is a central theme, running like a scarlet thread through the creation of an Assyrian national identity. Music is present in varying degrees and in different ways in every part of the Assyrian communities.

Linguistic & Cultural Base Language

On [Robert Oshana's home site](#) from February 1997, we can read the following introduction:

For those Assyrians, such as myself, who don't speak the language as adroitly as they would prefer, this page is for you. One of the secrets of learning any language is through music. Repetition is a proven method of retention and since your favorite songs are listened to over and over, the drudgery of repetition is actually an enjoyment. The songs are written phonetically and the translation (thanks to my mom) is below each sentence. Listen to the song of your choice and go to the lyric page. Print or save the lyrics. Purchase the album (the title is on the lyric page.) It may take some getting used to since phonetic interpretations are different from person to person but it is well worth the effort. You'll notice a dramatic increase in your vocabulary. Let me know what you think.

The ambition to create a common language for Assyrians the world over is illustrated by the choice of language courses offered on the Internet. Like Robert Oshana, both East Assyrians and West Assyrians frequently point out that it is essential to maintain the language as a basis for a common development. But how is it that people who call themselves a nation do not have a homogeneous language? Well, most Assyrians in Sweden who come from the same part of the Middle East (*Tur'Abdin* in South East Turkey and Northern Syria) already have a common language. But if we look at the Assyrian population scattered throughout the world, or if we try to include all the people living in Sweden who call themselves Assyrians, the language situation immediately becomes more complicated.

The language spoken in the ancient Assyrian Empire was *Akkadian*, a dialect which belonged to the Semitic language group.



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

Towards the end of 700 B.C. the Akkadian language was gradually superseded by another language from the same language group, namely *Aramaic*. This language has survived to the present day in the form of two main dialects: East and West Aramaic or *Aturaya* and *Turoyo*, in some contexts called East Assyrian and West Assyrian. From a geographical perspective these dialects can be linked to sections of the population that mainly come from Northern Iraq and Iran (*Aturaya*), and Northern Syria, *Tur'Abdin* in Turkey and Lebanon (*Turoyo*). But these languages only represent the vernacular languages in these respective regions. Apart from these languages there is a common church language, *Suryoyo*, which was standardised during the 3rd and 4th centuries as the liturgical language of the early Christian churches in the Middle East. The people who speak *Aturaya* and *Turoyo* can also be separated on [religious grounds](#) those who belong to the Church of the East and the Chaldean church on the one hand, and those who belong to the Syrian Orthodox church on the other.

The difference between Aturaya and Turoyo is relatively large. To call them two dialects of Aramaic is perhaps misleading. Assyrians in Sweden usually compare it to the difference between Swedish and Dutch.

The written language, *Suryoyo* or *Ktobonoyo* (the literary language) has until today been regarded as the language of the church, the holy tongue of Jesus Christ. In academic circles the English term *Syriac* is often used. In Swedish the term Syriac has long been translated as Syrian. Politically aware Assyrians have reverted to using the term Assyrian. During the 19th century, in addition to the church language, the [Chaldeans and Nestorians](#) began to write down their spoken language, a language which is full of expressions from the neighbouring languages of Persian, Arabic and Kurdish. In the Western church, on the other hand, the church language is the only Aramaic language which has been used as a written language, i.e. the same language that the patriarchs used nearly 1700 years ago.

Besides this, over the years many Aramaic-speaking people, particularly those who lived in areas mainly inhabited by Kurds, Turks and Arabs, adopted the dominant language of the region. Many of the older Assyrians in Sweden talk little or no Aramaic; their mother tongue could instead be Turkish, for example. A young Assyrian musician said that "at home we only speak Turkish, otherwise Dad can't understand what we're saying". The only time he ever spoke "Assyrian" was with his friends and his mother. The complex language situation in Sweden is reflected in the fact that articles in the Assyrian National Federation's magazine Hujådå are printed in five languages: Suryoyo, Swedish, Turkish, Arabic and English. In America the situation appears to be even more difficult, since many people in the East Assyrian group (who emigrated around the turn of the century) only speak English.

The work of spreading and establishing a common language is being carried out on many different levels. In Sweden it is effected not least through home language tuition in schools, and also by only permitting Aramaic languages (in Sweden this means Turoyo, which is by far the biggest dialect) at parties organised by the Assyrian societies. On the Internet one can see that East Assyrians are endeavouring to create a uniform language usage from the fact that several language courses are available, for example '[Learn Assyrian On-line](#)'. Besides written pronunciation rules there are also pictures of the characters on this web site, and it is also possible to hear how the letters should be pronounced. The language which is taught at these language courses is Aturaya, not the common literary language Suryoyo which one would expect from the use of the term "Assyrian".



This is *alap*, the first letter in the Aramaic alphabet. If you want to use Assyrian typeface on your computer you can [download it](#) from Nineveh On-line

Music's potential as a tool in language learning has already been mentioned by [Robert Oshana](#). During recent years [Joseph Malki](#) (an Assyrian musician and composer who lives and works in Sweden) has begun the work of collecting nursery rhymes. He has also set many existing texts to music. Here John Homeh from East Assyria has used one of Malki's tunes for an alphabet song, [Alap Beth](#) (*alphabet*), which is sung here by the well-known Assyrian singer Juliana Jendo (from the cassette "The Flowers of Assyria"). Alap Beth is an alphabet song based on a familiar pattern:

Alap - Ashur jumenee (Assyria is your mother country)
Beth - Beth Nahrain atrenee (The land between the two rivers)
And so on....

Both the examples above, the language course and Juliana Jendo's alphabet song, illustrate the fact that the language itself is only a part of what is learnt. Together with the language one assimilates knowledge, myths, geography, legends, ideologies etc. The language courses are transformed into history lessons where the language itself is only a part of an Assyrian cultural whole.

World in your kitchen

On the Internet we can also find information about several other types of traditional phenomena with national links, for example recipes and clothes. We can learn to make Assyrian food, such as *Booshala* (yoghurt soup) or why not *Kadee*, i.e. buns, to go with our coffee? Via the Net we can also order oriental spices from "World in your kitchen".

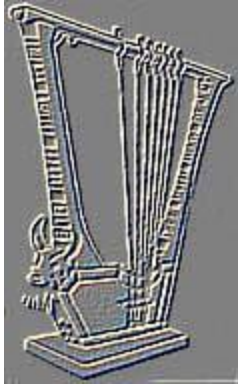


http://www.aaamodesto.org/Assyrian_Food1.htm

We can also fetch home Assyrian varieties of games, such as "Assyrian backgammon"!

The symbols that are used to decorate the pages play an important part in a visual medium like Internet and can also be used as distinguishing marks of identity. Firms and other organisations have their own logotypes to show their symbolic affiliation. It is obvious that a great deal of effort has generally been put into the layout and design of home pages, both by private and by professional users. The richly varied pictures and symbols that are produced are also easy to copy and reuse, thanks to the "drag and drop" functions that are included in many browsers.

Certain symbols have come to be used especially frequently, specifically to mark "Assyrianness". One of them is the kithara, the ancient lyre, as well as other types of flags and emblems that are perceived as typically Assyrian.



<http://aina.org/aol/flag.htm>

Assyrian symbols: the lyre, "kithara", written characters, emblems, flag.

The idioms and symbols on Assyrian Internet sites can be considered from various perspectives:

- They represent different levels in the building of a national identity, a common culture, history, language and national symbols. Cf. the D.I.Y. nation kit above.
- At the same time they constitute "typical Assyrianisms", such as the letters of the alphabet and the kithara.
- Idioms and expressions are also influenced by the fact that they are part of an "Internet genre". The Internet is not just a means of communication but also an artistic form of expression with its own characteristic style.

These are the three ways of expressing Assyrianness through which Cyberland Assyria is created.

Common Activities. The Role of Music in the building of a Nation.

If it would have been possible without music!!!??? No way! No way! God only knows what would have happened, I swear. I've lived here since 1970 and I know. I've got to know nearly all the families that live here through music and through parties, and I know. (Joseph Malki, interview 3rd March, 1997).

This was the Assyrian musician and composer [Joseph Malki's](#) answer when asked if he would have been able to organise the Assyrians in Sweden in the 1970s if he hadn't been able to entice them to meetings with music and dance. Music plays the role of a pleasure-filled hub around which a large part of the work and activities of the group's societies revolve.

What makes music so special is that it can have several parallel functions simultaneously. Music can function directly as a centre for activities – for dancing or for music-making – and at the same time form a link to other people in other places. Music is an important part of our cultural identity..

On the cassette tape "In Black & White", the East Assyrian singer Linda George sings the song *Malikta Shamiram* (by Peter Jasim). Like so many other Assyrian popular songs the lyrics are about the home country in the Middle East, and the title, "Queen Shamiram" brings to mind the ancient Assyrian Empire.

MALIKTA SHAMIRAM
(Queen Shamiram)

Oh young men.
Oh gentlemen and young ladies.
Listen (all of you).
I will tell you a story about your country.

I am...
I am a dove
from Nineveh.
I have flown (and came) from Nineveh

Let me know
Let me know oh -homeless(landless) person
where is...
The patriotic son's of Ashur.
Let me know. (all of you).
Let me know oh homeless ones.
Where are they?
The patriotic sons of Ashur?
** For thousands, for thousands of years I've been flying.*
With hope
of returning to my country keeping me alive.

*In Ashur,
in Nineveh and Arrbel, Garmoo.
One voice.
I heard calling us all.
It sayed show them,
show them the son and the daughter.
That way,
to the country, of -our mothers- and -our fathers-*

Translation by Robert Oshana.

Click here to hear an excerpt from [MALIKTA SHAMIRAM](#).

Linda George lives in the United States and is the idol of many young Assyrians, not least in Sweden, despite the fact that most of them don't understand her Aturaya dialect.

It is extremely common for cultural expressions to take on a special significance among people living in exile: music, dance, food and above all language become far more important and are far more visible in the new context. Read more about this in the section [With music as a boundary marker](#).

Our identity can of course display itself in a variety of ways, as an individual awareness, for example, or as a collective identity as members of a group. Music can be an individual pastime or a uniting symbol which bonds people together. This is the way it works in Sweden when Assyrians meet together in societies, for instance. The role of music in the activities of immigrant societies has been described by several ethnomusicologists and ethnologists. One example in Swedish is [Owe Ronström's dissertation](#) (1992), which discusses the role of music among Yugoslav immigrants in Sweden during the 1970s and 1980s.

What makes the Assyrians specially interesting is that for the most part their music has developed in the diaspora. Many of the most popular [singers, musicians and composers](#) (the majority, in fact) work in Sweden, America and Australia and also to a lesser extent in Russia.

One reason for this is that all [profane music-making](#) was actually forbidden by their own Christian church in the Middle East. As far back as the 4th century, music-making outside the church walls had been forbidden by St. Afrem, patriarch of what would later become the Syrian Orthodox church. When the growing nationalism burgeoned in Syria during the years between the First and Second World Wars, advocates of a free Assyria realised the significance of a national music of their own.

Another reason is that there is often a greater need of uniting activities and symbols in the diaspora than in a "home environment". In multicultural societies such as Sweden music is often an important identity and [boundary marker](#), which distinguishes different groups from each other. A music of their own is a prerequisite for *visibility* in the multicultural arena.

An important part of the national struggle was to "liberate the music", to make it possible for music to be used outside the church. That profane music was considered sinful had meant that the performance of instrumental folk music had been left to other minority groups in the region, mainly Kurds and Gypsies.

The leading composer in the new West Assyrian music which was written during the 1930s and 1940s was Gabriel Assad from Damascus. Assad died in 1997 and spent his last years in Sweden. He is regarded as a popular hero within the West Assyrian group.

When the Assyrian societies were building up their activities in Sweden during the 1970s, Gabriel Assad's songs were like a backbone for the Assyrian identity. He soon had his followers and a repertoire of Assyrian music gradually grew up, with Sweden as one of its main bases.

From an early stage the "[expressive specialists](#)" (singers, musicians, dancers, actors etc) became important symbols for the "Assyrian idea". That this is still the case is reflected by the fact that the present president of the Assyrian National Federation, Ninib Ablahad Lahdo (elected 1997), is one of the best known singers among Assyrians the world over. In an interview published in the magazine Hujådå, Lahdo was asked by the journalist Demir Aho if it was due to the fact that he is a singer that he was elected president:

In your opinion, was it the singer or the person Ablahad Lahdo who was elected to the post of president?

I don't think that people primarily chose the singer rather than the person because he is popular and well-known as a singer, even if there are certain people who may have reasoned this way. But for most of the others I think they chose the person Ablahad as president, because they think he's also capable of holding the position of president of the ANF. (Hujådå, May 1997)

Of course Lahdo is not prepared to accept that people voted for him in his role as singer. But at the same time it is obvious, not least since the question was posed in the first place, that his roll as a stage artist has played a part. In the Assyrian group in Sweden there are very few, if any, active politicians or other types of visible figures in Swedish public life. Since the Assyrian community to such a degree revolves round aesthetic forms, the people that control these forms – the expressive specialists – automatically become the centre of focus. This fact separates aesthetically based communities, such as the Assyrian virtual world, from other types of nationalistic goals.

[Read more about the modal system of the church music.](#)

Football



Sports also have a central place in activity-based communities. In Sweden the [Assyrian Football Club](#) is a very good example. "Assyriska", a football team which is based in Södertälje, south of Stockholm, plays in Division I (the next highest series) and is the most successful immigrant team ever in Swedish football.

The team has a definitely "un-Swedish" image, particularly at matches, where music and dance are important features. Unlike other "Swedish" football fans, Assyriska's supporters mainly make use of folk music. Assyriska has become a symbol of the new sporting Sweden, a country of multicultural sports, and over the last five years the football team has been given ample coverage in sports programmes on TV. In particular the exotic "immigrant party mood" at matches is often emphasised in TV features.

Assyriska has also meant a great deal to the Assyrian group in Sweden. The popularity of the team has meant publicity and visibility for Assyrians in general. At the same time it is a less well-known fact that the team consists of football players of ten or more different nationalities.

If you click on the image (above) you will come to the Assyrian Football Club's home page. Take the opportunity to listen to Juliana Jendo in Joseph Malki's ['laimé du fotboll](#) (N.B. "fotboll" with Swedish spelling).

At first glance it seems strange that Swedish, Turkish, Serb and Latin-American footballers can play in *Assyriska*. But if we look at the rest of the football world we soon discover that this is not an unusual phenomenon. Nearly all major European clubs consist of players with different origins and nationalities. The sociologist Aage Raadman

uses the terms "Gesellschaft" and "Gemeinschaft" (after Ferdinand Tönnies) to distinguish between the team's instrumental community (Gesellschaft), which is governed by contracts and salaries, and the supporters' non-profit-making community (Gemeinschaft), which is based on the values that the team is presumed to symbolise apart from purely sporting values (Carlsson 1997). In many ways football resembles music as an activity. Since there is a dearth of folk musicians in the Assyrian group, their dance music is often played by [musicians from other ethnic groups](#). In both football and music the need for [competence](#) far outweighs any demands that musicians or football players should be of the "right" ancestry.

Mass media

"Even if we're on our own at home, when we put the TV on we become part of a cultural community (be it good or bad)", Peter Dahlgren wrote in his article *TV och våra kulturella referensramar* (TV and our cultural frames of reference, 1990). A glance along the high-rise blocks of flats in Alby and Rinkeby (two Stockholm suburbs with a high percentage of immigrants) confirm the need for TV programmes in our own language. On nearly every balcony there is a huge satellite dish turned upwards towards the skies. Via parabolic aerials and satellite receivers, Turkish, Arabic and Latin-American immigrants in Sweden can see the same TV programmes as their compatriots in their homelands – simultaneously! These trans-national links undoubtedly play a highly significant part in establishing and maintaining cultural frames of reference.

Assyrian TV channels are available in the United States but are almost non-existent in Europe. Transcriptions that are at present being shown on trial once a fortnight via the Kurdish satellite channel MED-TV in Germany are an exception.

Like many Assyrians, the journalist Augin Kurt considers that the lack of Assyrian TV could present a great danger, since Assyrian youngsters are instead drawn to the Turkish and Arabic channels. Kurt considers that because of the music on offer on these channels there is an obvious risk that young people will be attracted to Arabic and Turkish popular music, and that the development of Assyrian music will come to a halt (Augin Kurt, interview 1st June, 1997).

But TV can also be transmitted via Internet. The introduction to this page shows a flashing logotype belonging to KBSV-TV23 Assyria Vision, one of two East Assyrian TV channels that transmit directly via World Wide Web.



The second channel is linked to Nineveh On-line:



<http://www.atour.com/~tvradio/>

Historical/scientific documentation

The right to a history.

The term "Assyrian" denotes a national and ethnic identity. In calling oneself Assyrian one is claiming kinship with the ancient Assyrian high culture, while the term "Syrian" indicates membership of a church. In Sweden the "name issue" has been the subject of discussions among representatives for the Syrian Orthodox church, as well as among Swedish authorities, historians and philologists. In 1982 the Swedish National Immigration Board and the National Council for Cultural Affairs published Bengt Knutsson's book *Assur eller Aram (Assur or Aram)*. Among other things Knutsson discusses the Assyrian/Syrian name issue. His scientific analysis of "the right" to an Assyrian identity – the right to call oneself Assyrian – has extended the discussion to cover such questions as to whether kinship with the "ancient Assyrians" can be proved (later also in Karlsson 1991). Paradoxically, today we can observe how Syrians in Sweden are now trying to find a language-based ethnic identity as Arameans.

Today research and other attempts to find scientific proof of kinship with the inhabitants of the Assyrian Empire is presented to a large extent on the Internet. Assyrian libraries are mainly being established in America. Virtually every Assyrian home page on the Internet publishes (or provides links to) articles which try to describe the historical background to the Assyrians' situation today, as well as presenting research on the Assyrian Empire.

Information banks have for instance been established through [C.A.S.A's website](#) (Chaldean American Student Associations).

Historians' and archaeologists' research into the Assyrian Empire forms a scientific background to the Assyrian national concept. Assyria is something to be proud of. On several Assyrian home pages there are links to historic archives, lists of Assyrian kings and reports from excavations.

The Assyrian *martyrs* perhaps play an even more important part in the awareness of a common history. On the 7th August every year, "Martyrs' Day" is celebrated by Assyrians throughout the world, both East Assyrians and West Assyrians. The role of martyrs for the national identity is obvious; "Our beloved martyrs who gave their lives for their Culture, Language, and God".



A home page with the title "[Genocides Against the Assyrian Nation](#)" presents a massive chronological overview of Assyrian martyrs, from the fall of the Assyrian Empire in 612 B.C. up to 1997. The emphasis is on incidents during the 20th century, such as massacres of Christians during the Second World War and other incidents which have led to the Assyrians' situation today.

The Assyrian situation has been described in musical guise in many songs. Perhaps the most direct example is Evin Aghassi's "[An Appeal to the United Nations](#)" to a text by Givergis Aghassi on the record "United Nations". In the last verse the Assyrian people are likened to an eagle which is forced to live in exile in the mountains.

*The eagle lives in the mountains.
He cannot show himself all at once.
Don't break its flying wings.
-until when- shall it be safe to fly.
We shall cultivate with our own hands
and earn our -daily (blessed)- bread.
Just give us our freedom
and we shall all live as neighbors.*

Translation by Robert Oshana.

National songs such as the one by Aghassi above follow a tradition which leads back to Gabriel Assad's almost revolutionary activities in Syria during the 1930s and 1940s. But what were the sources of Gabriel Assad's "new" Assyrian music? Assad, like his successor Joseph Malki, often emphasises the importance of Syrian Orthodox church music in this connection. In presentations of the history of Assyrian music, Assad's work is commonly regarded as a conquest. The church deprived its members of their everyday music-making and now, 1,600 years later, the people have taken their music back.

Although Assyrian national music has been created during the 20th century, the link to Syrian church music gives it a kind of historic legitimacy. This fact is often pointed out by present-day Assyrian musicians:

We have a musical legacy which goes back to the time before the Turks. Our ancestors sang this music. So these maqams existed. We know that Mar Afrem the Great and Bar Daisan taught these maqams, these scales in the church music, to pupils in Antioch and in Edessa and Nsi bin (which is called Diyarbakir today) as early as the 11th century. And then Arabic music, if you analyse Arabic music – we have eight maqams in our cultural legacy, they are bayat, rast, sigah, hidjas, nahavand, saba, we have these eight scales in our music. The Arabs have borrowed them. Many Arabic history books openly

admit that we were the ones who created this sort of music. If we start out from this historical background, obviously I can say that it is our music that we have practised, it's our legacy. Plus that there are nuances that are not like Arabian, Kurdish or Turkish music. There are nuances and meaning in music, the musical sentence structure which distinguishes it from all of these. (Joseph Malki, interview 3rd March, 1997).

Malki also provides arguments for the Assyrians' right to the music. In his discussion he tries to produce historic evidence that modal music was used by Assyrians long ago to prove that the tonal language of Middle Eastern music is more Assyrian than Turkish, for instance. The fact that Assyrian high culture existed before the Ottoman and Arabic cultures is a strong argument in many Assyrians' eyes in the fight for their right to the music.

Read more about church music and its relation to modern Assyrian popular music in the section [The liturgy of the Syrian churches](#).

National Ideology. A political community.

The idea of an Assyrian nation was aroused in earnest after the genocide on Armenians and Assyrians in Turkey during the First World War. Many Assyrians fled from persecution to the region which today is Northern Syria and which was then a French mandate. There the idea developed of an Assyrian state of their own. Cultural champions went into the breach who fought for a homogeneous Assyrian language and culture. One of the most influential of these in the West Assyrian group was the poet Naum Faik. Faik, who lived in America, wrote in lyrical terms about his ancient homeland, emphasising the Assyrians' historical ties to the ancient Mesopotamian culture.

At this stage the resistance men in this cultural liberation struggle were Turks and Arabs, as well as the Assyrians' own church. As early as the 4th century profane music-making had been forbidden by St. Afrem, patriarch of what would later become the Syrian Orthodox church. Thus it was also partly a battle against the decrees of the church that was being fought by the nationalistic representatives. To "liberate the music", to make it possible to use the music outside the church was an important part of this battle.



[Click to read about Syrian Orthodox Church Music](#)

Within the Ottoman Empire, which was the dominating political power in the Middle East from the 15th century up to the First World War, religion was the main grounds for

classifying people. Nationality, or whether someone regarded himself as a Turk or a Syrian etc. from an ethnic perspective, was of less significance. In the Ottoman Empire the most important political category was also a religious category; Muslims were

inhabitants of "The House of Islam" *Dar üI-Islam*

The Ottoman ruling class was a mixture of Turkish military officers, certain members of the priesthood of the Orthodox church, Jewish and Greek merchants and bankers, scholars and writers of Persian, Arabic and sometimes even Balkan origin and others. It was not until the 16th and 17th centuries that the Ottoman ruling classes came to be dominated by Muslims.

The subordinate classes, *re'aya*, consisted, like the ruling class, of a diversity of ethnically and religiously defined groups. Different Muslim congregations were organised in *millets* (approximately nation, body). Groups living in the Ottoman Empire that were part of a millet were allowed a kind of religious and ethnic self-government. Taxes were imposed but they were allowed to manage their own internal affairs. Even non-Muslims seem to have been organised in millets in certain cases (cf. Lapidus:324). The basic rule was that minorities with Jewish or Christian beliefs were to be left in peace as long as they kept a low political and economic profile and paid their taxes. Judaism and Christianity were regarded as brother religions since they, like Islam, were based on the Old Testament. This system also granted people the right to schooling and religious education in their own language right up to the 19th century. The non-Muslim groups that lived in the Ottoman Empire were named *dhimmi* (protected people), *tai'fa* (group) or *jamat* (religious congregation), depending on how they were organised. Through local agreements with the Ottoman rulers these groups were organised in millets or given similar rights to the members of a millet.

The system encouraged ethnic and cultural pluralism and was one of the prerequisites which enabled multinational centres of commerce such as Istanbul to function within the Islamic world.

The Christian identity was regarded as most important by Syrian Orthodox Christians in Tur'Abdin, and in fact the group of Christians in Sweden today who come from the Middle East and who call themselves Syrians are continuing in the same track. However, when part of this group of Syrian Orthodox Christians began to call themselves Syrians (Swedish, *syrianer*), the basis for religious classification was set aside. (In recent years, however, Syrians in Sweden have begun to identify themselves as Arameans.)



The author and poet Naum Faik (1868-1938). Source: The Assyrian National Federation's magazine Hujådå.

Naum Faik's work at the beginning of the 20th century was not only a matter of reinforcing the ties with ancient Assyria, he also wanted to ensure that nationalistic ideas were disseminated. Publishing magazines was one means of achieving this aim. One of these magazines was Hujådå, which Faik founded in 1921. Today the magazine is issued under the same name by the Assyrian National Federation in Sweden.

The musician and composer Gabriel Assad worked along similar lines when he began his nationalistic activities among Christians in Syria. When asked what he hoped to achieve with the national music, Gabriel Assad answered:

My aim was to cause a revolution with music. And I thought I could do it. So that the songs and the music would belong to the people. And I reached this goal and that makes me very happy. I travelled around – through Syria, the whole of Syria, then Israel and Lebanon and taught the poems and music which you now find in Assyrian and Syrian schools. And all these people learned them.

Assad's nephew Afram Some (who acted as interpreter during the interview) added:

He made a book. It was in 1952-53. The first book about music. He travelled around but he was very poor too. Nobody helped him, either financially or with anything else. But he went on fighting all the time. (Gabriel Assad and Afram Some, interview 10th March, 1997)

To reach out with his message Assad need an organisational platform, and this was provided by a cultural centre which was founded in 1958 in the town of Qamishli in Northern Syria. Assad worked as musical director at the centre and could thereby intensify his work of composing national songs. Through his educational work at the centre and by issuing records and books he was able to reach more and more people.



Assad at his writing desk at the Cultural Centre in Qamishli.

Music is a large and important part of the process of building an Assyrian nation. In certain cases it acts as a "lubricator" in processes that are designed to create a sense of community. Music undoubtedly plays an important part as a uniting force at meetings and parties. This is how Joseph Malki expresses his views of the role of music in society activities:

So we began to organise parties in Motala, in Linköping and in Gothenburg where the Assyrians lived. The simple fact is, it all started with the help of the music.

So you can say that by organising parties people were brought together? Well, that's how we attracted people. And people began to like each other. And began to get stronger ties, and love and relationships and people began to feel less isolated. The isolation was broken, and they felt that somebody cared about them. And music – I think that that is the greatest element one can use to show that people care for each other and have feelings for each other. And these human (Joseph Malki, interview 3rd March, 1997)

But music can also be a medium through which the national idea can be spread, or it can be used as a pedagogical tool in language tuition, for instance. Maybe these are the two most important aspects of music; its ability to be both an actual part of culture itself and at the same time to serve as a transmitter and symbol of cultural community.

With music as a boundary marker – music media multicultural

Studies of music and dance as organisatory factors in multicultural Sweden are being carried out within the research project [Music Media Multiculture](#). A central aim of several of the studies in this project is to examine how the mediation of music through radio, TV, records, satellite channels and Internet helps to establish and maintain ethnic life worlds.

By means of common expressive symbols, such as language, music, dance and clothes, people can create their own contexts in Swedish society. These attributes are in no way limited to ethnic groupings. Virtually all music styles in today's society are ascribed qualities which link them to groups which are defined via class, race, age, values, gender, leisure activities etc. Perhaps the most obvious present-day examples are the numerous music genres which are linked to groups within what is usually known as youth culture. Youngsters within the hip hop culture, for instance, create communities across national borders by means of music and graffiti and their way of dressing and talking. Krister Malm and Monika Sarstad have described the history of rap music and how it functions as an identity marker for young people the world over in [Respekt nu! Rappens rötter rotas fram](#) (Respect now! Roots of rap revealed). But music-based communities also exist in other parts of society. In several articles Ronström has drawn attention to the emergence of a pensioners' culture in the Western world, whose characteristics to a large extent are similar to those of ethnic groups: emblems, flags, clothes and also music and dance (Ronström 1997). Establishing an identity by means of organisation or belonging to a group would therefore seem to be a fundamental human property.

In the beginning there is organization. The basic human experience is belonging and dependence. We will argue that affiliation to organizations is a prerequisite for most human action (Ahrne 1994:5).

We can see that a game is constantly in progress in society, a kind of power struggle between different groupings or organisations. Membership markers are a distinctive feature of this game. The most obvious examples are uniforms: armies and football teams display their affiliation through their clothes.

But what about ethnic groupings? How can Assyrians in Sweden show their collective identity?

The multicultural context constitutes an arena where many different groups fight for a place. Like football players and football fans it is crucially important to be visible. The ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin talks about ³cultural brand-naming² – an attempt to claim musical expressive forms as the property of the group. Just as the flag, the emblem or the uniform symbolises a certain organisation or grouping and thereby also

symbolises its ideology and values, music – and musical instruments in particular – have a symbolic function as identity emblems. Bouzouki music symbolises Greek identity, the bagpipes symbolise Scottish identity, the keyed fiddle (nyckelharpa) symbolises Swedish identity, despite the fact that it is common knowledge that the bouzouki belongs to a family of long-necked lutes common to most nations around the eastern Mediterranean and that the bagpipes are public property throughout Europe, a part of a cultural heritage with roots in the Middle Ages.

In the multicultural arena the musicians – the expressive specialists – have an important status as qualified bearers and interpreters of the group's cultural identity. If something is to be made visible, it must be given shape; it must be expressed and dramatised and this requires access to expressive competence. The right kind of competence is a necessary prerequisite, but is not sufficient in itself to make things visible. Another prerequisite is relevance: visibility demands access to situations, arenas and contexts where it is both possible and relevant to display cultural differences.

A primary function of group symbols is their potential as ethnic markers. Thus music can indicate belonging and community. This entails a careful watch on the symbols that are used. A struggle for available ethnic symbols is taking place, in which cultural brand-naming functions as a kind of claim to available expressive forms. In such contexts a great deal of effort is often spent on proving historic links between one's own group and the emergence of a musical instrument, for example, or a musical genre. At the same time that a symbol indicates belonging it also marks dissociation. By marking a "We" we are also singling out "The Others". Or in the case of the Assyrians: we are Assyrians but at the same time, and equally important, we are not Arabs, Turks, Swedes, Muslims, etc.

There is an important difference between different types of organised affinity, however. Different group memberships display different degrees of compatibility, even when membership is marked with the same type of symbols. As Ronström (see above) stated, pensioners' clubs display the same type of attributes for group identity as ethnic groups: special music, dance, clothes etc. But at the same time, in another context or at another time, it is possible for the pensioner to proclaim a completely different identity which represents his or her nationality, religion, gender etc. Our actions are simply based on the fact that we possess and have at our disposal a number of identities which can be used on different occasions and in different contexts. But not all group memberships are compatible. It is obviously not possible to be both a Muslim and a Christian, for example.

Christians from the Middle East

A dozen people were sitting talking in different groups around the "musicians' table" in the Assyrian National Federation's new Cultural Centre in Södertälje, Sweden. There was a break in the music programme and the musicians were taking the opportunity to relax and have a bite to eat. There were musicians from the Assyrian group [Qenneshrin](#) (the house band for the evening) at the table, as well as a couple of singers and a few friends. "Are you all Christians", I asked.

Christians from the Middle East. Christians as distinct from Jews and the Muslim majority. In my ears the religious identity of the group of Christian emigrants who had come to Sweden from the region in South East Turkey and Northern Syria seemed a homogeneous and uncomplicated starting point.

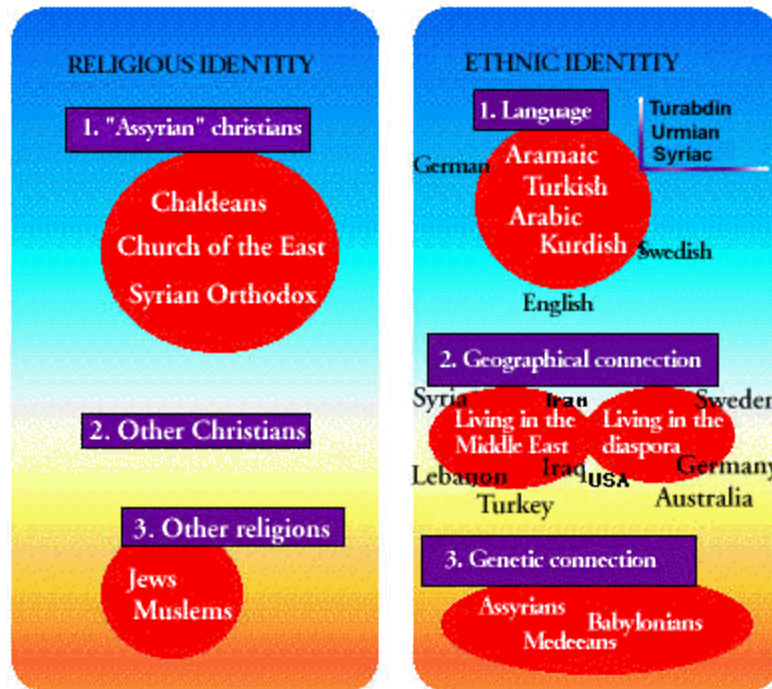
"Yes, all Assyrians are Christians", somebody answered. "But we are Christians in different ways, of course."

A quick inquiry showed that the people round the table represented four different Christian churches: the Evangelical Lutheran Church (myself), the Church of the East (Nestorians), the Chaldean Catholic Church and the Syrian Orthodox Church (Jacobites). Within the group that call themselves Assyrians we also find people belonging to several other Christian churches and even Muslims, although not represented at our table in Södertälje.

Well then, Christian, but with a definitely toned-down Christian identity. This is a prominent feature among those who call themselves Assyrians in Sweden today. Underlying the Assyrian identity there is a conscious choice of ethnically defined community, an affinity with the ancient Assyrian high culture which ceased to exist more than 2,500 years ago. This distinguishes them above all from the Syrian group in Sweden, who instead claim a religious identity, as Syrian Orthodox Christians.

At the same time the Assyrians would hardly claim that they are non-religious or atheist. Among the people of the Middle East the term "Christian" means something more than it does in Swedish. To be a Christian is to be part of a collective identity, which goes back to the classification of inhabitants according to their beliefs, and not on the basis of language or ethnicity, as practised in the Ottoman Empire and the Arab Empire. To a Swede, Christianity is an individual matter, based on more or less active religious worship. The classification of people according to membership of different churches in the Ottoman Empire can be compared to how we classify people according to nationality. To be a Christian means to be a member of a collectively based grouping, the significance of which does not need to be questioned any more closely. A Christian can speak Arabic, Turkish or Kurdish and live in the same manner as his Muslim neighbours, but nevertheless be regarded as something very different from a Muslim.

IDENTITY



The complex pattern of religious and ethnic identity, respectively. From the Swedish Assyrians' ethnic perspective, the most important questions are often what one is not. For example, it is important not to be Turkish, Swedish, etc. Ethnic identity does not involve saying no to religious identity, which for instance means that Assyrians in Sweden don't consider that the "Swedish" Syrians are "on the other side".

How come there are representatives for most of the early Christian churches within a region that stretches like a belt between the Caspian Sea and the north eastern corner of the Mediterranean? Well, first and foremost because this was the cradle of Christianity and also because from a historical viewpoint the Middle East has always been a cultural crossroads – this was where traders, missionaries, crusaders and caravans of military conquerors from the East and the West drew by. The major political (religious) powers have succeeded each others as rulers in the region – Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Mongols, Turks, Frenchmen and Englishmen – all have taken turns to rule in the Middle East.

In the article Shaikh fathullah. The Assyrian "modern" identity Denho Özmen draws up a "map" of religious membership in populations with "Assyrio-Aramean" origin (published in Hujådå in the autumn of 1997).

Özmen includes many folk groups that are not normally reckoned as part of this group.

Christians

- Maronits
Lebanon and Syria. C:a 3 millions

- Orthodox Melchites
Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan och province of Antakia in Turkey. C:a 4 millions.
- Chaldeans
Iraq. C:a 1 millon.
- The Church of the East
Iraq och Syria. C:a 1/2 millon.
- Syrian Orthodox
Syria, Iraq och South east Turkey.
- Syrian Catholics
Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine.
- Catholic Melchites
Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine.
- Syrian Protestants
Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine.

Muslims

- Mhalmoye
The area between Midyat and Mardin in Turkey. C:a 1,5 millons.
- Tai
Syria och Iraq.
- Tagritoye
Iraq. C:a 1 millon.
- Barazan
Iraq
- Shammar
Syria och Iraq

If one adds Özmen's figures, the total far exceeds the [population figures](#) of three and a half million (Assyrians/Syrians) which were quoted in the electronic newsletter Zenda in 1997, for example. In Sweden the Syrian Orthodox Christians are in an overwhelming majority among the Assyrians. Of the ca. 50,000 Assyrians /Syrians (Atman 1996) living in Sweden today they constitute more than 90%. The Nestorians are estimated to be a couple of thousand and constitute the next largest group. Other groups are therefore relatively small.

The dividing line in Sweden between Syrians and Assyrians lies between the religiously defined group: Syrians, who are Syrian Orthodox Christians, and the politically or ethnically determined category: Assyrians, whose members belong to several different Christian beliefs (the majority are of course also Syrian Orthodox Christians) but whose religious affiliation is toned down.

How, then, have all these Christian beliefs managed to get a foothold in the Middle East? The difference between the two largest churches, the Syrian Orthodox church and the Church of the East, emanates from early Christianity's theological disputes, where disputes concerning the interpretation of the relationship between God and Jesus were in the foreground.

A short history

The Roman emperor Constantine's endeavours to establish an ideologically homogeneous foundation for the Roman State included the battle against various heretical beliefs in order to create a homogeneous Christian doctrine for the Roman Empire. After the death of Jesus different Christian beliefs and interpretative disputes concerning the biblical message arose in various areas around the Mediterranean. The most fundamental questions concerned the interpretation of the Holy Trinity. Was Jesus God or human, or perhaps both, in one and the same person? One of the most influential interpretations is usually known as Arianism and originated from the Alexandrian priest Arius, who claimed that there was a divine hierarchy in which the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost represented different degrees of holiness.

When Emperor Constantine became a Christian in the year 312, one of his most important aims was to link together the Christian church with the state in the Roman Empire. To achieve this it was necessary to unite all the different Christian beliefs. To achieve this Constantine called a council of churches in Nicea in the year 325. The Council decided that the Father and the Son are one and the same essence. But discussions about the divine or human nature of Jesus continued, and the question gradually came to focus on how Jesus could be born of woman if he was God.

In 428 Nestorius was elected patriarch in Constantinople. After his appointment he claimed that Jesus has two different, independent natures: a human and a divine nature. Nestorius's statement led to further debate within the Christian church and at the Council of Churches in Ephesus in 431 he was accused by Cyril (who represented the Alexandrian theology) of trying to abolish the divine unity. Nestorius's doctrine, diophysitism, "two-nature doctrine", was rejected by the Council of Churches as heretical and Nestorius was removed from his office as patriarch. Cyril's theological work resulted in the approval of monophysitism, the "one-nature doctrine", by the Council of Churches in Ephesus in 449. The principle of monophysitism was that God had entered completely into Jesus through a kind of incarnation. It is God who is born, dies and rises from the dead through the life of Jesus, and in this way Mary is the mother of God. Only two years later, however, a new Council of Churches was called, this time in Chalcedon in the Bosphorus where a new formulation was approved:

He (Christ) is one and the same Son, perfect in humanity, true Godhead and true manhood, confessed in two natures free of all separateness, intermixture, confusion, mingling, change and transformation: the difference in natures is in no way abolished due to the unity. On the contrary, the typical characteristics of each nature are preserved and both are united in one person and in one figure (after Karlsson 1991:18).

The Council's definition of the Holy Trinity was accepted by the Byzantine Church. Still today this "Chalcedonian" belief is fundamental to the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches and also to most Protestant churches.

Cyril's followers in Alexandria did not accept the decision of the Council of Churches, however, but continued to confess to the monophysitic doctrine. The same applied to

the Aramaic-speaking Christians in present-day Syria. Today we find these followers in the Coptic Church and also in the Syrian Orthodox church and the Armenian Orthodox Church.



The Dairo d-Zaafaran monastery in Mardin in Turkey.

Source: Deuro d'Mor Ephrem: calendar from 1987

In the group of Assyrians/Syrians in Sweden we therefore find representatives for both the monophysitic and diophysitic beliefs. The Syrian Orthodox Christians from the northern parts of Syria and Tur'Abdin in South East Turkey are reckoned among the former. Members of the Church of the East originating mainly from Lebanon and Iraq are reckoned among the latter. Others names which have been used for these religious groups are Jacobites, after the Syrian church leader Jacob Baradai in the 6th century (Syrian Orthodox), and Nestorians (Church of the East). Incidentally, the name Nestorian was officially rejected a few years ago.

The Church of the East has its origin in what is now South East Turkey in the Christian church in Edessa (today Urfa), of which there are records from the end of the 2nd century. The name Nestorian was taken after Nestorius, whose doctrine was accepted in 484, after which Nestorianism was widely spread during the following thousand years. By the end of the 13th century there were twelve Nestorian dioceses in a strip from Peking to Samarkand. At the height of their powers they were estimated to have had nearly 80 million members (Karlsson 1991. 23). This age of greatness came to an abrupt end, however. When Timur Lenk conquered Persia, Mesopotamia and Syria at the end of the 14th century, the civilian population was decimated. Of the Nestorian Christians only scattered remnants survived. Their most powerful stronghold came to be in the region between the two lakes Van (East Turkey) and Urmia (North West Iran).

In the 16th century the Nestorian church was split into two movements, named after the people who lived in these regions: Chaldeans and Assyrians. The Western world again became aware of the existence of the Nestorians in connection with the Kurdish massacres in the 1830s and 1840s. When Western missionaries tried to spread Anglican and Presbyterian beliefs in the Middle East during the second half of 19th century, they encountered Nestorians in these regions. These missionaries preferred the designations 'Assyrians' and 'Chaldeans' since the name of Nestorius was associated with heresy.

Bishop Mar Odisho Oraham, Church of the East:

Doctrinally, the teaching of the Church of the East is based on the belief and faith of the universal Church which was declared in the Nicene Creed The mystery of the Holy Trinity and the mystery of the Incarnation are central to its teaching. The Church

believes in one triune God: Father, Son and Holy spirit. It also believes and teaches that the Only-Begotten Son of God, God the Word became incarnate for us men and for our salvation and became man.

In one of his hymns of praises, Mar Bawai the great, Patriarch of the Church of the East in the fifth century, states briefly the doctrine of the Church as follows:

"One is Christ the Son of God, worshipped by all in two natures. In his Godhead begotten of the Father without beginning before all time. In his humanity born of Mary in the fullness of time, in a body united. Neither is His Godhead of the nature of the mother, nor is His humanity of the nature of the Father. The natures are preserved in their Qnume in one person of one Sonship. And as the Godhead is three essences in one nature, likewise the Sonship of the Son is in two natures, one person. So the Holy Church has learned to confess in the Lord who is the Christ". (reproduced in Hujådå 1997).

The Chaldean Catholic Church mentioned above has its origin in the Church of the East. Several of the Bishops of the Church of the East converted to Catholicism in the 14th century. This led to a schism and a new Catholic movement was established. This new church came to be called the Chaldean Catholic Church. Today the Chaldean Patriarch resides in Baghdad. The Chaldeans have emigrated in large numbers, mainly to America, where it is estimated that the Chaldean population amounts to ca. 100,000 people in the Detroit area alone (Andersson 1991. 85). Information about the history of the Chaldeans and their situation today can be obtained through [Chaldean American Student Associations](#)

The Syrian Orthodox Church in Sweden

Since 1978 the Syrian Orthodox Church in Sweden is part of the Archbishopric of Sweden. The Archbishop Mor Dioscoros Benyamin Atas resides in Södertälje, south of Stockholm. The diocese consists of more than 30 parishes and in 1995 had 26,000 members.

Further information about the Syrian Orthodox Church in Sweden and throughout the whole world can be found in the catalogue, [World Archdiocese Directory](#).

The liturgy of the Syrian churches

Today the liturgical texts of the Syrian Churches can to a large extent be found on the Internet. For further information one can turn to informative web sites, such as the [Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch](#).

As an accompaniment while you read this page you can [listen to a Melchite chant](#) from the 4th century, sung by Sister Marie Keyrouz (Chants Sacré Melchites HMC901497).

Syrian Orthodox church music is presented on the home page [Beth Gazo Dne`motho](#) of the Syrian Orthodox Resources.

By clicking on [Modus 1 "Quqoyo"](#) we can listen to a chant in mode I, here called "Quqoyo", performed by Patriarch Jacob III and recorded in America during the 1960s. These recordings have been published on the Internet in RA format. The same material has also been [transcribed](#) by Nouri Isaknadar and was published in book form in 1992.

This is an excerpt from "Beth Gazo in the voice of Patriarch Jacob III". Source: Syrian Orthodox Resources & Syriac Comp. Inst. USA.

Church Music

In its present form the Syrian Orthodox liturgy dates from the 5th century. The starting point was the Greek Orthodox liturgy which was translated into Syrian and which over the years was influenced by Byzantine traditions. The "East Syrian" liturgy developed during the 7th century.

Syrian Orthodox church music, Beth Gazo Dne'motho in Suryoyo (approximately "Treasury of Chants") is exclusively vocal and nowadays consists of about 700 chants. The chants constitute an integral part of the liturgy. The church music is based on eight modes, in analogy with both the Byzantine and the Gregorian modal system. Each chant can be sung in every mode; the choice of mode depends on when it is used during the church year.

The different modes are numbered from one to eight (Qadmoyo = Mode 1, Trayono = Mode 2 and so on). The church year is divided up into eight-week cycles, starting on the eighth Sunday before Christmas. On this Sunday Qadmoyo is used, Trayono is sung on the following Sunday, and so on. As in Byzantine church music the modes are used in pairs. Modes 1 and 5 are used during the first week, modes 2 and 6 during the second week, and so on. During each church week the modes are sung every other day: mode 1 on Sunday, mode 5 on Monday, mode 1 on Tuesday, mode 5 on Wednesday, and so on.

Click to look at a [chant in Trayono](#), notated by Gabriel Assad.

From church music to popular music

Is present-day Assyrian popular music based on Syrian Orthodox church music? The question is particularly interesting, since Assyrians themselves often point out that their popular music has an affinity with church music, and that this specific musical feature distinguishes it from other popular music in the Middle East.

Hammarlund (1990) discusses the modal system in Syrian Orthodox church music and presents the vocabulary of available pitches of its eight modes.

The image displays eight musical modes, each represented by a single staff of music in a 4/4 time signature. The modes are arranged in four rows of two. Each mode is labeled with a number and a name: 1 Qadmoyo, 2 Trayono, 3 Tlithoyo, 4 Rbihoyo, 5 Hmishoyo, 6 Shtithoyo, 7 Shbihoyo, and 8 Tminoyo. The notation includes treble clefs, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and various note values (quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes) with stems. Some notes are beamed together, and there are occasional accidentals (sharps and naturals) indicating pitch variations from the standard scale.

Source: Hammarlund 1990:79

Hammarlund states that all the modes remain within a narrower interval than the octave; the store of tones of each respective mode is restricted to groups of three to five notes with additional "introductory notes". When these modal structures are borrowed and used in profane music (popular music), the tonal range is usually extended so that the scale covers the whole octave.

Hammarlund shows that the tonal range of the church modes corresponds to the maqam system in Arabic/Turkish art music. When the range of tones is extended in popular music, this correspondence becomes even more obvious in relation to the modally based Arabic and Turkish popular music. The *Qadmoyo* mode, which is frequently used in popular music, is used today in the same way as the Bayati maqam or the Ussak maqam, the *Tminoyo* mode is used like the Hicaz maqam, the *Rbihoyo* mode like the Rast maqam, and so on.

Modal structures in Assyrian music:

The image shows a single staff of music for "Modus 1: Qadmoyo". It is written in a 4/4 time signature with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notation consists of a sequence of notes, including quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, with stems. There are some accidentals (sharps and naturals) interspersed among the notes.



*Source: Interview with Joseph Malki, 3rd March, 1997.
Transcription Dan Lundberg.*

Qadmoyo or Bayati

Hammarlund considers that "it is therefore obvious that the basic principles of the modal system used in the Syrian liturgy cannot be regarded as specific to this genre". Where Assyrian popular music is concerned, one can say that it has developed towards a kind of general "Middle East style".

Listen to the singer Ablahad Lahdo in Joseph Malki's composition [Bu Shalvo Nahitina](#) from the CD "Ninib A. Lahdo". Are we hearing the Qadmoyo church mode or the Bayati maqam?

From a musical perspective the question may seem unwarranted, since these modes are obviously related to each other. The Middle East is often described as a cultural crossroads where large numbers of ethnic and religious groups have lived side by side for thousands of years. Obviously these groups' music, dance, handicrafts etc, have cross-fertilised each other. But although the question of Qadmoyo or Bayati may appear to be about musical structures, it is in fact a political issue, an issue which is highly important for the Assyrian identity as a whole. Joseph Malki's position as cultural adviser to the Assyrian National Federation involves organising courses for young people and teaching Assyrian music. An important background to this cultural education is that the musical legacy is seen as a part of the Assyrian identity. To Joseph Malki, even if Qadmoyo sounds the same as Bayati – which as a musician he is of course well aware of – it is nevertheless completely different.

When asked if it is possible to prove – and if it is necessary to prove – that the musical legacy really is Assyrian, Joseph Malki answers:

But I'm not the one who says it, it's the Swedish, American and English researchers who say it. A nation that lived there for 4,000 years and had three great empires over the years. And there were instruments, too. The harp – the kithara – has existed for

more than 6,700 years. There is evidence in history and in cuneiform script that music was performed by male and female singers, temple worshippers and all that. These maqams have existed for 2,000 years, and 2,000 years ago Assyrians were the only people living in this region. No-one outside this empire has had anything to do with it. The Arabs came with 20,000 horse-riders, but the people were still Assyrians until the Ottomans came and began to kill them off little by little. If you try and draw a conclusion from this, then you arrive at the fact that our music is one of the oldest. Against this background it must have been our music that was practised.

But music develops to a large extent as the result of meetings. Look at it this way: there was an Assyrian culture with Assyrian music, there were Persians, Arabs, different Turkish tribes All of them bring something with them when they come. Everybody meets So it's incredibly difficult today to say what was really the nucleus.

But the structure, these main maqams, since they've survived. Books from the 4th century mention Qadmoyo, Trayono And it was an isolated nation. From the year dot to modern time. That's the strongest evidence. We haven't mixed with anybody. You know, only simple farmers, poor, illiterate people. That's the strongest evidence. I hope I'm right.

Malki and a handful of other Assyrians have put an enormous amount of work into legitimising Assyrian music and creating uniformity in the motley musical flora. But they must do more than just prove that Assyrian music is different from Arabic/Turkish traditions; they must also struggle to co-ordinate Assyrian music theory – its starting point in Syrian church music turns out to be anything but uniform.

Throughout history, local variations to the melodies of the Beth Gazo emerged forming various schools of music. The relationship between all these schools still awaits studies by musicologists. It must also be pointed out that, there are variations, albeit minor, in each local school from one chanter to another. Therefore, any serious study must make use of many recordings by different chanters from different schools.

On the Beth Gazo Dne'motho home page, seven different traditions or schools of Syrian church chanting are presented, from the Indian traditions in the East, via the Tarkit school at the Mosul Monastery in Iraq to the West Assyrian schools from Mardin and Tur'Abdin.

If we compare Hammarlund's transcriptions with the scales that Joseph Malki uses, we can see that the names don't quite match. Hammarlund's Rbihoyo is called Hmishoyo, for example. There is no record of Malki's Rbihoyo (which corresponds to the Rast maqam) in Hammarlund's material. If we also consult the material published by Syrian Orthodox Resources, which is based on the Mardin school, we find considerable discrepancies. The background to this is not primarily that there are differences of opinions about the nomenclature, but rather that it is a question of different traditions, combined with the simple fact that there is no uniform music theory.

A visit to a musical rebel

"You've got a visitor, Gabriel, a swedoyo, a Swede, who is interested in your music. He's come to do an interview."

At first there was complete silence. After a while the old man in the bed muttered something inaudible in answer and raised himself on his elbow and peered out over the room. "Shlomo – Welcome. Come and sit near me so that I can see you."

The person that we had come to visit in the nursing home in Rinkeby in Stockholm's northern suburbs turned out to be a very old man. People had told me about a man from Qamishli in Northern Syria, a vivid character and a determined musical rebel, who was now living the remainder of his days in security in Sweden, far from Middle Eastern conflicts. And here he lay, haggard and emaciated and apparently alone, in a Swedish hospital bed. He raised a bony hand in greeting, as though to show that he knew we were in the room. [Gabriel Assad](#) died not long after my visit.



Gabriel Assad in his workroom at the Cultural Centre in Qamishli.

Source: the Assyrian magazine Hujādā

Gabriel Assad, or Jubran Some as he was baptised, was born in 1908 in Midyat in Tur'Abdin, in what is now South East Turkey. Like many other Christians from Syria, Gabriel Assad had two names. The surname Assad, by which he is known among his

friends, is a family name – his father's Christian name. The second surname, Some, is his "official" surname which is mainly used in contacts with authorities.

During the outbreaks of violence and the wholesale murders of Christians in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, the family fled to Damascus, where they lived under relatively stable conditions. The father had a steady income as a merchant in the town.

When it came to choosing a profession young Gabriel had other plans however: his dream was to be a musician. But the musical profession was definitely not a common choice or even a fitting one for a young Syrian Orthodox Christian at that time. All types of profane music-making were condemned by representatives of the church. Music-making in contexts other than activities organised by the church was considered a sin.

Nobody in the Some family had ever gone in for music before. Despite this Gabriel's parents accepted their son's wishes. Even if they were not happy about it, they let him take lessons in Western art music. And it was also in Western art music that Gabriel Assad found his first musical models.

الحزبنا كحزبنا

حزبنا

أنا حزبي لأفد حبيبتنا حب

The image shows a handwritten musical score on three staves. The first staff is a vocal line in treble clef with a 3/4 time signature. The second and third staves are piano accompaniment, also in treble clef. The lyrics are written in Arabic script below the notes. The score ends with a double bar line and the initials 'D.C'.

أنا حزبي لأفد حبيبتنا حب
حزبنا
حزبنا
حزبنا
D.C

Many of Gabriel Assad's compositions have become standard tunes for Assyrians. The example above is taken from Chamiram Khouri's book "The Cluster of the National Songs", an anthology of songs which to a large extent have been written by Assad.

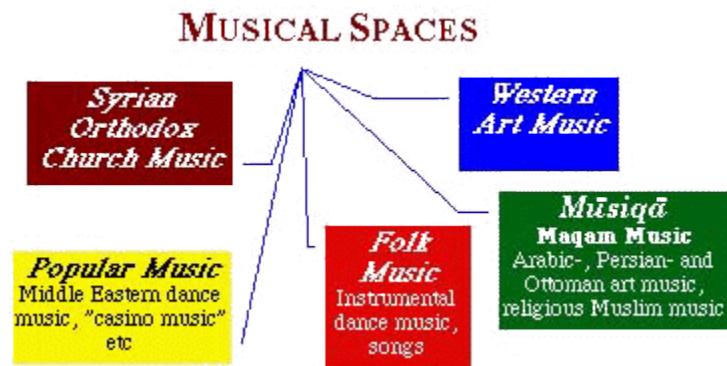
The power of the church over its members was not as wide-ranging in Syria as it was among the farming population in Tur'Abdin. This applied particularly to the larger cities in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean region. Profane music-making was common both among the Christian and the Muslim populations of Damascus, Aleppo, Smyrna, Istanbul, Cairo etc, all of which were modern cosmopolitan cities (see the section on the musiqa tradition in Aleppo below). The move from Tur'Abdin to Damascus was therefore an important prerequisite for Assad's musical activities.

Listen to an excerpt from Gabriel Assad's composition [Forah tho with](#) (I was a wing-clipped bird).

The [sheet music](#) of *Forah tho with*.
Source: Hammarlund 1990

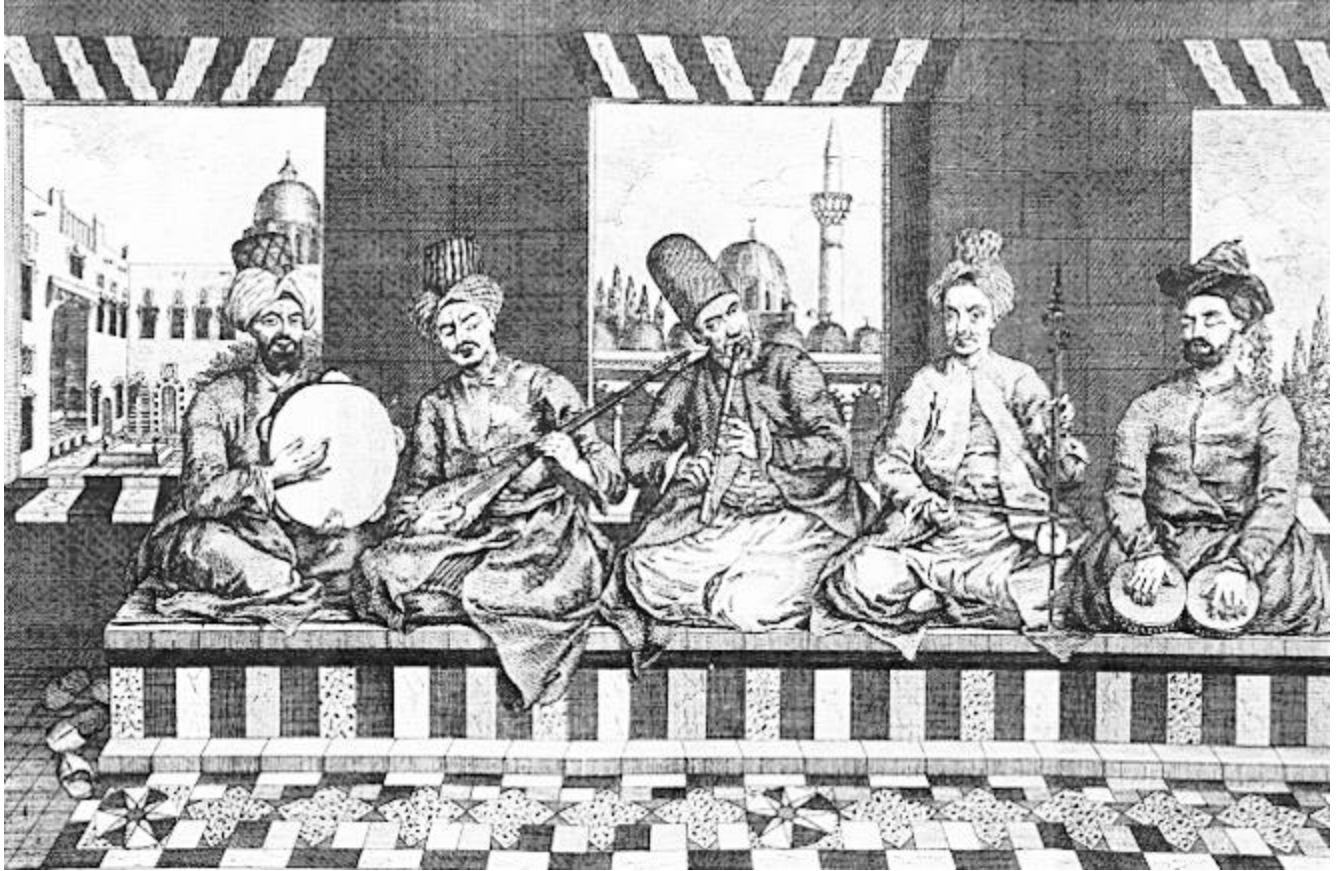
The music is characterised by the contrast between the "oriental" melodies and the Western accompaniment. This mixture of East and West is typical of a large proportion of Assad's output, and is also symptomatic of the prevailing cultural and political situation in Damascus in those days.

The musical environment in Damascus at that time was some what complicated.



The Christian minority had their church music, whose roots went back at least as far as the first Christian churches in the region in the second century. There was also folk music, of course, which was partly common to other people in the region; Kurds, Turks and Arabs. In addition to these genres there were other musical spheres to which other people in the region had access in the first instance: Persian, Arabic and Turkish art music, for instance, as well as different types of popular music.

Traditionally, Turkish and Arabic art music have had powerful strongholds in larger cities in the Middle East. Damascus, Baghdad and Aleppo were all important centres for high culture in the Eastern Mediterranean region.



Ensemble in Aleppo in the middle of the 18th century.

The picture is taken from the article *The Natural History of Aleppo*, which was written by Alexander Russell in 1754. (Source: *Turkish Quarterly*, vol. 5/6, 1993).

Russell's comments on the musicians in the picture are of particular interest. The def-player on the left is "a Turk of lower class", which, according to Russell, can be deduced from his rather clumsy turban, among other things. The next person is a Christian tambour-player, and next to him is a ney-playing dervish. The fourth person, who is playing the fiddle or kemenge, is also a Christian of middle rank. Russell does not know anything about the fifth person, but he mentions that the man is probably a Turk, judging from his clothing.

The colourful mixture of Christian and Muslim musicians of different social status was not only characteristic of the musical world, but of the Ottoman Empire as a whole. The Turkish Empire was in fact characterised by linguistic, religious and ethnic compounds to a much greater extent than is usually realised. The ruling classes consisted of Turkish military officers, members of the priesthood of the Orthodox Church, Jewish and Greek merchants and bankers, scholars and writers of Persian, Arabic, and even Balkan origin and others. It was not until the 16th and 17th centuries that the Ottoman upper class came to be dominated by Muslims.

We cannot be completely certain that the Christian musicians belonged to the Syrian Orthodox church, considering its ban on profane music-making. At the same time, as mentioned above, we know that the church's negative attitude towards profane music did not have the same impact in Aleppo as it did in rural areas. Russell also notes that the Christian tambour-player is slovenly dressed.

When Russell describes the music of 18th century Aleppo, he distinguishes between outdoor music, which was played on shawms and drums (cf. folk music and dance below), and indoor music, which was played by ensembles like the one in the picture (cf. Lundberg 1994). Indoor music appeals more to him than the "shriller" outdoor music and he writes:

The chamber music consists of voices accompanied with dulcimer, a guitar, the Arab fiddle, two small drums, the dervis's flute and the diff, or tambour de Basque. These compose no disagreeable concert, when once the ear has been some what accustomed to the music; the instruments generally are well in tune, and the performers, as remarked before, keep excellent time (Russell 1754 reprinted in Turkish Music Quarterly: 1993).

The place of music in society

Like the Some family, a large proportion of the Syrian Orthodox population in Damascus had roots in Tur'Abdin. The musical means of expression at their disposal also originated in this region. These included folk songs in *Turoyo* as well as instrumental music, mainly played on shawms, *mashroqo* and bass drum, *dawole* (cf. zurna and davul). This instrumental music primarily functioned as dance music and was played by musicians from groups other than Syrian Orthodox Christians. This practice – that profane dance music was performed by musicians who were not part of the group – is a common occurrence in the region and is not related to the Christian culture. Both ethnic Turks and Arabs often left instrumental music-making to Gypsy musicians (here the term Gypsy has often been used to denote other folk groups, not just "ethnic" Gypsies). The Islamic religion also has an ambivalent attitude to music and music-making, both of which are considered a sin according to certain parts of the religion.

Still today there is a scarcity of folk musicians in the Assyrian group. Even if a *mashroqo*-player is not regarded as a sinner, musicians in the folk music sphere are associated with *zutoye*, the lowest class of people in Assyrian/Syrian society. To answer the need for traditional folk music at weddings and other traditional occasions, musicians from other ethnic groups from the same region have to be hired. In Sweden the Turkish zurna-player Ziya Aytekin has played at a large number of Assyrian and Syrian weddings. The dearth of musicians also means that folk musicians with Assyrian backgrounds, such as the Sado family from Armenia, have a crucial role in the production of records, for example.

[Listen to an excerpt from a suite of folk dances.](#)



The suite *Raqdo d'Shekhane* comes from the cassette "Assyrian Folk Music" with the Sado brothers, issued by the Nineveh Music Association in Gothenburg. Nowadays the *mashroqo* and the *dawole* can be replaced by synthesizer and drum machine. Listen to the musician Nabu Poli from the group [Qenneshrin](#) when he plays "[mashroqo](#)" on his keyboard.

When Christians from Tur'Abdin fled from the Ottoman Empire over the border to Syria in connection with the outbreak of violence and massacres during the First World War, the new rulers – the Frenchmen and the British – were regarded as liberators.

This attitude was probably reflected in Gabriel Assad's choice of musical training. The status of Western music was higher than that of his native folk music, and it also represented forces in the political power game in the Middle East which were not regarded as hostile by the Christians. Arabic and Turkish art music dominated the musical environment, however, parallel with popular music which at that time was becoming increasingly prominent.

Nevertheless, when the young Gabriel Assad hoped to make a living as a musician, he started out in the domains of Arabic popular music.

Urban popular music forms which developed in the Mediterranean region during the 19th century experienced a new boom in the early 20th century. As before, the music belonged in restaurants and night clubs and the style can be described as a mixture of Arabic/Turkish melodies and modes and Western music ideals. The musicians also experimented with Western instruments and forms of expression.

An early impulse was provided by the interest in oriental dance in Europe and America towards the end of the 19th century. The success of dancers like "Little Egypt" in America was also echoed in parts of the Arab world. Belly-dancing in the so-called "cabaret style" was a common feature at many restaurants, cafés and night clubs throughout the Eastern Mediterranean region in the 1920s. Cosmopolitan cities such as Cairo and Beirut became centres for this new type of entertainment. At the end of the 1920s Gabriel Assad moved to Beirut and was taken on as a violinist at one of the town's "casinos", which was the name used for restaurants and night clubs with live music and dance (cf. Turkish "gazino").

Listen to another of Assad's compositions, [Num habib num ni](#), the lullaby "Sleep My Darling Sleep", from the same record as "Forah tho with" above.



*Gabriel Assad on stage together with the present president of the Assyrian National Federation, Ablahad Lahdo. The photo was taken in Qamishli at the beginning of the 1970s.
Source: the magazine Hujãdã*

Today Gabriel Assad's handful of followers are spread out all over the world. From a musical perspective his closest disciple is the composer and conductor Nouri Iskandar. Today Iskandar works in Aleppo in Syria. His compositions, like Assad's, are characterised by a mixture of East and West. The melodies are characterised by the same modal structures that can be found in Syrian Orthodox church music and also in the Arabic maqam music. The harmonies and instrumentation are in Western style, however.



Source: the cassette "Oriental Music" by Nouri Iskandar. Nineveh Studio.

[Listen to Nouri Iskandar's composition for lute \(oud\) and string trio.](#)

Or why not a piece for [solo violin and string quartet](#)?

Assyrian music on the Internet

In January, 1997, it was estimated that 50 million pages of text had been put out on the World Wide Web. The estimated speed of expansion (which is increasing all the time) is now 10% per month. We are living in an ongoing information explosion which is perhaps most obvious in our contacts with Internet.

The enormous amount of information makes search engines, link sites, etc essential so that we don't lose our way in the jungle of information.

Information about [Assyrian "Music-dealers"](#)

Information about artists, tunes, etc can be obtained from "[Assyrian voice](#)".

Longer articles about Assyrian artists and composers are published by the electronic newsletter Nineveh Magazine. Information about music and artists is also published regularly by Esha Tamras, who has put out a large amount of information on WWW via the site [Assyrian Information Medium Exchange](#), which also contains a special music page; [Assyrian Information Medium Exchange – Music Page](#)

The Assyrian music which is produced in Sweden is therefore only available to a very limited extent via the Net. The biggest Assyrian music producer in Sweden is the Nineveh Music Association in Gothenburg, which also has its own distribution. Sales take place almost exclusively through local Assyrian societies, which sell cassettes, CDs and music videos with Assyrian music, mainly of Swedish and American origin. But an expansion of the National Federation's Music Exchange via WWW is expected within the coming year.

Hardly any Assyrian music is available in "ordinary" music shops. Even shops with a Turkish/Arabic "ethnic" assortment, such as "Music Corner" in Rinkeby and "Videos and Sweets" in Norsborg (two suburbs in the south of Stockholm with a high percentage of immigrants), do not stock Assyrian products.

Expressive specialists

The important part played by music in creating a sense of fellowship within minority groups has been mentioned in several places in this study. Where Assyrians in general are concerned, it is obvious that the role of music as an identity symbol is even more important than in many other groups. The "Assyrian national concept", which arose towards the end of the 19th century and became an urgent issue after the First World War, was to a large extent based on the works of authors, poets, singers and composers. For West Assyrian liberation champions such as Naum Faik, Juhanon Salman and Gabriel Assad, poetry and music were the means that could unite a divided people. Today this striving for national unity has been taken over by new generation of Assyrians, and the old poems and songs have taken on a wider symbolic meaning. The content of the lyrics often alludes to the suffering of the people throughout history and to a nation which was scattered far and wide in the diaspora, but as a phenomenon the poems also symbolise the early national struggle.

Today's expressive specialists (singers, authors, musician etc.) in the Assyrian group are given a very important role as interpreters and promoters of the cultural identity. The fact that the President of the Assyrian National Federation is an internationally well-known singer should be seen in the light of the fact that his work as a singer does not only consist of being an "entertainer" – of amusing the party guests. The Assyrians are very well aware of the function of music and song as a creator of cultural identity and a preserver of tradition. The musicians, especially the singers, become important links that can convey the direct and symbolic content of the songs to the audience. The expressive specialists function as transmitters of a cultural identity. In *Om vi söker* (If we search) Augin Kurt writes:

Idealistic work was a prerequisite for the activities of our newly founded societies in the mid-1970s. The leading active figures were driven by a burning national feeling, which we regard as the most honourable word. During the latter half of the 70s Assyrian societies grew up like mushrooms, since the need of meeting-points was so enormous in these strange surroundings (1996:75f).

But what did they meet round? When Joseph Malki talks about the founding of the Assyrian National Federation, he is anxious to point out the importance of music:

It was in connection with the music that I began to think. Why don't we build societies? And so the Assyrian societies came into the world. Because of the music, you see, people met and so people came to the microphones. And through the microphones they have become leaders. In a way it's the music that has created all this. And the same thing with the founding of the Assyrian National Federation, that was my initiative. I said, why should we see ourselves as retarded people, as people of lesser value. The Swedes say that we can build a federation, we live in Sweden, don't we, and they give us this courage, you see, the Swedish people and the Swedish authorities. A lot of

people said, no, we're not ready for it. But I was obstinate and so we formed the Assyrian National Federation.

So you mean then that it was thanks to the music?

Yes, it was thanks to the music. How do we go about it, people asked. Well, the music will solve that problem, I said. Let the music do it. So we began to organise parties in Motala, in Linköping and in Gothenburg where the Assyrians lived. The simple fact is, it all started with the help of the music.

So you could say that by organising parties people were brought together?

Well, that's how we attracted people. And people began to like each other. And began to get stronger ties, and love and relationships and people began to feel less isolated. The isolation was broken, and they felt that somebody cared about them. And music – I think that that is the greatest element one can use to show that people care for each other and have feelings for each other.

(Joseph Malki, interview 3rd March, 1997)

So music "solved the problem". To a large extent the idealistic work that Kurt mentions was a question of organising cultural manifestations and culture days, of getting children's dance groups going, etc, in short, all sorts of activities where music was often the natural centre of focus. A big problem, however, was, and still is, the dearth of competent musicians. As mentioned elsewhere, popular dance music on the zurna and davul has traditionally been played by non-Assyrians, and this was also the case in Sweden. During the last 20 years the zurna-player Ziya Aytakin has been one of the most sought-after musicians, employed both by ethnic Turks and by Kurds and Assyrian/Syrians in Sweden.

Listen to a [sample from the CD Ziya](#) from 1994.



[Listen to another sample from the CD Ziya.](#)

According to Aytekin there was a noticeable increase in the number of weddings between immigrants from Turkey in Sweden and Denmark during the second half of the 1980s. The Kurdish and Assyrian/Syrian groups answered for the largest increase, which perhaps can be explained by the fact that these groups also represented the largest influx of immigrants, starting with the huge wave of Assyrian/Syrians during the second half of the 1970s. Another important factor is that there has been far more immigration on political grounds within these groups. Political refugees have not had the same opportunity to return to their homelands without the risk of reprisals from the Turkish authorities. (cf. Lundberg 1994)



[Habib Moussa doing a sound check](#) for a recording at the Mix Music Café in Stockholm on the 8th October, 1997.

Photo: Dan Lundberg.

The Assyrians have also built up a musical life of their own, centred on the early societies. Many new music groups have been formed to fill the need for music at culture days and parties. These groups play dance music of a more modern type, with the mixture of modern and traditional instruments which is so common in popular music in the Middle East today. A modern Assyrian music has grown up in Sweden around the few specialists in the music field, such as Joseph Malki and the singer Habib Moussa from Beirut.

Listen to [Habib Moussa](#), on a recording from 1995.

When Moussa came to Sweden in 1997 he was already an established singer. Through his work in "casinos" in Beirut and via records made in Lebanon, his fame had spread among West Assyrians throughout the world. At the age of 14 he had aroused both dismay and admiration in Syria by singing love songs in Aramaic in public. In Sweden he was welcomed with open arms by the music-starved Assyrian immigrants.

Groups such as Babylon, Shamiran, Ishtar and Nineveh appeared in public and also produced tapes with Assyrian music during the 1970s and 1980s. Nineveh from Gothenburg still give concerts and record Assyrian music. Even in the popular music field there has been a demand for musicians of non-Assyrian origin, particularly for recordings. One example is the Turkish ney-player Ahmet "Haci" Tekbilek, who can be heard in ensembles on many Swedish-produced cassettes with Assyrian music.

Listen to Haci when he plays an improvised introduction, [Taqsim](#), on the cassette "Hannisan Assyrian Choir".

The importance and potential of the expressive specialists is also apparent in the appeal to Assyrians that was published in the magazine Hujādā (June 1997). As a result of economic setbacks which affected the Assyrian National Federation, Ablahad Lahdo wrote the following words in an editorial:

All our literary and artistic personalities are exhorted to intensify their efforts to produce creative works, each one of them within his own sphere – to offer and create resources to support our institutions, in particular the Assyrian National Federation in Sweden. This is not the time for one-sided confrontations and emotional behaviour. Even if we come through this crisis unscathed, there is a risk that we will soon encounter problems of the same calibre if we do not here and now reflect on our present ways of working and thinking.

If we hope to have a strong and healthy institution, we need the forces mentioned above.

We are faced by a great test of our creditability concerning our statement that we feel for our institutions, which we have all helped to create and develop. We therefore exhort all spectators to come up on stage and take part. Because the crisis is so serious that it does not leave any room whatsoever for these spectators just to enjoy themselves and have a good time.

Ninib Ablahad Lahdo, Federation President

Gabriel Assad's activities have been described elsewhere in this study. Since the large-scale Assyrian/Syrian immigration into Sweden in the 1970s, two generations of his successors have emerged. The first generation was part of a circle of "idealists" who were responsible for building up the Assyrian societies which have been described above. The next generation consists of second generation Assyrians who have grown up within the Assyrian group in Sweden.

To read more about Gabriel Assad and national music, go to [A visit to a musical rebel](#).

Joseph Malki

Apart from Habib Moussa, the person who perhaps has had the greatest influence on the development of Assyrian music in Sweden is Joseph Malki from Tumba, south of Stockholm.

Joseph was born in 1948 in Qamishli in Northern Syria. After studying to be a film director in Spain he came to Sweden in 1971.

As a boy in Qamishli Joseph had played music in various contexts and learned to play the çūmbus (folk lute), accordion and saxophone. He had also worked professionally as a musician in night clubs ("casinos") in Damascus and later been a member of the

Syrian TV Ensemble in Damascus. It was mostly popular music of Middle East type that was played on television and in night clubs, and Malki's job often consisted of accompanying well-known Arabic singers who visited Damascus.

Yes, it was popular music that was played – Um Kaltsum and other well-known male and female singers. But our folk music when I grew up. I can say that when I was 14-15 years old I discovered that hardly anybody sings folk music. It was only Gabriel Assad who sang the nationalistic songs. He was a pioneer in the 20s and 30s. In connection with the French mandate the minorities became more optimistic. They thought they would be able to do something with their lives and with the people. And then Gabriel Assad came.

Did you know him in Syria?

Yes, I used to listen to him when we visited the Cultural Centre. Gabriel Assad was a big influence. He played these oriental scales and talked about our music and about the heritage from the church. He influenced me a lot. I also had the honour of playing with him four or five times on stage. We had formed a little group. I played the saxophone then. We also had violin and rhythm section. Gabriel Assad also played the fiddle with us. We played his compositions.

With his musical knowledge and his contacts with Assad and the national music, Joseph Malki became an important uniting force in Sweden, a spider in the Assyrian web of contacts.

[Introduction to Otadou](#) by Joseph Malki. From the CD "Ninib A. Lahdo", 1996.

We organised parties there and I was the only musician. Then people began to flock to the parties and I thought it would be a pity if I should stop at that. I had to go on and do something else. I began to learn a bit more about the music and began to teach other people who were interested how to play oriental music. I discovered that some of them had good voices. I taught them some songs and so it has continued.

Joseph's activities in Sweden have resulted in a large number of records and cassettes, as well as choral music and theatre music and so on. Many of the Assyrian music groups in Sweden are also a direct result of his work. Today he is employed by the Assyrian Music and Theatre Federation, which is part of the Assyrian National Federation.

The aim of the Music and Theatre Federation is to "stimulate Assyrian music and theatre and other activities that belong to these branches". Over the past ten years Malki has run music courses for youngsters between the ages of ten and fourteen, arranged by the Federation. In 1996 he had fifty-five music students. The tuition starts off with children's songs for the youngest children and continues with instrumental music and oriental music theory.

I'm a very optimistic person so I hope that through these courses people will perform this music and do more research and produce new music with the grounding they've received. So I'm very optimistic.

In recent years he has also been involved in the work of collecting material for two music anthologies: one with Syrian Orthodox chants and one with Assyrian/Syrian songs.

A conversation with the musicians in "The Eagle's Nest".

The group Qenneshrin, "The Eagle's Nest", is one of the Assyrian music groups that has sprung out of Joseph Malki's courses.

First we played at the society's parties and then people asked if we would come and play at their weddings and engagements. That's how it started. (Nabu Poli, interview 26th February, 1997)

"The Eagles Nest" is a semi-professional music group with members from Södertälje and Botkyrka, south of Stockholm. The group consists of six lads between eighteen and twenty-three years old. Like most youth bands the group has ambitions and they hope to be able to support themselves as musicians. Only a few years ago the group's activities consisted of meeting at one of the member's homes to play for fun. Since 1996 paid gigs have begun to crop up and the group's activities have changed character.



[Qenneshrin](#) at the Mix Music Café in Stockholm on the 8th October, 1997

Photo: Dan Lundberg

The members of The Eagle's Nest: from the left, back row, Gabriel Masso – synthesizer, Nasif Kusarji – bass guitar, Nabu Poli – synthesizer, front row, Fadi Haddad – darbake, Yaakob Danho

– oud and Emanuel Demir – saz. The band consists of second generation musicians within the Assyrian community in Sweden.

Joseph Malki is proud of his pupils who have attracted considerable attention both within and beyond the Assyrian community during the last year. Among other things they performed at the Stockholm Orient Festival in 1997.

What do you think will become of a group like this?

Well, if they continue to learn more about our music, their musical cultural heritage. Then they can do good things. They can spread the music to many people, since they are good musicians. I trust certain of the musicians in this group, specially Nabuch. I trust Nabuch very much. He is serious and skilful and respectful. He knows the value of his cultural heritage.

Do you think they will be able to make a living from playing their music?

Well, it's up to them and to circumstances. Unfortunately, as it is now they all just play music as a hobby. Nobody lives off it. Nobody can do it full time. But I hope that they'll be able to do so in the future. If we create fine music which makes our people known. Which people can like. Then it would be a good production, then you make a profit. You can arrange concerts, festivals and tours. What's well worth noting is that Sweden is a centre where our music can grow. I can say as a fact that our folk music has taken shape in Sweden. And that it has even been spread to our homelands. And they are very proud even in our homelands, since they feel that they now have folk music of their own which they recognise. I've noticed it and we must continue along this path, but we need support from the authorities, from the people. These lads – everyone that plays folk music – must have support. To spread this music further.

They play at parties, engagements and weddings, but where else do they play?

Sometimes at exhibitions, art exhibitions. Invitations from cultural institutions, for example, like Södertälje Day. In certain contexts, then they help out. And that's what we've done ever since we came to Sweden, we've played in a lot of centres, at many symposiums, many festivals and concerts.

(Joseph Malki as above)

If one compares "The Eagle's Nest" with young Swedish music groups, there is an important difference. A heavy burden of expectations rests on their shoulders. When Nabu's father, Aziz Poli, was asked what he would do if Nabu came home and said he was going to stop playing Assyrian music and start to play hard rock instead, he answered with a single word: Catastrophe!

But the risk that "The Eagle's Nest" should become hard rockers is non-existent. A far greater problem, which is often discussed in Assyrian musical contexts, is the influence from Turkish and Arabic music which poses a constant threat. Arabic and Turkish pop music is spread to Assyrian youngsters in Sweden through satellite TV channels and other media, and this is reflected in the repertoire of the youth bands.

The vast supply of Arabic/Turkish music, combined with the fact that Assyrian music has few distribution channels, means that there is a risk that the music will become "Arabified" or "Turkified".

As Emanuel Demir points out, there isn't very much Assyrian/Syrian music anyway.

(Interview with Emanuel Demir [ED], Gabriel Masso [GM] and Nabu Poli [NP], 26th February , 1997).

ED: We know nearly all of it already. But to play at weddings and that sort of thing one has to be more international, so to speak. You have to play in Arabic, Syrian, Assyrian and Turkish style. NP: And Kurdish too, sometimes.

ED: Yes, sometimes Kurdish, in fact

GM: But we prefer not to play Kurdish music.

DL: Why's that?

ED: It's to do with history.

The reason why they are not keen on playing Kurdish music is because of the political conflicts which still exist among the Christian minorities and the Kurdish Muslims, particularly in South East Turkey. But since many Assyrians lived in Kurdish villages where Kurdish music and language dominated the folklore, there is still a need for Kurdish repertoire at parties. "It depends on the family", says Nabu Poli, and continues, "some families grew up close to Kurds, so then we have to know their music. Otherwise they get Kurdish musicians for their weddings". What is important in this context of course is that the audience, even if they are Kurdish-speaking, are Assyrians. It is hardly likely that a Kurdish family would want Assyrian musicians at their parties.

The situation in Sweden naturally differs from that in the Middle East since here Assyrians with different origins meet in the same societies and live in the same areas. Here there are no Kurdish/Assyrian or Turkish/Assyrian regions; everyone is part of the same community. This naturally puts special demands on the musicians' repertoire. But the musical diversity which arises when the same musicians are employed by many different ethnic groups is not unusual in Turkey and the Middle East. An important difference, however, is that there the musicians themselves are seldom part of the same social sphere as the audience but have been brought in from outside. This is often the case, for instance, with mashroq and dawole players who are often of [Gypsy origin](#). The mixture of musicians in Qenneshrin, with origins in Turkey, Syria and Iraq, in a way mirrors the Assyrian group in Sweden as a whole. In a multicultural group such as Qenneshrin the various individuals are representatives for their cultural backgrounds. It is natural for Emanuel Demir, who grew up in Turkish/Kurdish surroundings, to contribute Kurdish and Turkish music to the group's repertoire. In the same way Gabriel Masso, who comes from Syria, has become the group's expert on Arabic music.

DL: How did you get hold of this repertoire – Kurdish, Turkish, Arabic? You must be on the lookout all the time? Isn't that so?

ED: Yes, of course, we listen.

GM: We see what's being asked for at parties and what's popular. And then we learn

those tunes.

ED: It's mostly dance tunes. That's what people want at their parties.

NP: If a new cassette comes out with good party music, then we buy it straight away.

DL: Then what do you do in the band, do you use notated music or do you learn it by ear? NP: By ear, by ear mostly.

ED: The lads can read music a bit. Gabi, for instance, he reads music well. Sometimes when a singer comes from outside and it's an emergency Singers sometimes bring their own music. Perhaps it's their own tunes which are not on the cassette

If we return to the question as to whether there is anything Assyrian in the music itself, we realise that the whole issue is somewhat complex. Obviously it is possible to find certain ways of playing and styles of phrasing and perhaps even instrumentation which distinguishes Assyrian music from other styles from the same region. But a very large part of the music is used by several different population groups. The lads in Qenneshrin seem to be fairly well in agreement that the strongest "Assyrian" expression lies in the lyrics. Just as an English tune which is given Swedish lyrics actually becomes Swedish in a certain sense, so a Turkish tune with Assyrian lyrics becomes Assyrian. But in the debate on what is genuine and what is not, Emanuel Demir considers that it can also be argued that "people are scattered all over the world. And they also have different origins. People that come from Turkey, if you tell them to sing an Assyrian-Syrian song then it will be a Turkish song. A tune that they have done but which is strongly influenced by Turkish music. When people are so scattered, then you get a mixture and a bit of everything".

Maybe it is the mixture itself that is "genuine"?



Emanuel Demir and Nabu Poli at the Mix Music Café on the 8th October, 1997.

Photo: Dan Lundberg.

When we listen to the members of The Eagle's Nest, it is possible to draw the conclusion that the new situation and the increased self-awareness among Assyrians in the diaspora has also changed the attitude to music. Young people do not seem to have as great a need as the previous generation to prove the music's "genuineness".

One would perhaps also be inclined to assume that the music rebel Gabriel Assad would be dissatisfied with the development towards a more Arabic/Turkish oriented profane music. But when asked what he thought about the development of Assyrian music he answered, on the contrary, that he is highly satisfied and that he is proud over what has happened. The main thing for Assad is that people can now play Assyrian music freely (Gabriel Assad, interview 10th March, 1997).

The efforts of Assad and other people have truly borne fruit. Profane music-making, which was condemned as sinful by the Syrian Orthodox church, is now a valid possibility for Assyrian youngsters today.

DL: Is it all right to be a musician then, for you, in the circles which you move in?

NP: You mean the attitude towards musicians?

GM: It's getting better, it's getting more positive. Before, if a man was a musician then he had a bad reputation, do you understand?

ED: Now the music is respected more.

NP: So it's not like it was before.

ED: They say that you should go and get an education. That we shouldn't keep playing at parties and things like that. Wasting time. That's what many parents say. But deep down they're proud. – OK, they play music and people respect them for that. Yes, it's a different attitude to it.

DL: What about among your friends then?

ED: Oh, they think it's great

GM: They wish they were musicians. Since they grew up here they've lived Western lives. DL: Why does one become a musician?

GM: A gift from God. (giggle) That's the way it is for me anyway.

DL: But as a musician you can feel proud that you can do something that others can't. Isn't it like that for you? Does it make any difference whether you're Assyrian or Swedish or Finnish?

ED: No it doesn't. Maybe I do want to be a musician in the future. But it will have to happen by itself. You don't just think: Oh, I want to be groovy, now I'm going to learn music. You live with the music. If you put the TV on you hear music, if you put the radio on you hear music, you hear music at home, you hear music everywhere. And suddenly you think, why not give it a try? And perhaps the interest grows and in the end perhaps you have a goal or a purpose with the music. And then you get somewhere.

DL: But when you are only nineteen there aren't so many things you can be. You can't be an engineer or a pilot or whatever. But you can be a musician.

NP: It has a certain status, so to speak, but still, if you compare with an education

People ask you what you do, what you are studying or if you are studying anything. If you say yes, I'm studying engineering or economics or something, that raises your status. – Oh, he's studying. But if you say you're a musician or something like that, then it's still this

At the same time there are big differences between different categories of musicians. Traditionally, singers have had better status than orchestral musicians. The singer is an artist, he is the one who attracts people to an event. His name is on the posters. This is also reflected in the fees. A relatively well-known singer often gets up to five times as much for a performance as his accompanist. Singers therefore have higher status than musicians.



Ziya Aytakin has been given a couple of hundred crown bills for playing at a wedding in Hagsätra, south of Stockholm.

Photo: Olof Näslund. Documentary Agency.

The position of the folk musicians, the mashroqo and dawole players, is somewhat special and rather ambiguous. In the traditional context these musicians belonged to the lowest social class with very low status. At the same time the audience – in this case the wedding guests – give the musicians tips during the evening, and thanks to this custom this particular category of musicians can earn a large amount of money from their music-making. A skilful mashroqo player can make thousands of crowns just in tips in an evening. Tips (bashish) are usually given to the mashroqo-player and can also be given to the singer if someone wants to order a special tune, but tips are seldom given to orchestral musicians. But even if the status of musicians has risen in recent years, not least in the diaspora, the lads in Qenneshrin sometimes have mixed feelings about their future.

GM: So I think, musician, what's that? I've been wasting my time. But if you are a singer then you earn good money, then you think this is really good, both financially and as a hobby and you've also got better status. Yes, status, a singer has much higher

status, that's how people think. I think that way too sometimes, that it's all a matter of money. But you hear that doctors earn a lot of money, lawyers earn money so you think, OK, I'll become a lawyer, then I'll have status. I'll earn a lot of money. It's all about money.

DL: But there are two worlds as well, aren't there? At least that's how it was for me. That there is a grown up world, and there it's doctors and lawyers and engineers that count. But there's a young people's world as well, and the values are not quite the same.

ED: No, it's not the same values, but deep down you know that it's two worlds. But you kid yourself. Deep down you know how things really are.

DL: If you think about the future then. If you imagine the Qenneshrin group or yourselves in thirty years' time. Will you still be playing together then?

ED: The chances are minimal. (laughter)

NP: You never know.

ED: We'll most probably still be involved in music and that sort of thing.

DL: Mm, then you will have grown-up children of your own.

GM: But I think, I think that the group will last. Unless you get married and have to move from here. That's the sort of problem that can crop up. I think we're a bit like some sort of family, do you understand? That's how I feel.

NP: Very, very close friends.

They dream about the future, but life as musicians seems as unreal for Nabu, Gabi and Emanuel as it does for any Swedish youth band. But the fact that the dream exists constitutes a new starting point for Assyrian musicians' identity.

Virtual Assyria – References

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