

## THE ASSYRIANS OF GEORGIA: ETHNIC SPECIFICS SHOULD BE PRESERVED

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### Migration and Settlement Patterns

As early as the 1st millennium B.C., Assyrian sources mentioned an ancient Georgian state. Much later, when Christianity reached the Southern Caucasus, Assyrians and Georgians established much closer ties. In fact, the Assyrian monks, known as the 13 Assyrian Fathers, who arrived in the 6th century from Mesopotamia, played a great role in promoting Christianity in Georgia.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See: A.K. Matveev, K.P. Matveev, *Istoria i etnografia assiriytsev*, U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences, Moscow, 1990, pp. 35-38.

The first Assyrian community appeared in Georgia thanks to King of Kartli and Kakheti Iraklii II, who secretly corresponded with Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East Mar Avraam with the aim of pooling forces against the Ottoman Empire. Their joint march against the common enemy failed; later several Assyrian families settled in Georgia in the Mukhrani district. The resettlement process continued when the Georgian kingdom-principalities became part of the Russian Empire.

The Turkmanchai Peace Treaty of 1828 between Russia and Persia allowed Assyrians (who were Persian subjects) to move to Tbilisi, which offered better employment prospects. By the 1890s, there were about 5,000 Assyrians in Tbilisi. To avoid persecutions in the Ottoman Empire, Assyrians moved in large numbers to Georgia (and Armenia) during and after World War I. To help their compatriots, the Tbilisi Assyrians set up an Aid to Assyrian Refugees Committee and an Assyrian National Council.

Under Soviet power, or to be more exact, in 1947, thousands of Assyrians were deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan—only some of them were able to return to Georgia when the ethnic group was rehabilitated in 1954.<sup>2</sup> According to the 1959 population census, there were 5,000 Assyrians in Georgia (0.1 percent of the total population); the figure for Tbilisi was 2,600, or 0.4 percent. According to the 1989 population census, there were 5,200 Assyrians in Georgia (0.1 percent)<sup>3</sup>; according to the 2002 census, their number dropped to 3,299, while their percentage remained the same.<sup>4</sup>

Today, Assyrians live in compact groups in two Tbilisi districts (Vaka and Kukia) and also in other cities and towns (Gardabani, Senaki, Zugdidi, Kutaisi and the village of Dzveli (Staraiia Kanda).

The Assyrian International News Agency estimates the number of Assyrians in the world at about 3,500,000, two-thirds of whom live in places of their historical settlement.<sup>5</sup> The largest Assyrian community in North America is found in Chicago; there are Assyrians in Europe and Australia, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Iran,<sup>6</sup> and Turkey. In the 1950s, the Assyrian population of Turkey was about 50,000 strong. Since that time, Assyrian emigration to Europe has cut down the number to about 5,000. They are mostly urban dwellers; the Assyrian villages have been practically abandoned.<sup>7</sup>

The largest number of South Caucasian Assyrians is found in Armenia, where they live in several villages. According to the 2004 Armenian population census, there were 3,409 Assyrians (0.1 percent of the total population).<sup>8</sup> Some of the Assyrians who left Georgia settled in former Soviet republics (Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan).

Assyrians leave Georgia in search of employment and better social and economic conditions. Those who used to live in Tbilisi prefer to emigrate to Russia and other European states. Those who used to live in compact groups in Gardabani prefer Russia (Stavropol and Krasnodar territories) to join relatives<sup>9</sup> already engaged in trade and handicrafts there.

<sup>2</sup> See: *Vystuplenie vitse-presidenta Mezhdunarodnogo natsional'nogo kongressa assiryitsev Gruzii Davida Adamova na konferentsii "Gruzia—mnogonatsional'noe gosudarstvo," Tbilisi, 4-5 March, 2002*, pp. 38-40; D. Adamov, *Konferentsia "Istoria i realii etnicheskikh obshchin Gruzii," 9 November, 2001*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> See: *Gosudarstvenny departament statistiki Gruzii, Statisticheskiy ezhegodnik Gruzii-2001*, "National'ny sostav naselenia, 37." According to the statements of the Assyrian organizations in Georgia, these figures are wrong—there are 12,000 Assyrians living in Georgia.

<sup>4</sup> See: *Rezultaty pervoi natsional'noy perepisi naselenia Gruzii v 2002 g.*, Vol. I, Tbilisi, 2003, p. 110.

<sup>5</sup> See: *World Assyrian Population* [www.aina.org].

<sup>6</sup> Significantly, since 2002 a team of Georgian Assyrians has been taking part in the annual International Sport-Cultural Festival of Assyrians that takes place in Iran and brings together teams from various countries: "Assyrians hold international sport-cultural festival in Orumiyeh," *IRNA*, 19 July, 2003; newspaper *Aviuta*, 6 April, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> See: J. Pacal, "What Happened to the Turkish Assyrians?" *Turkish Daily News*, 29 August, 1996; R. Donef, "Assyrians in Turkey: Ethnic and Religious Recognition Revised" [www.atour.com/government/docs/20030828a.html], 28 August, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> See: M. Toumajan, "Armenian Census Results," *Armenian News Network/Groong*, 27 February, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> According to the Assyrian organizations of Georgia, there are about 40 Assyrian families from Georgia living in Novopavlovsk (Stavropol Territory).

Like all other Georgian citizens, the Assyrians are badly hit by unemployment: in Tbilisi they are engaged in petty trade and crafts and live mainly on the money they receive from relatives living and working in other countries. The Assyrians of Gardabani also live on crafts, hunting, fishing, and gardening. Recently, some of them found unskilled jobs at large local energy enterprises.

The Gardabani District is losing more Assyrians than any other place of their compact settlement: half of the 1,500 Assyrians who lived there in 1989 have already left; many of the Assyrian houses are put on the market. Recently, the emigration wave subsided, mainly because those who stayed behind have no money to move out. Some of them found jobs, but if they manage to sell their houses for adequate prices, they will emigrate.

## Russian- and Georgian-Speakers

The Assyrians of Georgia, and of the Soviet Union for that matter, were in a very difficult cultural and political position. Their linguistic skills were limited to their native tongue, therefore they could not take part in public and political life. Few people mastered Russian, and there were not that many who were literate in Assyrian. As many as 85 to 90 percent could not read or write; what is more, at the end of the 1920s, nearly everyone in the Dzveli Kanda village was illiterate (90 to 95 percent).

By the second half of the 1920s, there were three Assyrian primary schools (two in Tbilisi and one in Dzveli Kanda) with no premises of their own. They functioned until 1937; today, there are no Assyrian schools in Georgia. Many of the Assyrian children were educated in Polish and Russian schools. Many teenagers willing to study found themselves deprived of an education.<sup>10</sup>

The Assyrians (Syrians) use the Assyrian tongue, a term for the modern Eastern Aramaic dialect. The language of the Assyrians abounds in dialects: in one of the Tbilisi districts (Vaka), the Assyrians use the Jilu dialect; in Kukia District, the Van dialect, while the Gardabani Assyrians speak the Bohtan dialect.<sup>11</sup> Other dialects (Salamas, Tiar, and Urmi) are also used in Georgia. The latter served as a basis for the literary language created in the 1940s.<sup>12</sup>

Today, the Georgian Assyrians learn the native tongue at home; normally they use the Russian language, with the exception of the Dzveli Kanda Assyrians who have perfectly mastered Georgian and are educated in Georgian villages.

In Gardabani, nearly all the Assyrians are Russian-speakers and are educated at Russian schools. As distinct from the older generation, young people speak adequate Georgian. The Tbilisi Assyrians know the Georgian language, their children attend either Russian or Georgian schools. The Russian schools and the Russian tongue are preferred because of planned emigration to Russia. In recent years, the Assyrian tongue is taught at church Sunday schools.

## Problems in the Sphere of Culture

In the past, the Assyrians published their own magazine and a newspaper that carried the writings of local Assyrians, folklore, and translations from the Georgian. In 1913-1914, a bi-weekly

<sup>10</sup> See: A. Songulashvili, *Kul'tura national'nykh men'shinstv v Gruzii*, Tbilisi, Metsniereba, 2002, pp. 29-30.

<sup>11</sup> See: D. Bit-Suleyman, "Izuchit', poka ne ischezli," *Aviuta*, No. 7, September 1999.

<sup>12</sup> See: *Gruzinskaia sovetskaia entsiklopedia*, Vol. 1, "Assiriyskiy iazyk," 662, Tbilisi, 1975.

*Modinkha* (The Orient), intended for the Assyrians of the Southern Caucasus and Russia, came out in Tbilisi.

In 1926-1938, an Assyrian newspaper *Kokhva Madinkha* (Star of the Orient)<sup>13</sup> was published in Tbilisi; there were all sorts of circles that contributed to educating the Assyrian intelligentsia. The 1937 repressions put an end to these positive developments: schools and the publishing house were closed down, while members of the intelligentsia were persecuted and repressed.

In 1952, an Assyrian Song and Dance Ensemble was founded for the first time in the Soviet Union under the supervision of Angelina Grigolia,<sup>14</sup> there was a club of lovers of Assyrian literature that promoted the native tongue and literature. Assyrian writer Rabi David Iliani, mentioned in the *Georgian Soviet Encyclopedia*, lived and worked in Georgia for many years.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1990s, the Ninevia and Daiana<sup>16</sup> dance ensembles functioned in Georgia, although they were pestered by great financial problems. The Assyrians' cultural life still suffers from underfunding: the state cannot support it, while private donations are few and far between.

Recently, a plot of land for a cultural center expected to preserve and develop the culture of the Georgian Assyrians was bought in Tbilisi on the initiative of the Assyrian Chaldean Catholic Mission.

## Public Organizations

The Assyrian International Congress of Georgia registered in April 1992 with the Georgian Ministry of Justice is the most influential among the Assyrian organizations. It was set up to preserve the language, culture, and traditions, and to establish and maintain contacts with expatriates; it is maintaining contacts with similar international structures. The 24th Worldwide Congress of the Assyrian Universal Alliance, which took place on 7-10 July, 2005 in London, elected David Adamov, leader of the Assyrian International Congress of Georgia, as a member of the Worldwide Congress' Executive Board. This international organization is resolved to maintain its contacts with the Georgian Assyrians.<sup>17</sup>

The Assyrian Beth Nahrain Cultural Center is functioning in Gardabani; the *Aviuta*<sup>18</sup> newspaper published there in Georgian and Russian by the Assyrian International Congress of Georgia cannot appear regularly because of financial problems.

The above-mentioned Assyrian Chaldean Catholic Mission headed by Father Benjamin Bethyadgar was set up in Tbilisi in 1995. It is active in three spheres: the spiritual, humanitarian, and educational. It helps the socially vulnerable Assyrians in many ways. The mission also holds courses in the Neo-Syriac tongue and runs youth groups.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See: A. Songulashvili, op. cit., pp. 55-56.

<sup>14</sup> See: L. Bit-Vardi, "Chast' moey dushi—moia rabota," *Aviuta*, 5 March, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> See: "Vystuplenie Davida Adamova...", pp. 38-40.

<sup>16</sup> See: M. Iukhanova, "Drevnie tantsy vnov' na stsene," *Aviuta*, No. 8, December, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> See: "New AUA Advisors & Committee Chairs Elected in London," *Zinda Magazine*, Saturday, 23 July, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> See: K. Kokoev, G. Svanidze, L. Melikishvili, "Interview with Mr. Gennadi Ivanov, one of the Heads of the International Assyrian Congress in Georgia," *National Minorities in Georgia*, Tbilisi, 1999, pp. 17-18.

<sup>19</sup> See: Father Benny Bethyadgar, *Caucasus, Georgia, Tbilisi—Brief History of Mission*, Detroit, 2002; *The Assyrian-Georgian Relief Fund, 1998 Annual Report*.

## Orthodox Christians or Catholics

Throughout their history the Assyrians professed two religions: the earlier of them was Assurism (Assur was the highest god of the Assyrians, hence their ethnic name). In the 3rd century A.D., most of them became Christians. According to the Assyrian International News Agency, Assyrians belong to different churches: 45 percent to the Chaldean Church; 26 percent to the Syriac Orthodox Church (Jacobites); 19 percent to the Church of the East; 4 percent to Syriac Catholic Church; and 6 percent to other churches.<sup>20</sup>

In Soviet times, the Assyrians found it hard to freely profess their religions and were tacitly patronized by the Christian Orthodox Church. Today, 85 percent of those who attend Assyrian Chaldean liturgies in the Catholic church are Christian Orthodox. The first such service was held in Tbilisi in 1995 in a Catholic church, it was led by Father Benny Bethyadgar,<sup>21</sup> head of the Assyrian Chaldean Church in the Southern Caucasus. The church runs a Sunday school that teaches the Assyrian language and history of religion. There are Sunday services in Gardabani as well. In the Dzveli Kanda village, most of the population attends Christian Orthodox services; 90 percent of those who attend liturgies in Tbilisi are also Orthodox Christians.

In the past, when the Assyrians came to Georgia, nearly all of them were Catholics. Under Soviet power, there were no Catholic churches in the republic, so the Christian Orthodox Church took them under its wing; as a result, nearly all Assyrians became Orthodox Christians. Liturgies in the Catholic church are conducted in Aramaic. Today there is no church in Tbilisi with a structure and architecture suited to the Assyrian Chaldean canons.<sup>22</sup>

## Restoration of the Traditional Family Names

Genuine Assyrian family names should begin either with “Bit” (son or daughter) or “Bar” (after). Some of the Assyrians added the Russian-style “-ov” ending to their family names. (The ending appeared in their names when they moved to Georgia, which was part of the Russian Empire.) The traditional family name of any Assyrian called “Ivanov” is Bit Iukhanan (son of Johan), Akopov should be Bit Iaku. In Western Georgia, quite a few Assyrians have Georgian names ending in “-dze:” Ionanidze, Ashkashidze, Badavidze (Bit Badav), etc. The Russian ending was typical of the Greek and Azeri family names as well. In the post-Soviet period, people tended to restore their old names: Ivanov calls himself Bit Iukhanan, Badavidze, Bit Badav, etc.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See: Assyrian International News Agency [www.aina.org].

<sup>21</sup> See: Father Benny Bethyadgar, Assyrian Directory of California, 3 July, 2001 [www.atour.com/~people/20010703m].

<sup>22</sup> See: I. Chikhladze, “Benjamin Bethyadgar: vse konfessii prizvany zhit’ v mire,” *Kavkazskiy aktsent*, 1-15 July, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> See: M.K. Kobaidze, *Minority Identity and Identity Maintenance in Georgia*, Lund University, Dept. of Linguistics, Working Papers 47, 1999, pp. 149-168.

*C o n c l u s i o n*

It looks as if the Assyrian outflow from Georgia will continue. Assyrians are driven away by social and economic problems and lack of bright prospects in Georgia. The number of Assyrians will drop dramatically in the near future.

This is especially true of the Russian-speaking Assyrians from Tbilisi and Gardabani: in the last 10 to 15 years they failed to completely integrate into Georgian society because of the language barrier. The Dzveli Kanda Assyrians have successfully integrated into, or even assimilated with, Georgian society. The socioeconomic problems and the task of maintaining their identity are the two main concerns. It is becoming an uphill job for the people in a small village—they should certainly be helped by Assyrian organizations.

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