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# **Memory and Social Identity among Syrian Orthodox Christians**

**Noriko Sato**

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**Doctor of Philosophy**

**Department of Anthropology**

**University of Durham**

**2001**



**26 MAR 2002**

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# **Memory and Social Identity among Syrian Orthodox Christians**

**Doctor of Philosophy 2001**

**Noriko Sato**

## **Abstract**

The massacre of Christians in Turkey and their subsequent expulsion at the end of the Ottoman Empire created fear and hatred between the various ethnic groups which have lasted to this day. The Syrian Orthodox Christians who were expelled from Turkey are unable to construct their own nation state. Religion (Christianity) separates Syrian Christians from the nation state of Syria to which they were exiled.

This thesis examines the relationship between memory and identity of these Christians and explores the interrelationship of three aspects: 1.) how these Christians have erased memories of their close relationship with their Muslim neighbours in Turkey; 2.) how they have elaborated orally their recent past to emphasise their unity and continuity in faith, though this is contested by other evidence, both literate and oral and, 3.) how they have developed a whole new formal history for themselves based upon the supposed transmission of tradition and language of ancient Christians in Syria from whom they are claiming descent.

Their present anxiety is of their community in the region becoming extinct. Therefore, they have turned increasingly to manufacturing a past so as to create a safe ethnic identity. These Christians have turned toward classical Syriac which had a very restricted use in the past, into not just their liturgical language, but to fashion the ideological foundations onto which to base their claims as the descendants of the *original* inhabitants of Syria, instead of justifying their 'rootlessness' and being content with the concept of a 'hybridic' identity. They attempt to prove that their community has had an enduring existence in this locality and to confirm their right to the land, even though this is contested by the evidence of their refugee origin.

*To My Parents*

# Table of Contents

|                                                                                                     |           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Abstract</b>                                                                                     | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>Table of Contents</b>                                                                            | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>List of Tables and Figures</b>                                                                   | <b>10</b> |
| <b>Acknowledgements</b>                                                                             | <b>12</b> |
| <b>Introduction</b>                                                                                 | <b>14</b> |
| <b>Chapter 1. Attempts at Establishing an Ethnic Identity:<br/>The Case of Qaḥṭānīya Christians</b> | <b>26</b> |
| Introduction                                                                                        | 26        |
| Written Accounts on the 1915 Massacre                                                               | 29        |
| Memories of the Massacre in 1915                                                                    | 34        |
| Third Parties as Mediators                                                                          | 36        |
| The History of Qaḥṭānīya                                                                            | 38        |
| Restoring the Linkage to their Land                                                                 | 46        |
| Conclusion                                                                                          | 51        |

|                                                                                                    |           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Chapter 2. Reconstructing History for Community Unity:<br/>the Case of al-Mālkiya</b>           | <b>54</b> |
| Introduction                                                                                       | 54        |
| The 1915 siege of Āzakh                                                                            | 57        |
| Miracles in the Church of the Virgin in al-Mālkiya                                                 | 62        |
| Dedication to the Virgin                                                                           | 68        |
| Crisis of Identity                                                                                 | 72        |
| Internal Tensions                                                                                  | 78        |
| Conclusion                                                                                         | 79        |
| <b>Chapter 3. Concealment Through Display:<br/>Ethnic Identity among Urfalli Syrian Christians</b> | <b>82</b> |
| Introduction                                                                                       | 82        |
| Refugees or Original Inhabitants?                                                                  | 84        |
| Forgotten Memories of the Community                                                                | 88        |
| Memories of Community Unity                                                                        | 92        |
| Community Activities and National Politics                                                         | 97        |

|                                                                                                         |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Syria as their Home                                                                                     | 100 |
| Conclusion                                                                                              | 103 |
| <b>Chapter 4. Changes in Marriage Ceremonies: Some Reflections on Problems in the Urfalli Community</b> | 107 |
| Introduction                                                                                            | 107 |
| Problems of Contemporary Marriage                                                                       | 109 |
| Transformation of Marriage Rites and its Ideology                                                       | 112 |
| Current Problems in the Syrian Orthodox Christian Family                                                | 125 |
| Conclusion                                                                                              | 131 |
| <b>Chapter 5. Transformation of Marriage in Qaḥṭāniya</b>                                               | 135 |
| Introduction                                                                                            | 135 |
| Marriage Choices among Syrian Orthodox Christian Villagers                                              | 138 |
| The Ideology of Marriage                                                                                | 143 |
| The Perception of Kinship Relations<br>– The Case of Local Arabs in Jazirah                             | 147 |
| Emigration and Changes of Marriage Practices                                                            | 150 |
| Who can be Godparents?                                                                                  | 160 |

|                                                                                                                                   |            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Conclusion                                                                                                                        | 165        |
| <b>Chapter 6. Choir Activities in Three Communities</b>                                                                           | <b>169</b> |
| Introduction                                                                                                                      | 169        |
| Syrian Orthodox Hymns                                                                                                             | 170        |
| The Community in al-Mālkiya                                                                                                       | 172        |
| The Community in Qaḥtāniya                                                                                                        | 176        |
| The Christians of St. Ephreim Church in Aleppo                                                                                    | 183        |
| Conclusion                                                                                                                        | 193        |
| <b>Chapter 7. Syrian National Identities: The Syrian Orthodox Version<br/>versus the Identities fostered by the Syrian Regime</b> | <b>196</b> |
| Introduction                                                                                                                      | 196        |
| The Development of Syrian Orthodox Christian Identity                                                                             | 197        |
| Identities fostered by the Regime                                                                                                 | 199        |
| Syriac-Aramaic as Original Unifying Language of Syria                                                                             | 206        |
| Descent-Genetic Origins: The Syrian Version of Biblical History                                                                   | 209        |

|                  |     |
|------------------|-----|
| Conclusion       | 217 |
| Conclusion       | 221 |
| References Cited | 231 |

# List of Tables and Figures

## Figures

|                                                                                                         |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Figure 1. Migration of Syrian Orthodox Christians from Turkey                                           | 15  |
| Figure 2. Number of Pupils of in al-Shahīd Ibrāhīm Masa’uud<br>Junior High School in al-Mālkiya in 1998 | 76  |
| Figure 3. Kinbg Abjar the Black of Edessa<br>at St. George’s Church, Aleppo                             | 102 |
| Figure 4. Marriage of Musa’s Family                                                                     | 141 |
| Figure 5. Proportion of Christians to Muslims in the School                                             | 152 |
| Figure 6. Yacoub’s Marriage                                                                             | 159 |
| Figure 7. Qarībo Relationships                                                                          | 165 |
| Figure 8. Hymn Aīran-rmokh, ‘I will exalt Thee’                                                         | 189 |
| Figure 9. The Development of Semitic Alphabets:<br>The Syrian Christian Version                         | 207 |
| Figure 10. Abraham’s Aramean Origin                                                                     | 210 |
| Figure 11. The Aramean Land                                                                             | 215 |

Figure 12. A Parade Celebrating Victory in the October War  
against Israel 230

Figure 13. A Baptised Baby and her Godmother 230

Figure 14. The Qahtāniya Choir 230

**Tables**

Table 1. Changes of Urfalli Languages 93

Table 2. Differences of Musical Practices between  
the Three Communities 181

Table 3. Changes of Common Languages  
in Syrian Orthodox Christian Communities 226

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## Introduction

“Between 1914 and 1918 my church lost almost 100,000 faithful through fighting, and nearly the same number were uprooted from their homeland. It was a tragedy for a small church that had lived for centuries in that region to be the innocent victim of ignorance, fanaticism and inhuman acts. The continuing memories of suffering from wounds that have not healed will keep historians busy throughout the third millennium.” (Mor Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, Archbishop of Aleppo, 2001: 8)

It is well documented that the collapse of the Ottoman system in Turkey resulted in massive population movements, massacres, re-appropriations of resources, and the creation of fear and hatred between the various ethnic groups which have lasted to this day. It was not only the Armenians and the Greeks who were expelled from Turkey; in fact, there were many others, including the subjects of my research, the Syrian Orthodox Christians (*Suriyān qadīm/orthodox*s). As far as religion is concerned, Syrian Orthodox Christians compose a section of Oriental Orthodox Christians as do Armenians and Greeks. The massacre of Christians in Turkey and their subsequent expulsion at the end of the Ottoman Empire hastened and symbolised the fact that the former Islamic political *millet* system, in which people of different religions coexisted, had now ceased to function.

At the time of the First World War, the Young Turks adopted Pan-Islamic policies in order to gain the support of the subjects of the Ottoman Empire against the Allied forces and started to persecute Christians in the Empire. In the eastern provinces, where many Syrian Orthodox Christians lived, the suspicion toward Armenians, who might have been sympathetic to Russia who tried to invade into Turkish territory from the north-eastern part of the Empire, was linked to Pan-Islamism (Allen, 1974: 224-5). The Muslim population concluded that the Christian subjects were infidels and should be persecuted. Contemporary Syrian Orthodox Christians refer to the attacks on the Christians in 1915 by Turks and their Kurdish agency as a governmental “order” (*furmān* in Arabic) and year of the “sword” (*seyfō* in Syriac). These terms emphasise the drastic change in the political situation, which meant that the Christian population in Turkey was no longer permitted to live with their Muslim neighbours, and so the Christians were obliged to emigrate to other parts of the Middle East and to Western countries. This resulted in a massive diaspora of the Middle Eastern Christian minorities.

Syrian Orthodox Christians were obliged to leave their homeland. This thesis will concern these Christians who emigrated from three different areas in Turkey to Syria. The whole of the community of the Syrian Orthodox Christians in Urfa emigrated to Aleppo in 1924. The Christian refugees from ʿTur ‘Abdīn and Āzakh in the eastern region, settled Qaḥṭāniya and al-Mālkiya in the Syrian Jazirah. It do not mean that all the contemporary Syrian Orthodox Christians in Syria have refugee origins, even though majority of them are descendants of refugees from Turkey. Similar to the Armenian and Greek Orthodox Christians who had had population in Syria before the 1915 massacre, there had been a small number of Syrian Orthodox Christians in the areas of Damascus, Homs, Aleppo and the north-eastern Jazirah adjacent to the present Syrian-Turkish border, before the massacre.

**Figure 1.** Emigration of Syrian Orthodox Christians



I became interested in the Jazirah region, which contained a large Christian population, before the Gulf War when I worked for a Japanese archaeological expedition in the area of Eski-Mousul, in the Iraqi Jazirah. 'Jazirah' in Arabic means both an island and the area between the two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. The border between Iraq and Syria politically divides the Jazirah into two parts. Although the Iraqi authorities did not allow members of our team to have personal contact with local people, I became aware as we worked with the local people that they identified themselves and classified others in terms referring to which ethnic group they belonged – for example, Kurds, Turkmen, Yazidis, Assyrians and Arabs. Even though my command of Arabic at that time was insufficient to fully understand the actual relationships between the workforce, I became aware that relationship in the workplace was a formal one. The various ethnic groups did not interrelate after work. Political tension seemed to exist between the various groups. This appeared strange to me, as a Japanese coming from a society which was largely homogeneous. Therefore, I wished to research the reasons for the tension between the various ethnic groups.

Although my interest in the Jazirah region had increased, due, in some part, to the political turmoil in Iraq, following the Gulf War, I chose the Syrian Jazirah rather than the Iraqi Jazirah as a place for my fieldwork. I carried out my research in the early 1990s in a local Arab Muslim village near Qāmishli, which was the largest town in the Syrian Jazirah. I had the opportunity to make friends with Syrian Orthodox Christians in Qāmishli, which contained a large number of Syrian, Armenian and Assyrian Christians. There were many occasions when I was able to meet and establish friendships with Syrian Orthodox Christians. They described the characteristics of other ethnic groups in the area in relation to their experiences between the 1910s and the 1930s when they were forced to emigrate from their villages in Turkey to Qāmishli. I was unable, at first, to understand why they often referred to the events in the past in order to define present relationships between the various ethnic groups. To investigate this matter, I started research, in 1997, for my Ph.D. on 'memories' of Syrian Orthodox Christians, in particular those of the 1915 Christian massacre in Turkey and enforced emigration of the Christians to Syria afterwards. These 'memories', I later became to realise, were reconstructions of events rather than what had actually taken place.

Among Syrian Orthodox Christians, religion, i.e. Christianity, is an essential element for defining their social identity as well as their religious one. Therefore, they asked about my religious affiliation in order to give me an identity. I told them that my family had a Buddhist origin. Many people whom I met had little knowledge about Buddhism and, therefore, questioned me about Buddha. My explanation about Buddhism was derived from my understanding of the emic perspectives of the universe and my personal experiences of Buddhist religious practices. I took the remarks of Klass (1995: 49-55) into my consideration that an *assumption* taken for granted in a given society was not always shared by people in another society. I adopted his way of explaining the origin of Buddhism, which reflected an emic perspective of South Asian society, but was oriented towards a Western audience, who did not share the same social *assumptions* as people in the South Asia. I told Syrian Orthodox Christians that Buddha had promoted a social and religious movement in which he challenged Brahmanical Hinduism which taught that one's position in the social-structural ladder reflected the result of one's behaviour in a previous life time. Each individual was held to possess *karma*, i.e. the burden of good and ill, which determined into what strata of the social ladder you were reborn. Buddha claimed that 'desire' was the root of problems which created the social hierarchy and the cycle of rebirth for the individual soul. Therefore, each person should strive to relinquish 'desire' and by doing so they became free from a cosmically decreed hierarchy of positions. I tried to imply a similarity between Buddha's religious movement and that of Jesus by referring to it as a new religious movement in pursuing salvation of one's soul. Syrian Orthodox Christians interpreted my description of Buddhism and understood it from their emic perspective; Buddha was a *nabī* (prophet). Their *assumptions* prevented them from comprehending the universe about which Buddha speculated.

Syrian Orthodox Christians, however, reached to the conclusion that I believed in God and Buddhism has no direct link to Christianity, Islam and Judaism. This understanding made it possible for me to maintain a different position from both that of Western and local researchers. My position was religiously neutral. In Syria, as a religious identity is directly related to one's affiliation to a particular social and ethnic

group, it means that I have also maintained a politically neutral position. This is related to the following fact. Syrian Orthodox Christians have been built up an image of Japanese through their access to its material culture, such as automobiles, audio equipment and electric power stations constructed with Japanese financial aid. Syrian Orthodox Christians flattered me by saying that 'Japanese has an electric brain (*mokh electron*)'. This implies that they have constructed the image of Japanese through its material products and have little experience of contact with Japanese, whereas their views on the French, British and Americans, have been generated by their direct and indirect relationships with the Westerners since the beginning of the twentieth century. Their view of the Japanese was friendly but superficial. Syrian Orthodox Christians did not have a preconception about Japanese which made it easy for me to be accepted by their communities.

I attended, frequently, Syrian Orthodox Church services and their community's educational and social activities organised by its Centre for Religious Education. I was impressed by its Sunday Mass in which religious performance and active participation of the Christians emphasised communication with the divine power. I learnt the symbolic meaning of each part of the services and found that the liturgy, which Syrian Orthodox Christians believe has been maintained for over thousand years, was used as a means for proving the continuity of their community. Jarman argues, in his study of Irish communities, that bodily movements in ritual can be formalised and are readily repeated over the years, while the meanings generated in the ritual are often more elusive and diverse (1999: 173). In the case of Syrian Orthodox Christians, the rituals are a means for re-enacting the past and drawing history into the present and, therefore, changes would deprive them of the means of confirming the historical continuity of their community. One is able to observe their social dynamics, in which the Christians are required to establish their local identity as a community, which has been existed since ancient times in Syria, in order to secure their position in Syrian society.

The one of the reasons for establishing a 'homeland' in Syria is that the Syrian Orthodox Christians, unlike the Jews, Armenians and Greeks, do not have an accepted home territory, and so are unable to construct their own nation state. For the Jews,

Armenians and Greeks, their homeland is very much defined by a sense of religious belonging and a distinct geographical space. Religion (Christianity), by contrast, separates Syrian Christians from the new nation state of Syria to which they were exiled. Therefore, Syrian Christians have been required to adopt strategies for affiliating with and differentiating themselves from the wider Muslim community in Syria. First, they have to explain how their group has forged their unity despite of the difficulties of adjusting to their new situation. Second, they attempt to construct an identity that places them as the original inhabitants of Syria, despite the fact that these Christians were originally refugees (outsiders).

The area I am dealing with has been a kaleidoscope of different groups and changing identities across time. There were various religious groups (Churches) in what is present-day Syria: Armenian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox and Nestorian. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century they were exposed to missionary proselytising from Rome and many gradually became the dominant intellectuals and traders of the area (Hourani, 1970: 55-7). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestant activities from the US and Britain grew. Syrian nationalism was partly developed by Christians. The people I am dealing with originated in three parts of present-day Turkey (Tur'Abdīn, Āzakh and Urfa) and they had a Patriarchate in Tur'Abdīn. Western visitors called them Assyrians, and this is indeed what migrants from the area to the US in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century called themselves. They did not call themselves Syrian Orthodox Christians. The terms Assyria/ians had been introduced by the British as a political-geographic concept. Theologically it has been claimed that they are Jacobites, but as this is a disparaging term (doctrinal memories seem to last long in the Middle East), they are not fond of using it to describe themselves. Ordinary people do not even know the meaning.

It is difficult to discover when this group started using the term Syrian Orthodox to describe themselves and thus locate themselves in Syria, but it was certainly after their forced migration to Syria. Yet, the term in English translated from the Arabic collapses two meanings, although it would be one that would please them by locating them so unambiguously within Syria. An inhabitant of Syria is called a *Sūrī* (pl. *Sūrīūn*). Whilst they together with all other groups (including Muslims) are *Sūrīūn* (inhabitants

of Syria), they also call themselves, and are called *Suriyān* (i.e. members of a religious community) but which stretches beyond the borders of Syria. The two terms are distinct, but whilst *Sūrī / Sūrīūn* is unambiguously a citizenship term, the term *Suriyān* is flexible and even a slippery one. It is used by Muslims to mean just the 'Syrian' Orthodox Christians, but is also used by Christians to denote a distinct ethnic and religious group (of Christians also including the Nestorians) who may not be *Sūrīūn*. Although there is a slippage between the two terms, there is a difference between them which translation into English cannot capture. The term *Sūrīūn* (citizens of Syria) is an incorporative term. In the hands of others, the term *Suriyān* (Syrian Christian) can be a distinguishing term and even a separating one. I shall try to show this ambiguity between being in and out, which constitutes one of the most fundamental anxieties and ambiguities of 'my' group.

Since Halbwach's pioneering work on memory (Halbwachs, 1992), anthropologists have long shown understanding and awareness of the importance of memory, as is reconstructed by the present population to promote their group's identity. The role of amnesia in the construction of group identities has been less well researched. It is usually the State which controls what people remember or conveniently forgot through their educational system (e.g. Anderson, 1983). My study is involved with a very distinctive example of the relationship between memory and identity. One of the aims is to examine how Syrian Orthodox Christians remember only the time when they lost their homeland, while they appear to have forgotten their life in the past before their expulsion/departure from Turkey. Those who are from Urfa erased even the memory of why their ancestors were obliged to leave their hometown. The memory which is retained and related refers to their journey from Urfa to Aleppo, their place of 'exile'. In the case of the Christians who emigrated to the Jazirah region, they retain memories of the 1915 massacre and describe how they cooperated with one another and fought the Turkish and Kurdish forces, who tried to deprive them of their rights and how the hostile relationships with their neighbouring population emerged.

However, forgetting or conveniently forgetting the past and breaking off past association has not been found to be always the case with the ex-Ottoman Christians.

According to the study by Pattie of Armenian emigrants in Cyprus, they have kept a closer relationship with their Turkish neighbours than the Greek majority in society and speak Turkish, even though many of them were expelled from Turkey (1990: 148-9). By contrast, Syrian Orthodox Christians tried to create boundaries between themselves and both Turks and Kurds who used to be and now are their neighbours in Syria and have striven to integrate themselves into Syrian society which is predominantly Arab.

Autobiographical accounts by Armenians describe their life in Turkey before the persecution and massacre as their idealised past (e.g. Bedoukian, 1978; Kherdian, 1988; Ohanian, 1990). These survivors who had similar or worse experiences than Syrian Christians now identify their Turkish past and its folk traditions as a symbol of their Armenian identity and try to keep these popular memories alive with the sentiment of nostalgia. Many of those who published such accounts are immigrants in the West and, due to the course of assimilation and intermarriage which threaten their Armenian identity, their past lives in Turkey becomes a representation of their Armenianness (Gans, 1996: 148-9). Syrian Christian immigrants in Europe look for remnants of their former villages in Turkey and recognise their fellow Christians who still live in the eastern Turkey as symbols of their own identity (Hollerweger, 1999). However, they never mention details of their past lives in Turkey. It is not because these emigrants are only interested in finding their origins, but also there are other reasons which prevent them from talking about their past. It is worth to pay attention to the way that Syrian Christians in Syria have attempted to 'forget' their folk songs, languages, traditional costume and marriage customs which they practised in Turkey.

Despite the fact that there is some documentary and historical evidence of the Turkish past of these Christians, these accounts play no part in the construction of group memories. By contrast, most of the cases encountered by anthropologists and oral historians show that popular memories are kept alive, but the written record is silent. In other cases, folk traditions, which they assume to be handed down from their parents, in fact have a literal origin (Alexiou, 1974). Syrian Orthodox Christians have erased memories and folk traditions due to the fact that these memories reveal a past in which they shared these social and cultural traditions with their Muslim neighbours.

Memories of their life after settling in Syria focus on the distinctive features of the threatened communities who cooperated in a struggle for power and rights and for affiliation into Syrian society. However, political alliance turned to be a risky choice for them to take in order to integrate themselves into society. Three examples are shown here:

First, Syrian Orthodox Christians were affected by Syrianism which acknowledged rights of small groups and which developed an ideology of a nation that was a synthesis of Arabs and other indigenous inhabitants of Syria as an alternative ideology to Arab nationalism in the 1930s. Due to the party's setback in 1955, Syrian nationalist supporters in Syrian Orthodox Christian communities were arrested.

Second, many men in the Jazirah region worked for the French as soldiers during the Mandate period. This threatened their existence. Resistance to French military presence and Syrians' request for independence intensified in 1944 (Mardam Bay, 1994: 128-30). At the time of the French army leaving Syria in 1946, Syrian Christians were afraid that they might be identified as French collaborators and be attacked by the rest of the population. The same happened to the *Harkis* in Algeria when the French left. In fact some villagers were attacked and lost their land and property.

Third, massive State repression stimulated the politicisation of the population. This produced an adverse reaction from the government at the beginning of the 1980s. Political alignments with oppositional forces brought serious damage to the Syrian Orthodox Christian communities. Many Christians believe that the arrests by the government of Syrian Christian intellectuals in 1980 was a retaliation on the dissidents, which was symbolised by the massacre of a large population in Hama in 1982. This incident enhanced their anxiety about living in Syria. Due to the Government's continued repression of Christians, emigration has continued and this decrease in the Christian population has become a serious problem for their communities.

A lesson for outsiders in the Middle East, and one that the Syrian Orthodox Christians know only too well, is that political alignments can change with amazing rapidity leaving the small and the powerless particularly vulnerable. Religious identity and political alignment are therefore weak or risky strategies in the construction of ethnic identity or as strategies for incorporation into the wider society.

Memories of earlier disasters of political alignments enhance their anxiety when they face a critical situation. A good example of this is that of the Syrian Orthodox Christians who fled from the area of Āzakh, Turkey, to the Syrian side at the time of religious intolerance and later settled in the town of Qāmishlī in the Jazirah region. In the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991, they feared that the Christians may be attacked by local Kurds, who had supported Iraqi Kurds. Kurdish anti-government uprisings in Iraq did not win support from the Western coalition, and the Iraqi president Saddam repressed the insurgence (Dannreuther 1991/2: 60-1). The Christians' anxiety consisted of two interrelated facets: 1) The Kurds regarded them as having a particular political alignment with the Western forces; and 2) the exalted anti-Western feeling among the Kurds might have encouraged them to attack the Christians. Memories of political alignments in past, which had resulted in creating vulnerable situation for them, as well as memories of their struggle with Kurds, enhance the anxiety of these Christians about their current political position. Several Kurdish attacks on Christians were reported by Syrian Orthodox Christian men. The Christian women were afraid of Kurdish attack and stored foods in their basements, which might become a shelter if they were attacked by Kurds.

The Christians' reactions to the situation suggests that their memories of the religious intolerance in 1915 has a great influence on their understanding of the contemporary political issues and their relationship with Kurds. The women who told me about their storage of foods were the descendants of the survivors of the 1915 siege of Āzakh by Turks and Kurds. The memories of the besieged Christians in Āzakh, who stored food and arms in the basement of their houses and used them as their shelters, are the matters of reference when the women prepared for Kurdish attack at the aftermath of

the Gulf War. These experiences also contribute to reconstructing memories of the 1915 incident. The fear created by both their memories and present situation is increased.

Their anxiety increasingly turns to a manufactured past to create a safe ethnic identity. Syrian Orthodox Christians have turned to classical Syriac, which had a very restricted currency in the past, into not just their liturgical language, but also as the ideological foundations onto which they base their claims as the descendants of the *original* inhabitants of Syria. Syrian Orthodox Christians believe that Syriac-Aramaic, as a written language as well as a spoken language, like Arabic today, used to be one of the most important unifying cultural features of people in the Fertile Crescent. Ancient Syria had extensive communities which were linked by the use of Syriac-Aramaic. Syrian Orthodox Christians seek Syria's origin in pre-Islamic Syria. Syriac-Aramaic, i.e. the language of Syrian Christians, which has been maintained until the present day, is used as an argument to prove Syria's cultural origin. By using the ancient language of Syria, Syrian Orthodox Christians can claim membership of the present community of Syria. In post modernist discussions, ethnic identities cannot be based on solely cultural 'roots', because diaspora communities have, over time, become 'hybridic' due to outside and host state influences and its nationalistic ideals (e.g. Hall 1992: 256-8). Instead of justifying their 'rootlessness', Syrian Christians wish for roots and a pre post-modern identity.

The following three chapters analyse the relationships between memory and group identities by referring to the cases of three Syrian Orthodox Christian communities in Syria. Despite the fact that the Christians in these communities had similar experiences at the time of the religious intolerance in 1915 and afterwards, memories of experiences at the time of their expulsion, which members of each Syrian Orthodox Christian community share, are selected for their contribution to constructing the Christians' own and their community's identities. The memories of persecution and expulsion are reproduced within the framework provided by oral accounts of their recent past. These memories reveal their groups to be small and vulnerable. Such group identities have led to promoting movements for manufacturing their past and for

supporting their contention that they are the descendants of the 'original' inhabitants of the area where they now live in Syria.

Chapters of 4 and 5 deal with their 'memories' of transformation of marriage and its ceremonies and discuss how they have 'forgotten' their old marriage customs in an attempt to establish identities in urban Syrian society. The changes of marriage customs reflect the problems inside their communities and reveal the fact that the Christians themselves create problems which make their social position weak.

Chapter 6 compares musical practices in three different Syrian Orthodox church choirs. Singing Syriac hymns is the only means for the laity, who have a limited knowledge of classical Syriac, to confirm their identity as the heirs of the ancient traditions of Syria. The rural communities in the Jazirah region are traditionalists and stress the 'original' form of their music as a proof of the endurance of their communities in Syria. By contrast, the choir in urban Aleppo is more innovative in their musical expression, which they share with Christians from other denominations. Their musical performance conveys an idea of unity of Middle Eastern Christians. As they are anxious about their existence as a small group in the big city of Aleppo, this ideology attracts them to a unity which may contribute to strengthening their social position.

Chapter 7 examines how Syrian Orthodox Christians construct their own version of Syrian national identity. As a government fostered identity emphasises the unity of Syrian Arabs who share Arab Islamic traditions and language in the territory of historical Greater Syria, Syrian Christians, who are ethnically not Arabs and are also not Muslims, feel that their rights in Syria are not acknowledged. Syrian Christians seek the source of Syrian identity in pre Islamic Syria. Syriac-Aramaic language traditions are crucial for maintaining that descendants of the original inhabitants of Syria share the ancient Syriac-Aramaic traditions of Syria. The Christians express their sense of national identity in common with the other groups which compose the Syrian nation state.

# **Chapter 1**

## **Attempts at Establishing an Ethnic Identity:**

### **The Case of Qaḥṭānīya Christians**

#### **Introduction**

The Syrian Orthodox Christians, after the Ottoman religious intolerance in 1915, emigrated from the mountainous area of Ṭur ‘Abdīn in southeastern Turkey to the Qaḥṭānīya area of Syria Jazirah, which is located in the foothills of ‘Abdīn mountain. The incidents which occurred in 1915 are regarded by the Christians as one of the most crucial events which obliged them to leave their villages. The events are recounted through both written accounts and narratives. Since over eighty years have already passed, only a small number of people who had experienced attack by the Ottoman army and its Kurdish agencies are still alive. Many people in the community of Qaḥṭānīya are aware of accounts of the survivors and their family members who had heard of the experiences of their parents and relatives, and also have read books on the 1915 massacre and the modern history of Turkey and Syria. The received stories of the massacre are remarkable enough to be retained and reproduced as collective memory of the community.

As Halbwachs has noted, collective memory is transformed in response to society’s changing needs (1992: 75). The collective memory of the events in 1915 does not limit itself to the stories told by the survivors and recorded in books, but are reproduced in the form which is common among contemporaries. However, this does not explain why Syrian Orthodox Christians choose to ‘forget’ their past before the 1915 massacre. There are historical accounts written by Western travellers which report on the situation of these Christians at the eve of the massacre. Both oral and written accounts produced by Syrian Christians do not mention any incidents which were reported by foreigners, even though their intellectuals are able to access these written sources. In fact, the written accounts play no role in constructing the memories of

Syrian Orthodox Christians. They try to conceal their memories of the eve of the 1915 massacre when the West attempted to make use of the Christians in order to interfere in the regional affairs of the eastern provinces, where Christians lived. The Christians do not want to take the risk of being regarded as supporters of the Western powers. Christians understand that the foreign interference in Syria raised anti-Western feelings and encouraged Syrian/Arab nationalism among Syrians. In order to secure their position in Syrian society, Christians become silent.

Memories of the 1915 massacre reconstructed by contemporary Christians can be distinguished from the written accounts of the events. The accounts came from various sources: Those written by these Christians, prior to the mid 1980s; records of the survivors collected by academics and diplomatic reports of eyewitnesses of the 1915 massacre. These describe the Christians as helpless victims. These accounts present ideas of how the Christians were separated from the Muslims by the Ottoman policy.

By contrast, the narratives, which I collected, display their group as a united Christian entity. At the end of 1990s, narratives of the event shift their focus to the story of how these Christians barricaded themselves in a church which was being besieged by Muslims at the time of the 1915 massacre. The physical boundary, signified by the Christian church building, became a symbol of their reaction to political oppression. They describe the conflict as a 'war' between different ethnic groups. There is a message that the Qaḥṭāniya Christians attempt to convey through their reconstructed memories of the massacre. They portray themselves not as a group to be identified by their religion, but as an ethnic group united in faith. They do not maintain that it is religion (Christianity) which separated them from others in the population, i.e. the Muslims, because it might isolate them from Syrian society. Rather, they emphasise that Turkish policy and Kurdish ambition persecuted 'us' in the guise of religion. In their narratives they present ideas of how their social identity has been created by personifying the experiences at the time of the massacre (cf. Sant Cassia, 1991: 2-3).

As many Syrian Orthodox Christians immigrated to the area of Qaḥṭāniya and have lived there for eighty years, their memories of their lives in the recent past in this

area have become enriched through time. Although the accounts take the form of talking about personal experiences, individuals tend to interpret their experiences by referring to regional, social and political situations. In this way, they have developed their own manner for recounting their personal as well as their community's experiences. As Fentress and Wikham have noted, local incidents are remembered because of their power to legitimate the present (1992: 88). Memories of experiences in the past, which Syrian Orthodox Christians in this area share, are selected for their contribution to constructing their own and their community's identities. When memories are articulated, what the Christians can share with their community members is not the personal experiences, but the framework within which the personal memories are reconstructed as part of their community's history.

As stated earlier, to identify themselves as a community unified in faith could isolate them from the wider society of Syria. Therefore, they choose an alternative strategy. They attempt to identify themselves as a group threatened by both political and tribal forces. They maintain that why they have been threatened is not because of their faith separating them from others, but there are social and political reasons. Their reconstructed memory of their lives in the Qaḥṭāniya area convey this message and emphasises that their history is that of their fighting against Kurdish tribes who tried to confiscate their land and oppression by state politics.

Their social anxiety has been increased due to their population decrease caused by their emigration, Kurdish expansion in the region and the potential threat of state persecution to their ethno-nationalist movement, as the regime massacred dissidents under the guise of religious persecution in the early 1980s. They are afraid that their group is labelled by religion, which may give political authorities opportunities to oppress Christians. In order to establish a secure position in this situation, they present themselves as an ethnic group, whose origin is Syria, even though many of them have emigrant origin. They attempt to manufacture a linkage between themselves and former Christian inhabitants in this region in order to prove the endurance of the community in this locality, even though they retain little memory before the 1915 massacre.

## Written Accounts on the 1915 Massacre

Although the Qaḥṭānīya Christians do not mention that their ancestors had benefited from the Ottoman political reform, Christians were allowed to renovate churches, which had not been permitted earlier. Parry, who travelled to Ṭur 'Abdīn in 1892, reports that many churches in Ṭur 'Abdīn were “built or restored during the last thirty years, which have seen no more of this kind than several hundred years previous” (Parry, 1895: 189). Bell who surveyed and photographed the churches and monasteries in Ṭur 'Abdīn in 1909 and 1911 reports the structure of the Monastery of Mār Malke, where some of the Christians stayed in 1915 in order to defend themselves from Turkish and Kurdish attack. She says, “its appearance is that of a little fortress... The remarkable thing is that much of the monastery had recently been repaired or rebuilt” (Bell, 1982: 38-9).

The political and social background on the eve of the 1915 massacre has to be mentioned. After the Ottomans were defeated in the war against Russia in 1878, Westerners, in particular the British, were keen to control Russian intrigues in eastern Anatolia, where the Syrian Orthodox Christians lived. The British counsels or vice-counsels serving in the major cities of the eastern provinces justified their interference as support for the Ottoman government's reforms for increasing central control and guaranteeing the security of local Christian inhabitants. Such a movement seemed to have resulted in the increasing tolerance of Christians in eastern provinces.

However, as Joseph has mentioned, such a movement and the increasing tolerance of the local Christians had created resentment by Muslim neighbours (1983: 87). Fortress-like church buildings, Western interference into regional affairs and exaltation of the Pan-Islamic sentiment contributed to fermenting anti-Christian sentiment among the Muslim population. However, as the government was unable to control the eastern region, Kurdish Agahs had increased power as agencies of the government. When the government tried to integrate the Empire by propagating Pan-Islamism and started to oppress the Christians, Kurds were therefore the main political force for persecuting Christians in the eastern region. Contemporary Qaḥṭānīya

Christians keep silent about the incidents at the eve of the 1915 massacre in order to conceal their tactical alignment with Western powers. However, they recognise that the change in the Ottoman policy immediately made their situation vulnerable. They may have learnt that a political alignment is risky (their alignment with anti-government movements of workers and professionals resulted in bitter experiences of government persecution in the 1980s) and, therefore, may conceal the memories of it. The small group of Christians were unable to control the political situation, when political changes were rapid and unpredictable.

To investigate the distinctiveness of oral accounts by Qaḥṭāniya Christians, they need to be compared with written accounts of the 1915 massacre. Three different types of the written accounts need to be examined: 1.) Accounts written by Syrian Orthodox Christians who are survivors of the massacre; 2.) the survivors' accounts collected by academics; and 3.) documents of Western diplomats. As Dubisch has noted, different meanings are assigned to events by different categories of people. Therefore, culture itself is never static or determinate, but necessarily always in process (1995: 158-60). Each category of authors assigns meanings to the massacre according to the authors' culture, roles and political purposes. However, these written accounts have certain characteristics in common. They all seem to emphasise that the Christians became helpless victims of religious persecution.

The historical accounts which were written by Syrian Orthodox intellectuals who were survivors of the massacre are examined first. They described the violence and cruelty of the Kurds and the Turkish army towards their community (Gorgis, 1987: 111). Among these accounts, Al-Qasārā fī Baknāt al-Nsārā (the major Christian catastrophe) and Genhe de Suryāyē de Tur 'Abdīn (an atrocious event for Syrian Christians in Ṭur 'Abdīn) are the most popular books among the Syrian Christians in the Jazirah region and those in Qaḥṭāniya. Many educated Christians seem to have read these books, as they recount the history of the massacre in Ṭur 'Abdīn and the Syrian Jazirah region. For example, al-Qasārā fī Baknāt al-Nsārā reports the massacre of Syrian Orthodox Christian villagers who lived at the foot of Ṭur 'Abdīn, which is now incorporated into Syria, i.e. the area of Qaḥṭāniya. The Ottoman government organised regiments under

the command of the three Kurdish leaders, in order to attack the Christians. The order was sent to other Kurdish Agahs (i.e. tribal leaders). Then, the Agahs started to kill the Syrian Orthodox Christians in the villages which were under their control. For instance, the Agha, Maḥmūd 'Abbās, with the help of fifty soldiers killed his Christian villagers in Dūger. In other four villages, Syrian Christians were also attacked and many of them were killed by Kurdish Agahs and their followers (Ārmāla: 465-6)<sup>1</sup>. Al-Qasārā fi Baknāt al-Nsārā repeatedly maintains that the evil order given by the Ottoman army sanctioned the Kurds to attack the Christians. In his description the author focuses on Kurdish brutality when they killed their Christian neighbours under the name of religious persecution.

The author of Genhe de Suryāyē de Tur 'Abdīn was an eyewitness of the massacre and a priest in Qaḥṭānīya. He has a similar view as Ārmāla and further analyses why the Kurds committed such atrocities.

Many ask the reasons for the massacre. I say, Muslims. As long as they are in the world, they kill, plunder and take captive Christians, whenever they have the opportunity. Especially these two peoples, Turks and Kurds, who are famous for their harshness and oppression with or without reason. ...In every century there are such catastrophes committed by them (Henno, 1987:1).

Henno states clearly that the Syrian Orthodox Christians have repeatedly suffered from terrible religious persecutions. He maintains that the evil attributes of the Kurds and Turks generated hostile relationships between them and become a marker for distinguishing Kurds and Turks from Christians. Here, moral values are used as ethnic markers. It is uncertain whether his idea was shared by these Christians at the time of his writing the book, in the mid 1980s, or if he initiated it into the community. In the present political state, Turks are no longer their neighbours, even though the Christians still feel resentment of both Turks and Kurds. At the end of 1990s in Qaḥṭānīya, the Christians have a view similar to that of Henno and maintain that due to evil Kurdish characteristics, they used the opportunity of religious persecution to attack Christians. However, the contemporary Christians regard the massacre as a social conflict between themselves and Kurds rather than a religious persecution.

A Christians' view toward Kurds is expressed in the following proverb, in which the Christians differentiate Kurds from local Arabs. It says that "we eat with Kurds and stay at the place of (literally, sleep with) local Arab (*naakul ma'a Kurād wa inām ma'a Shawāya*).” The Christians maintain that Kurds treat Christians fairly well, but they are two-faced. "If we stayed in their place, they may betray us and stab us in our backs. Local Arabs (*Shawāya*) are not civilised, as they do not know how to cook for their guests. However, they are simple but trustworthy.” This proverb is validated by the accounts of evil intent of Kurds, who attacked the Christians at the time of the massacre, even though they were neighbours. Such Kurdish characteristics are regarded by the Christians as a cause of disturbing relationships between neighbouring groups and are not related to their faith. By contrast, local Arabs are Muslims, but they do not have evil characteristics. A book about the Christian history in the Jazirah, written by a Syrian Orthodox Christian, even mentions political support by local Arab tribes, such as the Ṭai tribal confederation, who helped the Christians to settle safely in the Jazirah after the 1915 massacre (Malgē, 1995: 38).

The survivors' experiences at the time of the massacre in 1915, which academics collected and recorded, provide these Christians with the view of how they were helpless victims of the Ottoman policy (e.g. Yonan, 1989: 280-284). The government of Young Turks tried to obliterate the Christians in Turkey. Records of memories of Syrian Christian survivors (Yonan, 1996: 22) as well as a study of Armenian memories of the 1915 massacre by Miller and Miller (1993: 40-1) suggest that Young Turks plotted to diminish the possibility of Christian resistance as: 1.) Many young Christians conscripted to the Ottoman army were treated badly, and many died due to hunger and exhaustion; 2.) Early in 1915 the government confiscated arms possessed by Christians; and 3.) The local leaders of the Christian population were imprisoned, tortured or were killed. As possibilities for Christian resistance had reduced, then the Turkish army, which collaborated with Kurdish agencies, started to attack the Christians. The miserable situation of Syrian Christians is recorded by Jestrow (1994:75-9) who interviewed a survivor from Mlaḥsô near Diyarbakr in Turkey, whose village was surrounded by Muslim villages.<sup>2</sup> Many Christians lost family members, and the survivors, who fled to

Diyarbakr, suffered from hunger and starvation. These authors seem to stress the injustice of the massacre, <sup>3</sup> and the government plot of Christian termination. By contrast, contemporary Qaḥṭānīya Christians show little concern for how the government planned systematic persecution of Christians. They stress that military operations by Turks and Kurds provoked a reaction by the Christians who fought back.

Report of the 1915 massacre which were those written by British and American diplomats at the time of the First World War, convinced Western readers, such as Western politicians and humanitarian activists, that the Ottoman government had devised a cunning plot to eliminate the helpless Christians. These diplomatic sources tend to view the Christian massacre as Armenian genocide, who at the time constituted the majority of the Christian population in eastern Turkey. These reports suggest that most Armenian Christians, such as those in Zeitoun and Urfa, had been loyal to the government. However, they decided to hold against the government because of its 'cunning procedures', when they realised that the elimination of their communities by the government was the fate in store for them (Toynbee, 1916: 71; Sarafian, 1994: 24-5, 31). Contemporary Qaḥṭānīya Christians do not think their ancestors, who barricaded themselves in churches, were prepared themselves for an approaching death-struggle. Christians, who were to be attacked or eliminated, united together and fought against their enemies. Despite of their difficulties, the Christians kept their independence and an equal position to that of Turks and Kurds.

Many Christians in Qaḥṭānīya have read written accounts of the 1915 massacre and books about Syrian Christian history. However, the written accounts have little influence on the reconstruction of their memories of the massacre. It is no wonder that the aims of diplomatic documents and academic writings which record survivors' fears and exhaustion are different from that of oral accounts given by the Qaḥṭānīya Christians. Their memories are related to construction of their identity in this locality. It is inevitable that their experiences in this locality have affected their views about the massacre.

## Memories of the Massacre in 1915

Since over eighty years have passed, many people who have had direct experience of the massacre have either died or emigrated. The survivors to whom I spoke had experienced it as children. Others whom I interviewed were those who remember the experiences and stories after being told them by their parents, relatives and neighbours. A shared framework which constitutes the narratives of the massacre among the Qaḥṭāniya Christians is that their ancestors barricaded themselves in churches and Turks and Kurds laid siege to them. They present their memories in an identical structure so as to constitute a part of their community's history.

The following are brief accounts which I summarised from the narratives of the 1915 incidents by Qaḥṭāniya Christians. The first story of the village of 'Ain Ward which is presented here was collected from people who heard of the experiences of their parents and relatives at the time of the massacre.

The Ottoman soldiers marched to the village of 'Ain Ward which was located in the east of Midyat. Many Kurdish tribesmen followed them. The villagers braced themselves for the attack by the Turks and Kurds. Then the leader, i.e. Gallo Shābo, went to Midyat to tell the Syrian Christians there about the situation in 'Ain Ward. A beacon was the signal which notified the Syrian Orthodox Christians of the start of the war between themselves and the Muslims. Many Syrian Orthodox Christian villagers whose villages were located in the east and northeast of Midyat were afraid of being attacked by the Turks and the Kurds. When they received this message, they joined the villagers of 'Ain Ward in order to defend themselves. 'Ain Ward lay on the top of a hill and therefore, it seemed difficult for the Turks and Kurds to attack the village.

The Christians barricaded themselves in a village church (it might have been the church of St. Hūshābo). A Kurdish Agah and his tribesmen thronged in front of the church gate. Gallo Shābo tried to dissuade the Agah from attacking them. The Agah said, "we will abduct your girls and women". Gallo and the Christians were furious with the Agah and killed him. Then the Kurds said, "we will break into the church tomorrow at seven o'clock."

After the morning prayer, the Kurds broke down the church door which the Christians had propped up with wooden poles. But when the Kurds entered the courtyard, they could not find the Christians. The Christians under the command

of Gallo had hidden in the upstairs rooms surrounding the courtyard and started to attack the Kurds. Eighty Kurds were killed there.

There were 150 families living in the village at that time. In all, including people from other villages, 2,000 people had been in 'Ain Ward for two months during the siege. No one can tell how they fed such a large number of people. Although the Turks and Kurds had besieged the village for two months, the Christians did not surrender<sup>4</sup>. The government tried to negotiate with the Christians in order to end this war. The Christians requested the government officials to appoint Sheikh Fatahallah to the mission. This Kurdish Sheikh of al-Muḥallamīya, which was located to northeast of Midyat, was believed to be a descendant of a Syrian Orthodox bishop who had been converted to Islam. The Christians thought that this sheikh might be trustworthy. The sheikh negotiated with the government officials and they promised to withdraw their army and to leave the village.

The second story is of the Monastery of Mār Malke where Christians retreated from their villages and gathered there when the beacon in Midyat notified the Christians of the start of the war between Christians and Kurdish and Turkish forces. The monastery stood alone in the south of Midyat. The Turkish army and Kurdish tribes besieged it for a year. The following is the narrative of Ellia, who was a survivor and was ten years old at the time of the siege.

Due to the shortage of food and water for two hundred Christians, in the limited space of the monastery many people became sick. Even though some of them slipped away from the monastery at night and stole food and water from villages nearby, many people in the monastery died. My mother also became sick during the siege and died. Despite such critical conditions, the monastery did not fall to the Muslims. Sheikh Fatahallah mediated between the Christians and the Turkish officials, and then, a peace settlement was arranged.

As over eighty years have passed since the siege, the memories of the details of the sieges may be hazy. However, the ways they described the event are remarkable for their clarity. In the written accounts, the Christians in Midyat were afraid of murder and arrest and therefore fled to 'Ain Ward (Yonan, 1996: 21-4). Those in 'Ain Ward who held out against Turks and Kurds are described as those whose elimination was the fate in store for them. By contrast, the Qaḥṭānīya Christians have a propensity for looking at the event as the 'war' between the Christians and the Kurds. Kurds are described as those who took advantage of the persecution and took the opportunity for eliminating the Christians and stealing their land and properties. The Christians in 'Ain Ward even tried

to protect the honour of their fellow Christians in the church and killed the Agah, since he had tried to ruin sexual honour of the women. The Christians were described socially as equal to Kurds. The event is depicted as an ethnic conflict rather than a Christian persecution.

The Syrian Orthodox church is used as a symbol which differentiates 'us' from 'them'. Although Muslims besieged the church, they could not set foot inside it. The church is seen as a sanctuary which only these Christians were allowed to enter. They fortified themselves with the thought that divine love is supposed to have saved them (Wilson, 1983: 24-9). Divine miracles, i.e. guarding and defending these Christians, are not expressed in their narratives as a demonstration of the interrelationship between God and themselves. The description given by these Christians suggest a fundamental belief in eminent divine justice that protects the Christians from falling to their 'sinful enemies'. The Christians use the characteristics of their enemies, which are depicted as 'evil'. It may be possible for people to interpret that food and water were given by God to individuals who were faithful Christians. However, it is not possible to say that the Christians who died because of starvation and illness during the siege, like Ellia's mother in the Monastery of Mār Malke, were not faithful enough to be saved. A crucial point in their historical account is, therefore, that during this 'war' against the Turks and Kurds, these Christians co-operated and strove for a collective salvation, i.e. for their community as a whole, rather than individual one. The community was united in faith (cf. Meijers, 1984: 149).

### **Third Parties as Mediators**

A key figure in their accounts is the Sheikh Fathallah of Muḥallamīya in Ṭur 'Abdīn. As a descendant of a Kurdish ex-Syrian Christian and a powerful leader in the region, it was important for Syrian Orthodox Christians that he undertook the role of a peacemaker. The Syrian Orthodox Christians in Qaḥṭānīya describe the ancestor of this sheikh, who was both a religious and tribal leader in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century, as being responsible for saving his congregation at the time when they suffered from famine. They needed to eat whatever they obtained. Despite this critical situation, the Patriarch

would not allow them to eat dairy products and meat, during the fasting period of Lent. For the sake of the congregation, the ancestor of the sheikh, i.e. the Syrian Orthodox bishop, converted to Islam in order to allow them to break fast. The Qaḥṭānīya Syrian Orthodox Christians give the bishop a positive commitment to honour his descendants. Due to this action undertaken by the ex-bishop, his descendant, the Sheikh Faṭḥallah, was regarded symbolically as a person who was able to cross the boundary between the Christians and the Muslims and negotiate with both sides. For the Qaḥṭānīya Christians, existence of the mediator is important in order to claim that they negotiated with the government and the Kurds on the equal terms.

By contrast, historical accounts of conversion of Muḥallamīya Syrian Orthodox Christians to Islam, which are written by the Syrian Orthodox Church authorities, do not endow Muḥallamīya ex-Christians with any heroic character. The Church does not admit mismanagement by the Patriarch Ismāīl, which led to the loss of the Muḥallamīya congregation. The late Patriarch Ephreim Barsoum maintains that the Patriarch Ismāīl admonished some Christians, when they broke the fast. This made the situation more serious as it became a social problem as the dispute spread. Therefore, the Patriarch excommunicated them. Furthermore the late Patriarch tries to deal with the story of the conversion being brought about by the famine as a 'legend', which is believed by the Syrian Orthodox Christians in Ṭur 'Abdīn (Barsoum, 1963: 353-4).

The bishop Ishaq Sakka mentions the conversion as happening in the fourteenth century (1983: 51). This statement implies that the story of the famine and conversion, which the Christians from Ṭur' Abdīn believe occurred in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, is not related to historical fact. The local Christians challenge such a historical view of the conversion. For example, Ibrāhīm Horī who lives in Qāmishlī, whose town is located next to Qaḥṭānīya, conducted research on Syrian Christian history of Muḥallamīya. He suggests that the conversion took place at the time of the Patriarch 'Abdallah al-Mardīnī in 1643. For the Christians in Qaḥṭānīya, the story of the conversion which brought about by the famine is a historical fact. This history endows the ancestor of the Sheikh Faṭḥallah with honourable character and, therefore, is essential for creating a putative link between

themselves and the Sheikh. Due to such linkage, the Christians agreed to accept him as a mediator in the peace talk at the time of the massacre.

However, the role played by the Fathallah's family at the time of the conversion is never mentioned in the writings of the Church authorities. Writings by Church authorities convey a message in which the power and authority of the Church is pronounced. As clergymen try to deny the Qaḥṭāniya Christians' belief in the relationship between the famine and the conversion of Muḥallamiya Christians to Islam, and the role of the Fathallah's family, their accounts have had no influence on the reconstruction of the memories by the Qaḥṭāniya Christians.

The Qaḥṭāniya Christians have created an 'authentic' past for themselves, in which written accounts have little influence. The memory of the 1915 massacre recounted by the Qaḥṭāniya Christians suggests that the Kurds failed to exterminate these Christians, due to the unity of their community in faith, which they believe was the key for their survival. They fought against oppressive Kurds, and struggled in defending their rights. The conflict ended due to the mediation of a powerful third party. Moreover, unconditional withdrawal of the Turkish and the Kurdish forces was a sign that their power and injustice which had oppressed these Christians had now broken down. Memory of the 1915 events contributes to establishing their identity as an ethnic group united in faith.

### **The History of Qaḥṭāniya**

Through writing about memories of these Christians in Qaḥṭāniya, I can distance myself from the accounts given by the Syrian Orthodox Christians. These accounts show how these Christians view the history of their area and, therefore, I cannot treat them as objective, i.e. describing factual incidences on which their actual history can be based. As I spoke to many people and recorded their historical accounts, I am able to say that their memories, which I present here, is not merely narrators' individual accounts, but a shared view of the history among these Christians. What I have been attempting to show

is their collective ideas and how they present their memories by imposing their own understandings of the historical incidents that they experienced. This also has an effect on shaping oral accounts on the 1915 massacre.

The narrators are the “authors” of “the local history” and are also “actors” who speak for themselves and imbue their emotions into their accounts. My task is to understand and interpret the meanings which emerged from their narratives. However, there is a problem here. My understanding may not be identical to the narrators’ aim (cf. Rosaldo, 1989: 49-50). When I present in this chapter what these Christians say about their history, the material is the product of my transcription and translation of their narratives in Arabic into English and my attempting to categorise them. What I aim is to show that my anthropological writing presents the meanings that the narrators are trying to convey in their dialogue. I shall adopt an analytical framework that acknowledges the metaphorical interpretation in order to fill the gap between what is said and what is meant. This metaphorical approach “proceeds from the literal to the figurative, and in so doing creates meaning” (Moore, 1986: 75). Their history is a repository for delving into the meaning behind what the Syrian Orthodox Christians mean in their narratives, which are affected by their social position and political situation.

The Qaḥṭānīya Christians have a refugee origin and, therefore, need to establish a secure position in Syrian society. Their reconstructed memories of the 1915 massacre identify them as an ethnic group unified in faith. They emphasise that due to changes of the political situation in Turkey, their relationships with their neighbouring population had deteriorated and, consequently, ethnic conflicts emerged. They are afraid that their group is labelled by religion, which easily gives political authorities and their Kurdish neighbours opportunities to oppress Christians. Therefore, they strive to establish not religious, but social identity. Their historical narratives of their recent past in Qaḥṭānīya maintain that Christians had been oppressed by Muslim tribal sheikhs not because of differences in religion, but because of the latter’s economic and political ambitions. They stress that although they were liberated by the third party, e.g. the Alawi government of the president Asad, there is a possibility that the small group of Christians might be persecuted in the guise of religion. Thus the past is reconstructed

from their current political stance and its complex historical details are reduced into a basic plot structure (Zerubavel, 1995: 8). Now I shall relate a famous story known by these Christians in Qaḥṭānīya and investigate why they consider it so important for claiming their identity.

After the Turkish defeat in the First World War, they lost their sovereignty over Syria. In 1920, the Syrian Congress proclaimed the independence of Syria. However, this was rejected by the British and French. At the Council of San Remo, the Mandate for Syria was assigned to France. Consequently, the French advanced to the east, i.e. the Jazirah region.

The Syrian Orthodox Christians describe the murder of a French corporal, Rogan, which changed French tribal policy and triggered tribal domination over the Christians. The story of this incident does not reflect exactly what occurred in 1923 and 1926. This is a reconstructed version of the historical incidents given by the Christians in Qaḥṭānīya.

Some tribesmen ambushed and waited for the French corporal Rogan in Bayāndīr near Qaḥṭānīya on his way back from 'Ain Duwal where the French started to construct a new army base. Since his party was small and isolated, the tribesmen succeeded in killing Rogan. A sister of Rogan visited Qaḥṭānīya in order to bring his remains back home. She got on a plane to look at the place where his brother was killed. Then she had a meeting with a Kurdish tribal Agah, called Hajo.

Sister: "You used to take the Turkish side [against the French]."

Hajo: "The Turks attacked my tribe. I do not support Turks. As we moved to Qaḥṭānīya, we are on your side."

Sister: "You are like my brother [who dedicated to his life to France]."

There are different views among the Syrian Orthodox Christians about who murdered Rogan. Some say that local Arab tribesmen killed Rogan and blamed the murder on Hajo. Others say that Hajo issued orders to kill Rogan. Whether the Arabs framed Hajo, or whether he committed the actual murder, this incident shows that tribal leaders resisted French tribal policy.

Hajo, who was one of the important Kurdish Agahs in Ṭur ‘Abdīn, tried to expand his power by collaborating with Turkish officials. Since the 1915 massacre Syrian Orthodox Christians in Ṭur ‘Abdīn had been hostile to Hajo who had attacked Christians. The relationship between Hajo and Turkish authorities deteriorated (Syrian Christians are unable to explain why the relations between the two became strained) and Hajo told the Syrian Orthodox Christian leader, ‘Atte, that he was ready to make peace between his tribe and Syrian Orthodox Christians who supported ‘Atte. It seemed to be a military threat by the Turks which instigated the alliance between Hajo and ‘Atte. They left Ṭur ‘Abdīn with their followers for Mt. Sinjār, which was occupied by Syrian Christians and Kurds, and then moved onto Qaḥṭānīya where they tried to establish their influence. For Syrian Orthodox Christians the murder of the French Lieutenant manifests the French failure to control the tribes. French policy, which relied on their own officials to administrate tribal affairs, failed to control the tribal sheikhs in the region. The incident at Bayāndīr is an example of how a tribal sheikh, Hajo, was successful in manipulating this situation and was able to manifest his influence on regional politics. The Christians recount that due to the political turmoil, the French were obliged to change their tribal policy. The French introduced a policy of appointing powerful tribal leaders, such as Hajo, to administrate this large and remote area. Since the 1920s, the Mandate government needed to appoint tribal leaders and thus incorporated regional politics into national politics (Frederick, 1975: 151). The Christians consider that Hajo showed his power by manipulating regional politics and the French had to acknowledge Hajo’s leadership. The change of the French policy led to tribal domination over the Christians.

Christians present further evidence of the change of the French policy. They maintain that at the beginning of the Mandate in Qaḥṭānīya the French tried to punish the Kurdish Agahs, such as Hajo, who attacked local Christians at the time of the 1915 massacre. The French favoured the Agahs who had helped the Christians escape from attacks by Turks and Kurds. For example, the Christians recount that the Kurdish Agah Ṣārūkhān helped Christians escape to the Monastery of Mār Malke at the time of the 1915 massacre and therefore was entitled to be treated as a Pasha by the French (the Syrian Orthodox Christians do not remember the name of the Kurdish tribe of which

Ṣārūkhān was a leader). The Christians suggest that the French tried to favour this tribal leader who had not collaborated with Turks at the time of the Christian persecution, but failed due to the plot of Hajo who murdered Ṣārūkhān. It was a manifestation by Hajo of his influence on both tribal politics and regional affairs.

The change of French tribal policy is symbolised by the meeting of Hajo and the sister of the murdered Lieutenant, who was described as a representative of French authority. Hajo promised to support the French Mandate and to be responsible for peace and order in the region. As a reward, the French gave him administrative power. The French offered Hajo the right to own nineteen villages and have a monthly subsidy (according to the Syrian Orthodox Christians, it was twenty Turkish gold Liras).<sup>5</sup> As the indirect administrative policy became effective, the characteristics of tribal leadership were altered. In the tribal structure, a tribal leader was one among equals. However, under this new French policy, privileges were given to tribal leaders who served the French and the new policy made them dominant figures in the region. The change in French policy made it possible for Hajo to expand his personal power based on the government support. According to Christians, the Kurds took advantage of the political turmoil and confiscated Christian lands. The following case proves their belief. Even in 1998, twenty Syrian Orthodox Christians whose ownership of land had been acknowledged by the French Mandate in 1934, but had been occupied by Hajo asked the present government to return their land (2,000 *dwānam*, approximately 200 hectares).

This reconstructed history, which is represented by the story of Hajo, is different from written accounts given by the French. The comparison between oral and written accounts emphasises the message which the Christians try to convey through the story. According to the French historical records, we find that the Christians generated the story by relating two major incidents which occurred in 1923 and 1926. The French Mandate force arrived at the Jazirah region in 1922 and tried to advance to the east. In 1923 Kurds, who were agents of the Turkish army and resented the French, attacked the French at Bayāndir (Béhedour) (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Beyrouth Carton no. 413, n.d.: 8). Although the Christians mention the murdered lieutenant as the French

corporal Rogan, he may be identical to the Lieutenant Regard, who was murdered at Béhedour (Prezezdziecki, 1936: 5).

In the official French accounts, Hajo cooperated with Turks in raiding Béhedour against the French (Dilleman, 1979: 53). However, it was not Hajo who murdered the Lieutenant, but another Kurdish Agah, 'Abbas. He murdered the Lieutenant Regard, as a retaliation against the latter's killing of his brother (Prezezdziecki, 1936: 5). The French punished the Agah by confiscating some of his village lands (Van Bruinessen, 1992: 99).

Dilleman explains that in 1926 Hajo betrayed the Turks and killed Turkish soldiers and that this obliged him to pledge loyalty to the French Mandate in order to secure his position in the Syrian Jazīrah (1979: 53). For his personal gain, in 1926 Hajo ordered his agent to kill his rival Šārūkhān by abusing his position as a security guard of the Syrian-Turkish border (ibid.: 54).

These written records suggest how the Christians combined incidents occurred between 1923 and 1926 and manufactured a story to explain how the collaboration between tribal figures and political authorities created a situation which made the Christians vulnerable. According to the written records, the murder of a French Lieutenant did not affect French tribal policy. Hajo was described as a figure who sought personal gain and put the regional situation into turmoil. In fact the French was not successful in controlling the region, but people who were stationed in Qaḥṭānīya and wrote reports might have tried to defend their position and not to expose their inability to act. Therefore, it may also not be possible to say that the written records reflect historical truth. However, it is obvious that the Christians speak for themselves. The comparison between oral and written accounts makes it clear what the Christians try to do through this story: The reason why they had been threatened is not due to their religion, but due to the changes in the government policy and its collaborators. A similar political structure is also depicted by them in the narratives of the siege in 1915. Memories of different incidents have reconstructed in a similar way to emphasise these points. They give *political* rather than *religious* or ethnic persecution accounts.

Agricultural land is, to this day, the main capital resource of the region. The time of the agricultural boom in this region coincided with the period of tribal expansion. Confiscation of land by tribal leaders has therefore political and economic importance in the history of this region. Syrian Orthodox Christians, whatever villages they lived in those days, shared the experiences of being afraid of losing their land to the tribal leaders. Some of the Christians were peasants and paid tribute to Hajo. Others, who disliked working for Kurds, worked in the territory of the local Arab sheikhs. Since many Syrian Orthodox Christian villagers moved into Qaḥṭānīya between the 1970s and 1980s, they settled down together there. Stories of the domination of tribal leaders were represented by that of Hajo's dominance in Qaḥṭānīya which became a shared historical knowledge among Qaḥṭānīya Syrian Orthodox Christians. Once they settled down in a single place, i.e. Qaḥṭānīya, accounts of the Christian villagers' experiences in the past now became told in a similar form. They were reproduced as a simple story. Hajo becomes the symbolic figure of a powerful tribal leader.

Tribal domination ended when the Ba'ath party introduced agricultural land reform in 1963 and when President Asad strengthened central government control. The Christians mention that the Hajos were unable to retain power, due to the confiscation of land by the government. National politics no longer gave the Kurdish Agahs privileges. Consequently the importance of tribal sheikhs in regional politics decreased and Kurdish control over the Qaḥṭānīya population ceased. The Syrian Orthodox Christian peasants obtained the right of lease-holding the land confiscated from the tribal leaders. However, many of them were still poor.

In the 1970s, the development of the national oil industry provided job opportunities in the National Oil Company in Rumeilān, near Qaḥṭānīya. Many Christian peasants who got jobs in the company and moved into Qaḥṭānīya from where the company provided bus services for the commuters. The Qaḥṭānīya population gradually increased and economic opportunities developed. The Christians did not miss out on such economic opportunities and former peasants started to be engaged in urban occupations, such as mechanics and shopkeepers. The more the town of Qaḥṭānīya provided job opportunities, the more Syrian Orthodox Christian villagers emigrated to

the town. Political and economic liberation was brought to these Christians by the Alawi regime.

Even though the tribes no longer oppress them, the Christians fear that Kurds may once again dominate the region. At the end of 1990s, they realised that the Kurdish population in the area of Qaḥṭānīya has increased and, consequently, many villages were occupied by them; whereas the Syrian Orthodox Christian population in villages had dramatically decreased due to their emigration to urban areas.

Moreover, many of the urban population then started to emigrate to Europe, and this movement reached its peak after the Hama incident in 1982. At the beginning of the 1980s, there was a big trend towards opposing the government's economic restrictions. The Qaḥṭānīya community contained many workers in the Rumeilān oil company and a few professionals, both of whom were dissatisfied with the economic policy. The government took decisive action. Some of them were arrested. Then, the regime showed what happened when the dissidents were retaliated. The regime destroyed the market in Hama, which was the centre of anti-government traders, who had collaborated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and massacred people in the town. This massacre must have terrified the Syrian Orthodox Christians in Qaḥṭānīya. What Christians learnt from the incidents were: 1.) That they take a big risk of being persecuted if they are involved in political activities; 2.) that the present regime may use religion again as a tool to justify a massacre, similar to that of the Turks who massacred Christians in 1915. Even at the end of 1990s, they are still afraid of government retaliation due to the reason that many Christian professionals in the Jazirah try to trace their ethnic origin of Syrian Christians going back to ancient Assyrians who had controlled the region. This ethnic identity implies their having a territorial demand. Many Syrian Christians think it is dangerous, because of the regime's harsh characteristics.

## Restoring the Linkage to their Land

Syrian Orthodox Christians feel threatened due to a possibility of government persecution and expansion of Kurdish population in the area. Christians look for a way to establish identity in order to secure their position. They look at the fact that Christian villages at the foot of ʿTur ‘Abdīn, which are located near to the border between Syria and Turkey, have been occupied by Christians long before the border was fixed. Christians are, therefore, the original inhabitants of the region and their rights to the land should be protected. Syrian Orthodox Christians attempt to re-establish a connection to their villages, where many of the villagers have emigrated, and prove the continuity of their community. To renew the relationship with village saints is a crucial means for maintaining the land associated with their village territory. The importance of such patronage further indicates that the Qaḥṭāniya community is unified in faith. Therefore, they believe that they need to restore their village churches and their relationship with the local saints who might admonish them for neglect. Restoring their relationship to the local saints is a means for tracing their Syrian origin, which Christians believe contributes to establishing a safer identity in this locality.

First, I shall examine the case of Gergshamo, where sixty Syrian Orthodox Christian families used to live, but now all of them have emigrated. Many village houses have already been demolished. Only the family of a former Syrian Christian landowner refurbished their house for their visit to the village. There are three Yazidi refugee families who fled from Mt. Sinjār in Iraq in 1983 and who occupy houses and a school for former villagers. The village church is dedicated to St. Quryaqus. The former villagers talk about their relationship to this Saint.

When we lived in the village, we used to sit in the courtyard of our church and chat. Often in visions, we saw St. Quryaqus sitting with us. A family took their deaf and dumb boy to the church and spent a night there. During the night, the family were woken up by someone knocking on the church door. They found that the boy opened the door and talked to St. Quryaqus. It was a miracle performed by the Saint. Since we left the village, we do not often have a vision of the Saint. This must be the sign of his sorrow. He feels we neglect him.

They believe that receiving messages from the village's revered saints is an attestation of the faith. These saints give Christians favours and provide miracles, such as healing diseases and removing physical handicaps. Such favours are the proof of their close relationship with their local saints. Former villagers are anxious about losing their ties with St. Quryaqus and his favours. The village church was the place which had mediated their communication with the Saint. His patronage and favour were given to the people who were devoted Christians and attended this local church. The narrative is a coded way of saying that nothing cements the relationship between the Saint and the former villagers since they gave up their land in the village. When they live outside the village and stop attending the church, the church loses its congregation as a collectivity, and the Saint no longer protects the villagers and gives special favours (c.f. Christian, 1972: 66, 74-5). The reconstruction of the church is a way of restoring the relationship with the Saint, and, at the same time, maintaining their connection with the village.

The reconstruction of the St. Quryaqus church was completed in September 1998. The Bishop of the diocese acknowledged this reconstruction and a local priest promoted it. The village landowner, as a member of the village congregation, donated money for the reconstruction, and the former villagers welcomed this project. The Syrian Orthodox Church believes in strengthening the connection between the Qaḥṭāniya congregation and the village through official participation in restoring the relationship with the Saint. The Qaḥṭāniya Christians interpret the intention of the Church authority to bring people back to the village: "if there is a church in the village, people will visit." They value the renewal of the relationship between themselves and the village, since it enhances regional identity to coalesce the Qaḥṭāniya Syrian Christians. As this official promotion of a reconstruction project is a parish one, it is not only the former villagers, but also other local Christians who consider this matter of collective interest. Their relationship with the Saint acts as a symbol of their connection with their territory, which will prevent from it being violated by Muslims, mostly Kurds, since the Christians believe that their relationship with the Saint, associated with the village, legitimates their right to the land.

Their territorial concern is expressed in the case of St. George's church in the village of Drējīk. This village used to be occupied by Assyrian (Nestorian, or East Syrian) Christians in the 1930s. As the government reallocated them to the Habūr basin, Yazidis settled in the village. The construction of St. George's church is related as follows.

'Ashu Malge, a Syrian Orthodox Christian from Qāmishlī lived in Lebanon and one day he had a dream of St. George, who told him: "Build me a church in Drējīk ! It will be a place where you can stay." First, 'Ashu did not follow the instruction being given to him in the dream. The vision appeared once more and then, he decided to visit Drējīk and look for the place where St. George's church used to be. He discovered the foundation stones of the church which was in ruins having collapsed after the Assyrian Christians left. He built a church on the same site in 1973 and dedicated his life to the Saint. He spent most of his time, until his death, in the church.

Although 'Ashu died in 1991, many Syrian Orthodox Christians in Qaḥṭāniya still visit this church. People know Drējīk has never been a Syrian Orthodox Christian village. However, it was a Syrian Orthodox Christian who was chosen by the Saint to reconstruct the church there. This makes it possible for the Christians to establish their association with the St. George's church. Moreover, Syrian Orthodox Christians share their identity with Assyrian or East Syrian Christians, as Syrian Christians in a wider sense, since both Christians use Syriac as their liturgical language. The Syrian Orthodox Christians maintain that Assyrian Christians use East Syriac, whereas they use West Syriac. These languages developed as different dialects of Syriac, but, originally, were derived from the same language, i.e. ancient Aramaic, which was the language of ancient Aramean tribes. Therefore, the Syrian Orthodox Christians regard both themselves and Assyrian Christians as belonging to the same ethnic group and the descendants of ancient Arameans. As all the Christians in this parish, except for two Armenian families, are Syrian Orthodox Christians, they feel they ought to reclaim their Syrian Christian heritage in this area, as well as that of the land.

They try to associate themselves with this area by referring to archaeological evidence that their liturgical language, i.e. Syriac, had been used there. One example is the St. Shama'ūn Zaitūni church in the village of Qasrūk. When the first Syrian

Orthodox Christians settled here in the 1940s, there was no inhabitant nor was there a church in this village. The church was established in 1997 by the decision of the Bishop. His decision was made on the basis of archaeological evidence which coincided with the popular belief that miracles occurred in the village. According to the villagers, they found a stone with Syriac inscriptions in the present graveyard and reported their finding to a local priest in 1948. The stone was blessed by him. The villagers also found other archaeological materials, such as coins and decorations added to an altar.

They report several miraculous experiences. The following was told by a deacon from the village.

They say that there used to be a holy man living near the village, but his name is unknown. One night I and a son of the priest in Qaḥṭāniya went up to the top of the tell (a hill where a strata of archaeological ruins have been accumulated for over thousand years) near to the village. We heard voices and recognised them as that of St. Shama'ūn Zaitūni and St. Shimūne were talking to each other (details of the conversation were not given by the narrator). After this incident, I bought ten *duwānam* (approximately 1 hectare) of land in this tell, believing that this was the place where St. Shama'ūn Zaitūni dwelled. Other Syrian Christian villagers also maintain that many years before this incident happened, a Muslim villager, a slave tribesman of the local Arab sheikh, Dahām al-Hādī, who had administrative power to control villages surrounding Qasrūk, saw a light and a holy man who was standing on the tell. This man told his experience to Dahām. Dahām thought that the tell must have had a shrine and so, removed his garage which was built on the tell. These historical evidences indicate that the village was the place where a Syrian Christian saint used to live, and where there was a church dedicated to him.

Memories of miracles and findings of archaeological church objects are combined and make it possible for them to say that Syrian Orthodox Christians are not outsiders, but have a linkage to the area going back hundreds of years. This view is supported by an official announcement of the deciphering of the classical Syriac inscription on the stone which was found in the village. The Syrian Orthodox Bishop announced that the contents of the inscription showed that the local Arab tribe, the Ṭai (Muslim), used to be Syrian Orthodox Christians. A study by archaeologists of the inscription proved that it dated back to the fourteenth century. These official statements supported the historical circumstantial evidence that the villagers presented. The

villagers claim that Syrian Orthodox Christians had occupied this area, at least since the fourteenth century and, therefore, this area has been the territory of Syrian Orthodox Christians. They share this view with the Syrian Orthodox Church authority and insist that the Syrian Orthodox Christians had been dominant in this area, and that it is proved by the historical fact that even local Arabs were Syrian Orthodox Christians. Since they believe there used to be a church dedicated to St. Shama'ūn Zaitūni, the new church also dedicated to him. This is a means for restoring the relationship between the Saint and the villagers. Since the Church authorities officially participated in the activities for restoring the links between the Syrian Christian present and the past of this area, it is not only the villagers, but also the Qaḥṭāniya congregation who is involved in this renewal. This religious movement demonstrates the continuity of Orthodoxy and the Syrian Orthodox Christian community as an enduring existence in this area. They claim that the land they occupy now has been their territory for hundreds of years.

The idea of the relationship with local saints, as a symbol of their association with their land, is deeply rooted in the consciousness of the congregation who celebrate the feasts of the local saints. Each village church in the parish has a feast of celebration. One of the largest village feasts is that in Maḥrkān on 6<sup>th</sup> May. I attended it. On the eve of the feast in the village of Maḥrkān, people start to visit the village church and some of them stay there overnight. Around nine o'clock at night, people, as well as musicians, gather in front of the church and start folk-dancing, in which they dance hand in hand. Maḥrkān does not have enough space for accommodating a large number of the pilgrims from Qaḥṭāniya and Qāmishlī, so on the day of the feast, they attend the Mass in the morning in Maḥrkān and then move to its neighbouring village, Rutān, which has a suitable space for picnic lunches and dancing. On the feast days, people not only attend the church services, but also sing Syriac folksongs and dance. This worship generates a common bond between the Syrian Orthodox Christians whose devotion to the local saint enhances their concern for their village land and whose churches are the places for their communication with the saints. Pilgrimage plays an important role in creating their linkage to the area and unity of the participants.

## Conclusion

The political threat and critical struggle against their population decrease and the Kurdish expansion influence their reconstruction of their history, and, at the same time, this 'history' is used as a means for understanding their present social situation and promoting social movements aiming at securing their position in this locality. I have tried to show how their present concerns affects their way of reconstructing their distant past. Memories of the 1915 massacre explain how they barricaded themselves in a church which became a symbol of their unity and struggle against the government persecution of an ethnic group in the guise of religion. Such historical reconstruction of the 1915 incidents is different from written accounts which describe the incidents as religious persecution and Christians as its helpless victims. To identify the incidents as religious persecution means to accept that their faith separates Syrian Orthodox Christians from Muslims. This identification makes their position insecure in the wider society of Syria whose majority are Muslims. The Christians therefore ignore the written accounts and reconstruct their own version of the 1915 incidents.

They fear being oppressed as a religious group, as they refresh their memories of their recent past in Qaḥṭānīya when the changes in the French Mandate policy caused them to be oppressed by tribal leaders and obliged them to struggle against the land-grabbing Kurdish tribes. Although they were later liberated from the oppression by the Alawi regime, this regime then massacred people in the guise of religion in retaliation against anti-government movements. Syrian Orthodox Christians are afraid of being persecuted as Christians, since many of their intellectuals support an idea of Assyrian nationalism. Therefore, the Qaḥṭānīya Christians strive to affiliate themselves to Syrian society. They regard themselves as descendants of the 'original' inhabitants of the region. The reconstruction of village churches and their emphasis on the 'worship' of their saints are attempts to prove that their linkage to the Qaḥṭānīya goes back at least hundreds of years. However, their memories before the 1915 massacre are fragmented and they are unable to prove the linkage between the present Christians and former Christian inhabitants in this region. These reconstruction movements convey the message that they maintain their right to the land of their ancestors and so they are

attempting to conceal their refugee origin and to create a safe identity that their origin is Syria.

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## Chapter 1. Notes

<sup>1</sup> The author's name is not mentioned in al-Qasārā fī Baknāt al-Nsārā, even though this was written by Ishaq Ārmāla. The Syrian Orthodox Christians in Jazirah maintain that this is due to his fear that Kurds may seek revenge on him and the government may censor his book.

<sup>2</sup> The Sultan Abdulhamid's policy used pan-Islamic sentiment to integrate the eastern provinces which were dominated by Kurdish tribal agahs. For example, in Midyat several Kurdish agahs completely dominated political power. There was no Ottoman force to restrain them. Moreover, some Kurdish tribesmen enlisted in the *Hamidieh* regiments, which were created in order to put down Armenian revolutionary activities, and gave them authority legally sanctioned by the government (Duguid, 1973: 140-7).

<sup>3</sup> Armenian survivors of the massacre also present a similar view in their biographies. They emigrated to the United States and Europe after the incident and recollected their experiences (e.g. Bedoukian, 1978; Ohanian, 1990 [1988]; Kherdian, 1988 [1979]; Hartunian, 1968). It seems to be understandable that those who were obliged to leave their country describe themselves as being sacrificed in national and regional politics.

<sup>4</sup> The Turkish policy of oppressing the Christians had continued for three years since 1915.

<sup>5</sup> Wigram mentions that one gold Turkish lira is normally worth a hundred piastres in these days (1922: 15).

## **Chapter 2**

### **Reconstructing History for Community Unity:**

#### **In the Case of al-Mālkiya**

##### **Introduction**

Al-Mālkiya is a small town which is located in northeastern part of the Syrian Jazirah region and close to both the Turkish and Iraqi borders. The only official census for al-Mālkiya's population was published in 1981 when it stood at 13,225 (Mārwīnī, 1986: 220). As the Syrian government now publishes its population census at the provincial level, the number of the recent inhabitants of the town cannot be obtained. However, the annual population growth rate in Syria is 3.2% (Economist Intelligence Unit, 1998-9: 15). In 1998, there were about 380 families of Syrian Orthodox Christians in the town. The other Christian inhabitants were 83 Armenian families and about 20 Protestant families plus a small number of Chaldean Christians, who are East Syrian Christians united to the See of Rome. Kurds form the majority of the town folk.

Al-Mālkiya was scarcely populated until the Christians immigrated to this area. Formally, the ancestors of the Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Mālkiya, lived in the area of Beth Zabday, which is the ancient name for the village of Āzakh, now Idil, in southeastern Turkey. They mention that there used to be nineteen villages attached to Āzakh, the largest village in the area, which contained the Christian population. Among these villagers, only those who lived in the six villages (i.e. Kufakh, Bābqqa, Kufakh, Khaddel, Esfes, Kafshanna) and retreated into Āzakh survived when the Ottoman army and its Kurdish allies attacked them in 1915. The Turks and Kurds besieged the village of Āzakh, which was surrounded by walls, but when the Kurds heard the sound of gunfire coming from the church of the Virgin Mary, they withdrew their troops, assuming that the Christians had an armed force there. However, according to contemporary Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Mālkiya, they were mistaken. The retreat of the Kurds subsequently gave rise to the belief that the Virgin Mary was responsible

for the impression of gunfire and did so to prevent the Kurds from annihilating the Christian community.

The Mālkiya Christians identify themselves as descendants of the survivors of the 1915 siege of Āzakh. Both direct and indirect memories of the siege emphasise that Christians cooperated during the siege and were united in faith due to a 'miracle' of the Virgin, which the present Mālkiya Christians accepted as historical fact at the time of my fieldwork in 1998. There is a similarity between the memories of the 1915 massacre given by the Qaḥṭāniya and Mālkiya Christians. For both of them, the event takes a symbolic role in explaining how the boundary between the Christians and their neighbouring non-Christian population emerged. However, the meaning of the siege to the Mālkiya Christians differs from that given by the Qaḥṭāniya Christians. For the Mālkiya Christians, the importance of the siege is to confirm how the present community and its unity in faith emerged at the time of the siege. It is a foundation myth. By contrast, the Qaḥṭāniya Christians maintain that the incident of the 1915 was a 'war' which separated them from Kurds, i.e. their neighbours. These different interpretations of this distant past event, given by these two separate Syrian Orthodox Christian communities, are affected by their recent experiences.

Some intellectuals in the Mālkiya community must have read published work on the 1915 massacre. This knowledge appears to have little influence on their oral accounts of the siege, which emphasise their salvation by a 'miracle' of the Virgin. Other details of the siege, as well as their life in Turkey before the siege, play no part in defining how the present community has emerged.

Similar to Armenians and Jews, Christians were obliged to leave their homeland and live as a small group in Syria. The Mālkiya Christians as well as their Kurdish neighbours, who emigrated from Turkey to al-Mālkiya due to Kurdish persecution, are refugees. Therefore, both of them needed to expand their influence and secure their position in the area. Conflicts occurred between them. Christians recount that Kurds invade Christian villages and their quarter in al-Mālkiya. In order to claim their right to the land, Christians used two strategies. First, they maintained that their right is

supported by the Virgin. The patronage of the Virgin enhances their feeling of unity since the community, as a collective entity, experienced 'miracles' in 1915 in Āzakh and in the 1960s when the Virgin led them to find oil springing out of an old church ground in al- Mālkiya. To promote their community's unity in faith is, however, a risky strategy for Christians. They fear that their rivals, i.e. Muslim Kurds, may have the advantage of being able to secure their rights in the area. In order to establish a secure position in society, Christians manufacture their past by claiming that a 'miracle', which made them find an ruined old church, provides them with evidence that Syrian Orthodox Christians are originally from this area of Syria.

Nash (1989) has noted that traditions provide a community with the evidence of its survival for over a long period of time, and, therefore, the continuity of its traditions encourages the community to claim the rights for their future survival. Syrian Orthodox Christians believe that the Virgin's intercession occurred several times in their history in order to save the community and, therefore, it is a distinctive tradition of the community. Maintaining memories of the 'miracles' and the current practice of demonstrating their dedication to the Virgin enable them to rationalise their survival as a distinct community, on the one hand, and on the other hand, they claim that political authorities have guaranteed their right as descendants of 'original' inhabitants in the region as the 'miracles' are acknowledged by them.

Nowadays their unity is threatened from both outside and from within. This chapter investigates their problem of how to maintain unity in the face of external threats and internal tensions. External threats are: 1.) from the Kurds who have dominated these Christians for over eighty years and are rapidly increasing their population, whereas the Christian population has been decreasing over the last twenty-five years due to emigration; 2.) from the quasi-Christian groups, such as "the Brethren" and "the Jehovah's Witnesses", who have made some local converts. This has threatened the unity of the Christian community. Christians fear that their community is gradually diminishing and they may once again be suppressed by the Kurds. In the face of these threats, the Christians have tried to gain ground by

establishing themselves as urban 'professionals' so as to differentiate themselves from the Kurdish 'peasants' (in fact they are tribal members). However, this attempt has not proved very successful due to regional economic stagnation. Identity as an urban professional is also threatened from within when they find their community members who emigrated to Europe are at the bottom of the social ladder. Moreover, different village origins and different attitudes among community members on the issue of whether or not Syrian Christians should demand their territory as an ethnic group create further divisions within the community. The only way for these Christians to establish and promote their integrity and establish a secure position in the region is to reconstruct their history and so display their community as one which has endured in the region under the protection of the Virgin.

### **The 1915 siege of Āzakh**

When I visited al-Mālkiya for preliminary research in March 1998, Yusef al-Qass who is a knowledgeable Syrian Orthodox Christian deacon and a local historian told me that his book about the oral history of Āzakh is not obtainable in Mālkiya, but only from the Church publisher in Aleppo. He seemed to be anxious about the local authorities' reaction if he should give it to a foreign researcher, as his book mentioned the Turkish and Kurdish atrocities against the Syrian Orthodox Christians in Āzakh during the time of the religious intolerance between 1910s and 1920s. Al-Mālkiya contains both Kurds and Syrian Orthodox Christians and the hostile relationship between them has lasted throughout the history of al-Mālkiya. This has a great effect on these Christians' view of their contemporary relationships with the Kurds.

I returned to al-Mālkiya in June 1998 with his book, which had been published in 1991, and was planning to meet the survivors in al-Mālkiya, whose experiences during 1910s and 1920s Yusef al-Qass recorded in his book. However, I found that many of these people had died and others had emigrated abroad. Although I asked many people in the community about these survivors, I was not able to find anyone who was

mentioned in the book. During this inquiry, I also discovered that most Syrian Orthodox Christians in Mālkiya neither had read Yusef's book nor known of its contents, or even that it was the only one having recorded the history of their community in the early twentieth century. Records written based on a study of events during the Christian persecution in Turkey are likely to be more reliable than their memories. However, Christians have elaborated the whole oral past that emphasises the importance of the 1915 event which creates unity and continuity of the community. The historical narratives which I collected are therefore heavily reliant on people's memories or what they have been told of the events from witnesses.

When I asked the community members about people who remember their past in Turkey, only a small number of elders were suggested to me. I had meetings with them and they talked frankly to me about what they remembered. I found that memory prior to the 1915 siege was no longer retrievable. However, I needed to talk about their past with as many other people in the community as possible in order to discover how the Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Mālkiya understand their past in Turkey. I tried to speak to people who visited my host family and my neighbours, and asked about their own and their family's historical experiences. As I had seen the reaction of al-Qass, the local historian, who was afraid of local government authorities, I confined myself to asking about their experiences within such family settings. The reason behind this fear of censorship was that the authorities in al-Mālkiya needed to check on the political activities of inhabitants who might be involved in subversive activities, such as Kurdish and Christian autonomist movements, across both Turkish and Iraqi borders. The conversations about their family's experiences led the Christians into describing ethnic and political conflicts between their community and their Kurdish neighbours and to their political interpretation of the origins of regional political conflicts during the 1915 siege. These pieces of information, which I collected through conversations, gradually took shape. I discovered the symbolic importance of 'the miracle of the Virgin Mary' during the 1915 siege.

Yusef al-Qass mentions that Āzakh had undergone a siege twice in 1915 (al-Qass, 1991). According to him, the Ottoman army and Kurdish tribesmen had first

surrounded Āzakh for forty days in summer, but were unable to break into it or destroy the village walls (ibid.: 57-8). However, in 1998, the Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Mālkiya could not separate this incident from a later siege in November 1915. There is a specific reason why the contemporary people's concern is focused on the second siege in November and that the first siege is forgotten. The second siege contains the image of divine intervention through which they were able to survive. Contemporary Christians mention that the Ottoman army regarded villages in Beth Zabday to be those of Armenians, among whom there were Armenian nationalists and revolutionaries, and, therefore, the government ordered the army to evacuate all the Armenians. However, it is unlikely that the local authorities did not know the population composition of the villages in the area. By stressing that this deportation order (*furmān*) was only applicable to Armenians, Syrian Orthodox Christians tried to describe how the siege was unjust and that they were the victims of: 1.) Turkish nationalism which was combined with Islamic identity; and 2.) the desire of the Kurdish Muslim population to control the region. The following is a narrative of the 1915 siege given by Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Mālkiya.

The Ottoman soldiers and Kurdish tribesmen, who were agents of the government, reached Āzakh. The Bishop of Āzakh insisted that Āzakh was a village of Syrian Orthodox Christians and had no Armenians. Despite the efforts of the Bishop, who hosted government officials and repeated to them that the Christians were obedient subjects of the Empire, next day the army started to attack the Christians. The latter used the basements of their houses, where they stored up a large amount of food and arms, for shelter and also returned fire. Some of these men slipped over the village walls and stole guns from the dead soldiers and supplied these arms to their community. Due to the heavy attack and overcrowded conditions (Christians from other six villages in the region took refuge in Āzakh and, therefore, each house contained around thirty people), the Christians were terrified and soon became exhausted.

Dozens of Kurdish tribesmen heard shot of cannons coming from the direction of the church of the Virgin Mary. They recognised that the shots were deliberately targeted on the Turkish and Kurdish sides. The Turkish commander requested a meeting with the Christian leaders and suggested investigating the church. The Christians flew a white flag and invited the officials inside the village gate. The officials said to the Bishop and the community members, "you should hand over the latest model cannon to the government as the proof of your obedience." The Bishop replied: "We do not own a cannon. You can search the village if you wish." Although the officials searched the church, they could not find any arms

in it. Moreover, there was no window in the church, from where the Christians could fire a cannon. Since the officials could not find a cannon inside the village, both Turks and Kurds believed that the fire was the work of God and that God had intervened in the war. The Syrian Orthodox Christians maintain that their enemies were afraid of God and, therefore, this miracle was the cause of the Turkish withdrawal.

The narratives of the siege emphasise how the experiences of the villagers in Āzakh, including those from the other six villages, and their cooperation during the siege, united them as a community. They were within the village walls which were besieged by the Turkish soldiers. The latter regarded all the Christians as infidels and Armenian armed revolutionists. Until this day, the Turkish government claims that the government reacted reasonably to the Armenian revolts (Poulton, 1997: 81). However, the narratives of the Syrian Orthodox Christians suggest that the Christians became victims of a retaliation, which attempted to unite Turks under the name of Islam. This movement established a crucial boundary between Christians and Muslims and, consequently, the Christians in the Empire were no longer regarded by the authorities as loyal subjects. The Christians claim that the Kurds, as agents of the army, took advantage of this religious persecution and the governmental order which allowed them to evacuate, plunder and massacre the “infidels”, i.e. the Christians. The narratives describe that under such a political situation, the besieged Christians in Āzakh, who experienced fear, hunger, thirst, disease and death, wished to stay together and support one another.

The old people in al-Mālkiya refer to the Christians in Āzakh as being in an ‘ark’, i.e. a vehicle (the walled village) which provided them with refuge from hostile forces as did Noah’s ark in the case of the Flood. Due to its association, the ‘ark’ of Āzakh is seen as a vehicle and a signifier, which supports the blessed, i.e. the Christians, from the Turks and Kurds. Contemporary Christians in al-Mālkiya wish to associate the ‘ark’ of Āzakh with the original Biblical story, and emphasise their identity as the survivors of the siege in order to unite their community members. Their experiences are associated with the symbolic vehicle, i.e. the ‘ark’ and the Āzakh’s ‘ark’ generates its own meaning, or significance apart from the original meaning (cf. Turner & Turner, 1978:143-4).

The Christians in Āzakh differed from Noah in that they were not told by God to enter into the ark to save their lives due to their righteousness (Genesis 7: 1, 1982). They did not know their fate until their enemies, i.e. Kurdish tribesmen, heard gun shot coming from the church of the Virgin Mary and then, the Turkish army commander found that the Christians did not possess the cannon. Since God did not address them, contemporary Christians interpret the situation as a case of the Virgin Mary acting as an intercessor with God to save them, as God had done for Noah. This miracle was a sign, the Christians recognised, of God imposing order upon confusion (cf. Coleman, 1987: 209). The Christians maintain that the Turks and Kurds who saw what occurred recognised this incident as a miracle, in which human beings had no power before God. The present Christians regard the Turkish and Kurdish withdrawal from Āzakh as the sign that the Virgin's protection of the Christians was acknowledged by their enemies.

As the Virgin did not communicate with the Christians nor send messages to them, they could interpret the incident in different ways. Reported incidents of apparitions and miracles of the Virgin in other parts of the world suggest that many stories about miracles spread and strengthen the belief in a site's miraculous power, and that these stories are sometimes used to achieve political purposes (e.g. Zimdars-Swarats, 1991: 31-7; Christian, 1996: 29-33). However, the contemporary Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Mālkiya share a standardised view of the 'miracle' whose importance is to confirm the patronage of the Virgin and identify their community as a social entity whose unity is derived from their shared experience of the 'miracle'. As Connerton has noted, a particular experience entails a set of expectations by virtue of which people understand current issues from the perspectives that these have the same features as those of the previous experiences (1989: 12). Present day Christians believe that their community's unity is achievable under the patronage of the Virgin even in their current situation where their neighbouring Kurds exceed the Christian population and their integrity is threatened due to divisions within the community. In discussions of ethnic identity with the Syrian Christians, Āzakh has, therefore, a meaning not only as a place of the 'miracle', but as the place from which their unity has created. Āzakh is therefore significant as a symbol for reintegrating the community.

No one in the community considers that they can have access to God's blessing by visiting Āzakh. Prayer to the Virgin is the only way for descendants of the Āzakh survivors, who immigrated to al-Mālkiya, to plead for her intercession on their behalf. They believe that strong faith (*amāna qauwī*) may make it possible for them to hold communion with the Virgin. Faithfulness, *amāna*, is an important value not only for individuals, but also for the community whose dedication to the Virgin brings her blessing to the community as a collective entity, as occurred during the 1915 siege. This belief is largely affected by the community's social and religious experiences in the recent past, which I shall discuss in the following section.

### **Miracles in the Church of the Virgin in al-Mālkiya**

The 1915 'miracle' has been recounted in its relation to the Syrian Orthodox Christians' social and religious experiences in al-Mālkiya. Their struggles and potential hostility against Kurds have never ceased throughout their history. In order to investigate how the patronage of the Virgin is important for unifying the contemporary Syrian Christian community, memories of the Virgin's 'miracles' which occurred in the recent past should be examined. Some of the survivors of the 1915 siege moved to northern Iraq, due to their fear of Kurds and Turkish authorities. Iraqi Arabs and Kurds disapproved of Syrian Christians, i.e. Assyrians (Nestorians), and other Syrian Christians, such as Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Protestant and Syrian Catholic, many of whom were refugees from Turkey and were attempting to create a homogeneous Christian settlement zone. After the British mandate in Iraq was terminated in 1932, the Iraqi army fired on Assyrians who pleaded for autonomy. Fighting followed and many Christians were massacred in 1933 (Arberry, 1969: 530-1; Nisan, 1991: 164-5). Many Syrian Orthodox Christians fled from Iraq to the area of al-Mālkiya in Syria.

Other survivors of the 1915 Āzakh siege returned to their villages in Turkey. At the time of Kurdish uprising in eastern Turkey between 1924 and 1928, the Turkish republican government oppressed not only Kurds, but also the Christian population. The

government saw the Christians as unsuitable to become 'Turkish' and tried to eliminate them (Poulton, 1997: 97). Moreover, in 1924 when the frontier between Turkey and Iraq was drawn, the former Ottoman province of Mousul in present northern Iraq was integrated into Iraq under the British Mandate, Turkish nationalists became hostile to the British. Contemporary Syrian Orthodox Christians maintain that Turks suspected Christians in Turkey as British collaborators since many Assyrians and some Syrian Orthodox and Syrian Protestant Christians in Iraq, worked for the British. The Turkish government strictly controlled Christian inhabitants in Turkey, even though the Christians in Āzakh were obedient to the government. The Christians describe British interference in the regional politics and the consequent upsurge of Turkish nationalism accentuated the differences between the Christians and the Turks. In 1926, according to Yusef al-Qass, it was on the first Sunday of Lent that 257 out of approximately 700 Syrian Orthodox Christian men in Āzakh and adjacent villages were arrested by the government (1991: 91). The men were chained together in fours and were sent to a jail in Jazirat Ibn 'Umar. Later, they were sent to Midyat and were confined in St. Simona Church. Elderly Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Mālkiya, whose fathers and family members experienced this incident, so-called *al-qafla* (the confinement), remember it due to their difficult personal experiences.

The authorities tortured the prisoners badly and did not provide them with food. Even their Bishop was beaten and died. Their anxiety was enhanced by their belief that the government might once again try to exterminate them. Some died, even though Syrian Orthodox Christians in Midyat offered these prisoners food. Syrian Orthodox Christian women came from Āzakh and other villages near there to Midyat in order to feed their men. Many of these men were set free in August, but some of the more influential members were transferred to Harput. They bribed officials in order not to be sentenced for treason. After five months, they were able to return to Āzakh.

This incident still remains as bitter personal and family experiences in the minds of the Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Mālkiya, whereas many people in the community regard the 1915 siege as a foundation for defining their origin and a means of integrating community members who share this historical experience. Some survivors cried when they recollected their desperate situation in 1915 when the Turkish army started to attack Āzakh. However, such emotional reactions are rarely shown by the

younger generations. By contrast many elders, even middle-aged people, who have indirect experiences of the 1926 *al-qafila*, talk about it as a terrible experience. Such an emotional response is related to their understanding that their suffering was caused by official discrimination against Christians in the 1926 *al-qafila* and that the co-existence of different religious and ethnic groups was no longer possible in Turkey. This increased their anxiety about living there. Therefore, they decided to move to the Syrian Jazirah, when the French Mandate constructed their army base there. The narratives of the two persecutions give different meanings to each event. The 1926 event was an incitement to their emigration and loss of their homeland. On the contrary, the 1915 siege was a sign of consolidating the community through sharing the same historical experiences.

The Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Mālkiya maintain that Turkish discrimination and the Kurdish attacks and plunders continued after 1926. At the beginning of the 1930s when the French army was stationed at 'Ain Duwar, which is located on the riverbank of the Tigris on the Syrian side and adjacent to the border between Syria and Turkey, the Syrian Orthodox Christians from the area of Āzakh moved there. They expected the French neither to discriminate between Christians and Muslims, as Turks did, nor to allow Kurds to attack them. As Kurds had massacred Syrian Orthodox Christians in this part of Syria in 1915, they did not have relatives nor land there. They needed urgently to find sources of income in order to feed themselves. Their preferred job was to work for the French as soldiers since the French provided the soldiers with ration tickets for food supplies, such as sugar, olive oil and milk. Some people opened shops in 'Ain Duwar. Many others constructed villages and settled there. There were Christians who worked for Kurdish landowners, i.e. tribal chiefs, as agricultural labourers.

Due to security reasons, the border village of 'Ain Duwar was not an appropriate place to develop as a regional economic centre. As early as the 1930s, when a barracks for the French soldiers was constructed in Derik, which is an old name of al-Mālkiya, Christians moved there.<sup>1</sup> Since Derik was a new village, it did not contain an established Kurdish population. However, the Kurdish population in Derik gradually increased due to their emigration from the Turkish side. The Kurds gradually moved into the Syrian

Christian quarter. These Christians who did not want to live with Kurds in this quarter started to construct a new quarter, i.e. Waṣṭa quarter. The Christians who lived in the old quarter gradually moved into the Waṣṭa quarter and, consequently, the old quarter became entirely Kurdish. Furthermore, increase of the number of Kurdish emigrants created conflicts between Christian and Kurdish villagers. Both of them tried to obtain agricultural land in the area, which used to be scarcely populated.

After the French left Syria in 1946, these Christians lost their protection, and so they became fearful of Kurdish attacks. Since the French took the local soldiers to Lebanon at the time of their withdrawal, the families left behind in al-Mālkiya, consisted mainly of women and children, were anxious about Kurdish raids. They shut themselves up in St. Simona's church. Nothing adverse occurred in al-Mālkiya. However, in a village near al-Mālkiya, conflicts between Kurds and Syrian Christians started and the Christian inhabitants were evacuated in 1948. The Syrian Orthodox Christians saw the imminent danger of Kurdish attack in this period of political instability. They had to defend themselves in order to ensure their survival and protect their property. It was in this situation that miracles of the Virgin occurred.

A Syrian Orthodox Christian peasant had a dream of an old sheikh indicating a spot inside the wrecked church of the Virgin in the old quarter. The sheikh said to him, "Dig here! You will find a cross and a picture of the Virgin." The peasant found a bronze cross, a picture of the Virgin and a book in Latin. He reported his findings to a priest in St. Simona church in the Waṣṭa quarter. The priest blessed them.

According to al-Qass, this incident occurred in 1953. These objects were believed to have been buried at the time of either the 1895 Kurdish attack on the Christian or 1915 massacre (al-Qass, 1993: 35). The finds discovered by the peasants in the wrecked church could be interpreted that Syrian Orthodox Christians were in al-Mālkiya long before the present population moved in. They even believe that the foundation of the church dates back to the fourth century A.D. The Christians identify themselves as descendants of the survivors of the 1915 siege of Āzakh and this reveals their refugee origin. Therefore, they need to have a means to secure their position in Syria. Memory of finding remnants of an old church is related to construction of

identity among the contemporary Mālkiya Christians. They hold that the findings prove continuity of Orthodox faith in this area; the endurance of their community in this locality for over thousand years. This religious identity has become a means for claiming that the church is proof that Syrian Orthodox Christians were the original inhabitants of this area. Therefore, they are able to claim their rights to the land. Here, the connection between their religious and social identities is established.

Due to the potential hostility by the Kurds, Christians do not want to live in the old quarter surrounded by Kurdish neighbours. They say: "We never think of Kurds as our fellowmen, even though they say the relationships between us and them are like those of brothers." Christians believe that Kurds want to establish their independence in Kurdistan and try to get support from the Syrian Christians to realise their political aims. However, the Christians consider that the co-existence of the Christians and Kurds was destroyed in the 1915 siege and subsequent conflicts between them and the Kurds, which occurred after their emigration to Syria. They believe that a clear boundary should be maintained between themselves and the Kurds. A proverb used by them denies the possibility of Christians living together with the Kurds: "If a Kurd were an apple and you put it into your pocket, you would find a hole there [because the apple dropped out of it or vanished]." <sup>2</sup> A measure Christians took in order to protect their right to the land was to reconstruct their church in the Kurdish quarter, as a claim to prior residence there.

Thus, in 1954, the board of Trustees, who were representatives of the Syrian Orthodox Christian community in al-Mālkiya, decided on the reconstruction of the church of the Virgin. The Bishop was invited to the church, and many community members attended prayers and a ceremony conducted by the Bishop before setting to work. For the Church, the reconstruction is a sign of the people's devotion. For the laity, its importance is a symbolic feature of patronage of the Virgin to the community in this specific locality. The acknowledgement of the Church authorities adds theological meaning to this reconstruction and provides a vehicle for the laity to claim the territory as theirs, i.e. that of 'original' inhabitants, by right.

Their memories of the 1950s and the 1960s suggest that Christians in those days were threatened by the Kurds. When the unification of Egypt and Syria in 1958 increased tension between Syria and Turkey, Turkish and Kurdish landowners who retained their land in Syrian side sold it to Syrian Orthodox Christian peasants who cooperated financially to buy it. The Christians maintain that Kurds took advantage of the political tension between Turkey and Syria and stole crops from the purchased land. Under such a situation, the ultimate concern of the Christians was to defend themselves from Kurds. Other 'miracles' of the Virgin occurred, which gave favours of the Christians. The narratives of the incidents describe how their community was united under the protection of the Virgin who defended their rights. The contemporary community recollect an incident where a local priest found holy oil springing out from the ground at the south-eastern corner of the altar of the Virgin's church in 1960. A vision of the Virgin is also reported (Ishaq, 1993: 57-8; al-Qass, 1991: 36, 38). This incident was told in the following way:

In 1961, city planners decided to demolish the church for a road expansion. At that time, the story of the holy oil had spread among Christians in Jazirah across boundaries of denominations and many people visited the church in order to ask for God's blessing. Syrian Orthodox priests explained the miracle to two engineers, who were in charge of the demolition plan, and tried to persuade them to abandon the plan. A bulldozer arrived in front of the church to knock down the building, but it stopped working. This was the manifestation of the Virgin's power preventing the work and supporting the conservation.

When the authorities required proof that the miracle was genuine, the congregation held an examination session. In front of a city-planning engineer, the congregation wiped the oil from the cement surface from which it sprang out and then, covered and locked the place in order that no one could enter it. After one week, the same engineer confirmed that there was no sign of anyone having entered the covered place. The community members watched the examination. The engineer unlocked the place and found oil on the surface. The engineers sent reports to government authorities about the examination and result of their scientific analysis of the oil's components. The authorities accepted the Christians' request and abandoned the demolition plan.

This historical experience shares its characteristics with the 1915 incident in which the Christians were unreasonably threatened by the Kurds and the Virgin, who was unable to let Kurdish violence go on, supported the Christians. Their memory of the

experiences in their recent past is functionally relevant to that of the 1915, in which they try to reconfirm their social identity as those who were saved and united by the patronage of the Virgin.

These series of incidents, concerning the church of the Virgin, are regarded by Christians as community matters. The relationship between the Virgin and the community was shown by the messages from the Virgin, such as interruption of the demolition work and a spring of holy oil, which were accessible to any community member. The Virgin showed a priest where to find the holy oil and this resulted in the Church authorities persuading government officials to maintain the community's right to keep their church. The negotiations between authorities of each side made the matter public. Christians maintain that the Virgin appealed to the political authorities not to eliminate her church as well as her people from the area. They understand that the 'miracle' was acknowledged by political authorities and the right of Christians as 'original' inhabitants in this area was respected. However, the report written by the engineer did not mention the spring of oil as holy nor Christians' right to the land. Therefore, it is the Christians' interpretation that the patronage of the Virgin to the community which contributed to obtaining their political rights in the area. They maintain that as the Virgin who gave support to them they were able to obtain official acknowledgement of their rights as 'original' inhabitants of the region.

### **Dedication to the Virgin**

Since their group identity is closely related to the Virgin, the community has the means for confirming their unity in social and religious practices, e.g. an annual cycle of religious feasts. The Virgin is the only saint with one exception, for whom the community celebrates feasts, such as the feast of Annunciation (25 March), the celebration of the church of the Virgin in the village of Bara Bait (15 May), and the feast of the Assumption (15 August). The only exception is the feast of St. Ephreim, the patron Saint of the Syrian Orthodox Church. As Valensi has noted in the case of Jews who lost their homeland, religious memory as well as social memory becomes one of the

bases for reproduction of their identity and is a result of their choosing which figures and events are to be retained by religious commemoration ceremonies (1986: 80). Dedication of the Syrian Orthodox Christians to the Virgin, i.e. celebrating her rather than other saints, is a result of their strategic choice in which the feasts of the Virgin tend to make them remember their relationships to her. In these official celebrations men take the initiative, whereas women present their association with the Virgin in another way.

As can be witnessed, every Saturday afternoon, a crowd of female Christians walks down to al-Mālkiya's oldest quarter in order to visit the church of the Virgin. They have an implicit understanding about date and time for their visit. The main street of the quarter is filled with the Syrian Orthodox Christian women. The Christian women walk towards the church confidently as if they are returning to their homes; the Kurdish inhabitants stand on the edge of the road and look on. There is no communication between them. This visit is a weekly event for commemorating the miracle and support of the Virgin given to their community. Their visit is also a means of reconfirming their victory to the Kurdish inhabitants by suggesting that they retain rights to this quarter and to maintain their church.

A local priest conducts a religious service on Saturday afternoons. However, it is not very important for these women whether or not they attend the service. There are also some women's groups, even teenage girls with their teachers, who stay overnight on Saturday. Their purpose is to visit the church and to spend their time there praying in order to affirm their association with the Virgin. Inside the church, there are icons of the Virgin of Āzakh, in which the Virgin is shown inside the village walls of Āzakh and stretching out her hands to help the Christians. The scene described in the icons is a symbol of their communion with the Virgin (cf. Bowmann, 1999: 145-6). Dedication of these icons by community members to this church suggests an understanding by the community of the historical linkage of the two 'miracles' of Āzakh and al-Mālkiya as sharing the characteristics for unifying the community under the protection of the Virgin. Photocopies of the icon are also hung on walls of the houses and shops.

The community's relationship with saints is expressed in their support for the Coptic Patriarch whose photo hangs on the wall of the Virgin's church. This is the only Syrian Orthodox church in which I found his picture. The Coptic Church promotes the idea of a faith that governs human beings' relationship with the deity through stories of saints and personal experiences of divine miracles, and these are presented in videos and magazines. These concrete materials project the idea of how human beings and the divine are interrelated. I shall present the story of St. Mīna, whose video was produced by the Coptic Church. I had an opportunity to watch it when my neighbour borrowed it from a Syrian Orthodox priest and invited her female neighbours to watch it together. The story is composed of two parts. The first part is a story of the human Mīna. He overcame human desires, such as wealth, a luxurious life and sex, all of which make human beings commit sin. Due to his Christian faith, he was tortured and killed by a pagan Roman governor. The second part is a story of St. Mīna who is given miraculous powers, such as healing and communication with humans. Because of his obedience to God in this world, God endowed him with such power. An individual devoid of sin, i.e. being obedient to God's will, is considered to have a strong faith (*amāna qauwī*). This is an ideal relationship between God and a human. These kinds of stories teach the Syrian Orthodox Christian audience how they can internalise an ideal relationship with God and how the saints act as intercessors between man and God. They believe that their patron saint, the Virgin, favours and loves faithful Christians, as St. Mīna's story suggests. There is another reason why the relationship with the saint is so important for the Mālkiya Christians. They believe that the Virgin's power protects them, i.e. the community of faithful Christians, from offences connected with social vice, such as Kurds plundering crops from Christian villagers. The following example shows how the Virgin gives the strength to Christians and protects them from someone who does them an injustice.

George remembers the experience of his deceased mother at the beginning of 1940s when she lived in Āzakh and was jailed in Jazirat Ibn 'Umar. (George does not remember why his mother was jailed. Since her husband had died in 1940, the Turkish authorities might have persecuted her, instead of her husband, due to the reason that her

children had secretly immigrated to Syria in 1942.) The following is the memory George has of his mother.

My mother had been confined in jail for five months. A Kurdish prisoner who was in a cell opposite to hers sympathised with her and liked her character and motherly love. Their cells were located on the third floor and had a small window near the ceiling. He laid one box upon another under the window and helped her climb up on the top of the boxes. She jumped down from the window and her body fell to the ground. The noise of her fall did not wake the prison guard. Moreover, she was not injured. Then, the Virgin crossed her forehead and said to her, "Your way is open. Run away from here!" She hired a man who was able to smuggle her out of Turkey and guide her to the village of Bara Bait in the Syrian side, where her mother and brother were. When she arrived there she asked for support from a priest in al-Mālkiya who originally came from Āzakh. As policemen were inquiring about her, the priest helped her escape to the monastery of St. Matta in Iraq. The monastery gave her refuge. After a while, my mother returned to Syria and, finally, was able to come and see me in the village of al-Ḥayāka.

George believes that Turkish officials unfairly exercised power to put his mother into a jail even though she did not commit a crime. The Virgin gave support to her as a faithful Christian during a difficult time. The Virgin's miracle eliminated all the obstacles laid in her way, such as the prison, country border and police investigation, when she tried to rejoin her son, George. This event is an experience in which the image of divine support is externalised and the Christians' rights are protected by the Virgin. This kind of personal experience is told to relatives, friends and neighbours, and then spreads to the community at large. Their inspiration derives from what they interpret as a miracle which is enacted through their relationship with the Virgin. Narratives of personal experiences with miracles are embedded into the community's history, such as that in the 1915 siege and the holy oil of 1960 and 1961, in which their community, i.e. a group of faithful Christians, fought injustice and was saved by the Virgin. Therefore, the Virgin's support for Christians whom someone had done an injustice serves as locus for their relationship with the Virgin which forms part of their collective history. The patronage of the Virgin is not only a means for the Mālkiya Christians to construct their religious identity, but also a means to claim their social rights.

## Crisis of Identity

The Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Mālkiya have been facing crises for over twenty-five years. One of the causes which created their problems is the introduction of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Brethren of the Lord to this area. These sects have created two problems: they threaten the Syrian Orthodox Christians' unity based on their unity under the patronage of the Virgin; and some of Syrian Orthodox Christians converted to either of these two sects. Syrian Orthodox Christians do not remember exactly when these Christian sects started their missionary work. Existence of the Jehovah's Witnesses is mentioned in the description of the holy oil springing up in the Virgin's church: The story spread to Christians in the Jazirah region even to the Jehovah's Witnesses in 1960 (al-Qass, 1993: 37). Even though the Witnesses had not yet started their work in al-Mālkiya, they had had a certain number of the conversions in the Jazirah at that time.

When I spoke to women about the Brethren and the Jehovah's Witnesses, they said, "the Brethren and the Jehovah's Witnesses attracted people by preaching God's love and love between human beings. Some of the Syrian Orthodox Christians converted to these sects and then they discovered that these sects deny the holiness of the Virgin and the Trinity".<sup>3</sup> Women explain the reason why they are not able to accept the Brethren's attitude by using the phrase of their 'denial of the Cross'. Syrian Orthodox Christians cross themselves and are taught the meaning of it. When the Christians make a cross, they put their own fingers on parts of their bodies in the following order and each movement carries a meaning. The forehead means the God in heaven, and the belly is embodiment of God, i.e. Jesus. The left shoulder means sin which human beings commit, the right shoulder represents the Holy Spirit. And finally, the movements that they make a circle in front of their chests and put their hands on their chests symbolise the Trinity.

The honour of Mary is derived from the birth of Jesus from her virginal womb due to the Holy Spirit that came into her. Mary is the Holy Mother who is pure and clean of sin. The Brethren's denial of her life-long virginity, which means Mary later had

children and remained a virgin only until the birth of Jesus, is not acceptable for the Syrian Orthodox Christians and is seen as a means to deny her honour and purity. Moreover, they understand that the Jehovah's Witnesses make little of the Virgin. Mary is seen as the mother of Jesus who is both God and man. Because of the belief of the non-existence of the Trinity, the Jehovah's Witnesses regard only Father as God and consider Christ, the Son of God, as inferior to the Father. For the Syrian Orthodox Christians, this teaching means a rejection of Mary's character as the mother of God.

Syrian Orthodox Christian women use a symbol of the Cross to show the discrepancies between their belief and that of the other two sects, whereas the men try to protect their own beliefs by constructing a logical explanation by referring to Biblical evidence. For example, during my research in al-Mālkiya, there were male community members who requested to have a meeting with me when I had told people of my research topic: How community members remember their own history. It was usually me who asked to have a meeting, but in al-Mālkiya, it was community's male members who initiated it. At the meetings, I let them speak on whatever the topic they were interested in. I thought that it was an appropriate way to get to know what concerned the community members. What they talked to me about was their Biblical stories and the history of the Syrian Orthodox Christians dating back to the Old Testament. They insist that Jesus stressed the virtue of generosity, unselfishness, mercy and love in his ministry in order to present that it is not only the Brethren and the Jehovah's Witnesses who preach these virtues, but their denomination does as well. The Resurrection, by which Jesus ascended into Heaven, is the proof of the second person of the Trinity. Through this argument they try to reconfirm Mary's heavenly credibility and at the same time, defend the identity of their community which is derived from their relationship with the Virgin as the mother of God and as a powerful intercessor.

The reason why the challenge of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Brethren has threatened the community, is not because some of the community members converted to these sects, but because the ideological foundation of constructing their social identity has been threatened by these sects. Syrian Orthodox Christians understand that these sects denies their beliefs in Mary's characteristics as Mother of God and an intercessor

between God and themselves, based on whose support they are able to integrate the community.

Their village population started to move into towns, such as al-Mālkiya, Qāmishlī and Aleppo, since the late 1950s. Employment in the national oil company in Rumiēlān gave the Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Mālkiya, as well as those in Qaḥṭāniya and Qāmishlī, alternative economic employment between the late 1970s and the beginning of 1980s. Their emigration to the town and regional economic growth provided Christians with opportunities to be engaged in urban occupations, such as mechanics, drivers, teachers, government employees, hair dressers, tailors and shopkeepers, and with opportunities to educate their children in schools.

Urban occupation and education have become markers which Christians use in order to separate themselves from Kurds, who are categorised by them as rural peasants. Although there are affluent Christians who are farmers owning a large amount of land, they also live in the town and commute to their villages in order to maintain their identity as urban residents. Another criterion which they use in order to show themselves as the cultivated is at the educational level. Figure 1 shows the number of both Muslim and Christian junior high school boys in al-Shahīd Ibrāhīm Masa'uud junior high school in al-Mālkiya in 1998. Christians do not have separate schools and, therefore, Muslims and Christians go to school together. Since the Syrian government does not publish a census of population composition in the country by using religions as its criteria, this school material, which I obtained from the headmaster, is an interesting example that suggests different attitudes toward child education between Muslims and Christians in al-Mālkiya. Junior high school is where children go at age twelve years old after their finishing six years elementary school education. However, pupils who have failed school exams are unable to progress to a more senior grade. In the seventh grade, there are seven classes and the average number of pupils in a class are thirty-eight. Christians occupy 17.7% of the total pupils in the seventh grade. In the eighth grade, the number of classes reduces to four, due to dropouts, and the average number of pupils in a class is thirty-seven. The proportion of Christians in this grade is 29.9%. In the ninth grade, there are five classes and the average size of a class contains forty pupils. The proportion

of Christians in this grade increases to 30.7%. Although the category of Christians includes Syrian Orthodox Christians, Armenians, Chaldeans (*Kuldān*) and Protestants, the majority among them are the Syrian Orthodox Christians. Kurds are believed to occupy over 80% of the regional population. Therefore, this school census reveals the basis by which Syrian Orthodox Christians identify their group as 'educated'. It does not mean that their group contains many people who obtained higher degrees, but it means that they are more educated on average than the Kurds.

Christians ideally try to establish themselves as an urban middle class, but the actual economic situation prevents them from realising this ambition. The regional economic situation created a serious shortage of daily necessities in the late 1980s due to import restrictions. This was solved by the government relaxing restrictions on private business due to its expectations of foreign aid after the Gulf War. However, salaries of employees in public sector are still low due to the government policy of reducing unemployment rates by hiring a large number of people in excess of requirements. Although public sector employment and teaching are preferred occupations for the educated Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Mālkiya, a substantial raise of their income cannot be expected in the present economic situation.

Due to economic difficulties, some Christians were unable to establish themselves in urban areas. Many of them have already left their villages. By contrast, Kurdish village population are increasing. Christians feel that their community is becoming small and vulnerable. Such a fear is accentuated by the decrease of their population due to their continuous emigration to Europe, mainly Sweden, for the last twenty-five years, which has accelerated since the mid 1970s. Björklund who conducted research on Syrian Orthodox Christian immigrants in Sweden mentions the majority of these selected belonged to the Syrian Orthodox Church (Björklund, 1981: 57-8, 63).

Although it is claimed by Syrian Orthodox Christians that the figure (unpublished) was less for the 1990s than for the 1980s, the decrease of the community members and what they learnt from the emigrants, who temporarily return

Figure 2. Number of pupils in al-Shahīd Ibrāhīm Masa’uud Junior High School in al-Mālkiya in 1998

| Grade           | Class | Muslims       | Christians    | Total        |
|-----------------|-------|---------------|---------------|--------------|
| 7 <sup>th</sup> | 1     | 32            | 7             | 39           |
| 7 <sup>th</sup> | 2     | 32            | 6             | 38           |
| 7 <sup>th</sup> | 3     | 30            | 8             | 38           |
| 7 <sup>th</sup> | 4     | 30            | 7             | 37           |
| 7 <sup>th</sup> | 5     | 30            | 7             | 37           |
| 7 <sup>th</sup> | 6     | 32            | 7             | 39           |
| 7 <sup>th</sup> | 7     | 33            | 5             | 38           |
| Subtotal (%)    |       | 219<br>(82.3) | 47<br>(17.7)  | 266<br>(100) |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> | 1     | 26            | 12            | 38           |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> | 2     | 24            | 12            | 36           |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> | 3     | 25            | 11            | 36           |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> | 4     | 28            | 9             | 37           |
| Subtotal (%)    |       | 103<br>(70.1) | 44<br>(29.9)  | 147<br>(100) |
| 9 <sup>th</sup> | 1     | 26            | 14            | 40           |
| 9 <sup>th</sup> | 2     | 31            | 9             | 40           |
| 9 <sup>th</sup> | 3     | 22            | 18            | 40           |
| 9 <sup>th</sup> | 4     | 25            | 15            | 40           |
| 9 <sup>th</sup> | 5     | 34            | 5             | 39           |
| Subtotal (%)    |       | 138<br>(69.3) | 61<br>(30.7)  | 199<br>(100) |
| Total (%)       |       | 460<br>(75.2) | 152<br>(24.8) | 612<br>(100) |

to their homes in al-Mālkiya, make them reconsider their situation. They say that they experienced emigration to Syria after *al-qafila* (the confinement) in 1926 and, then, gradually reconstructed their community in al-Mālkiya. They question why once again

they have to be dispersed throughout the world. When they emigrate to Sweden, these emigrants, consequently, abandon their homeland and become a minority in Swedish society. These Christians are afraid of their community disintegrating due to this emigration. Moreover, the situation of their fellowmen abroad threatens their social identity as urban professionals, which they have attempted to build up during the last twenty-five years. Many emigrants depend on social benefits and have to begin their life from the bottom of the social ladder since even people who are highly qualified in Syria, such as engineers and medical doctors, do not have their qualifications recognised in Sweden.

In order to solve the problem of the break up of their community and the loss of their identity, by the late 1990s they began to adopt alternative ways for strengthening their unity and claiming their rights as 'original' inhabitants. The first is to prove the continuity of the community in this locality by claiming that their religious traditions have been maintained since ancient times. Knowledgeable deacons and priests are all keen to transmit their religious traditions to the younger generations, such as the chants with modal stanzas of weekday Offices, hymns with Syrian Orthodox musical tunes, and their liturgical language, i.e. Syriac. (see Chapter 6). The second is to establish proof that the ancestors of Syrian Orthodox Christians dominated this region in ancient times and, therefore, they have a right to be in al-Mālkiya. They maintain that they constitute not only a religious community, but also an ethnic group, i.e. of Arameans who seek to trace their origin back to the ancient Assyrian Empire. This ethno-religious identity includes the Christians using Syriac as their liturgical language, which, as stated earlier, is derived from ancient Aramaic, i.e. a lingua franca of the ancient Assyrian Empire. Therefore, Christians maintain that these areas were their original homeland and those who maintain Syriac, i.e. modern Aramaic, as their liturgical language ultimately share their origins with the ancient Assyrians. This belief has been disseminated worldwide by the Christians. In the regional context of al-Mālkiya, this ideology makes it possible for them to locate their community as a part of a larger ethnic group, whose identity is derived from a shared origin, language, religion and homeland.

## Internal Tensions

These strategies which al-Mālkiya Christians adopt do not contribute fully towards integrating their community. The community tends to split into two groups who support different strategies. Furthermore this division is related to their village origin. Since the Mālkiya Christians originally came from seven villages, they have a village identity. The largest two of these village groups in al-Mālkiya are those from Āzakh and Esfes. They do not want to intermarry. Their marriage practices show an endogamous tendency within their own groups. The Āzakh group contains twelve clans and the Esfes group has seven clans. These people can trace their patrilineal genealogical relationships for a few generations back, but are not able to trace back their genealogical relationship to their believed common ancestor. Christians from both Āzakh and Esfes say that they used to differentiate community members in terms of kinship relationships only at the time when they chose marriage partners. However, nowadays the community tends to be composed of two factions, i.e. those of Āzakh and Esfes.

The Āzakh group composes a large number of the congregation of St. Simona's church, whereas the Esfes group insists that the church of St. Dodo is theirs. Both of them attempt to establish social identity as the descendants of 'original' inhabitants of the region through maintaining tradition and culture based on their religion, which are the only means for them to trace their origin and prove the continuity of their community going back to thousands years. Ironically, they reveal their refugee origin, i.e. villages in Turkey where they lived, when they claim their Syrian origin. Many people who attend services in St. Simona's church insist that the maintenance of ancient traditions of Syria proves the endurance of the community in this region and, therefore, their rights to the land should be acknowledged. By contrast, the congregation of St. Dodo's church stress that the rights to their territory could not be acknowledged without maintaining their ethnic origin as Assyrians. The supporters of the former approach regard the latter as ethno-nationalists who may create dangers for their community through possible persecution by the government, like the Kurds experienced in Turkey. Those who insist on their Assyrian origin consider that religion itself cannot define them as an ethnic group and, therefore, they require another marker to characterise their group, like the

Muslims who can describe their social identity based on ethnic groups to which they affiliate. These Christian groups recognise that religious identity does not contribute to securing their social position. However, two conflicting views for constructing secure identity of the Mālkiya Christians further increase the danger of the community disintegrating.

These opposing views are presented by different groups which are maintained by practising endogamous marriage between people of the same village origin. These Christians admit that such a division is a recent phenomenon. St. Dodo's church was not regarded as entirely composed of people from Esfes (*Fsainiya*). The community members know that the church's foundation stone was brought from St. Dodo's church in Esfes to al-Mālkiya and its construction started in 1982. Therefore, more people from Esfes donated money for its construction than did those from Āzakh. However, they insist that this fact did not become a cause for division in the community. When the church was established in 1991, the idea of creating group solidarity in line with village origins is connected to the opposition between the ethno-nationalists and the traditionalists. Consequently, the churches become vehicles for the factions to promote their religious activities according to their own principles.

## Conclusion

The reluctance shown by the community members to talk to me about the dissension between community members was not due to their intention to conceal it from an outsider, but to their reluctance to accept that situation has weakened their integration (cf. Fentress & Wickham, 1992: 99-100). Their disunity increases their anxiety about living under the threat of the Kurds. Through their historical narratives, they wish to confirm which experiences the community members shared and what is the distinctive tradition of their community. Shared memories, real or imagined, provide them with prospects for unifying the community. The patronage of the Virgin, which is sustained by their memories of the 'miracles', is maintained by their participating in

both the one year cycle of feasts dedicated to the Virgin and weekly prayers in her church.

The patronage of the Virgin defines the community as descendants of the survivors of the 1915 siege of Āzakh when she came to their assistance and homage to her contributes to creating their unity. However, they now want to secure their position in Syria. They attempt to create their identity as 'original' inhabitants of the region rather than that of refugees and so protect their rights in this locality. They adopt three strategies: 1.) to emphasise the collective memory of the 'miracles' of the Virgin, who they believe supports their aim of securing their rights to the land; 2.) to prove the endurance of the community in Syria and 3.) to claim their ethnic origin as an ancient tribe of Syria. Although all these strategies are expressed through religious practices, their main aim is to establish their social identity as Syrians.

The strategies for redefining their identity as Syrians ironically split the community into two factions, whose composition reveals their refugee origin. Since genealogy, village origin and political orientation are intertwined, people have to make careful consideration before choosing their affiliation to one of these factions. For example, people from Āzakh are not necessarily traditionalists; a person from Esfes may choose to attend St. Simona's church because he/she cannot support the idea of ethno-nationalists. The Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Mālkīya are faced with the discrepancy between the ideals of their unity and the present turmoil within their community.

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## Chapter 2. Notes

<sup>1</sup> Due to the Arabisation policy promoted by the Syrian government, names of places which are not originally Arabic were replaced by Arabic ones. According to the Syrian Orthodox Christians, Derik, whose name is originally Syriac and whose meaning is a small monastery, officially changed its name into al-Mālkiya between 1960 and 1961.

2 Björklund mentions the similar proverb which is used among Syrian Orthodox Christians in Ṭur 'Abdīn (Björklund, 1981: 79).

<sup>3</sup> According to a Syrian Orthodox priest, not a disinterested observer, in 1998, among the Syrian Orthodox Christians who converted to the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Brethren only twenty people are still believers of these two sects.

# **Chapter 3**

## **Concealment through Display:**

### **Ethnic Identity among Urfalli Syrian Christians in Aleppo**

#### **Introduction**

As was discussed in the previous chapters, Syrian Orthodox Christians in both Qaḥṭānīya and al-Mālkiya do not recall their past before the 1915 massacre. The Syrian Orthodox Christian population of Urfa, i.e. *Urfallis*, who were expelled from Urfa in southeastern Turkey in 1924 and settled in Aleppo, must have had similar experiences to those of their fellow Christians in the Jazirah. However, in the space of eighty years they claim not to remember their past in Turkey, nor the reasons or conditions relating to why they left. In all these three cases the amnesia is oral. There is some documentary and historical evidence of their Turkish past, but they have not preserved these in their own memories. In most cases encountered by anthropologists and oral historians the opposite attains: the written record is silent, but popular memories keep alive certain sentiments (oral history). The role of amnesia in the construction of group identities has been less well researched, although there have been some important exceptions (e.g. Collard, 1989).

Written records do not appear to play any part in the construction of group memories of Syrian Orthodox Christians. Instead, they appear to have done two things to attempt to maintain their ethnic identity. Firstly, they have elaborated a whole recent (oral) past that emphasises unity and continuity of the community in faith. Secondly, they managed to construct an identity that places them as the ‘original’ inhabitants of the area where they live in Syria, despite the fact that they have refugee origin. Can one talk about the historical continuity of a group across time if individuals claim no memory of their medium-term past, whilst at the same time claiming links that go back some thousands of years? It is usually States that claim long pasts for their nations where none existed (Gellner, 1983). The case of Urfalli Christians, whom I discuss in this chapter, is

distinctive in that they claim to have a long past but never had a state, and, moreover, they do not recall, or are not interested in their time in Urfa before moving to Aleppo.

One factor can be discarded. According to Anderson, the state's systematic historiographical campaign obliges people to forget certain memories (1991: 199-203). The collective amnesia of Urfallis is not a result of state control at integration. Turkey wanted to expel these Christians. The Christian persecution in the 1920s in Turkey, where neighbours fought one another, is not part of Syrian history and, therefore, the Syrian government shows no interest in the memory of this persecution. It is Urfallis who expelled themselves from their own past.

Eriksen has suggested that minority groups follow three ideal types of strategies: assimilation with, separation from and subordination to the state control (1993: 123-4). In practice, minority groups choose combined strategies. Urfallis' attempts at integrating themselves into Syrian society, have resulted in the collective amnesia of their past in Turkey. Ironically, this prevents them from identifying the origins of their community and its endurance. In order to acquire a new identity as Syrians, they have to develop a collective history of how their community has constructed relationships with others in the wider Syrian society while maintaining their distinctiveness as a community.

Modern states in the Middle East lack homogeneous national populations, many of which are sub-divided along tribal lines (Tibi, 1991: 137-43). According to the government propaganda, Syria is a state of ethnically Syrian Arabs. However, they are sub-divided into a pre-modern organisation of tribes, who have geographically occupied Greater Syria. Within such a political situation, Urfallis have no traditional warrant which bestows upon them a pedigree guaranteeing them their ethnic identity, due to the collective amnesia of their past. Urfallis identify themselves as Syrian Orthodox Christians who are the descendants of Arameans, the dominant tribal people in ancient Syria. They thus attempt at integrating their group into the tribes which, ethnically, are composed of Syrian Arabs. However, such an attempt to establish their ethnic identity in contemporary Syria ironically makes Urfallis inhabit ancient Syria.

## Refugees or Original Inhabitants?

The Urfallis settled on vacant land on the outskirts of Aleppo, now called the quarter of Ḥaī as-Suriyān. As immigrants they did not know Arabic, the major language of Syria, and they were unable to integrate easily into the larger society of Aleppo.

By contrast, Syrian Orthodox Christians in Qaḥṭāniya and al-Mālkiya in the Jazirah region, did not have such experiences as outsiders in society. They had established their communities in the places which were located on the Syrian side adjacent to the frontier between Turkey and Syria and which were close to their former villages in the Turkish side. Moreover, both Qaḥṭāniya and al-Mālkiya used to be lightly populated. Both Christians and Kurds settled in Qaḥṭāniya and al-Mālkiya and had emigrated from the same area in Turkey. Their neighbouring local Arab tribes, who used to be pastoral nomads had often moved across the frontiers between Turkey and Syria at the time when borders were porous and national boundaries were rudimentary. These Arab tribes had settled on the Syrian side, to where the Christians immigrated. As a result, the population composition in these new settlements was almost identical to that in their 'homeland' in Turkey. Therefore, Syrian Orthodox Christians who immigrated to Qaḥṭāniya and al-Mālkiya did not have difficulty in affiliating themselves into the society, whereas the Urfallis in Aleppo did.

Isolation was not only the problem for the Urfallis. As the majority had left property and houses in Urfa at the time of their emigration, they also experienced financial difficulties in reconstructing their lives in the new environment. They developed a strong sense of community, due to shared experiences of dislocation and isolation. "We had to leave everything in Urfa. We were poor when we started our life in Aleppo. We gradually developed a reasonable standard of living in Aleppo by cooperating with each other. We achieved it by ourselves without the help of outsiders", they recount proudly. While these Christians try to present their community as unit, nevertheless, they faced the necessity of adapting to Aleppo's social situation.

The most extraordinary aspect of this community is that they claim to have forgotten, or at least cannot recall why they actually left Urfa. Throughout my research into Syrian Orthodox Christians, it was apparent that the collapse of the Ottoman political system, which allowed co-existence of people of different faiths on Turkish territory, resulted in bloodshed. The Christians were under threat from the Turks. Because of nationalist stirrings in the Balkans, and the important role of the Churches there as representatives of their respective *ethnos/ethnoi*, the Ottomans became increasingly suspicious of the Christians. They were seen as fifth columnists of Western Christian powers and harbingers of the collapse of the Ottoman system. As Christians had experienced the sustained trauma of persecution since 1915, the Urfallis must therefore have experienced a very critical situation. However, I found that their direct and indirect memories of their past in Urfa were fragmented. There must be reasons why they forget or conceal their past. A collective amnesia, such as that of Urfallis, is more difficult to maintain than for example, a collective mythic memory of origins. This chapter examines this conundrum.

From the time of their immigration until the beginning of 1960s, political and economic instability of Syria had a bad effect on the Urfallis. Many of them were poor and so needed to integrate themselves into the new region in order not to be discriminated against as outsiders by the other populations in Syria, Aleppo in particular. Such necessities led them to participating in community's activities. This participation had two ideological components. One was to attempt to develop certain activities, such as the Scouts and Guides movements and Sports Clubs, which supported Syrian nationalism. The second was to promote the distinctive characteristics of the community, such as solidarity and unity, which have been nurtured through communal activities.

The Christians seem to sustain an apparent contradiction in their reconstructed history. On the one hand, they merge their community's history with the national history of Syria. On the other hand, they claim their community's distinctiveness. This is found in other communities that experience an ambiguous and tense relationship with their national centres. Cretans present themselves as 'super Greeks' in terms of the retention of the national values of courage, resistance, etc., whilst at the same time, despise

mainland Greeks (particularly Athenians) as 'soft' and 'corrupted' (Herzfeld, 1985). Knudsen has noted that in Corsican history the Corsicans' view of their local society and its activities are enacted within the wider framework of traditional egalitarianism, which is different from that of national politics, which produces absolute and centralised power. Corsicans seem to have dual histories, i.e. local and national histories. According to Knudsen, a local community's history is occasionally merged into a national one when the locals try to settle local disputes by arbitration by national authorities (Knudsen, 1992: 95). The Urfallis had a difficult set of tensions. They had just been expelled from across the border. As displaced persons, they had to integrate themselves by developing a new identity; they had to develop symbols and a history. As outsiders, they had to develop activities that linked them to the wider Syrian society, so as to be accepted.

By the 1970s, the community's ability to adapt to life in Aleppo was no longer a significant problem. Their economic conditions had improved and the number of educated people in the community had gradually increased. The necessity of adaptation into Syrian society gradually declined in importance and they began to view their current situation in terms of a new idiom: their development as a community. As the Urfalli community has integrated into Aleppiene society, its interest has shifted from how to adjust to the new region, to how they can improve their social and economic position within the society. Such a change transforms the depiction of their history. However, it does not mean that unity and solidarity are no longer important values.

Urfalli Christians are interested in talking about their past. By doing so, they create the ideal image of the community. The following is the account of Abu Salim, when a schoolteacher in the community and I asked him to talk about his experiences.

I was only 13 years old when the French took me and my siblings from Urfa to an orphanage in Beirut to be educated (my father had been dead some years). I took the Baccalaureate in Beirut and, later, came to Aleppo in order to see my family. I worked for an Armenian merchant in Aleppo as his accountant and also worked voluntarily as a teacher in the community's elementary school. Later, I became a member of the School Committee. I cooperated with members of the Charity Committee, who asked donations from community members in order to

improve educational quality of the school. We were united under [our community's spirit of] *maḥbba* (love). There was no *khalaf* (difference) of opinion between us. We decided to ask Urfallis in the USA for financial help to build a new school building. I wrote a letter to my friends with whom I brought up together in the orphanage in Beirut and who later emigrated to the States. They donated money to our school.

Individuals, like Abu Salim, are proud of their achievements in the past, and so have high hopes for their community's future prosperity by claiming their community's principle of *maḥbba* (love). They reconstruct their experiences and tell stories of their contribution to the community's activities, in which more or less every individual member has participated, in order to demonstrate their role in satisfying community's ideals. Yet, individual experiences are not only one's personal memories, but also are those of communal activities and so constitute part of the community's history. Thus, the history can be seen as a dialectical reference for comprehending past events, whilst implicitly constructing future objectives.

Such reconstructed histories are not free from coloration. Historical events or examples which do not support their construction of future oriented identity are concealed or ignored. For example, not every decision of the School Committee was made according the idealistic principles of *maḥbba*. The fact that the Committee members favoured children of their relatives through a remission of school fees generated conflicts between community members. This was opposed to their ideal of 'love' and, therefore, was concealed. Their recounted history conveys idealistic comments about what problems they faced in those days. It was a hard task for me to discover the things that were not told and why they were concealed. Hence we need to explore the gap between their reconstructed history and what actually occurred.

To begin with, the Christian community's continuity with the past is ruptured by their ignoring events which took place before their arrival in Aleppo. Ignoring pre-expulsion events has generated the anxiety that their origins cannot be identified. Therefore, they need to have evidence of their community having endured for centuries. Since the 1970s Urfallis have began believing that their living tradition have lasted for generations. In the late 1990s, their revivalism led to church services being conducted in

Syriac, which they believe has been their liturgical language since ancient times and which used to be the everyday language of Syrian Orthodox Christians. As they trace the origins of their tradition, their origins are also rediscovered. As Hutton suggests, a living tradition is the source for reminding the community's place of origin, even though a living tradition might provide only the imaginative representations of one's historical identity (Hutton, 1993: 87). Urfallis maintain that the ancient Christians were found all over Syria. Thus, their "heritage" of Syriac provides them with an identity as Syrians. Syria's regional history and their memory of their traditions thus suggest that the ultimate solution for Urfallis (who are in fact immigrants), for securing their position in contemporary Syria, resides in identifying their place of origin as Greater Syria. Here 'Syria' is not so much a bounded nation-state, but a representation of an idea of the past conceived in linguistic terms.

### **Forgotten Memories of the Community**

The present Urfallis maintain that when most of their community members emigrated to Aleppo in 1924, they were not aware that the community had obtained permission from the Turkish governor to leave Urfa on the condition that they would not return. Only a handful of leaders of the community, who negotiated with Turkish officials in Urfa, knew this. Thus many people were waiting for the time to return to Urfa. Two years after their emigration, this fact was revealed to the community members, who, believing that they were staying only temporarily in Aleppo, lived in tents rather than permanent houses.

When I conducted research between 1997-1998, many Urfallis, who had experienced this emigration, or were descendants of the immigrants, did not know the reason why their community as a whole had had to abandon their properties and leave Urfa. Indeed some educated middle-aged people who knew about my project asked me: "Have you found out the reason for our emigration? We have no documents relating to the emigration. We did not ask the older generation about the reason why they decided to leave Urfa. By 1924, the Turkish massacre of Christians was already over. So why

were our elders forced to emigrate?" Yet there are books, which were published in the 1980s, based on authors' own experiences of the 1915 massacre in Turkey. Educated Urfallis must have read some of these books and knew about the massive social disturbance and expulsion of Christians from Turkey, which lasted for three years after 1915. This knowledge and awareness appears to have filtered through to the contemporary community. We are thus witnessing an example of collective (oral) amnesia in the face of historical (written) documentation. The question posed by Urfallis is why their ancestors were obliged to leave Urfa in 1924 after they stayed in Urfa at its most difficult time. Their fragmented memories can no longer help them understand the reason of their displacement and emigration, their social situation of Urfa, and their lives on the eve of their immigration.

There are cracks in this sustained official amnesia, but these do not amount to a radical collective rethink. Some elder Urfalli Christians remember that the Turks confiscated arms from Christians in Urfa and in 1915 started to arrest influential men. Some of them were deported, and others were tortured and killed at a ravine near Kara Koepru (Black Bridge). This incident is confirmed by historical sources (Yonan, 1996: 214). However, Urfallis never recall the disaster of their neighbours, the Armenians in Urfa. By contrast, Armenians express their harsh experiences in public. Syrian Orthodox Christians oppresses their memories, whereas Armenians do not. This seems to be related to the fact that Syrian Orthodox Christians do not establish their nation (Armenians did) and have to coexist with other dominant groups. An autobiography written by an Armenian pastor, Jernazian, who lived in the Syrian Christian quarter in Urfa at that time and later emigrated to the United States, recollects how Armenians were in a vulnerable situation in 1915. By then, the Armenians had began to realise that their peaceful compliance with Turkish authorities only brought them increased oppression from the Turks and the gradual elimination of their leaders and young men. The Armenians thus decided on an honourable death through active resistance (Jernazian, 1990: 75).

Although Syrian Orthodox Christians lived in their own quarter and were not involved in the fighting, except for small numbers who lived in the Armenian quarter,

there must certainly be reasons why such a crucial incident cannot be recalled. Possibly a fear of annihilation seems to have made them forget the incidence. But it also shows how their ethnic identity does not encompass other Christian groups. In short, it indicates separate histories and separate identities – hardly a sign of collective action by the different ethnic groups, but confirming the ‘fruit cake’ nature of Ottoman society. Each group is distinct and retains its own identity. Nor did the subsequent experiences of the Urfallis encourage them to re-evaluate their recent past and establish an empathic identification with the Armenians who experienced far harsher treatment than they probably experienced. Indeed many Urfallis then and now understand Armenian.

Written accounts provide some clues to apparent oral amnesia. Jernazian describes how the situation became vulnerable again after 1919 (ibid.:115-9). The British army which occupied Urfa for eight months in 1919 supplied arms to the Turks for fighting against the French. After the British relinquished Cilicia and Syria to the French, they withdrew from Urfa. The armistice of Mudros in 1918 ended the First World War, and Mustafa Kemal launched an effective military campaign to promote Pan-Turkish nationalism. When a French battalion of infantrymen came to Urfa in 1920 the local Turks in Urfa gave the French an ultimatum to leave the city. When the French refused, the Turks immediately began to attack them. After two months of fighting, the French surrendered, due to being outnumbered by the enemy, a severe winter, and the lack of food.

Some older Syrian Orthodox Christians remember the tragedy of the French and the forty Syrian Orthodox Christians who had followed them:

The Turks had promised the French safety if they took the mountain route to Syria, i.e. to Aleppo. Some Syrian Orthodox Christians worrying about safety of the French suggested to them that they took the roads in the plains of Harran instead. The French refused, trusting the Turks. The French fell into a trap set by the Turks who slaughtered them in a deep ravine. Heads of murdered French soldiers were displayed at the city centre of Urfa, and Turks had celebrated their victory for three days. Syrian Orthodox Christians feared that it might be their turn to be slaughtered.

Elder Syrian Orthodox Christians recollect that their community did not side with the French, even though a small number of people joined them and, consequently, were killed in the ravine. Their memories emphasise the treacherous characteristics of the Turks. Their narratives highlight the feelings of being helpless victims about to be slaughtered. However, they were not able to locate this incident in wider regional politics. There is a gap in their memories of events between the aftermath of the French incident (1920) and their emigration in 1924. One elderly man told me of an account which he printed in order to deliver a lecture. According to him the arrest of community's intellectuals by the Turkish authorities was the immediate reason for their emigration (Touma, n.d.: 8-9). However, it appears Touma confused incidents which occurred after 1920 with the arrests and slaughter of Syrian Christian men near the Black Bridge in 1915.

The people to whom I spoke had left Urfa as children and, consequently, were unable to understand what happened. Their elders did not tell them or concealed the events that occurred on the eve of their emigration. It is highly probable that the elders feared for their community's safety. Manipulation and fragmentation of their memories thus prevented them from linking the fear of annihilation, generated by the slaughter of the French, to their departure from "home". Instead of Urfallis saying: "we left because it was life threatening for us", they appear not to remember the Turkish atrocities. It is an unlikely scenario that a handful of community's leaders were able to mobilise 5,000 people without saying why they were leaving.

A person who experienced the emigration and wrote a book about the community's history is Yusef Nāmek. Although he was a small boy at the time of the emigration, he recounted the events. In his book, as well as in my conversations with him, he explained the reason of their emigration in a broader political perspective. Yet he gave me a political analysis of the situation rather than grounding his account in the actual experiences of the community, i.e. a non-participant's account rather than a personalised account based on experience. His view is that the existence of Christians in Turkey gave the British and the French justification for interference into Turkish affairs. In order to stabilise the social and political situation and to eliminate foreign

interference, Mustafa Kemal encouraged the Christians to leave Turkey voluntarily by spreading fear among the Christian population and causing them to panic (Nāmek, 1991: 42). This is regarded by community members as Nāmek's personal view of the emigration, as his view is not confirmed by 'memories' which describe the process of emigration from Urfa. Although his interpretation may be correct, what is interesting to note is that nobody in the community talks about how their fear of the Turks had been generated within the community. As Bozon points out, "the memory of the oppressed ... is first and foremost an oppressed memory" (Bozon, 1990: 40).

### **Memories of Community Unity**

Although Urfallis left Urfa without having acquired permission to enter Syria, they were allowed to stay in Aleppo as refugees. Some families had relatives in Aleppo, who were able to afford to accommodate them for a short while. Even though the Syrian Orthodox Bishop, Siurerius Ephreim Barşum, petitioned the French delegation to construct a refugee camp for them and give them tents, the Church was unable to provide them with financial aid. The Urfalli refugees were poor and spoke Turkish and Armenian. They did not know Arabic, the lingua franca of Syria. It was very difficult for them to integrate into Aleppiene local society. Syrian Orthodox Christians in Urfa might have had intimate relationships with the Armenians. By the fear of being identified as Armenians and being persecuted, Syrian Orthodox Christians concealed their relationship with the Armenians and claimed separated identity.

In a bid to resolve their isolation and economic problems, in the 1920s and 1930s, many Urfalli Syrian Orthodox Christians converted to Catholicism supported by the French Mandate in order to get food and assistance. Contemporary Urfallis do not mention that they or their family members became Catholics then in order to obtain flour and scholarships for their children. Thus hidden parts of their history emerge only when some community members mention their own or families' contribution to welfare. Such narratives suggest that around seventy-five percent of the community converted temporarily to Catholicism.

In their narratives, contemporary Urfallis maintain that the Catholic Church gave food and money to poor Urfallis in exchange for handing over their identity cards to Catholic priests. The Catholic priests then used these cards to change the government registration of the Urfalli Orthodox Christians to that of Catholics. Contemporary Urfallis interpret such an incident as an example of how the Catholics attempted to steal “our” people: “it was difficult to convert Protestants to Catholics because they are supported by Americans. However, it is easy to make the people of the Wooden Chapel (i.e. Urfallis) convert to Catholicism. When we give them food and money, they will bend to us.” Contemporary Urfallis maintain that the Catholics took advantage of their precariousness. Lack of Arabic and of political support isolated them in the large society of Aleppo. Conversion into Catholicism may also have been an attempt at protection by the French.

**Table 1.** Changes of Urfalli Languages

| Year/<br>Language      | Prior to<br>1920 (Urfa) | 1924-<br>(Immigration<br>To Aleppo) | 1970s                | 1990s                |
|------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Official<br>Language   | Turkish                 | Arabic                              | Arabic               | Arabic               |
| Liturgical<br>Language | Turkish                 | Turkish                             | Turkish to<br>Syriac | Syriac               |
| Common<br>Language     | Armenian/<br>Turkish    | Armenian                            | Arabic/<br>Armenian  | Arabic<br>(Armenian) |

The unity of the community as a single Orthodox Christian one is highly valued nowadays. According to oral history, in the face of apostasy to Catholicism, some key individuals, i.e. members of the Board of Trustees and other committee members, decided to construct a church building in 1932. Although they already had a humble wooden chapel, built in 1926, an appeal was made for donations to build a larger stone church. Once the donations reached the necessary amount for materials for foundations,

the community leaders asked the bishop's permission to construct a new church. Due to shortage of funds, men and women voluntarily donated their labour. According to their accounts, once they began, the foundations were completed almost miraculously in one day. They maintain that this achievement was a result of cooperation between the community members: men were engaged in the building work and women fetched water from a well and carried it to the construction site.

The building of the church had another significance. It showed that in spite of some conversion to Catholicism, members of the community could rally together to distinguish their church from that of the Catholics. The fact that they were able to construct a large stone edifice also enforces their importance of their church. The church is thus a historical marker and provides a symbol to reflect upon and proclaim their unity, despite their poverty. However, such ideals do not always reflect the realities of the past. In reality, the community was unable to collect enough money to buy materials to complete the construction. They got loans from a Syrian Orthodox Christian in another community in Aleppo. This led to many debates with many suggesting its postponement. Indeed, due to financial difficulties, it took twenty years to complete the building. The road to a completed church is paved with many debates.

Apostatised Urfallis returned to the Syrian Orthodox Church, when the Catholic Church no longer provided economic aid to its congregation after the French Mandate force withdrew from Syria in 1946. They ironically rhyme: "No more flour, no more [Catholic] religion (*Oum bitti Din bitti*)". This suggests that although they yielded to Catholics proselytising, they did not renounce their faith in Orthodoxy and, therefore, they returned to the Syrian Orthodox Church soon after resources dried up. They turn the story into a moral about their resistance to the Catholics' attempts to divide their community: Due to their maintenance of their Orthodox Christian faith, the community were once again united. However, they do not mention that the return of the converted to the Orthodox Christian faith occurred at the time when being Catholics was no longer politically important to secure a position in the larger society. Indeed that it may even have been a liability.

The most urgent task for the Urfalli community was to integrate themselves into the new region, i.e. Syria. The historical accounts of the community's elementary school, which Urfalli Syrian Orthodox Christians established and developed by themselves, emphasise how they made efforts to improve their ability in Arabic. Their accounts suggest that the community was eager to educate children in Arabic following a curriculum adopted by the schools in Aleppo. It seems they regarded adoption of the Syrian educational system as a means of indicating their affiliation to society. There was, however, a problem in that their educated members only spoke Turkish, not Arabic.

By the late 1920s and 1930s, several youth groups recognised such problems of the poor educational standard in the community's school. The ultimate concern was to raise funds and hire a teacher from outside the community who was able to teach Arabic. By the late 1930s, the first generation who had been educated in Aleppo had become teachers in the community's elementary school. Former pupils, teachers and the school committee organised parties and film sessions for the community and used the profits to employ competent teachers. The following is a recollection by Maryam, who worked as a teacher of the community's elementary school in the 1940s.

I went to a girls' school in the Armenian quarter, which had the reputation of giving good Arabic language education. Although it was difficult to catch up with classes taught in Arabic, I finished my five-year elementary education in 1942. As I wanted to earn wages and help my father, I worked for a stocking manufacturer. Then, at the age of fourteen, I got a job in the community's elementary school as an Arabic teacher. I taught the children the alphabet and read stories in Arabic. This had been the way I had been educated during my school days. At the time of my marriage in 1951, I stopped working as a teacher. As I had only elementary school education, my father thought that my qualification would not be enough to get a good job in future, if I should need it. He encouraged me to learn skills as a seamstress. My father was right. When my husband became unable to work due to his illness, I had worked as a seamstress at home for twenty-two years.

Maryam's narrative can be examined from the dimensions of both personal and collective histories. As an individual, Maryam was fortunate, as her father was interested in girl's education and was able to afford to send her a school outside the community, which had high educational standards.<sup>1</sup> However due to poverty, Maryam, like many

girls of the community, who started to work at ages between ten and thirteen in tobacco and sweet factories, got a job in a stocking factory after finishing her elementary education. In those days, knowledge of Arabic and the acquisition of skills as artisans were important for economic advancement. Her good command of Arabic and later her skill as a seamstress helped provide her with an income.

Such personal histories must be placed in the framework of the community's history. History concerns itself with social change and how the change is understood by people in the present. Individual memory can be extended beyond the scope of an individual subject and can be placed in a collective tradition (Halbwachs, 1992: 81-3). What is critical about these accounts is that they are not merely personal life stories. They are also stories about how the collectivity improved itself gradually. Individuals peg the collective history of the groups onto their own personal trajectories. Individual memories of the school are recounted within the framework of proving how the community was gradually integrated into Syrian society and progressively improved its lot. The history which is reconstructed on the basis of such narratives provides contemporary Urfallis with collective characteristics indicating that the community improved its educational standards, which they regard as a distinctive achievement.

When I carried out fieldwork in the late 1990s, all the people who told me about history of the school mentioned that community members made many efforts to solve educational problems. Until the 1960s, the educational standards of the community's school lagged behind those of other schools in Aleppo. However, what the present community members express through their narratives of the school history is different from what community members in past tended to achieve through school activities. By the late 1990s, Urfallis were fully integrated into life in Aleppo and their adaptability to life in Syria was no longer so problematic. Since their immigration to Syria, the community had undergone massive social and economic changes. As a result, the adaptation strategies which had been adopted until the 1960s seem now to be a little out of place. Currently, Urfallis are more interested in relating their history from the view point of their economic improvement and the acquisition of better social positions. The community replaces old strategies of integration into Syrian society with new strategies

for climbing the social ladder. Consequently, their reconstructed history ignores the fact that Arabic education used to be a means of indicating their affiliation to society.

### **Community Activities and National Politics**

As Blok has noted, historical time is perceived by memory of social events (1992: 124-5). Urfallis attempted to affiliate the community to the wider society of Syria through their alliance with nation-wide political movements. Many political movements in Syria were linked to the Scouts movement and Sports Clubs which started their activities in the 1930s. This was at a time of an upsurge of Arab nationalism and Syrian nationalism demanded independence for Syria. Urfallis organised football teams and an Urfalli regiment of Boy Scouts was established. These nation-wide associations provided a framework in which each group could find its place.

Contemporary Urfallis still consider these activities as important. The political background between the 1930s and 1950s has to be taken into consideration. Many Syrian Christians supported Syrian nationalism developed by the Syrian Nationalist Party which was founded in the early 1930s by a Lebanese Orthodox Christian, Antun Sa'ada. Syrian Nationalists (*al-qawmī Sūrī*) strove to create a modern and secular Syrian nation embracing a greater geographical Syria extending to the Suez Canal in the south and proclaimed that the nation was a synthesis of the Phoenician and Arab people and their culture.<sup>2</sup> Their supporters were spread throughout Syria and Lebanon and were mainly non-Muslims, as Syrianism developed as an alternative ideology competing with Arab nationalism and appeared to protect rights of small groups in Syria (Petran, 1972 :73-4). When the anti-French campaign erupted in 1936, the National Block, *Waṭanī*, which was one of the groups led by young people as a movement of Syrian nationalism, emerged from a Boy Scouts movement (Erlich, 2000: 60).

Urfalli group activities started in the 1930s in Ḥai as-Suriyān were attempts to establish their identity as Syrians through political alliance with Syrian nationalists. Their groups adopted Syriac names which indicated their cultural origins. For example,

*Ninawa* (Nineveh) and the *Aryo* (Lion), which symbolise the Assyrian Empire. *Lahmat Lishono* ([mother] tongue lovers) and *Īto Lishono* (Church language), which were the first groups to organise Scouts. The use of Syriac names emphasised the Syrian Orthodox Christians' right to be acknowledged as citizens of the nation state of Syria – their spiritual and actual home. Even though liturgical services in the Urfalli community were mostly conducted in Turkish in the 1930s, they learnt Syriac hymns in the community's elementary school. They attempted to identify their cultural and political origins with Syria by tracing the roots of their liturgical language. By doing so, their identity merged into Syrian identity and they were able to incorporate their activities into national movements.

As representatives of the community, the Sports Clubs participated in sports competitions and national celebrations, such as Independence Day and the Celebration of the French Withdrawal. The Boy Scouts movement of Ḥāi as-Suriyān was registered as the Sixth Regiment (*al-Fauji as-Sādis*) in Aleppo. Syrian Orthodox Christian Scouts regiments from different regions participated in sports competitions in the rally on an equal basis to other regiments which were composed of different religious and ethnic groups coming from all over Syria. Participation in these public events meant firstly, that their community was officially recognised as an organisation having rights to participate in governmental political events and, secondly, that they were admitted as one of the independent groups which constitute the Scouts or Sports Club Association in Syria.

Before the Unification with Egypt in 1958 when both the Scouts and the Sports Club activities flourished, Syria's political situation was unstable. The deciding factor in Syrian politics was the control of the national army. In 1955, Adnan Malki, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Syrian Army, was assassinated by a Syrian nationalist, and both Ba'athists and Communists seized on the murder as a chance to remove the Syrian nationalists. Due to the party's set back, Syrian nationalists called on supporters to coordinate a military uprising. However, due to Israel's invasion of Sinai in 1956, Syrian nationalists postponed their operations. Later, their plot was discovered and the leaders were arrested and persecuted (Rathmell, 1995: 97-98, 120-123; Seale, 1965: 241-2).

Leaders of the Scouts and the Sports Club in Ḥai as-Suriyān were supporters of Syrian nationalists. As the present regime is controlled by the Ba'athists, Syrian Christians were not willing to talk to me, an outsider, about how these youth groups participated in political movements in the 1950s. Yet, in the course of the purge of Syrian nationalists, disputes occurred between the young people in the community. For example, some Communist members of the community informed against the Syrian nationalist supporters in the community to the authorities and, consequently, these supporters were arrested. This is a typical example of internal divisions which exist in the Urfalli community, yet which were concealed under the umbrella of the Scouts and Sports Clubs.

Political alignments can change with amazing rapidity. Political alliance is a risky strategy leaving the small and the powerless, such as Urfallis, particularly vulnerable. Although Urfallis are proud of the contribution of the Scouts and Sports Club activities to unifying their youth and presenting the community as part of Syrian society, what they learnt is that political alliances should not be used as a means of establishing a secure position in Syrian society. Therefore, contemporary Urfallis are no longer interested in getting involved in political movements.

When Asad came into power, the Sports Clubs and the Scouts came under state control. The community lost interest in the Sports Clubs and the Scouts, in 1972 when the government issued a new regulation that certain sports clubs should merge into one. The Urfalli Christian Sports Club was merged with other Christian clubs of the Syrian Catholic and Greek Orthodox. Apart from the practical difficulties in managing the united club, it lost its social significance as the community's club of Urfallis. Urfallis resent the loss of their right solely to manage their own Club.

Something similar occurred to the Scouts Association. In the 1980s, the government launched a campaign to bring youth movements further under its control. The Scouts Association was displaced by the Ba'ath Party's Youth Association and was deprived of its function of integrating Middle Eastern youth. The only way the Urfalli Scouts regiment could survive was to transform itself into a youth group for religious

education under the authority of the Syrian Orthodox Church. They do not think that to portray their community as a religious (Christian) group will contribute to affiliating them into Syrian society whose majority are Muslims. Consequently, the community lost interest in the Scouts activities.

These accounts suggest that the community possessed its own local organisations which had a representative function. When these groups lost their independence, as the community's political representatives, they no longer held importance for the community. The decline of the Scout and the Sports Clubs suggests that they had meaning only when such groups participated in state politics and the state acknowledged their political rights and identity. In this sense, the history of these groups was merged into national history.

### **Syria as their Home**

Under the state control of collective activities Urfalli Christians lost the means through the Sports Clubs and the Scouts, to identify the community as part of Syrian society. In the 1980s, Urfallis have become concerned about their political and social position in Syria. Urfallis say, "we left everything behind in Urfa, except our faith (*imān*)". As their memory of Urfa has faded, the community's continuity with the past has ruptured. However, the fact that they have refugee origin remains. Urfallis need to have evidence to prove the apparent continuity of their community and its relation to Syria. They find it through their religious traditions. They recollect that even at times of adversity, soon after their immigration to Aleppo, children studied the Bible, sang Syriac hymns and recited part of liturgy in Syriac in the community's school.

Syriac as their liturgical language presents a problem for the Syrian Orthodox Christians, as, in fact, they have retained only a limited knowledge of Syriac. When they lived in Urfa, Turkish was the official language. They have not and did not use Syriac as their common language. Due to their poor knowledge of Syriac, there are current

attempts to revive the religious and cultural heritage of the community through holding Syriac courses for both children and adults.

The revival of Syriac started in the 1970 (see Table 1). Until then liturgical services had been mostly conducted in Turkish by priests who were trained by immigrants from Urfa. In 1976 a young priest from the Jazirah region was appointed to work for the Urfalli community in Aleppo and young priests from the community were then ordained. These started to use Syriac for the religious services. They had been educated in Syria, together with Muslims and Christians from other denominations. Currently, many community members welcome this revivalism of Syriac as a movement of creating the threads between the Syrian Christians' present and its past. It is also a means of distinguishing themselves from other Christian denominations.

As the current Urfallis regard themselves as Aleppienes (inhabitants of Aleppo), they wish to conceal their origin as refugees from Turkey. Therefore, the revival of Syriac is a means for them to identify themselves as Syrians. They maintain that Syriac was used in the southern part of present-day Turkey, including Urfa, as well as in Syria. Therefore, the connection was not lost.

One attempt to prove such origins is the installation of a stone carving which illustrates an ancient legend of King Abjar the Black of Edessa (present-day Urfa). Committee members in the community planned the renovation of the community's church and decided to install the stone carving in front of the church door. This carving gives eminence to the Syrian kingdom, as the first Christian dynasty, where the people spoke Syriac. The carving tells the story of King Abjar who sent a mission to Jesus to ask him to come to Edessa and cure his disease. Jesus said that he could not go to Edessa, but one of his disciples would go. This disciple cured the king who, consequently, became the first Christian King in the world<sup>3</sup>. As Urfa used to be a centre of ancient Christians of Greater Syria, this legend makes it possible for them to identify themselves as descendants of the ancient Christians of Syria.

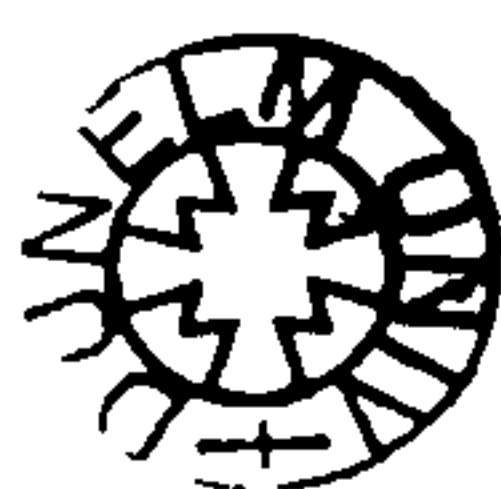


**Figure 3.** King Abjar the Black of Edessa at St. George's Church, Aleppo



Present Urfallis also try to find evidence that ancient Syrian Christians lived in the area of Aleppo. They organise one-day trips to visit areas, such as Jabal Barisha outside Aleppo, looking for ruins of ancient Syrian Christian villages. For example, they can see that the second century Roman road along with ancient Christian villages connected Antioch, i.e. an ancient Christian centre, to Aleppo. From this, they assume that their ancestors lived in this part of Syria. This affirms the persistent presence of Syrian Christian community in Syria, and hence the continuity of their group. Even though Urfallis moved from one place, i.e. Urfa, to the other, i.e. Aleppo, both of them are within the territory of the 'land of their fathers'. By reconstructing their history in such a way, they try to make a connection between the religious history of their community and history of Syria in order to secure their position in Syria's current social and political situation.

## Conclusion

The problem which the Urfallis face is that they need to be accepted by the nation state not only as citizens of Syria, but also a community in its own right. Urfalli Syrian Orthodox Christians use the Arabic word *tāifa* to describe their community. The word can imply both a community in social terms and a religious group. Current group activities aim at presenting their community as a successor to the ancient Syrian Christians, so that their *tāifa* has been in this region prior to the invasion of Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula. They try to conceal their refugee origin and define their community as ‘original’ inhabitants of Syria. Urfallis have turned to archaeology and language and education as means to establish their identity. Education enabled people to be evaluated on the same criteria without taking their social background into consideration. Educational achievements elevated not just individuals but also enable the community to conceal its origins. They describe how they have achieved their ideals, such as unity, cooperation and solidarity of community members, in order to integrate themselves into Aleppiene society. These ideals are regarded by them as distinctive characteristics of their *tāifa*.

When attempting to establish their historical right to be in Syria, the gap between oral memories, those recounted in stories people tell, and written histories becomes evident. As we have seen, there appears to be an oral amnesia in the Urfalli community. Little is mentioned about life in Turkey nor about their expulsion or emigration, although some data is available in historical accounts. The reason why such accounts appear not to have filtered down into oral culture could partly be explained because of inability in Arabic among the older generations. Written accounts about the Christian persecution were obtainable, but they were unable to read them in Arabic. Furthermore, the few individuals who had some restricted literacy in Turkish did not write because the young were being educated in Arabic. The formal model available to individuals does not appear to have been the autobiography or personal narrative (“I was there; I saw this...”) as in the West, but rather the formal model of grand political actors and geopolitics. There is however the problem of why the Urfallis never seem to *talk* about their expulsion. This is very different to the Armenians who have kept strong traditions

of expulsion and genocide alive, and whose experiences the Urfallis certainly were aware of before their own expulsion. Urfallis actually interacted with Armenians before and after, and spoke the language. Isolation cannot be advanced as an explanation.

We must therefore look to other reasons. One might be that the Urfallis, realising their time in Turkey was up, decided as a small group, to try to camouflage their alterity in Syria as much as possible. The other émigrés in other parts of Syria maintained links with their past, but the Urfallis had to adjust to a novel and uncertain political situation in Syria that threatened to replicate their immediate past. Some did indeed align themselves with the French and converted to Catholicism, ultimately a risky strategy in the face of rising Arab nationalism. Their suggestion that they have always maintained their Orthodox Christian faith is contradicted by the facts and requires a vocabulary of justification. Others began supporting Syrian nationalism which equally turned out to be risky. A lesson for outsiders in the Middle East, and one that the Urfallis know only too well, is that political alignments can change with amazing rapidity leaving the small and the powerless particularly vulnerable. Religious identity and political alignment are therefore weak or risky strategies for the construction of ethnic identity or as strategies for incorporation in the wider society. Christianity in any case differentiates them from their Muslim neighbours.

Having concealed their origin, Urfallis have tried to identify themselves as descendants of the original inhabitants of Syria. They claim that their original language is Syriac and that it is the remnant of the original language spoken in Syria. Since the 1970s, Syriac has been revived as their liturgical language to articulate their identity with Syria. Their memory of Syriac hymns and the liturgy is now shown as proof that Syria is the 'land of their fathers'.

Herein lies the irony of their predicament. Syrian Christians appear to have been expelled from their own original homeland, and they conceal their insecurity by claiming to be the descendants of the original aboriginal inhabitants of the land they now live in, even before the invasions of the Arab tribes. They are refugees from their own past and guests in a future that might not be theirs. If as Lucette Valensi (1990) has

suggested ‘to be Jewish is to remember’, perhaps ‘to forget is to be Syrian’ – which may be even more fraught.

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### Chapter 3. Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the 1930s, the old Sunni elite in Syria as well as prominent Christians tended to send their youngsters to private schools and neglected state affiliated education (Hourani, 1946: 93-5). Urfalli Syrian Orthodox Christians who wanted to give their children a better education tried to follow such a trend in education and sent them to either American or French schools. Parents who were unable to afford to send their children to these private schools educated their children in government schools, which had a good reputation, outside the community.

<sup>2</sup> The contemporary discourse of Syrian nationalism advocated by Syrian Orthodox Christians defines Syria in terms of geographical and cultural unity of the land of ancient Arameans. This proto-Syrianism shares some ideological aspects with that of Syrian Nationalists in the 1930s. See Chapter 7.

<sup>3</sup> The panel in the church of Ḥai as-Suriyān represents the Urfalli Christians' version of the legend of King Abjar the Black. The panel depicts a messenger of the king, Ḥannan, reporting to him about his meeting with Jesus. As Jesus had said that as he was unable to visit Edessa, he would send his disciple to cure the king's disorder. The king had ordered his mission to bring back a portrait of Jesus, if Jesus could not visit him. The panel shows Ḥannan with a cloth on which the face of Jesus is printed. This print was miraculously made by Jesus putting the cloth on his face. Also see Drijvers, 1994:91-5, and Segal, 1970: 62-9.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Changes in Marriage Ceremonies: Some Reflections on Problems in the Urfalli Community**

#### **Introduction**

As analysed in the last chapter, Urfallis developed idealised characteristics for their community when recounting its history. They recount that they cooperated together in order to affiliate themselves to Syrian society and improve their social position there. Unity of the community, which they have achieved through community's activities, is one of the most important characteristics of the Urfalli community. Despite their idealistic statements of love and unity, there are conflicts and differences between community members. This chapter examines how their statements of such ideals do, in fact, reveal that there are social differences among community members which divide them. This chapter, also, relates the changes in their marriage ceremonies, and the reasoning behind them. Urfallis maintain that they have promoted changes in marriage rites in order to create good relationships between affines and between community members. As a result of their efforts, ideological changes have occurred and enable them to establish good relationships between community members. Such historical accounts can be seen as a dialectical reference for comprehending past events, whilst indicating current problems in their community. In fact education, professions, and marriage choices, create social differences between them.

All members in the community have been involved in marriage negotiations or attended ceremonies. They can share such experiences and can demonstrate reasons why they have changed marriage customs. Thus, the community develops a collective repository of knowledge of how adaptation have been made to customs so as to deal with problems in the community. As Fentress and Wikham mention, personal experience and collective knowledge are brought together and thus emphasises the relevance of the former for understanding the latter (1992: 99).

Both elder and younger generations maintain that the transformation of marriage started in the 1960s. This was the time when the economic situation of the Urfalli community improved and they developed the desire to establish a better social position in Aleppiene society. In the 1960s, the first educated generation among the community members acquired qualifications to enable them to become senior government officials, and young artisans expanded new economic opportunities. As Baron has mentioned in her study of Cairene society, when a younger generation introduces more efficient ways of improving lives both economically and socially, they challenge traditional ideas about the family and, consequently, reshape its relationships (1991: 287). As Urfalli youth acquired modern values and skills which are effective means for climbing the social ladder, dependence of the younger generations on their fathers and elder family members was no longer obligatory, and the balance of power between the generations started to shift. In this process of social change, the community has started to discard traditional ways of marriage negotiations and ceremonies.

Urfallis embody strategies for distancing themselves from what they conceive to be archaic marriage customs which had been practised in their time in Urfa. In their history of marriage, Urfalli Christians explain that they discarded the traditional ways of marriage negotiations and wedding celebrations in order to create good relationships between the bride's and the bridegroom's families and to enforce conjugal unity. This idealistic statement reflects two interrelated facets. First, by adopting the Aleppiene way of wedding celebrations they try to conceal their origin as outsiders and claim their affiliation to Aleppine society. Second, they attempt to demonstrate improvement in their social position by showing their economic ability to prepare a flat for a newly-wed couple and hold a wedding reception, in a similar way to that of middle class Aleppienes. These new customs have created a financial burden on the groom's side who are responsible for these expenses. This change affords the bride's side the leverage to negotiate with the groom's side. The former can request the latter to follow the new customs. The new customs, which they maintain have contributed to constructing good relationships between the two families, in fact, create tensions between them. A contradiction is found between their ideal statement of the relationships and what is actually brought by the changes.

As Friedman has mentioned, current practices of constructing social identity reflect ways of reconstructing a community's history (1992: 853). The historical narratives on the transformation of Urfalli marriage customs are attempts to let slip the old values which had been maintained since the Christians' time in Urfa. Their description of old marriage rites does not always reflect what they used to be. By examining how Urfalli Christians perceive these changes, it becomes clear why they need to demonstrate them in a particular way and what problems the community has faced and are facing. Urfallis recount the changes of marriage rites as if they have contributed to promoting changes in family and conjugal relationships and so has become a source for constructing their new identity. For example, the rites which formally displayed control exercised by elders, the bridegroom's parents in particular, were discarded and were replaced with new rites which present ideas for respect and equality between spouses and for creating good relationships between their natal families. These ideas in fact reflect problems, such as a husband's control over his wife and alienation of affines, which the community currently face. Furthermore, they stress their respect for 'modern' values, which new marriage ceremonies embody, and are proud of such an attitude as a positive characteristic of the community<sup>1</sup>. Ironically to forget the old customs means to lose group's characteristics, which they have succeeded for generations and which are proof of the endurance of their community.

### **Problems of Contemporary Marriage**

The community reproduces itself by maintaining the tendency to choose their spouses from among community members. Second and third cousin marriage of both maternal and paternal sides have been common. However, the marriage law of the Syrian Orthodox Church used to forbid marriages between first cousins and marriage of a person to his/her sister/brother-in-law. Since social differences based on professional qualifications emerged in the community in the 1960s, social stratification of the educated, well-off artisans and traders, and ordinary and poor artisans has gradually become apparent within the Urfalli Syrian Orthodox Christian community. Thus, their

marriage choices can be related to current social problems in the community. Marriage choices became a marker for indicating social position and, therefore, widen social differentiation among community members. Educated men and well-off businessmen choose girls who are educated as their appropriate spouses. Consequently, marriages between educated men and women are conducted across family lines and contribute towards creating a socially respected social stratum. By contrast, poor male artisans, who are less educated and have only small financial resources, are finding it difficult to find girls with good qualifications or those from professional families. Similarly, less educated daughters of such artisan families have limited opportunities for being proposed to by professional men. Consequently, the idea of strengthening the unity of a family through marriages between close relatives has become of significance in order to justify and facilitate marriages of ordinary and less educated community members.

Marriages of close relatives, marriage between first cousins in particular, have been of a great concern for the Urfalli community in Aleppo. As poor artisans tended to choose marriage partners within a circle of their relatives, such popular demand has influenced the Syrian Orthodox Church to change its marriage law and accept first cousin marriage in the early 1970s. Such a change has promoted a preference to choose close relatives as spouses and has enhanced the idea of the community maintaining its homogeneity.

However, marriage between patrilateral first cousins, first parallel cousins in particular, is religiously and biologically regarded by community members as undesirable due to their closeness. The solution they adopt in order to reduce possible number of marriages between patrilateral first parallel cousins is for the father to choose his brother as his son's godparent (*qarībo*) when the boy is baptised. This boy and the daughters of his godparent are regarded as quasi-siblings (who are also in the relationship of patrilateral first parallel cousins) and, therefore, are forbidden to marry. They thus overlay biological kinship with fictive kinship. In the case of a girl, either her father's brother's wife, or her father's sister if her father's brother is not married, becomes her godmother (*qarība*). This relationship between the godchild and her godparent forbids this girl to marry her godparent's son (who is either her patrilateral

first parallel cousin or patrilineal first cross cousin). Marriages between close relatives have changed the choice of godparents who used to be chosen from non-relatives. Although the previous pattern of choosing godparents is no longer traceable, community members remember when it began to change.

Changes in settlement patterns at marriage coincided with the improvement of economic situation of the community. There has been a movement from patri-virilocality to neo-locality. A married couple used to remain in the bridegroom's family's household. Small and poor limestone houses with galvanised tin roofs, which the first generation of the community built after their purchase of the land, were the houses of extended families (newly-wed couples having joined the grooms' families). Even though these limestone houses are too small to accommodate big extended families, due to the poor economic situation, they had no choice but to share this small space. These houses have gradually been replaced by modern flats. This movement started in 1936, when building contractors demolished old houses and built concrete four or five storey blocks, on the condition that the previous owners exchanged their right to the land for ownership of flats in the new buildings. However, the majority of the community lived in poor housing until the end of the 1960s. According to their memories, many people still slept on the paths in front of their houses in 1967 at the time of the war against Israel.

In order to demonstrate the improved economic condition, Urfalli Christians started to buy flats for conjugal couples and neo-local residence has become a marker of indicating one's economic status. In the 1990s, such a change of settlement pattern obliged a bridegroom to prepare a flat for his marriage. People now comment that such changes in the settlement pattern have isolated families and distract from the unity of the community. This makes some yearn for 'the good old days' when many slept on the house paths in summer and everything was shared. Sharing goods in common was one of the special characteristics of the community whose members trust one another (*aman*).

## Transformation of Marriage Rites and its Ideology

The current problems of the community are caused by the expanding separation between ordinary artisans and professionals, which reflect on marriage choices, and the isolation of families as a result of changing settlement patterns from patrivirilocal to neo-local, which, as explained earlier, demonstrates improvement of one's economic status. These problems which distract unity of the community are not mentioned in public. Narratives on the transformation of marriage rites imply such current problems and therefore emphasise the ideal of cooperation and good affinal relationships. The Urfalli community respects the family values of maintaining good relationships between the bride and her bridegroom. However, the marriage ceremonies manifest the traditional idea of a contest between the two families. As marriage is arranged through a process of negotiation between the two families, their authority which is displayed in the marriage rites often creates tension between them. They recount that the changes of marriage rites attempted to reduce such tension.

Most wedding ceremonies take place on Sundays and its associated activities start one week before the ceremonies. On Monday, the bride's family ask close relatives and friends to help them display the trousseau (*jihāz*) in one room of her natal family. This is a traditional custom for Urfalli Christians. The trousseau consists of sheets, pillowcases, duvet covers, bed skirts, cushions, night-dresses, underwear, dressing-gowns, towels, pot-holders, aprons, table cloths, dresses, clothes, shoes, jackets, cosmetics, bottles of perfume and so on. Girls used to spend years decorating bed linen and sets of tablecloths with embroidery and lacework. However, nowadays they buy most of these items in the market. On the Tuesday and Wednesday, the bride's relatives and friends are invited to see the trousseau. On the Thursday afternoon, it is the turn women of the bridegroom's family, e.g. his mother, sisters, brothers' wives, paternal and maternal aunts and uncle's wives, come to see the trousseau. The bride's family offer all the guests who visit them to see her trousseau coffee and sweets. Accepting coffee is a sign of keeping good relations with the host. Sweets symbolise happiness.

Since the trousseau is the only property which the bride takes from her natal family at her marriage, the display of the trousseau is an occasion for demonstrating the financial status of the bride's natal family. However, the people's attitude in the Urfalli community has changed. They now consider that spending a large sum of money for preparing the trousseau is only for displaying the vanity of the bride's natal family and is not practical. Even though the trousseau contains enough clothes and shoes for the bride not to have to buy them for some years, in these days, young people do not wear clothes and shoes which can soon become out of date and unfashionable. They try to indicate how the community's economic situation has improved. Naima, who immigrated to Aleppo in her childhood, recollects that her mother, who used to work as a seamstress in her days in Urfa, stopped working after the exodus as there was little demand for new clothes. This account suggests that community members were not able to afford to buy new clothes. By having experienced such hardship, the trousseau used to be a display of economic and social status of the bride's family. However, community members insist that, in modern marriage, the welfare of the new couple should be considered first. This attitude contributes to establishing good affinal relationships. Therefore, it is preferable for the bride's natal family to present materials which the newly married couple will require in order to establish their new life, e.g. a refrigerator, furniture etc., instead of spending a large amount of money on the trousseau. What they attempt to do is to negate the old value system, which had endured since their time in Urfa, by indicating that today's trousseau is of less practical value. Urfallis attempt to abandon the custom which reveals economic and social differences among community members. Although such an idea is widely accepted, in practice, when a daughter marries, it is difficult for her family to abandon the old value system advertising their status by displaying a luxurious trousseau. Consequently, her family need to prepare both trousseau and modern equipment as a gift to the couple to show their status in both traditional and modern ways. The introduction of a new idea imposes a financial burden on the bride's side. Ironically, their attempt to introduce new customs results in revealing social differences among community members.

On the Friday afternoon, the trousseau is carried to the place where the new couple will live. Sisters, female relatives and friends of the bride used to carry the

trousseau to her bridegroom's house on foot. In the past the parents of the bride and the bride herself did not join the procession. The bride now comes along with her relatives and friends to the groom's house. When they arrive, the male relatives of the bridegroom then leave to visit the bride's family in order to collect the rest of the trousseau. The bride's sisters and female relatives enter the still-empty nuptial bedroom in order to make up the new couple's bed, display cosmetics and bottles of perfume on a dresser, and put other clothes and sets of table cloth in a wardrobe. Then, they start to dance. Sweets and drink are offered by the bridegroom's side to the guests.

As marriage is a matter of negotiation between the families of a bridegroom and his bride, the transfer of the bride's property to the bridegroom's house means that her family announces their permission for the bride's transition to her new husband. However, the absence of the bride's parents shows that the transition of the bride is not completely admitted by her family. Such an old social value still remains alive in the ceremony of transferring the bride's property. However, the bride's participation now in this ceremony means that the bride tends not to be a passive participant in her marriage negotiations, which formally were dominated by the elders in her family, but to express publicly her will to accept the marriage. The bridegroom's family, who used to look on while the bride's relatives put her trousseau into the bedroom, now also give a hand to them. This cooperation is based on the new idea of constructing good relationships between the two families.

Marriage is regarded as an indissoluble sacrament based on Christian belief and morality. Both bridegroom and his bride together with the elders of their families, who are usually their fathers or brothers, go to the church on the Friday morning. The couple make a confession of their belief, and kneel down in front of the altar in order to tell God about their sins, so that a priest can ask God's forgiveness. Then, they receive the Sacrament of Eucharist. (It is sin for Syrian Orthodox Christians to participate in a sacramental act without first cleansing themselves of sin.) Apart from this rite, there is a rite which symbolises that any disputes between the bride's and the bridegroom's families have been removed. The two elders of the bride's and the bridegroom's families also hold a big loaf of flat bread which they pull from each side. By splitting the bread

into two pieces, both families indicate that they wish to break away from any causes of dissension. Which elder obtains the bigger piece is a matter of chance. It is believed the bigger the piece is, the more fortunate will be the elder's family. The priest blesses the bread and then it is distributed to relatives of both families. One can see thus as a social rite paralleling the religious rite of the Eucharist. In both cases breaking bread together creates conviviality, union, and harmony. Distributing bread is a communion with family members who share the feelings of joy and happiness at the new marriage. This rite indicates that the marriage is negotiated between the both families and the elders are the representatives of this negotiation. In this rite, the Urfalli community respects the family values of maintaining a good relationships between the bride and her bridegroom on the one hand, and on the other hand, stresses that marriage is an occasion for negotiations between the two families. The following presents what procedures take place involving both families when an Urfalli couple marry.

On the Saturday evening, the bride's family invites her relatives and friends, and holds a henna party, separately from her bridegroom's party. At midnight, the mother of her bridegroom, with the tray of henna on her head, together with her female family members dance in procession, intrude into the party and approach the bride. The mother produces with three items from the tray which are: henna, candles and an apple. Candles symbolise the light which represents God. This symbolism of light is observed in Syrian Orthodox Church architecture. In the central altar, one can see two windows which channel the light of God to the earth. Although association of light with God is recognised by Urfalli Christians, their awareness of the symbolism of apple and henna is obscure. It might be related to the statement in the Old Testament that an apple is a symbol of something precious and of affection (e.g. the apple of one's eye, Deut.32: 10, Ps.17:8; apples, Pr.25:11, S.of S.2:5 ). As henna often stands for blood, the henna in the tray may associate with the blood which the mother gives to her child and spills in giving birth to the child (Combs-Shilling, 1981: 194). However, the symbolic meanings of the henna tray is not fully recognised by the community's members.

The significance of the rite is that the bride dips her little finger into a henna paste. At midnight, to coincide with his future bride's ceremony, at the bridegroom's

party, the bridegroom dips his little finger into the henna, which was mixed by his female relatives. Here, this ceremony in the henna party contains two aspects. One is the celebration of unity of the new couple. Participants in the party either dip their fingers into the henna paste or bring a portion to home share the joy of celebrating the conjugal unity. The other is the authority of the bridegroom's family, his mother in particular, to acknowledge that the bride will contribute to reproducing his family line as Delaney has mentioned in a Turkish wedding (1987: 32-3). However, in the present idea of marriage, celebration of the conjugal unity of the new couple is emphasised.

Memories of marriage suggest that, until the 1960s, marriage was to separate the bride from her natal family. The female party of the bridegroom's side used to sing songs in Turkish when they offered henna to the bride. The songs are farewell songs that express the sadness of the bride's family caused by the departure of the bride from her natal family. According to the older women who used to sing these songs, it was at this time that a bride usually started to cry because she suddenly realised her departure had come. The songs take a form that the bride and her family exchange farewell greetings.

Bride: "I am going, Oh, my father!"

Father: "Be in peace. God will help you."

Mother: "You are leaving. I am sad. I am crying. God is with you. Good fortune will be yours. Your brother comes. He will hold the reins of the horse [on which you will ride] and will take you to the church."

Women: "A carpet is on the one side and another carpet is on the other. Our bride is tall like a carnation."

Another song expresses the words of the bride's mother to her daughter on parting.

Mother: "My daughter, you want to leave your family and move [to your husband's]. Your mother is not there. When you will go there, [I wish] you will be happy. Your brother, and your father, who is crying, say, "you will be comfortable and happy with your husband."

It was not easy for me to find elder women who remembered these old marriage songs and were able to translate these Turkish songs into Arabic. Since these songs had not been sung for forty years, many women have already forgotten them. As these were sung in Turkish, this evidence suggests that the Urfalli community had had this tradition before their emigration from Urfa to Aleppo in 1924. They explained the reasons why

these Turkish songs were forgotten: "The less Turkish was spoken, the less popular these songs became." After their emigration, Turkish, which was their ordinary language in Urfa, was gradually replaced by Arabic, which has been the lingua franca in Syria. However, they did not translate these songs into Arabic. They have completely died out. This fact suggests that they tended to erase this tradition, which reminds them of their origin as refugees from Turkey. But it also suggests that certain traditions are embedded in a fundamental way in language, and therefore when languages change, traditions are abandoned. By abandoning these songs, they became free from their traumatic past and tried to integrate themselves into Syrian society. Marriage rites are also very important semiotic markers of a community's identity. Abandoning Turkish songs would also have been a means to conceal their 'otherness', their alterity in Syria. In the 1990s, in order to justify their attitude of concealing their past, they attached negative meanings to these songs. As these songs forced the separation of the bride from her natal family, they maintain that due to such characteristics of these songs, they discarded them. Community members think that such impositions on the bride's family are not appropriate for their current idea of marriage, i.e. respect for good relationships between natal families of both the bride and groom. Such new values also justify their current views that they respect women and wish for equality between the two families.

There is another rite, whose meaning in the past is now forgotten. After the wedding ceremony at the church on Sunday, the bride used to break a fragile item before entering her new home. The bridegroom's mother or his elder female relative used to hand over the bride a valuable fragile item, such as a glass or a vase, and ordered her to drop and break it. They had smuggled this item out from the bride's natal family at either one of these occasions: on their visit to her family on the Friday to see her trousseau or on the Saturday night at the henna party. They indicated that the glass or the vase was now in another house as part of the bridegroom's family, and that the bride could not return to her natal family as a 'whole piece', just like the fragile article. As she had agreed to join them, then she 'belonged to' her new group. If she broke this contract of agreement, she could go back as a 'broken piece' and could not get back to the situation as it used to be.

This traditional rite revealed a process of negotiation between the elder women of the bridegroom's family and the bride. Nowadays, community members explain that, from the perspective of her natal family, the bride is precious for them, just like the fragile valuable of her family, and, therefore, her family cannot accept the rite which makes the bride a victim of such bullying by the bridegroom's family. Community members maintain that this rite diminished the relationship between the two families and, therefore, has been abandoned. This is a total fabrication of their past in order to justify their new value system. They adopt a new way of expressing the transition of women's status at marriage. These days, a bride prepares a piece of pottery and fills it with things which symbolise the future happiness and prosperity of the couple: sweets, such as sugar-coated almonds and candies, to bring blessings and welfare; coins symbolising wealth; rice meaning fertility. When the bride breaks the pot, she demonstrates her departure from her maidenhood protected by her natal family and her will to construct a new happy family. This new rite symbolises the bride's agreement of her transition into the new status and promotes unity between her natal family and her bridegroom's family. The transformation of forms and meanings of this rite show how Urfalli Christians transform their past and try to demonstrate their ideal of community's unity.

Marriage used to be only for the perpetuation of the bridegroom's family and, therefore, its patriarch used to exercise control of the bride's transition into a married woman engaged in sexual and reproductive activities for the bridegroom's family. On the first night of her marriage, the bride was obliged to sit silently in the bedroom of her bridegroom's parents facing a wall waiting for her father-in-law's permission to 'go to bed'. This ceremony which promotes the patriarch as a figure of authority to control the bride's initiation into reproductive activities is no longer practised. In the present idea of marriage, the conjugal unity of the new couple is emphasised.

The current idea of conjugal unity respects the privacy of the newly wed couple's sexual relationship. The rites, which announce the young couple's sexual relationship to the public as a means of displaying family honour, no longer take place. The morning after the wedding, the bridegroom's mother and old women of his family

used to ask the bride to show the sign of her purity, i.e. virginal blood on the cloth, which also demonstrated the groom's masculinity. At eleven o'clock, the bride's mother visited the bridegroom's family in order to receive the sign. The mother took the piece of cloth to her home and, then, showed it to the bride's relatives with pride. The bride who has remained "pure" until her marriage, even to this day, honours both herself and her family. It proves her good character, modesty and obedience to her parents, and also verifies the good discipline of her family in ensuring the respect of family honour which women's sexual misconduct ruins. A bride carries an immaterial or conceptual value for social exchange because her chastity enhances the honour of both bride's and bridegroom's families (Gilmore, 1987: 4). The rite of displaying her purity demonstrates the bridegroom's family's ability to conduct a fair exchange, i.e. spending a large sum of money and receiving a woman of social worth, which is similar to marriage in Cyprus as Argyou mentions (1996: 83).

The social significance of a woman's sexual virtue and her husband's masculinity has not changed. The idea of constructing good relationships between the wife and the husband shows respect for their privacy and, consequently, the rites have lost its public character. The Syrian Orthodox Christians regard sexual virtue as a matter which should be sorted out by the couple. The objection of displaying the evidence to the public is found in another society in the Middle East, as Eickelman reports the perception of women in Oman that a bride would be too "embarrassed" to have such an intimate part of herself displayed in public (1984: 107). The Syrian Orthodox Christian women, both elders and youngsters, object to the old custom of displaying a proof of the bride's virginity due to the reason that this obligation becomes a psychological burden for a newly wed couple. They say, "a bride may feel extremely tense at the first night of her marriage. Her husband may need to make her feel relaxed and postpone having sexual intercourse". What they imply here is that others should not force the couple to engage in sexual intercourse at the first night and it should be conducted on the couple's mutual consent.

Such a change is related to the new idea of respecting conjugal unity, which suggests that closeness of the newly wed couple is highly evaluated. For example, male

friends of a bridegroom used to tease and prick him with thick needles, which symbolises a phallus, when he dipped his little finger into a henna paste in the party on the Saturday night. The public display of manliness used to be encouraged. Abolishment of this rite means that the public should not intrude into the sexual intimacies of the couple. The diminution of these conventional ceremonies reflects the new morality and ideas of marriage which recognise the right of a new couple to keep their privacy and create intimate bonds of conjugal relationship.

Nowadays, due to the spread of new ideals of conjugal unity and mutual respect, a young couple may have sexual intercourse by their own consent after their engagement. Yet, it is believed that few young couples engage in pre-marital sexual activity. Both the bride and the bridegroom are often not willing to gamble their futures by engaging in sexual intercourse before marriage. After the engagement, the couple are permitted to visit each other's family and attend social meetings organised by the Centre for Religious Education in the Syrian Orthodox Church. The engaged couple usually do not go out alone, so that the girl can avoid gossip which can ruin her reputation. Community members highly value a young man who respects his fiancée's sexual honour. If an engagement is called off after long-term courtship, a woman may be suspected of having sexual intercourse with her fiancé. If her sexual honour is compromised, she and even her sisters may lose the opportunity of being asked for in marriage by men who 'respect' themselves. Therefore, long-term engagements are not preferable. If something goes wrong after the engagement, and the man wishes to end it, if he has had sexual intercourse with his fiancée, or if he has been engaged to her for a long period, he may be afraid that his fiancée's family may try to 'tie him down', to maintain their honour. This can act as a deterrent to having sex before marriage. Families and the Church warn young engaged couples not to create family problems by indulging in sexual activities before marriage. Therefore, young people respect female sexual virtue for their own sake as well as the honour of their families. The bridegroom's family tries to receive a woman who respects her sexual virtue, and the bride's family tries to protect her honour in order to maintain the honour of her family. In this sense, female sexual virtue is used by both sides in order to have a good deal in

marriage negotiations between these two families. The old system of sexual virtue is maintained in contemporary marriage negotiations.

Ideals of the relationship between the bride's and groom's families were brought into practice when Urfallis introduced new ways of celebrating marriage. One of the significant changes in marriage rites is that the bride's family acknowledges her transition by attending the wedding ceremony on the Sunday. In the old ceremony, the bridegroom's female relatives, holding a big tray with sweets and fruits, went into the bride's house. They surrounded the bride, covered her face with a shroud and took her to the church. The bride's family and her relatives, gathered there, but did not go with her nor attend the wedding ceremony at the church. Only her brother, who held the reins of the horse on which the bride rode, took her to the church and handed her over to her bridegroom in front of the church door. The ceremonial abduction, in which the bride was taken away from her natal family by the bridegroom's relatives for the wedding ceremony, highlighted the authority of the bridegroom's family who proclaimed their acceptance of her as a mother of their descendants. Their acknowledgement of her social value as a virtuous woman and a respectable member of her natal family allowed her to enter the life cycle to achieve a woman's ideal goal, i.e. gaining dignity by becoming a dedicated mother and a good housewife. After marriage, a woman used to move into her husband's household whose members, her mother-in-law in particular, in part, treated her well, but also, continually emphasised her subordination to them.

Marx (1967) reports of a similar ceremony which was practised among the Bedouin of the Negev and deduced that this ceremonial abduction of the bride was the action of the bridegroom's group for transgressing the boundary of their rights without asking her family for final agreement to her transition; the bride's family has not completely agreed to her transition and therefore, she retains membership of her natal family (ibid.: 104-6). With the Syrian Orthodox Christians, marriage is regarded as a sacramental tie between the bride and the bridegroom. When she accepts the sacramental tie in the wedding ceremony in the church, she is now not able to retain the membership of her natal family. Her parents no longer have direct responsibility for her sexually and financially, which is now transferred to her husband. Yet, a married woman retained her

maiden name which was associated with the name of her father, signifying her incorporation into her agnatic line<sup>2</sup>.

Urfalli Christians explain that the ceremonial abduction hurt the feelings of the bride's family and discouraged them from keeping good relations with the family of the bridegroom. They maintain that the termination of this rite reduced potential tension between the two families. In the 1960s, the bride's family started to attend the wedding ceremony in the church. At the beginning of the 1970s, people became able to hold wedding receptions, as other Aleppienes do. This is an attempt to affiliate to the wider society of Aleppo. Both the bride's and the bridegroom's families attend the reception. On the practical level, however, their ideal that attendance of the bride's family at both the wedding ceremony and the wedding reception creates intimate relationship between the bride's and the bridegroom's families is not achieved, and a married woman still has marginal status.

If a woman becomes a widow, the ambiguity of a married woman's status is revealed. Many widows in this community, both in the past and at present, receive little support from either her husband's or her natal family. A widow, even today, easily becomes the object of gossip. As many widows have to work outside the home to bring up their children, community members keep a close watch on them to see whether she has contact with men. Such a concern is closely related to her ambiguous status in that she is not fully protected by both her natal and her deceased husband's families, as she is not fully recognised as a member of either of these families. Many widows have suffered from the 'public eye' and, consequently, refrain from attending public meetings as they are wary of being regarded as 'being there in order to look for men'. Moreover, some people maintain that her conjugal tie with her deceased husband never religiously breaks off and this interpretation prevents young widows from remarrying. As time goes on and she grows older, the widow, with children, may gain the dignity attached to being a good mother and a good housekeeper. In the Urfalli community material control such as accessibility to productive resources (which is regarded as a source of male authority) is not a key to understand women's authority and power, as suggested in the case of Greece (Dubisch, 1986). The fulfilment of the maternal ideal is not only

important for a woman to establish her position in the household, but also embodies important social values of society that a woman is able to achieve her status by symbolising and recreating female ideology which separates her roles from a man's. (ibid.: 21-2).

Even though Urfalli Christians maintain that the introduction of the wedding reception has produced close affinal links, it in fact has created tension between the bride's and the groom's sides in the course of their marriage negotiations. Marriage negotiation is always started by the bridegroom's side as the notion of female sexual virtue restrains a girl from expressing interest in a particular man. When a man or his parents identify a girl as a potential bride, he and his family ask their relatives and friends about her and her family. If she is deemed as appropriate for him, the bridegroom's side sounds out her and her family's intention with regards to marriage. If the girl's side shows interest in the marriage and tends to agree with the marriage proposal, female elder members of the bridegroom's family visit the bride-to-be and her family in order to investigate them. When the elders regard her as a suitable woman, the bridegroom's family informs the bride's family that his family, including the male members, i.e. the bridegroom, his father and his brothers, would like to pay an official visit to her family in order to ask her hand for marriage. Shortly after their visit, a guardian of the bride-to-be, i.e. her father or her brother, officially gives consent to the marriage. From this stage of marriage negotiation, the bride's side has some leverage over the marriage negotiations.

The most important matters for the present marriage negotiations concern the future<sup>3</sup>. Whether or not they will hold a wedding reception and the residence of the newly-wed couple are matters of discussion between the two families. Since the 1970s the wedding reception has become a means of showing the improvement of the economic state of the family as well as social status. However, the introduction of this new communal celebration brings great financial burden to the bridegroom's family, as the bride, in principle, provides only trousseau at marriage in terms of financial resources. The bridegroom's side pays for all the expenses of the wedding ceremony and wedding reception, including the wedding dress of the bride in a modern Western style.

Moreover, a movement from patrivirilocality to neo-locality obliges the bridegroom to provide a separate household at marriage. As the wedding reception and neo-locality are symbols of economic development of families, a man who is not able to hold a wedding reception and provide a flat at marriage is regarded as a poor loser. These men obviously cannot attract young women. Young men, therefore, desperately need to establish themselves financially in order to marry. In the past, it was the bridegroom's side who created tensions by performing the ceremonial abduction which provided them with leverage, whereas at present it is the bride's side who are able to use of men's vulnerable situation and exercise more control in marriage negotiations.

In the late 1990s, a well established self-employed artisan earned 10,000 Syrian Liras (\$200US) per month, whereas the salary of an educated government employee is only 5,000 Syrian Liras (\$100US). Young men say, "artisans start their career earlier than university graduates and can earn more money than those being educated. The longer a man spends time on his education, the more he needs time to economically establish himself for marriage. We are in a difficult situation". Until the early 1980s, educated young government employees earned higher salaries than artisans and, therefore, education fulfilled their social as well as economic demands. Higher education is still an important social marker for Urfallis as they are regarded by others in Aleppiene society as a working class community, and believe that through education they will acquire a higher social position in society. However, education no longer guarantees economic success. Young girls ideally want to marry educated and financially established men. Young men have financial, social and psychological burdens and, consequently, marry later than in the past.

This situation where young men are desperately obliged to achieve male full ability through marriage advantages a bride and her family when negotiating a marriage arrangement. This creates tensions between two families. Sometimes the bride asks for the holding a wedding reception which could be beyond the financial ability of her bridegroom. If the bridegroom respects his bride's wish, he may enter deeply into debt. There is an example of a couple who held a big wedding reception, due to the bride's wish and because of overdue repayment, her bridegroom faced a financial crisis and

obliged to part with their new flat. Despite the fact that tensions were created by the bride's side who abused their advantageous position in marriage negotiations, Urfallis consider that these families wished to show off their financial ability and spent huge amounts of money for their vanity. In the late 1990s, the community started to recognise that the bridal couple should live within their means. In negotiations between the bridegroom's and the bride's families, including the young couple, they are able to say that instead of spending a large sum of money on the wedding banquet, it would be more useful to spend the bridegroom's savings in preparing the couple's new flat, as a face saving exercise. This ideological shift seems to work by gradually reducing the financial burden on the bridegroom. However it, in fact, only changes the standards for evaluating the bridegroom's financial ability and social position. The expenses of the wedding reception are replaced by the cost of purchasing electric equipment and furniture for their new residence.

A young man has to fulfil certain financial requirements in order to ask a woman to marry him. This situation advantages the bride's side in marriage negotiations between families of the bride and her bridegroom. Although marriage negotiations ideally provide opportunities for enhancing affinal bonds, shifting power balances between the families, in which the bride's family can demand more say in the negotiations, creates potential cleavage between them. Moreover, after marriage, a wife keeps close contact with her natal family and often visits them, whereas her husband maintains his close links to his parents and his siblings. Such attitudes do not contribute to generating close affinal links.

### **Current Problems in the Syrian Orthodox Christian Family**

The ideals of conjugal and affinal unity, introduced in local accounts of the evolution of marriage, actually conceal current community problems. I will now examine these problems, which divide the community.

One of the current problems faced by the community is related to their marriage choices. Many Urfalli young men abandon their education prematurely for practical economic needs and tend to enter artisanal work, but their choice raises a social dilemma in that they are unable to escape from the working class. These men tend to choose as their spouses their close relatives from artisan families who maintain a similar economic standard to them and understand their limited financial resources. Moreover, a bridegroom bears less of a financial burden for the marriage ceremonies and presents for his bride when he marries a woman who is a close relative. This is a wide spread marriage strategy among people in Syria to conserve the economic resources of the family. As I indicated at the beginning of this chapter, ordinary artisans tend to marry close relatives in order to retain their family resources, while professionals seek partners, who have similar educational and financial levels, across family lines in order to consolidate their status and establish alliances. Consequently, differences in marriage choices accentuate the class differences between artisans and professionals within the community. Due to this problem, accounts of the transformation of ideas constituting marriage rites, i.e. introducing the idea of creating good relationships between the bride's and the bridegroom's families in marriage negotiations and respect for conjugal bonds, are important to integrate the community. Holy's analysis of Middle Eastern families shows that when the agnatic solidarity is maintained by emphasising patrilineal relationships, affinal relationships are regarded as less important (1989: 122). In the case of Urfallis, whilst ideologically they promote good affinal relationships, in practice, marriage between relatives and close contact with natal families results in a weakening of affinal and conjugal ties.

The idea of conjugal unity is emphasised in narratives of the transformation of marriage rites. Changes of marriage rites can be correlated to the change of the roles between husband and wife when they started to use marriage ceremonies as a means to manifest their economic and social status. In the 1960s when the change of the rites started, their economic situation also started improving, even though both male and female household members, including children, had to work in order to sustain their living. By the 1970s, when economic conditions in Syria as a whole improved, men

became able to earn enough money to sustain their households. Housewives stopped going to work to provide financial support for their family.

That married women used to work for an income is, for them, the main sign of poverty in the past. The improvement of the economic situation in the community and the introduction of neo-local residence had a great influence on husband-wife relationships. Here, a conservative and idealistic family value has been introduced. A husband, as a head of his independent household, financially supports his family by providing them with food, a house, clothing, educational costs and social expenses. He bears sole responsibility for the lives of all his family, i.e. his wife and children in the contemporary urban setting. As Davis has mentioned generally in his survey of Mediterranean societies, men's economic ability to protect women is a sign of a successful performance of an honourable role (1977: 77). Marriageable single women perceive that a married woman's role is to take care of her family and do not think that they should work after their marriage. Throughout the Middle East, the greater the poverty, the more female labour outside the house is demanded, whereas, with the increase in wealth, more women may be expected to remain within the compound (Altorki, 1986:23). For example, in a poor urban quarter in Cairo, when economic situation became difficult, more married women in the quarter became street vendors. In such an economic situation, women working in market are not touched by the innuendo of loose morals (Early, 1993: 84-9). Similarly, when the Urfallis were poor, women working in factories were respected due to their economic contribution to the family. However, when economic conditions improved, the Urfalli women, as well as their men, started to follow the general pattern of attributing financial responsibility to husbands in conjugal relationships. This displays an improvement of their economic status and their attempt of showing their social position by adopting the standards that are shared among the population of Aleppo.

The exception is highly educated professional women. For example, for female medical doctors, whose occupation is highly respected, it is regarded as worthwhile for them to continue with their careers, because both men and women say that these women are distinguished and competent to serve their society. Gender norms restricting female

labour outside the house are likely to be more applicable to less educated women and artisan families. Thus, gender separateness correlates with male dominance. This is reflected in the view of young male artisans toward women's work. They say, "A lower ranking government employee earns only 3,000 Syrian Liras (\$60US) per a month. Why do such female employees earning such a small sum of money need to keep their jobs after their marriage? There is a great gap between lower ranking government employees and higher ranking officials, and therefore, working conditions of these women is not good". A lower ranking government employee symbolises an exploited poor worker without any hope of promotion, whereas higher ranking officers use personal connections (*wasta*) and take full advantage of their position for their own personal benefit. The status of these lower ranking employees overlaps with the social position of the Urfalli Syrian Orthodox Christians in the society of Aleppo. Therefore, a Syrian Christian husband, an artisan in particular, cannot accept the domination of other higher ranking officers, usually men, over his wife even at work. To leave his wife in such a socially subordinated situation shows the world his inability to protect and provide for his woman.

Different meanings are attributed to married women's economic activities. For artisan families in the Urfalli community, that married women give up their economic independence is a way of demonstrating their economic affluence and, hence, a sign of their climbing the social ladder. Moreover, the current increase in marriage between close relatives in this stratum directs the majority of people in the community to value ties with their natal families. Such a tendency is opposed to conjugal and affinal solidarity. Such marital relationships, as Goody suggests the case in some southern Mediterranean societies, correlate to a lack of women's economic independence and strengthens male dominance, (1983: 29-30). Their attitude of keeping close contact with their natal families and the male misuse of their authority, which is strengthened by married women's economic dependence on their husbands, weaken ties between husband and wife. By contrast, highly educated women usually marry highly qualified men and maintain their independent economic role after marriage. Their families constitute an upper stratum of the community. Couples in this stratum are not restricted by the conservative gender norm of married women remaining at home. Consequently,

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1,500 families in the community, joined one of eight 'family' groups. I participated in their meetings for over a year between 1997 and 1998 and observed their changes. Each group was composed of between twenty and twenty-five couples. About five couples in each group formed the core members, who recruited their relatives and friends and organised the group's activities. They aimed, first, to get to know each other. They included both white collar and artisan families in a 'family' group. Since the differences between the two strata have enlarged, they have a little opportunity to talk each other. 'Family meeting' provides them with such an opportunity. Each group aimed to consider the community's problems, such as the community's welfare, child education, support for disabled people, care of elders, relationship between younger and elder generations and learning their liturgical language of Syriac etc.

Once established, three couples in each group are put in charge of organising meetings for three months and then another three couples take over. The hope is that in order to prepare for the meetings, the chosen couples need to meet many times during these three months, which will give them the opportunities to get to know each other's family and construct close links between families, including each other's children.

Another purpose of these meetings is to reconsider husband-wife relationships. In the present gender division, wives are unable to become the spokesperson of their families, and never express their opinions in public especially when they are with their husbands. His authority requires a display of female modesty and self-restraint, which is a mark of the honour for the less powerful gender. Such a display of power relations between wife and husband is observed in the different part of the Middle East (Abu-Lughod, 1986: 107-8). As the 'family' meetings recognise problems of domestic violence and alienation of husband and wife, the meetings provide opportunities for members to be involved in activities which help them to realise more equal relationships between husband and wife and mutual support.

The acknowledgement of women's active participation and the members' respect for women's opinion are expressed during the meetings. One example is that wives read passages from the Bible at the beginning of the every meeting and give their

own interpretation. They timidly read a paper which they prepared for the reading, when the meetings were launched. They gradually understood what the members of the 'meetings' expected of them. Their positive participation and presentation of their opinions during discussion are understood to be part of the process for overcoming family problems. Men also started to experience women's work at communal meals which are the most enjoyable occasions for the participants of these meetings. It is husbands who take the lead in serving sweets and victuals during the meetings and cleaning up dishes, i.e. activities in which they are not normally engaged at home. By doing so, each community member, irrespective of social differences between them, supports the idea of conjugal unity by introducing the notion of sharing roles between husbands and wives. This is an attempt to promote the ideal of unity within the community by dealing with shared problems of conjugal relationships.

## **Conclusion**

Urfallis recount that the changes in their marriage rites are related to their demand for adopting modernised moral values. New values, such as affinal ties, conjugal relationships and gender equality replace old ones, which displayed the authority of elders and constrained to develop good relationships between community members. They transform the meaning of the marriage rites in the light of their present concern about the division among community members. Their attempt is related to two facets. First, in order to conceal their refugee origin, Urfallis try to diminish their old marriage customs connected to their past in Turkey and demonstrate their integration in Aleppiene society. When their economic situation has improved, they attempt to affiliate themselves with the middle class Aleppienes. Urfallis introduced wedding receptions and modern values of conjugal and affinal relationships, which they believe are similar to those held by Aleppiene families. Consequently, marriage rituals of Urfallis become standardised and diminish their traditional characteristics. The community conceal the evidence which relates them to their past in Urfa and, consequently, abandon the means of proving the endurance of their community. Second, they talk as if they have already achieved ideas of creating good affinal and conjugal

relationships by having transformed marriage rites. In fact this attempts to conceal current community problems, such as class divisions, alienation of affines, and husbands' domination over their wives.

Urfallis recount that the changes in marriage rites contribute to enhancing bonds between the bride's and bridegroom's natal families. This ideal is supported by the practice of choosing spouses from relatives due to the reason that genealogical relationships are renewed by creating affinal ties between them. However, such an ideal is postulated as a means of justifying marriage practices that ordinary artisans, who have limited choices, due to their qualifications and limited financial means, marry daughters of their relatives who belong to the same social stratum. By contrast, professionals tend to choose their spouses from families whose financial and educational status is similar to theirs. Such preferences in choosing spouses from the families who have the similar financial and educational backgrounds increases the gap between professional and artisan community members. The Urfalli community recognises that these current problems threaten their community's unity. Therefore, they express, in narratives, how the community transformed marriage rites in order to construct good relationships among community members, epitomised by the relationships between the bride's and the bridegrooms' families. The meanings of the old marriage rites which the present Urfallis explain are not necessarily derived from their memories of the old marriage rites. They explain the transformation of marriage rites from their present perspectives. Urfallis in the past may have interpreted the meaning of marriage rites different from those which the present Urfallis do. In this sense, Urfallis create a different past.

Artisans in particular have adopted a popular idea spreading in Middle Eastern societies that the economic advancement of a family is shown by the confinement of married women's economic activities. Consequently, the husband becomes the dominant figure in conjugal relationships. By facing this problem, Urfallis promote the ideals of intimate conjugal relationships in their accounts of the historical transformation of the marriage rites. They look for ways of coping with current problems, such as changing the relationship between husband and wife, the expansion of social stratification within the community, which all have a detrimental affect on the unity of the community. They

also try to deal with the problems by attempting to put these ideals into *practice by* holding community activities, such as 'family meetings'. Thus the proposed ideals work on two levels: warning them about their community's problems, and presenting modernised moral values which they hope will symbolise their unity.

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## Chapter 4. Notes

<sup>1</sup> On the level of community activities, innovative attitudes are encouraged and community members show interest in improving the community's welfare. Even younger generations are able to propose plans, for amending the old customs, to community elders, such as the Board of Trustees, who are respected and are authoritative figures in the community. For example, young people suggest that the community should take the initiative in adopting a more efficient way of giving wedding presents, instead of presenting gold accessories to brides. One of the proposals is that a community committee will prepare envelopes and set a money box in front of the newly wed couple and their families, when they stand in a row in front of the altar to receive the blessing of everyone at the wedding ceremony. The suggestion is that instead of gold, people can give the couple money as their gift. This means that they have more control over the amount, according to their income level, which they can spend on the gift.

<sup>2</sup> To what extent the control of a woman's conduct is transferred at marriage from her natal family to that of her husband is unclear in Middle Eastern societies (Meeker, 1976: 416; Meneley, 1996: 75-6; Pitt-Rivers, 1977: 43, 49; Tapper, 1979: 128).

<sup>3</sup> Another example is that the demand of the bride's side for securing her future is respected in the marriage negotiations. Before an engagement, a young-couple-to-be must exchange their health and single certificates (issued by their church). It used to be only a bride-to-be whose health was investigated. A sister of her bridegroom-to-be used to be sent to the bride-to-be and stay with her overnight before marriage. They say, "the sister checks the bride's breath. If the breath of the bride-to-be smells, she has health problems". The exchange of the certificates is intended to give the future bride and bridegroom equal opportunities to discover each other's health record, in order to predict whether their marriage has good prospects. However, there is gossip about several cases of forgery of health certificates which came to light when the husband died shortly after the marriage. This is interpreted as a sign that such a husband, or his family, paid little or no regard to the bride's future; showed disrespect for women; and that men do not consider that marriage involves shared responsibilities. Changes in attitudes towards the marriage partners allow for more leverage in marriage negotiations by the bride's family.

## Chapter 5

### Transformation of Marriage in Qaḥṭānīya

#### Introduction

As discussed in Chapters 1-3, Syrian Orthodox Christians in Qaḥṭānīya, Mālkiya and Urfallis in Aleppo recount that their community has been oppressed by external forces, such as tribal power and state persecution. They feel that external threats render them vulnerable as a small group. In facing such a difficult situation, Syrian Christians have made various attempts at unifying their community in faith and claiming that their religious traditions prove their Syrian origin and, therefore, their rights should be protected. However, it is not only external forces, but also the Christians themselves who create internal divisions within the community and make their position weak, as having discussed in the cases of the Mālkiya and Urfalli Christians. A similar phenomenon is observed in the Syrian Christian community in Qaḥṭānīya. This chapter examines the relationships between social changes brought from outside the community and marriage choices of the Christians and how the changes in their marriage choices weaken ties of community members and accelerate divisions between them.

The changes in marriage choices among the Qaḥṭānīya Syrian Orthodox Christians are related to their population movements. In the 1970s Christian villagers found new economic opportunities in the town and emigrated there. The massive scale of their immigration abroad in the 1980s was triggered by the regime's persecution of dissidents in the guise of religion. Due to the continued emigration, the Christian population in Qaḥṭānīya has decreased. They feel that their political position has weakened. In facing such a situation, there has been an increase in preference for close kin marriage.

Owing to political fear and the lack of economic and political prospects, marriage between close relatives became to be practised for the following two practical reasons. First, many people want to emigrate abroad in order to expand their

opportunities. In order to pursue this aim, many people in Qaḥṭānīya seek to arrange their children's marriages with close kin who return from abroad for short visits. Second, in urban settings, personal networks are an important resource in order to find a job and to facilitate legal procedures. The Christians, who are a minority group, require intensive kinship networks to strengthen their economic and social position. However, such practical demands for strengthening ties between close relatives are difficult to achieve due to the marriage rules of the Syrian Orthodox Church which prohibited close kin marriages. One of the aims in this chapter is to present the changes in the marriage ideology held by Syrian Orthodox Christians, in which the demands of lay people for establishing ego-centered kinship relationships emphasize the changes in the rules for regulating kinship and marriage. It is necessary to investigate how such ideological and practical changes have been brought about and how these changes have affected their social position.

Syrian Orthodox Christians do not express a formal or religiously sanctioned preference for marriage between patrilateral kin. However, they need to discover some legitimation for their increasing practice of certain types of close kin marriages. This is what has been called "official strategies" (Bourdieu, 1997). By contrast, in various Middle Eastern Muslim communities, marriage preferences are graded according to patrilateral genealogical distance. Analytical attention paid to marriages between patrilateral cousins indicates that this kind of marriage expresses an indigenous ideology of marriage preference in terms of kinship distance (Holy, 1989: 27). A preferred spouse in the Middle East is the patrilateral parallel cousin, i.e. *ibn 'amm*, father's brother's son (abbreviated in this text as FBS) and *bint 'amm*, father's brother's daughter (FBD). These terms can also apply to descendants of the patrilateral grandfather's and great grandfather's brothers. This recognition can even go back about five generations of offspring in the male line. This principle of differentiating kinship relations is applied so as to constitute ego-centred kinship relations, in which an individual defines one's relationship to the other in terms of the kinship categories in which both of them are included (Lancaster, 1981: 152).

As the Christians used to use Kurdish at their time in Turkey and now use Arabic, their languages may have influenced on the categorisation of kinship relationships. However, there are fundamental differences between the marriage ideologies of the Muslims and those of the Christians. Among their Arab and Kurdish neighbours, normative endogamy within the category of FBD marriage is not often practised, but presents the preference for endogamy with patrilineal relatives (cf. Lancaster, 1981: 38, 61; Stirling, 1965: 201; R. Tapper, 1979: 140-1; Patai, 1965: 334). By contrast, Christians are reluctant to accept marriage between close relatives despite the fact that the present social situation requires it.

On the other hand, Christians now emphasise changes in the Church's marriage laws. The Syrian Orthodox Church has been obliged to acknowledge marriages between close kin due to popular demand and practice. Thus the main difference between the Muslims and the Christians is that the former express a formal preference for close kin marriage, whilst the latter accept it "reluctantly" as a *force majeure* imposed on them by circumstances. In *practice*, therefore, there may be less differences between the two communities, although there are some difference. This echoes the work of Cole and Wolf (1974) who conducted comparative fieldwork in the Bozen/Trento region of northern Italy/ Austria where formal differences between the 'Italians' and 'Austrians' in their inheritance system (equal partible /unigeniture inheritance) was subverted by common practices. The rule of marriage prohibition between close kin was a distinctive feature of the Syrian Orthodox Christian community. Christians are now losing such an ethnic marker by adopting ideas and practices of marriage similar to their neighbouring communities. This negates their ideal of establishing their rights by claiming that their community has had an intact culture for generations in this locality. Furthermore, their increasing demand for emphasising ties between close relatives and changes in marriage ideology ironically make their networks smaller and weaken ties between community members. It also contributes to a decreasing Christian population in Qaḥṭāniya. The Christians thus generate problems from within.

## **Marriage Choices among Syrian Orthodox Christian villagers**

There was a great demographic disruption when Syrian Orthodox Christians in Ṭur ‘Abdīn in Turkey escaped from the massacre of 1915 and settled in villages in the area of Qaḥṭānīya. They found spouses who were not related, but were from a similar background. This may have created new opportunities for marriage with previously unknown people. For example, many women married men who were also refugees and shared common experiences of the atrocities at the time of the religious intolerance. Some women who had been obliged to marry Muslim men during the time of the religious intolerance ran away from their husbands and their families, and asked a Syrian Orthodox priest, Malke, in Qāmishlī, who was respected by both Christians and Muslims, about returning to their Christian faith. The priest accepted their request and also sanctioned their marriages to Syrian Orthodox Christian men.

The political situation of Jazirah was quite complex and the area was not fully settled until 1963 when the Ba‘ath party assumed power. Since the 1930s, the northern Jazirah became an important area for Syrian agriculture due to its high precipitation pattern and the fertility of its terrain. As discussed in Chapter 1, Syrian Orthodox Christians who settled there as agriculturists had confrontations with both Kurdish and local Arab tribes in order to maintain their agricultural land. One example is a Syrian Orthodox Christian village called Rūtān. The Syrian Orthodox Christian villagers were fearful of Kurdish massacres in 1915 and left their village. After their return in the 1920s, they had to fight the Kurds, who had squatted in their village and on their agricultural land, in order to get their land back. They had the assistance of regional police and so got their land back. The authorities were required to strengthening the guard at the border between Turkey and Syria in order to prevent raids from the Turkish side. The authorities wanted to use the Christian villagers in Rūtān, which is located close to the border, as border guards in order to establish the French control of the region. When the regional situation was unstable, bargaining with the authorities was an important skill for the Christians to practice.

The enormous possibilities for growing wheat and then cotton, whose production

was introduced in the 1940s, caused problem for Syrian Orthodox Christian peasants. The introduction of machinery in 1948 made it easier for tribal sheikhs, who regarded themselves as nomads and were politically dominant, to engage in cultivation without lowering themselves to the level of common peasants. This accessibility to cultivation stimulated their interest in agricultural businesses (Sato, 1997: 199). Syrian Orthodox Christians perceived that the authorities supported the domination of tribal sheikhs in the area in order to stabilise the region and ignored them, i.e. peasants, who were obliged to pay tribute to the sheikhs for housing and for the land they cultivated.

Syrian Orthodox Christians, who were being exploited by the tribal sheikhs, needed to fight hard to hold on to the right to the land they cultivated. For example, some Syrian Orthodox Christians constructed new villages, such as Qaşrūk, which was part of the territories of an Arab Shammar tribal sheikh, Daham Hādī. Although the Syrian Christians paid tribute to the sheikh, they tried to be as independent as possible.

As a result of the massacre and immigration, many family members were dispersed throughout Jazirah. Old village communities in Țur ‘Abdīn were broken up. However, the Christians recount that relatives and former neighbours of villages in Țur ‘Abdīn heard of fellow survivors, so they settled together in new villages. This suggests that migration was very individual and spread out over time rather than collective and at a single point of time.

Due to the threats posed by an oppressive and tyrannical tribal power in Qaḥṭānīya, an alliance between Syrian Orthodox Christian neighbours was required. This was reflected in marriage strategies. Syrian Orthodox Christians married locally at least within a closed geographical area, i.e. their own village or neighbouring ones. As they obtained information about their former neighbours and some family members who were separated, village communities gradually came to be composed of kin and former neighbours of Țur ‘Abdīn. Villagers tended to marry their peers. Marriage between neighbours meant that people knew the family history with whom the marriage was planned because of geographical vicinity. An example of marriage practices between Syrian Orthodox Christian villagers in the village of Gergeshamo near Qaḥṭānīya is

presented.

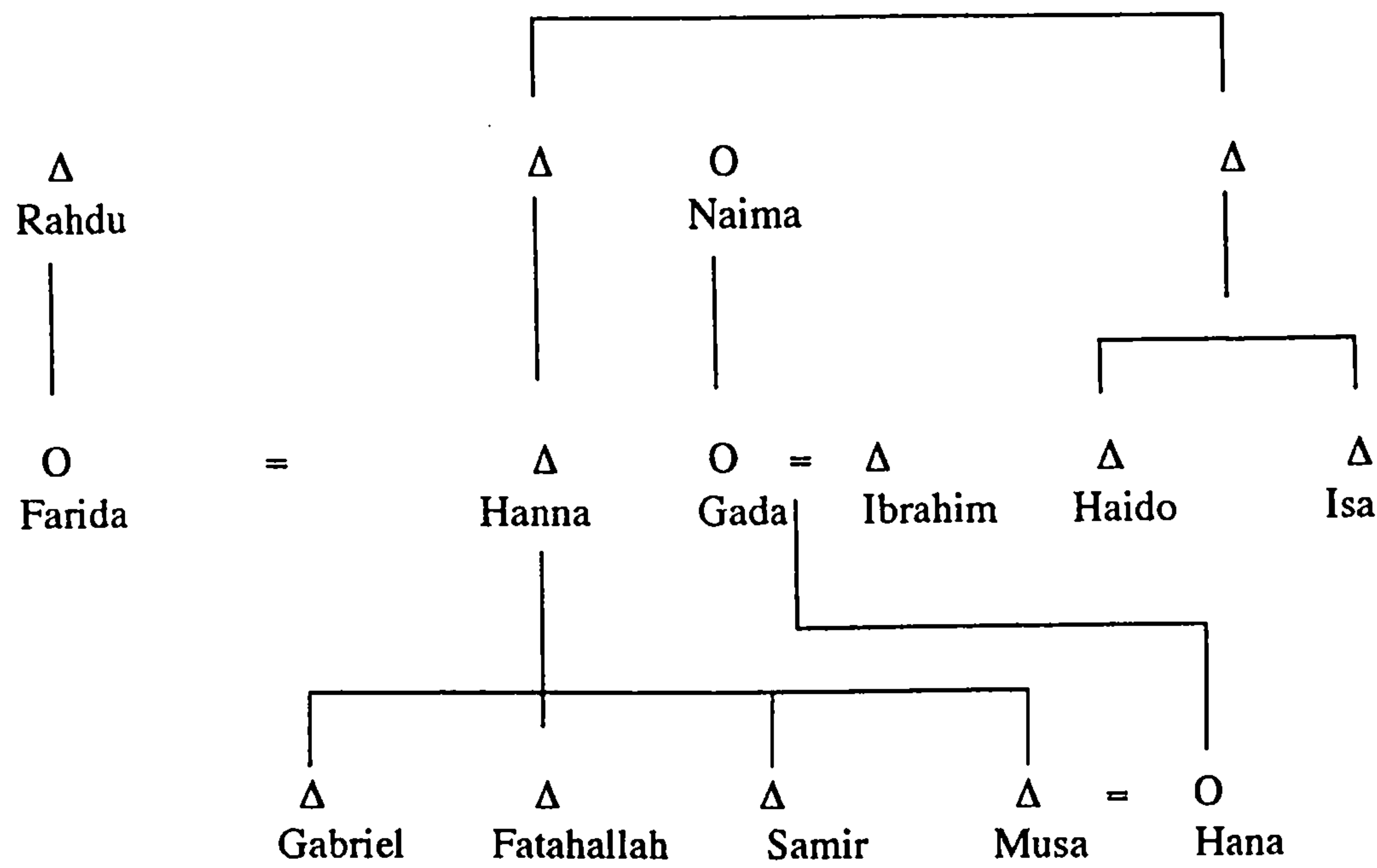
Musa and his household members related their family's history of marriage (see Figure 4). It was at the time when the Armenian deportation order in 1915 was issued (in Arabic it is called 'the time of the order', *al-furmān*, and in Syriac 'the year of sword', *seyfo*). Syrian Orthodox Christians were also attacked by their Kurdish neighbours who took the advantage of this policy of intolerance to the Christian inhabitants. Musa's father, Hanna, fled from a village called Arbo in Tur 'Abdīn to Gergeshamo in the area of Qaḥṭāniya with his neighbours, Rahdu, and his daughter, Farida, when Musa was a boy. Hanna knew that his MB was in Gergeshamo. There was no time for them to check where their family members were before escaping. Hanna's FBS, Haido, was a small boy and was found alone by a Muslim family. He was brought up by this family in Qaḥṭāniya. He, therefore, became a Muslim. Haido's brother, Isa, stayed at 'Arbo and became rich and owned land and property. Since then his three sons immigrated to Sweden, he moved there at his old age and subsequently died.

Musa married the daughter of his neighbour, Hana. Her father, Ibrahim, became an orphan when his father was killed by the French army due to his betrayal of them. He was a French army soldier, but had been secretly communicating with the Syrian Nationalists (*qawmi Sūrī*). Although after his father's death, a Muslim family took care of him, his FB eventually brought him to Gergeshamo. Ibrahim married his neighbour's daughter, Gada, whose real father was a Kurd. Her mother Naima was obliged to marry the Kurd at the time of the massacre in 1915. After his death, Naima left her deceased husband's home with her only daughter Gada. Naima heard that her FB, who was the only survivor in her family, was in Qāmishlī. She asked him for his protection and returned to Christian faith. Brothers and sisters of Musa's wife, Hana, married their neighbours who were Syrian Orthodox Christians living in Gergeshamo and in its neighbouring villages.

In the past, they used to be many people who became sick and died young. Both Gabriel and Fatahalla, i.e. Musa's elder brothers married three times due to the death of their wives. Fatahalla's first wife was his MBD and who died during childbirth. His second wife who was from Ḥassake died of cirrhosis. He married again a neighbouring woman after moving to Qaḥṭāniya. Musa's mother, Farida, remarried Hanna, after her first husband's death. Musa's younger brother, Samir, loved a Syrian Orthodox Christian in Qāmishlī. The bride-to-be's mother's brother's wife (MBW) interrupted the marriage arrangement and demanded a high *naqad* which was the money presented to the bride's family one week before the wedding. He and his family were not able to afford this large sum. The couple, then, eloped. They asked a powerful Syrian Orthodox Christian man in Ḥassake to help them. The couple sheltered with him for three months. The case followed the tradition that at the end of the couple's three months protection, he took them to a priest and obtained his permission for their marriage. The families of both the bride and her bridegroom were obliged after

the wedding to accept the marriage. The guardian's effort to settle the matter proved successful. Both families now have good relations.

Figure 4. Marriages of Musa's family



The marriage history of Musa's family shows characteristics of Syrian Orthodox Christian marriage, which were prevalent in this area until the 1960s. The first generation who experienced the massacre in 1915 were separated from their family members. Orphans, like Musa's FFBS, Haido, who were brought up by Muslims, and, consequently were converted to Islam. A Christian girl, who separated from her family, like Musa's wife's MM, Naima, was obliged to marry a Muslim. Both Muslims and Christians admit that there were many Syrian Orthodox Christian boys who were adopted by Muslim families. Syrian Orthodox Christians also say that Syrian Orthodox Christian girls who were obliged to marry Muslim men (Muslims believe that their marriage contracts were exchanged based on the mutual consent between bridegrooms and their Christian brides). Syrian Orthodox Christians estimate the number of families who are descendants of these converted Muslims at three hundred in Jazirah. Like Musa's father, Hanna, people sought their relatives and settled in the village where their

relatives lived. Villagers tended to marry within their community, such as Musa and Hana, Musa's father, Hanna, and Farid. They needed to establish alliances between their neighbours when living in unstable social situations.

Since Musa's family did not own land, they, like other tenant farmers, paid tribute to their landowner. Many Syrian Orthodox Christians worked as agricultural labourers. Therefore, he had no inherited property when he wanted to marry and set up his own household. In the early stage of his life, he worked as a shepherd and economised to set up his household. In village families, men married at around twenty years of age and women were between thirteen and sixteen. In the past, they married younger. Since village families owned little property, young people did not expect to receive a share of family inheritance. So there was no need for them to wait. Young men, who become old enough to maintain households independently from their parents, were able to marry at an early age (cf. Segalen, 1986: 118-9).

Marriage is regarded as an indissoluble sacrament and divorce usually is not permitted. Both men and women were able to remarry after their spouses' deaths. A man, in practice, needs to remarry so that his new wife can take care of his deceased wife's children. Good examples are Musa's brothers, Gabriel and Fatahallah, who remarried after their wives' deaths. Musa's mother married his father, Hanna, after her first husband's death. Similar to the case of Greece discussed by Du Bouraly (1974: 122), remarriage is socially important for women, in particular, as they can put away all signs of her former mourning and reverts totally to the full status of a married woman.

Many people who immigrated to this area gradually found their relatives and reconstructed their family ties. Some people of the second and the third generations had chosen their maternal cousins, including matrilineal first cousins, as their spouses. Musa's brother, Fatahalla, who firstly married his MBD was such an example. Marriage with maternal cousins is also common amongst their Muslim neighbours. This was the time when the villagers started to emigrate to towns. Due to Syrian land reform, local tribal leaders, whose financial resources used to be the huge amount of land they dominated, and whose rights to their land was acknowledged by the political authorities,

now found their power reduced. The centralisation, which was accelerated by the Ba'ath party, contributed to the stabilisation of the region. Such new circumstances gave hope to the Christian villagers to find new economic opportunities in the towns. Consequently, Syrian Orthodox Christian village communities gradually dissolved. Women, mothers in particular, play an initial role in organising marriages and arranged marriages with their BDs for their sons. As for mothers, their BDs are their close relatives and they can expect intimate relationships with their daughter-in-laws, if their BDs would marry their sons. This was a practical device for enabling mothers to retain their sons in their village at a time when young people had started to emigrate to towns.

Syrian Orthodox Christians who discussed their marriages with me believed that patrilateral first cousin marriage was forbidden or was regarded as incest.<sup>1</sup> However, matrilateral first cousin marriage was easily accepted. Throughout my fieldwork, I met only a small number of Syrian Orthodox Christians who married their patrilateral parallel cousins. Under the Syrian Orthodox Christian Church law, both paternal and maternal first cousin marriages used to be forbidden. So why do contemporary Syrian Orthodox Christians regard only marriage with one's patrilateral first cousin as unfavourable? This makes them very different to Muslim Arabs who 'prefer' this type of marriage. In order to investigate this, the official ideology presented by the Syrian Orthodox Church should be examined.

### **The Ideology of Marriage**

Under the legal system of the Syrian Arab Republic, members of the Orthodox Churches of Syrian, Greek and Armenian, Evangelist and Catholic Churches, are deemed to be religious minorities and are to be treated as equal to Muslims. Each of the religious minorities is considered as a sect (*Tāifa* plural: *Tawāif*) and given a limited legislative and judicial authority in the field of marriage law. For example, the Syrian Orthodox Church has the right to enforce its own marriage laws on its believers and to amend its laws as long as it takes place by legal deed with the Ministry of Justice. Islamic jurisprudence and Ottoman legislation are the sources of religious law which

give judicial autonomy to non-Muslims. Syrian legislation has divided Syrian citizens into three religious categories: Muslims, Druze, and Christians and Jews. (Berger, 1997: 117).

Since marriage in Syria is based on religion, Christian marriage has to be celebrated by a priest and must be registered at the Civil Registry (*al-Sijill al-madanī*). The marriage certificate must contain the signatures of the priest and two witnesses. Syrian Orthodox churches in every diocese function as places for consulting matters relating to marriage. A bishop has authority to make final decisions in each case.

If an inter-sect marriage takes place, the wedding ceremony is conducted at the church to which the bridegroom's family belongs. Although the ritual follows the liturgy and law of the Church where the marriage is celebrated, a priest of the bride's family also joins the celebration, which means the acknowledgement of the marriage by her Church. Marrying a Muslim is not permitted. In Syria's judicial system, a Muslim man can marry a non-Muslim woman, but not vice versa. This follows Islamic law. For a Syrian Orthodox Christian, the community does not allow either case. If a Syrian Orthodox Christian married a Muslim, Syrian Orthodox Christian law could not be effective for this marriage. Muslim family law applies to the case. A Christian woman who married a Muslim man is no longer regarded as a Christian by Syrian Orthodox Christians and her children are, without choice, Muslims. At the time of religious intolerance in Turkey in 1915, many Syrian Orthodox Christian women were forced to marry Muslim men. It was a sign of their subjugation. Since the Qaḥṭāniya Christians remember these events, which threatened the existence of their community, they would never consider marrying Muslims.

The reason that they marry in church is not only due to their faith, but also due to their social needs to legalise their marriage. If a couple seek marriage outside the Church, the couple lose their position in their community. However, in the 1950s some Syrian Orthodox Christians started to challenge the Church law and its prohibitions of marriages between close kin. As discussed in Chapter 4, in the Urfalli community in Aleppo, there were another reasons which encouraged marriages between close

relatives, such as isolation and poverty. In urban areas, such as Aleppo, concern about close kin marriage started earlier than in the countryside, such as the area of Qaḥṭānīya. In the area of Qaḥṭānīya, this phenomenon seems to have started when villagers began to move to the towns in the 1960s and their village communities decreased in population. In order not to lose its congregation, the Church had to adjust to the social need for marriage between close relatives. The Church was afraid that its congregation would convert to other denominations whose churches allow marriages between close relatives.

The Syrian Orthodox Church sought to remedy the situation by providing its congregation with more possibilities for expanding their choices of marriage partners. The Church justified the change in the marriage law by reference to God who said, “it is not good that man should be alone; I will make a help mate for him” (Genesis 2: 18). In 1954, the Church announced its resolution for dealing with the issue of marriage between close relatives. The Church allowed the following marriages:

- a. A man can marry his brother’s wife’s sister
- b. A widower can marry his deceased wife’s sister
- c. The marriage of a man with a woman who is a sister of his sister-in-law or a woman who is a sister of his brother-in-law

In this resolution, marriage between first cousins was still prohibited. However, according to the Church authorities, the demands for first cousin marriages, which required permission of the Patriarch, increased and such demands gradually paved a ground for further change in the marriage law. In the early 1970s, the Church issued a resolution allowing first cousin marriages. The Church considers it to be an unavoidable strategy for maintaining continuity of the community and the Church.

However, lay people understand these changes to the marriage law differently. The 1954 resolution is regarded as the Church’s declaration permitting marriages between maternal first cousins, and the 1970s resolution as the final decision of the Church by which it accepted marriages between paternal first cousins with the Church’s advice and consultation. The understanding of lay people thus differs from what the Church intended. The exchange of marriages between two families whose children

marry each other are permitted in the 1954 resolution. This ideological change might be reinterpreted by lay people in the course of marriage practices, even though in the official ideology marriage between first cousins was prohibited in this stage. However, this is not able to explain why Syrian Orthodox Christians considered the prohibition of maternal first cousin marriage was suspended, whilst that of paternal first cousins was sustained. One possible explanation is that in patrilineal society, maternal relatives belong to a family different from one's own and, therefore, marriage exchanges between the two different families were permitted. Matrilineality and agnation constitute different cultural categories. When cousin marriage takes place, this social relation has to be labelled and defined with reference to existing cultural categories. If the marriage were defined as patrilineal first cousin marriage, it would contest both the Church laws and their social norms which define it as incest. Such contestation should be avoided. A cultural category which conforms to normative expectation has to be applied for defining the relations in order to reduce tension in actual management of social relations, as Comaroff has noted in his studies of cousin marriages in Tshidi in South Africa (1987: 66-7). Matrilineal relations are less formal than patrilineal one in the agnatic society of Syrian Orthodox Christians. The permission of matrilineal first cousin marriage was reinterpreted by them, owing to the reality of increasing marriages between close relatives.

Such perception is related to their concept of 'closeness' between kin and relatives. However, Syrian Orthodox Christians, due to the dispersal of their families and their peasant origin, cannot trace back genealogical relations between kin to the same degree as that of neighbouring tribes. Therefore, their conception of patrilineal descent is not enough to explain mutual obligations between patrilineal kin in terms of genealogical distance. However, Syrian Orthodox Christians share a perception with Arab tribes of constructing ego-centred kinship relations. The concept of 'who is closer than whom to ego' seems to determine the Christians' understandings of the change to the marriage laws and in the arrangement of their marriages. This categorisation of relationships between patrilineal relatives is a common feature which is observed in a local Arab tribe, the Tai, and Syrian Orthodox Christians. Therefore, in order to clarify the perception of kinship relations among the Syrian Orthodox Christians and

obligations attached to them, the following case of the local Arab tribe, the Ṭai, is presented.

### **The Perception of Kinship Relations - The Case of Local Arabs in Jazirah**

Ṭai is one of the largest local Arab tribal confederations in the northeastern Syrian Jazirah. Their tribal territory stretches from Mount Singar in the south to Diyarbakr in the north, and from al-Malkiya in the east to Qāmishlī in the west. Existing or proposed relationships between groups are based on the mutual recognition of their genealogical relationships. A genealogy legitimises present relationships. Therefore, when they define a relationship in the present, they refer to common ancestors. As Lancaster mentions in the case of Rwala, ancestors are seen only as a link to the larger segment of the tribe and this only has meaning when seen in relation to complementary groups of real, living people (1981: 152). An ego-centred kinship network expands by tracing ancestors and including their descendants, who exist at the present time. In the context where group relationship is considered, this relationship is understood in terms of individuals who are related patrilineally. For example, two individuals can understand the kinship category by which their relationship is defined, if they can trace a relationship (patrilineal) to the same ancestors. They are not trying to find the exact genealogical relationship between each other in the process of categorising their relationship. The exact genealogical relationship between the two is not a matter for consideration. Moreover, which kinship category they use in order to explain relationship between kin can change, depending on who wishes to recognise the relationship with whom, and in what context. Insider-outsider opposition is crucial in categorising relationships between kin. The notion can only explain what they conceive their kinship affiliation to be (Gellner, 1969: 41-44; Peters, 1967: 270).

As Eickelman suggests in the case of the Bnī Batāw in Morocco (1977: 47-52), the genealogical linkage to the past continues to pervade the present, and past events, which directly related to the social order, provide a positive value to the present relationships. In the case of the Ṭai, patrilineal descent indicates that there is social

distance between them. The cognition of present kinship relations, which defines one's relation to others, is the ego-centred and is contextual in terms of the kinship category in which both of them are included.

Obligations between patrilineal kin are to be understood with reference to the notion of kinship relations between the persons involved, such as brother (*akh*), patrilateral parallel cousin (*ibn 'amm*) and patrilateral kin (*qarāib*). The Ṭai perceive that the closer they are, the more obligations they bear to each other. For example, when conflict occurs between different groups within the tribe, they can expect support from kin whose relationship to them is closer than that of kin which is more distant. This is the ideal situation, but in many cases, this support is absent. (Dresch, 1986: 320; Salzman, 1978: 61, 80).

Terms indicating kinship relations between the persons involved, such as Father, Mother, Brother, Sister, *ibn 'amm* (classificatory patrilateral parallel cousin), and *qarāib* (patrilateral kin), determine obligations in their relationships. *Ibn 'amm* and *qarāib* are kinship categories in a classificatory sense. How they recognise these relationships changes according to the contexts in which the relationships are mentioned, so further description of these two relationships is necessary. *Qarāib* (single: *qarīb*), which means patrilateral kin, is a word derived from *qurba*, meaning 'to get close'. *Ibn 'amm* means literally a person whose relationship to ego is as a son of a paternal uncle. In the classificatory sense, this category is applicable to patrilineal kinsmen who share with ego an ancestor up to five generations back. These close relationships, such as *qarāib* and *ibn 'amm*, are not only determined by categorising kin in their relation to ego, but also by maintaining mutual obligations required by the relationship. They are expected to maintain obligations between them, according to the norm of supporting each other (*musā'ada ma'a ba'ad*). These obligations are maintained, in particular, on the occasion of funerals when expected roles are allocated to people based on their relationship to the deceased. Past genealogical relationship is simply a presupposition, which mutual obligation can bring into play as present relations are constituted. If a person does not carry out his/her expected roles on these occasions, he/she is no longer considered close to the family of the deceased. Ṭai members sometimes complain about the *qarāib*

behind their back: “*qarāib* cannot be close if they fail to fulfil their obligation (*ijbār*) by supporting each other. They understand that co-operation and mutual support is important in maintaining relationships between kin.

When relations between patrilateral kin are referred as *ibn ‘amm*, the relation is understood by the ʿTai as different from the *qarāib* relationship, which, in this context, is the relationship between kin who are more distant than those of the *ibn ‘amm*. The relationship between ego and *ibn ‘amm* is regarded as a close relationship and, therefore, the relationship is often understood by referring particular obligations between these two. As the ʿTai conceive marriage between *ibn ‘amm* and his *bint ‘amm* (patrilateral female parallel cousin) is preferential (even though first patrilineal parallel cousins are not frequently arranged), in order to define the relationship, particular obligations are imposed on this relationship. For example, women gossip about a woman’s marriage and say that she was obliged to marry her *ibn ‘amm*. They recognise the bride’s obligation to accept a proposal from her *ibn ‘amm*, and regard this obligation as a part of the recognition of the kinship relation between her and her *ibn ‘amm*. The principle of closeness works to classify men included in the category of *ibn ‘amm*. In the case mentioned above, one of the women explained the reason for the bride’s acceptance of marriage; “the bride feared that no one wanted to propose to her as long as this *ibn ‘amm* had not given up the idea of marrying her.” Her husband was her first patrilateral parallel cousin, and, therefore, had the primary right to marry her, more so than other *ibn ‘amm* whose genealogical relation to her was more distant. The closeness between her and her *ibn ‘amm* defines whose proposal she is obliged to accept.

Syrian Orthodox Christians also classify kinship relations according to ego-centred genealogical closeness and use kinship terms such as *ibn ‘amm* and *qarāib*, in a classificatory sense in order to define their patrilateral relationships. They also have a similar classification of kinship rights and obligations. For example, in funerals different roles are allocated to kin according to their relationships to the family of the deceased. Close kin and relatives have to visit each other at the occasions of the Christian feasts as local Arabs do during Islamic feasts. They recognise relationships between kin by using ego-centred kinship classification. The distance between patrilateral kin is not only

defined by genealogical relationships, but also by norms of obligations, which accompany particular relationships, and its practices. These obligations apply to patrilineal relationships and, therefore, maternal relatives are not involved.

The major difference between local Arabs as well as Kurds and Syrian Orthodox Christians is that Arabs and Kurds use the norm of rights and obligations of patrilineal parallel cousin marriage for describing the closeness of the relationship between two persons concerned. However, Syrian Orthodox Christians use patrilateral parallel cousin marriage, marriage between first patrilateral parallel cousins in particular, as the sign of closeness between them and, therefore, the closer the relationship between them, the more strict is the obligation for avoiding such a marriage. Therefore, the marriage between first patrilateral parallel cousins was regarded as incest and the couple who breached this rule used to be ostracised. This seems to have been a marker of differentiating them from Arabs and Kurds. Marriages between second and further distant patrilateral cousins are more acceptable due to the distance between them. Whereas, marriage between maternal first cousins was not and is not regarded as the breach of norms of the community, due to the fact that maternal relatives are considered less bound by the obligations between paternal kin. As will be discussed later, the practical demands of marriages between close relatives weaken the norms for keeping people away from patrilateral first cousin marriages. Syrian Orthodox Christians now introduce another obligations for defining relationships between close kin by imposing on paternal closest kin obligations of Godparents, who used to be unrelated persons or distant relatives and are now chosen within one's own agnatic group. Before starting this discussion, the social background which accelerates marriages between close relatives and their practices will be examined.

### **Emigration and Changes of Marriage Practices**

Political and economic changes in the early 1960s gradually brought about the abandonment of Syrian Orthodox Christian villages. As a result of Syrian land reform which started in 1958, peasants were guaranteed the right of cultivating the land, i.e. the right of lease-holding by the government. Many peasants still do not own land they

cultivate, but are entitled to cultivate it. They, therefore, were no longer the tenant farmers of big landowners and tribal leaders. Many Syrian Orthodox Christians became freed from the confinement of being controlled by big landowners and tribal leaders.

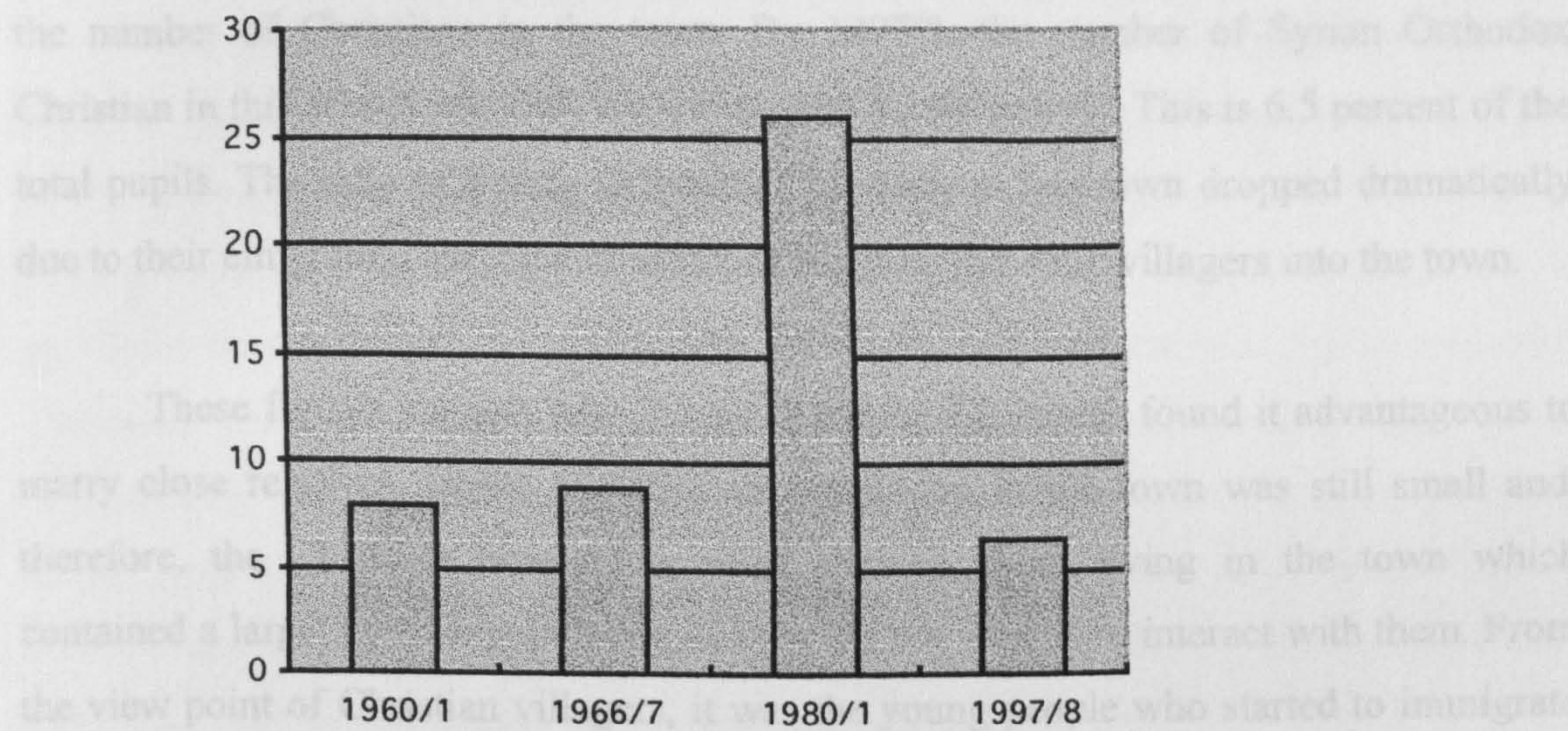
However, the state did not always distribute the same land to the tenant farmers that they used to cultivate. Instead, some received land which was located far away from their villages. Some contemporary Syrian Orthodox Christians interpret this government policy as an attempt to dissolve the Syrian Orthodox community and weaken its solidarity. This policy was applied to some villages whose landowners and tenants were both Syrian Orthodox Christians. For example, in a Syrian Orthodox Christian village Qaṣrūk, whose landowner was a Muslim tribal sheikh, the State allocated Syrian Orthodox Christian villagers the right to cultivate their village land. However, there is insufficient documentary material available to support this contention. By contrast, in the village of Gergeshamo, where both the landowner and his tenants were both Syrian Orthodox Christians, each tenant acquired the right of cultivating only a few hectares of the village land and several hectares in a village which was located far away from their own village. Moreover, these former tenant villagers were not able to earn enough income from the land which the State provided for them. Despite such economic difficulties, the government's campaign through the slogan 'Land reform liberates peasants from landowners' inspired Syrian Orthodox Christian tenants not to work any longer for their previous landowners.

Until the late 1960s, the occupations followed by Syrian Orthodox Christians in the town of Qaḥṭānīya were as ironsmiths, drivers, bakers, bricklayers and shopkeepers. There used to be no industry in the town which could absorb many of the Christian villagers into urban occupations. However, Syrian oil production in the late 1950s brought about regional industrial development, which was able to provide former tenant villagers with job opportunities in the National oil company at Rumeilān which increased the number of its employees from the beginning of 1970s to the beginning of 1980s.<sup>2</sup> These workers moved into Qaḥṭānīya as the company provided bus services for the commuters to the oil company's premises. The development of both the oil industry and the agricultural industry increased the demand for workshops, vehicles and

mechanics. One street in Qaḥṭāniya is occupied by such mechanical workshops most of which used to be run by Syrian Orthodox Christian immigrants from the villages.

**Figure 5.** Proportion of Christians to Muslims at the School

Proportion to Christians to Muslims  
(%)



The change of occupations has accelerated the immigration of Syrian Orthodox Christian villagers to regional towns, such as Qaḥṭāniya and Qāmishlī, and, as a result, has reduced the village population. Small landowners of Syrian Orthodox Christians started to invest money earned in agriculture into their own businesses in the towns, such as shops and restaurants.

I conducted a demographic survey on the number of primary school pupils in Qaḥṭāniya. The school, established in 1952, is the oldest primary school in Qaḥṭāniya and is located in the oldest quarter. Pupils who attend this school are Syrian Orthodox Christians and Kurds. All the Syrian Orthodox pupils were registered in this school. Among 279 pupils registered in the year 1960/1, Syrian Orthodox Christians were 22, whereas the number of Muslims were 257. In the year 1966/7, the number of Syrian Orthodox Christians was 24 and that of Muslims was 249. Syrian Orthodox Christians occupied only 7.9 percent of the pupils in total in 1960/1 and 8.8 percent in 1966/7.

During the 1960s, this school was the only primary school in Qaḥṭānīya and therefore, it reflects the population composition in Qaḥṭānīya in those days. The number of pupils registered in the year 1980/1 was 1181 among whom Syrian Orthodox Christians were 306 and Muslims were 875. The number of Christian pupils comprised 26 percent of the total. This number reflects the population of two old quarters and a new Syrian Orthodox Christian quarter where in 1976 the immigrants from villages started to build their houses. It is obvious that immigration of Syrian Orthodox Christian villagers increased the number of Christians in the town. By 1997/8, the number of Syrian Orthodox Christian in this school was only 64 among 980 pupils in total. This is 6.5 percent of the total pupils. The ratio of Syrian Orthodox Christians in this town dropped dramatically due to their emigration abroad and influx of Kurdish and Arab villagers into the town.

These figures suggest why Syrian Orthodox Christians found it advantageous to marry close relatives. In the 1960s, their population in the town was still small and, therefore, the Christian immigrants were anxious about living in the town which contained a large Kurdish population as they did not wanted to interact with them. From the view point of Christian villagers, it was the young people who started to immigrate to the town and the older generations, mothers in particular, who tried to retain their sons in the villages. These two different intentions increased demands for strengthening ties between relatives and accelerated the change in marriage ideology, which allows them to marry their close relatives. As ties between neighbours in villages were reduced due to continuous immigration, kinship and affinal networks became more important for developing opportunities in urban settings. For example, Musa in the previous example (Figure 4), whose mother first married a man in the town of Qāmishlī and had children, asked his half-brother, who was an government official, to help him to get a job in the oil company. Personal connection (*waṣṭa*) is important for facilitating the processes of job application, getting a place in university and obtaining legal permission. Intimate ties between relatives are useful in order to expand opportunities in urban life.

When the Syrian Christian population reached its peak at the beginning of the 1980s, there were five hundred Christian households in Qaḥṭānīya, according to a priest who is knowledgeable about demography, due to the fact that he visits every household

in his parish every Easter. By 1998, only two hundred and seventy-five households were resident in Qaḥṭānīya itself and with another sixty households in villages in the parish. The decrease in their population in the parish is due to emigration to Europe, which continues to this day. Their destinations are principally Sweden, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland. As having mentioned in Chapter 1, the emigration reached the peak after the massacre in Hama in 1982.

Urbanisation and immigration have created two different tendencies for their marriage choices. There is a tendency to marry persons who are not relatives, but are in similar social position. Another tendency is that marriages between close relatives are getting popular. First, the former phenomenon will be discussed. Immigration to Qaḥṭānīya made it possible for villagers to have daily contacts with Syrian Orthodox Christians from different villages. Even their mobility has increased. They go to neighbouring towns, such as Qāmishlī and Ḥassake for business, prayer, attending colleges and social gatherings. This affects their marriage choices. One example is given below of marriage in which the bridegroom's and his bride's family did not know each other until their marriage negotiations had commenced.

Joseph who lived in Qāmishlī gave a ring to Rula's family who lived in Qaḥṭānīya in order to show his intention that he would like to marry her. Joseph and the families did not know each other. He said that he saw her at a church in Qāmishlī when she attended a service as a member of the choir. Then, Rula's family started to investigate who he was.

It is common that if a young man and his relatives do not know the family of a prospective bride, they make inquiries about her family's reputation and economic situation, the girl's personal character and educational level. If his relatives consider the girl suitable, he asks the girl's family to arrange for an opportunity to meet them, including the girl. Joseph undertook a similar process. He used his personal networks to find out about her. Her family were of humble origin, former villagers who had moved into Qaḥṭānīya when her father got a job in the national oil company. All her siblings were educated to a certain levels, and Rula was finishing her studies in a college in Ḥassake. The girl's family also investigated the man, who asked for her hand, and his family. Rula's family found from whom Joseph received information about her family

and how he obtained it. Joseph was a university graduate engineer and has two brothers. One was a medical doctor and the other ran a shop in Qāmishlī. For Rula's family, objectively speaking, this match would be an ideal one.

Joseph asked Rula's family to allow him to visit them in order to state his intention to marry her. At the time of his visit he got a positive reply from Rula's family suggesting the possibility of the marriage. Then, he also asked their permission to speak to her on phone in order for them to get to know each other.

It is a general view in the Middle East that a modern marriage should be based on compatibility of the families and ideally conformity of the couple (Hoodfar, 1997: 62). Syrian Orthodox Christians often say, "in conformity with the couple's wishes, the arrangement will go ahead." The couple's mutual consent is regarded as one of the important conditions for determining the choice. It is possible for the bride or bridegroom-to-be to express opposition to the marriage. However, if the two families think the marriage of their children is in their best interest, girls, in particular, feel that they should give their consent. It means that the ultimate aim of marriage strategies is to maintain or establish a social position for oneself and one's own family. Since the honour of the family is determinant of social status, young men and women have to consider whether their choice of marriage partner is appropriate in order to maintain his/her family's social status. In the case of Joseph and Rula, the proposed marriage was regarded as suitable by their families, and the young couple liked each other through their communication on phone. Then, Rula's family gave consent to her marriage.

In these days, there are many cases of marriages between persons who did not know each other until when the man saw her at a church services or a wedding reception and became interested in her. Such marriages between persons previously unknown to each other, occur because they find that they are in a similar social position. This happens not only in the cases in which the couple live in different towns, but also between people who both live in Qaḥṭānīya. Urban life provides them with the chance of a modern life style, educational opportunities, professional experiences and broader social networks, which are means of improving their social and economic status. Consequently, social differences among the community members emerge and affect their choices of marriage partners. When they lived in villages, many of them were

agricultural labourers and, therefore, stratification among these peasants had not developed. However, urbanisation generated differences between the former peasants. They now tend to marry people who occupy a similar social position, as the marriage between Joseph and Rula suggests.

Syrian Orthodox Christians in a town of Qaḥṭānīya believe that education is one of the means for improving their economic and social status. Although many villagers have, at best, an elementary school education, after their moving into Qaḥṭānīya, they have more opportunities to send their children to junior high schools and secondary schools. Since national school education has been free, education has been a means for poor Syrian Orthodox Christians to climb the social ladder. If they obtain high marks at the examination of the Baccalaureate, they can study at colleges in Ḥassake and go to the university in Aleppo to become teachers, medical doctors, pharmacists and engineers. Joseph and Rula in the previous example improved their personal status through education. It is ideal for men to have a university degree and for women to finish college education. It is not preferable for girls to go on to university. Parents do not like to send their daughters to a big city, such as Aleppo, as there it is difficult for them to control their daughters' behaviour. This may create possibilities for damage to the family honour. Considering the economic condition in the region, there is little need for women to study at university. When they finish their college education, they are able to obtain enough qualifications to become teachers, which is the only preferable occupation for women.

The reason that Syrian Orthodox Christians developed their idea that education enhances one's social position is related to government policy. Until the beginning of 1980s, the government policy of investing in the public sector increased the number of employees (*muważẓaf*) in the public sector (Perthes, 1992: 45). Only people who had obtained university degrees have the possibility of becoming higher-ranking officials. The public sector is the only place where people without property can find a respectable job, since the private sector in Syria consists of family business which are usually run by rich families. This is also applicable for women, who obtain higher qualification as teachers, to be employed in the public sector. Even though the Christians develop ideals

what educated Syrian Orthodox Christians can achieve, in reality, only a small number of people graduated in universities and became urban professionals.<sup>3</sup>

This ideal is that Syrian Orthodox Christians are people who desire to improve themselves (*mutaqaddim*). This ideal of improving their social status prevents them from doing menial working, e.g. vendors and porters. Most of these roles are undertaken by Kurds. Syrian Orthodox Christians also no longer wish to work as agricultural labourers as they regard them as underdeveloped and uneducated. This attitude makes it more difficult for them to get a steady income, particularly in a rural town, since economic stagnation and rapid inflation at the end of 1980s has reduced opportunities for local employment in the public sector. Even Syria's open economic policy, which was launched in 1991, has brought few economic opportunities to the Jazirah. The most reliable income source is still agricultural land, if they own or lease enough land. Many people who do not have enough land find it difficult to sustain their families solely on their agricultural income. Syrian Orthodox Christians perceive that the lack of a steady income, or a low salary in public sector makes it difficult for their young men to establish their independence for marriage.

Consequently, Syrian Orthodox Christian men now tend to marry at an older age. Despite the fact that this is due to the pragmatic economic situation, they provide an idealistic statement to explain this: "if a man wishes to marry, he, first, has to complete his education and find a job. When his income reaches a level to enable him to sustain his own household, he is then ready to marry. It is for this reason that the average age of our men at marriage is over thirty." In reality, there are only a small number of university graduates in the community and even many graduates do not have opportunities to use their skills and education. Many men are engaged in urban professions such as artisans, mechanics and carpenters, self-employed drivers, shop owners, and lower ranking employees in the national oil company. Christians wish to portray their community as one of urban professionals. A similar statement is applicable to women: "it is preferable for a woman to be educated, because an educated mother can train her children better. When a woman graduates from a local college at the age of twenty, she is ready to marry." This statement is a symbolic representation, showing that

the Christians are interested in female education, which many of Kurds and local Arabs do not regard as important. Female education is not a means for Arabs and Kurds to improve their economic and social status. They are rather afraid that outsiders whom a girl encounters at school and on her way to school may create possibilities for damage of the family honour. By contrast, Christian girls are given equal opportunities to boys for attending schools. They try to differentiate themselves from their neighbouring Muslim population in terms of education, even though in fact there are not many women who pass examinations and obtain a Baccalaureate. However, women have a more practical view: "if a woman is educated, she has more opportunities to marry a well established man and also may be able to be employed as a teacher on her 'rainy days'. This is the only job women can find here".

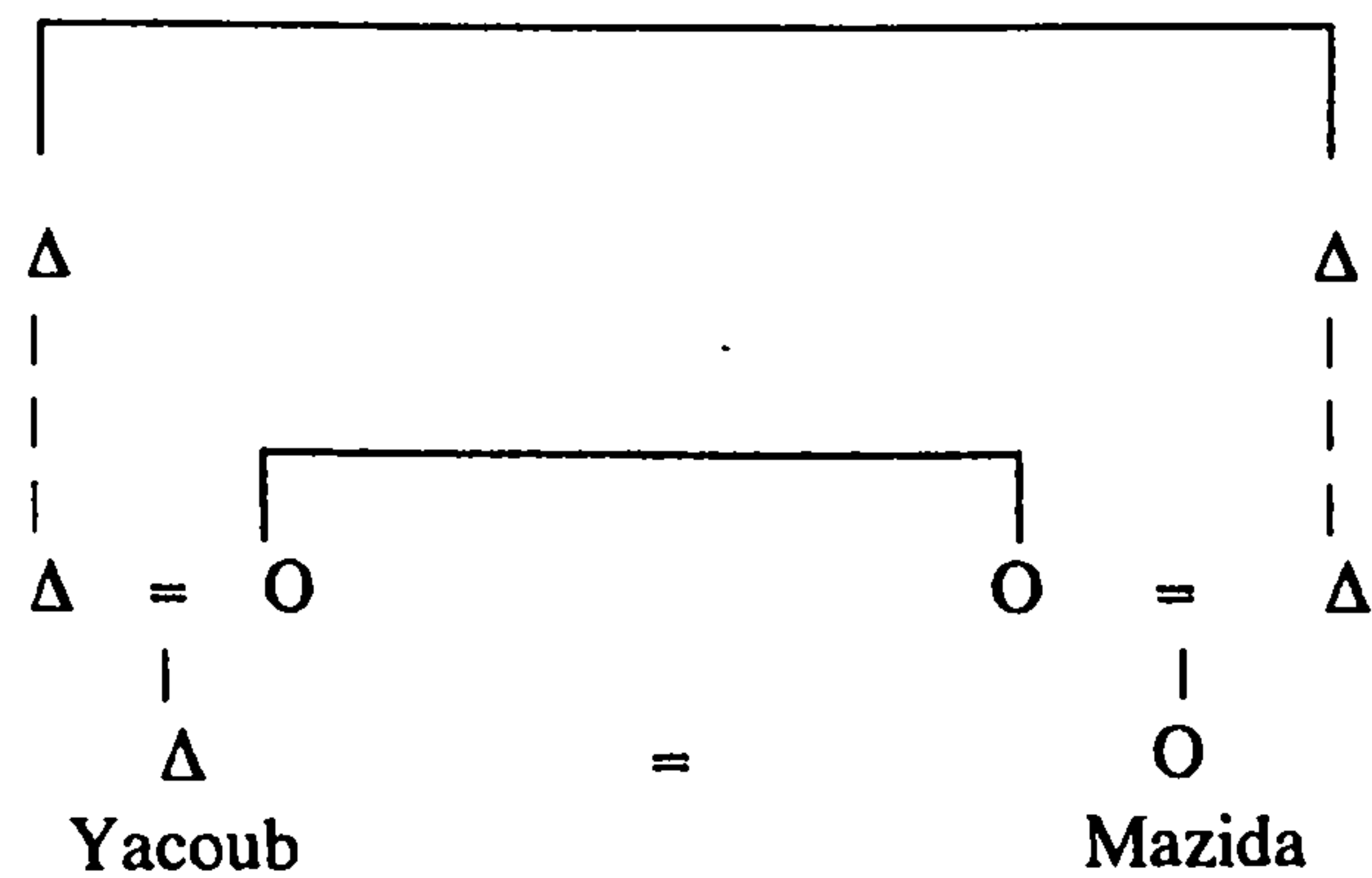
Another factor affects marriages between close relatives. As there is little hope that the government can improve the salary of the employees and that the private sector will bring more economic opportunities into the region, it is difficult for young people to establish themselves. Many youths, hoping to obtain a better life in future, want to emigrate abroad. Girls prefer Syrian Orthodox men, who emigrated to Europe and then returned to seek brides, to men locally established for their spouses. This is because women worry about social and economic uncertainty of their future in Syria. By marrying emigrants, they can get the opportunity to emigrate.

However, there is no official way for them to get permission to emigrate abroad and it is also difficult for them to obtain visas for travelling abroad. Due to the demands of local Christians to emigrate, temporarily returning emigrants enjoy the advantages of being able to find desirable spouses in Syria and take them back to their new countries. Although more emigrant men than women visit to find spouses, nowadays, the number of young female emigrants who prefer to marry men in Syria is increasing. For emigrants, marrying people in their homeland or people sharing the same origin is a way of maintaining ties with their native community and confirming the source of their own identity which might have become tenuous after a substantial amount of time living abroad as emigrants (cf. Maher, 1974: 160). They usually stay with their relatives. If they no longer have relatives in the town, they stay with the family of their godparents.

Their host families usually search for their prospective spouses from their close relatives. If the host family cannot find a suitable one, they ask their friends and neighbours to find appropriate candidates. One example is presented here.

A Syrian Orthodox Christian man, Yacoub, who was brought up in Sweden, paid a visit to his mother's natal family in Qaḥṭānīya. The purpose of his visit was to find his bride. He is a successful young man whose family is engaged in restaurant business in Stockholm. Yacoub's MZ was interested in marrying her daughter, Mazida, to Yacoub (see Figure 6). Yocaub's father and Mazida's father are in the relationship of patrilateral relatives whose family used to be neighbours of their mothers' family when they lived in Ṭur 'Abdīn before their emigration to the area of Qaḥṭānīya. Yacoub and Mazida are maternal first cousins (MZS and MZD) and are also patrilateral relatives. Mazida's father was not economically and socially successful in comparison to her mother's brothers who were engineers. Therefore, for the sake of Mazida and her parents, the match would give her a chance to be better off and, therefore, it was desirable.

Figure 6. Yacoub's Marraige



When Mazida obtains her Swedish citizenship, her parents may get the opportunity to emigrate to Sweden. If the parents can obtain Swedish citizenship, their other children may also enjoy the opportunity to emigrate there. Mazida's marriage with Yacoub would provide a great opportunity for her family. This example suggests that marriage between an emigrant and his/her close relatives in Qaḥṭānīya might give their relatives in Qaḥṭānīya opportunities to emigrate. Due to the 'closeness' between their families, who know each other well, the emigrants do not have enough information on other people in this locality, but feel secure arranging a marriage with a close relative.

However, the couple's mutual consent is regarded as an important condition determining the choice in order to present their marriage as modern. In the case of Yacoub and Mazida, they said that they liked each other and married. When the emigrant cannot find his/her spouse-to-be among close relatives of the host family, his/her host family make enquiries among their distant relatives, friends and neighbours, as to whether or not there is an appropriate person for the marriage. The search follows a pattern of concentric circles emanating from the host family. The closer he/she is genealogically to the host family, the more possibility she/he has in introducing to the emigrant by the host family.

Despite such a demand for marriage between close relatives, as referred earlier, marriage between patrilateral parallel first cousins is not regarded by Qaḥṭāniya Christians as desirable. Moreover, marriage between non-relatives whose social positions are similar has become an important social asset among the Christians. These tendencies do not provide patrilateral close relatives, such as families of ones' FB, FBS, with opportunities to strengthening their kinship ties through marriage. Mutual support by, for example, offering to introduce appropriate persons through their personal connections (*waṣṭa*) when looking for jobs and taking steps to speed up a solution to problems is important in urban life. Patrilateral relatives ideally must support each other. However, there are no particular rules for defining what mutual support is expected. As mentioned earlier, local Arabs maintain the ideology of preference for marriage with patrilateral parallel cousins as a symbol of the close relationships between patrilateral kin, and the rights and obligations attached to them. There is no such definite rule among the Christians. The Christians, therefore, generate a device for defining mutual obligations expected of patrilateral kin. The custom of godparenthood is chosen as such a device.

### **Who can be Godparents?**

A godparenthood relationship involves two sacraments: baptism and marriage. A godparent carries his/her godchild at his/her baptism. A godfather (*qarībo*) can only have a boy as his godchild and a godmother (*qarība*) a girl. The term *qarībo* refers to the

relationship between the two sides, i.e. a godparent and his/her godchild. It is also used as a term of address. The couple who act as witnesses of their marriage are composed of a man and a woman are also in the relationship of *qarībo*. The two sacraments create this ritual relationship which is believed to be sanctioned by God. The *qarībo* relationship involves two parties in baptism: the family of a baptised child and the family of his/her godparent. The family of a baptised child includes the child's father, mother and siblings. The family of the godparent means the godparent, his/her spouse and their children. Marriage is prohibited between these two families. Ideally, the family of a child's *qarībo* will continue to support not only the child's but also the child's family members and be a sponsor of his/her siblings. The relationship is in this sense unilateral and potentially renewable. A godparent is expected to present a white dress, a cap and a pair of gloves which the child will wear after baptism when the child is taken by this godparent to the altar to receive the cross of holy oil (on forehead) and a piece of consecrated bread. The child's family in turn often invites the godparent to a meal to celebrate the child's union to the Church. A male witness to a marriage is chosen from the family of the bridegroom's *qarībo* and is usually a son of the bridegroom's godparent who carried him at his baptism. As a female witness of marriage, the son's wife or if he has not married, his sister takes the role. Members of the family in *qarībo* relations are under obligation to renew the relationship in the succeeding generation.

*Qarībo* relationship shares similar characteristics with the *krīf* relationship of Muslims in this region. *Krīf* refers to relationship between the family of a circumcised male child and the family of the male sponsor at the circumcision. Both relationships are referred as spiritual kinships. Spiritual kinship relations in both Christian and Muslim societies are described as relationships based on friendship and mutual trust (e.g. Davis, 1977: 224; Magnallella & Türkdogan, 1975: 1630-1; Pitt-Rivers, 1976: 323). Tapper says that the tie of friendship is fragile and, therefore, is converted to a ritual relationship which required continuous reinforcement between the family of the circumcised boy and that of the sponsor (1977: 138). Pitt-Rivers mentions that the godparenthood relationship in Sierra provides an irrevocable tie of both formal and sacred friendship and mutual trust, which is stronger than kinship because it owes its existence to the free consent of both parties (1971: 107-8). This relationship based on the social and spiritual

ties between two families is similar to the *qarībo* relationship among Syrian Orthodox Christians in the Jazirah. Among the Christians, marriage is prohibited between these two families. This is also applied to families who are in *krīf* relationship. What makes *krīf* relationship different from *qarībo* one is that male siblings have different sponsors of their circumcision. Since the choice of *krīf* is made by a household head, usually the father of the boy-to-be circumcised, the *krīf* candidate is asked whether or not he will consent to sponsor the ritual. The sponsor is not a relative of the boy's family. Before the massacre in 1915, Syrian Orthodox Christian men used to act as sponsors of Kurdish boys at their circumcisions. The boys' fathers were friends or neighbours of these Christians. Syrian Orthodox Christians also call this relationship *qarībo*. There are stories of Syrian Christian women, who, when they escaped from the massacre, asked for the protection of their Muslim *qarībo*. This relationship was ideally based on mutual aid and trust. Therefore, they helped these Christian women. Since male members of their *krīf/qarībo* families were prohibited from marrying women in the relationship of *krīf/qarībo*, women's sexual virtue was protected. However, elders do not transmit these stories to the young. They tend to conceal memories of their good relations to Kurds at their time in Turkey.

Members of the family in *krīf* relations are under no obligation to renew the relationship in the succeeding generation. By contrast, *qarībo* relationships between Syrian Orthodox Christians are regarded ideally as successive. However, there was a disruption in its continuity. Since the massacre in 1915, and their subsequent immigration, old village communities were disbanded, and former villagers needed to build new *qarībo* relations in their new settlement. They used to choose their neighbours who were unrelated or were their distant relatives to sponsor their children and its relationship contributed to reinforce extant neighbourhood ties. It was employed as a mechanism for integrating village communities.

It has been over seventy years since these Syrian Orthodox Christian immigrants started to construct new *qarībo* relationships. Massive population movements from villages to the town of Qaḥṭāniya and their consequent emigration abroad disbanded *qarībo* relationships, which they had established when they lived in

villages. Although *qarībo* relationships contribute to establishing ties in a village community, such relationships lost their meaning when most of Syrian Orthodox Christian villagers left for towns and abroad. Therefore, it is impossible to trace how *qarībo* relationships succeeded over generations. There are cases where emigrants pay a visit to their *qarībo* in Qaḥṭāniya and ask for their support to find their spouses there. Yet such relationships are often not renewed in the next generation. For example, if a couple's *qarībo* at their wedding emigrated abroad, the child of the sponsored couple would be borne at its baptism by the couple's *qarībo*'s brother or his son (in cases of girls, by either his brother's wife or his brother's daughter). Emigrants are not able to fulfil their obligations as *qarībo* and consequently fail to maintain the relationship. This fact suggests that people are more concerned about establishing horizontal kinship networks in their locality. As a father and his sons, even after their marriage, are regarded as members of one family, the bridegroom's *qarībo* is replaced by a *qarībo*'s brother/brother's son.

Ideally, godparent relationships having been created between the two families are succeeded by the family segments whose member baptised the children of the sponsored, as Hammel found in the case of the Balkans. He says if the sponsored household split, individuals within the sponsoring group took special responsibility for particular segments of the sponsored (Hammel, 1968: 45-50). However, among the Syrian Orthodox Christians, it is difficult to realise such ideals of the *qarībo* relationship succeeding from fathers to sons over generations, because of their leaving for abroad.

As a result of their emigration and having broken up their village community, many families are no longer able to maintain old *qarībo* relationships. Many people nowadays choose their *qarībo* among their close kin, i.e. father's brother's family. Their statement that it used to be impossible for them to choose a man's patrilateral relatives as *qarībo* suggests the dramatic change of their choice of their *qarībo*. Their concern is now shifted from establishing good relationships with their neighbouring villagers to maintaining ties between patrilateral relatives by introducing obligations of *qarībo* relationship, in the situation that even relationships between patrilateral relatives are gradually disbanded due to their emigration abroad. An example of this is given below

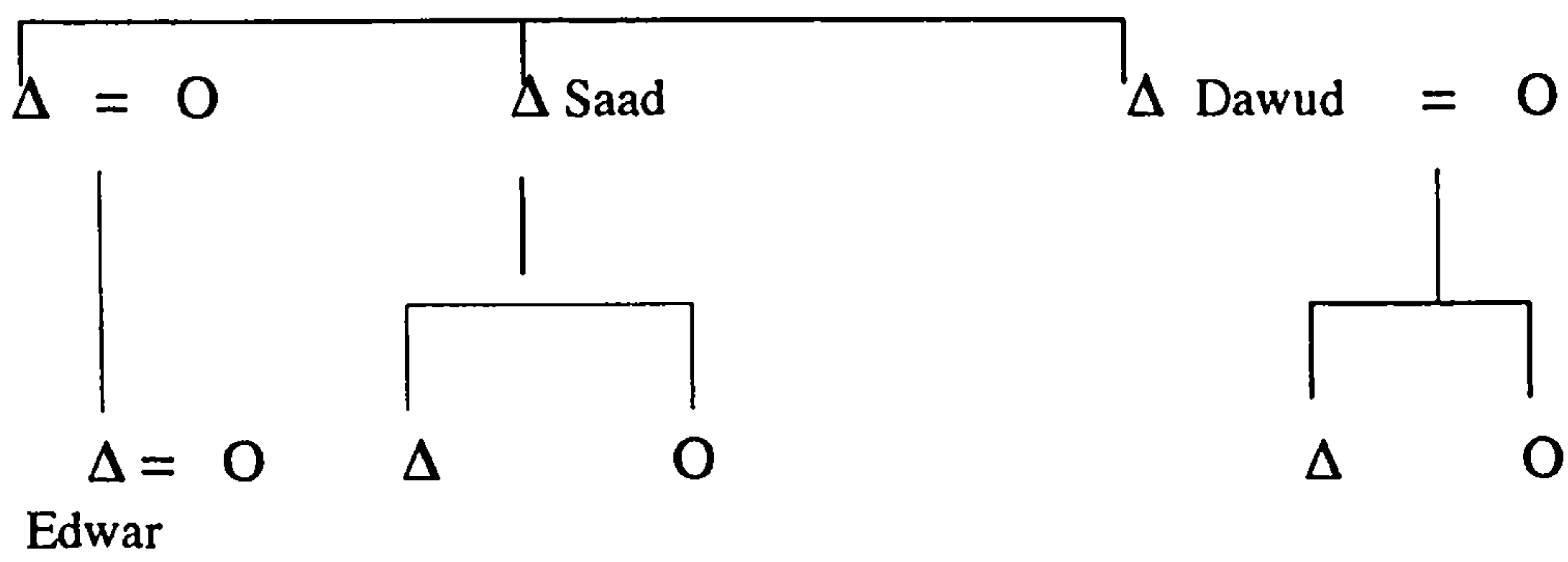
(see Figure 7).

A son and a daughter of Saad, were witnesses of Edwar's marriage. Saad was Edwar's father's brother. It means that the marriage prohibition between people in *qarībo* relationship is applied to Edwar's children and those of Edwar's *qarībo*. By following the ideology that *qarībo* relationship should be renewed at the time of a child's baptism, when Edwar had a daughter, he chose the wife of his other father's brother, Dawud, as his daughter's *qarība* at baptism due to the reason that the female witness at their marriage, i.e. the daughter of Saad, married out. Through this relationship, Edwar's child is not able to marry one of Dawud's and his wife's children.

These *qarībo* relationships which include, at best, two generations of their family are obliged them to carry out such duties as performing ritual exchanges at the time of baptism, mutual support and abiding marriage prohibitions. The succession of the relationships from one generation to the next and the obligations imposed on them contribute to maintaining close relationships between these patrilineal relatives. Their choices of *qarībo* suggest that all Edwar's FBs and their family members are in *qarībo* relationship to the family of Edwar. Edwar's FBs are regarded by Edwar's household members as an agnatic unit because they are all brothers. They also keep genealogically equal distance from Edwar. This understanding is based on ego- (in this case, Edwar) centred recognition of genealogical distance and kinship relations.

Edwar did not choose his brothers as his *qarībo*. This was due to the reason that to establish *qarībo* relationships with his father's brothers and their children was an important social strategy for Edwar to maintain a wider kinship network than by choosing his brother as his *qarībo*. However, there are many cases where a bridegroom chooses his brother as his marriage witness, *qarībo*. Consequently, children of these brothers, who are first patrilineal parallel cousins, are not able to marry. Due to this rule, some Syrian Orthodox Christians interpret the current phenomenon to choose the bridegroom's brother's family as their *qarībo* as their strategy for avoiding marriage between patrilineal parallel first cousins.

**Figure 7. *Qarībo* Relationships**



However, this is only one aspect for promoting such choice. The rules of *qarībo* relationship, which define obligations and mutual support across generations, are used for putting into practice the idea of mutual support and trust between a patrilineal kin. The first weakening in this close relationship between patrilineal kin occurs when brothers form separate households. It is important to retain good relationships between them. However, the ideology of the Church law discourages marriages between children of the brothers. In order to maintain close relationships between patrilineal kin, Syrian Orthodox Christians require alternative means to regulate exchanges between them. Godparenthood is chosen as such a device. It enables linkages to be maintained between kin who are normally moving apart due to the normal process of fission and segmentation. One could see it as an agnatic enforcing link, perhaps even similar to the ideology of agnatic harmony as found among the Arabs, but the crucial difference here is that godparenthood is an individual strategy of choice that can be renegotiated at each generation or birth. It enables individuals to maximise and balance out their long term obligations and strategies.

**Conclusion**

Syrian Orthodox Christians believe that the dispersal of their village

communities and later by emigration abroad have changed not only their life style, but also ideas which they formerly nurtured. Their understanding of these changes is expressed in a Syriac folk song called 'Gergeshamo'. This song appeals to these Christians as it describes how a former villager of Gergeshamo expresses nostalgia for his home and his dilemma when he is no longer able to return to his previous village life. The song says, "when I lived in the village it was my world and it was mighty. After my emigration I became aware that it was just a village." The former villager recollects the annual feast of St. George which he celebrated with his neighbours and danced with music played with a drum and a clarinet. He asks himself, "when will I visit our village?" and says, "I will never forget our village".

This song suggests that norms, relationships between villagers and practical life in the village constituted the entire world for him. However, these are no longer able to be maintained in urban setting or as emigrants in a foreign land. This former villager's nostalgia for his village does not mean that he wants to return to his village, for to become educated and sophisticated urban professionals is the ideal for present Syrian Orthodox Christians. However, the former peasant recognises the importance of intimate relationships between community members. Such relationships are difficult to maintain in the current situation of the dispersal of their community and weakening ties between relatives.

The Qaḥṭānīya Christians maintain that people look for better economic and political prospect and therefore emigrate. Economic and political anxiety reflects their vulnerable position in Syrian society. However, the Qaḥṭānīya Christians themselves create a situation that they weaken their social ties as well as their social position. Their marriage choices accelerate such a tendency. Their individual desire for improving their social position in urban settings involves choosing marriage with a partner whose educational and social status is similar. This results in expanding social differences among community members, which were hardly found when many of them were peasants. The desire for emigration abroad leads locals to marry the emigrants of their relatives (when they return on visit). Then they themselves leave the community which accelerates its dispersal. Their emotional and practical demands require a change in the

rules determining whom one can marry. To allow marriage between what were once considered 'too close' relatives now assists in reinforcing kinship ties between close relatives. Ironically this change resulted in reducing their social networks.

Even in the situation that relationships between patrilineal relatives are gradually disbanded due to their emigration abroad, patrilineal first cousin marriage is not socially and morally preferable. This hinders re-establishing ties between close patrilineal kin. Then the rules of godparenthood, which defines obligations across generations, are used for putting into practice the idea of mutual support and trust between a patrilineal kin. Their concern is now shifted from establishing good relationships with their neighbours to maintaining ties between patrilineal relatives. This demand required changing the rules of who are able to be one's godparents. Their attempt at enforcing agnatic bonds, seems to be similar to the ideology of agnatic 'closeness' found among Arabs. The agnatic genealogical relationships proliferate at every generation and automatically impose obligations on people who are involved in the relationships. By contrast, godparent relationships can be renewed at each generation. Godparent relationships having been created between the two families are succeeded by the family segments whose member renewed the relationship. Therefore, its network does not expand in a similar way of agnatic genealogical relationships. Christians try to maximise their strategies for dealing with problems generating from outside the community. However, their attempt at strengthening ties between close relatives ironically prevents them from establishing wider relationships. The anxiety about the break-up of their community is ever present.

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## Chapter 5. Notes

<sup>1</sup> Björklund who conducted research on Syrian Orthodox Christians who emigrated to Sweden reports that he has never of heard first patrilateral parallel cousin marriage being practiced (1981: 75).

<sup>2</sup> The principal oil fields lie in northeast Jazirah. Output here increased sharply from four million tons in 1970 to a record level of ten million tons in 1976 (Meyer, 1987: 48).

<sup>3</sup> The number of university graduates in 1988 in Syria in total was 13,860 and in 1996 was 14,294. The estimated total population between twenty and twenty-four year old was 654,000 in 1989 and 1,419,000 in 1998 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 1989: 348, 349, 60; Central Bureau of Statistics, 1998: 374-5, 68).

## **Chapter 6**

### **Choir Activities in Three Communities**

#### **Introduction**

The Syrian Orthodox Christians face difficulties of proving the continuity of their group due to the fact that they have concealed memories of their past before their departure/expulsion from Turkey. The only means which is available for them to claim continuity of their community is Syriac. However, as I mentioned earlier, classical Syriac had a very restricted currency among the Christians. Therefore, Syriac hymns which Syrian Orthodox Christians assumed to have been handed down over generations become important as a proof of transmission of Syriac heritage.

Barth points out that social actors usually can choose from a variety of cultural traits which they wish to emphasise in order to claim membership of a particular group (1969: 14). However, in the case of Syrian Christians, their choice is limited to one, that is Syriac, due to the historical background mentioned above. By singing Syriac hymns, they pride themselves on being the heirs of ancient Christian traditions. Furthermore, the musical tonality, as well as Syriac language, leads support to their claim that they have maintained pre-Islamic traditions of Syria. As Cohen proposes (1969: 2, 27-9), political ethnicity focuses on a strategy for organising cooperate actions which articulate distinctive features of their cultural traditions in their struggle for establishing a secure social position. The communities of Syrian Orthodox Christians, i.e. those of Qaḥṭāniya, al-Mālkiya and Aleppo, organise choirs as community activities which attempt at articulating their identity. This chapter focuses on these activities in the three communities, and aims to show different orientations in their musical performances, which are due to each group's own interpretation of their way of attempting to establish their position in the wider society of Syria.

## Syrian Orthodox Hymns

Hymn singing is assumed by Syrian Orthodox Christians to be traditional. Emphasis is now placed on the work of St.Ephreim, the patron saint of the Syrian Orthodox Church, of his musical tonality and hymns in the Syriac language. Hymns are an oral tradition which is self-contained and dependent on the continuous recitals within the community, as Syrian liturgical books lack musical notation (Qureshi, 1991: 163). Their knowledge of music has been handed down from senior to junior. They believe that this method has been adopted for generations to transmit Syriac hymns. Until to this day, Syrian Orthodox Christians learn hymns by using this oral method. They learn hymns by attending Sunday school, young people's meetings, and the Choir, which are organised by community members, both men and women, and provide a wide forum for cultivating a shared concern for the very survival of their hereditary music. Singing hymns is the only domain in which the laity, without being trained to become deacons, can take an active role in the Mass.

Only male professionals, i.e. priests and deacons, can enjoy opportunities to learn the eight modes of Syrian Christian music for reciting psalms and singing the same religious texts to different melodies. Mode is used in a week order and the chants are organised in an eight-weekly modal cycle (Husman, 1980: 475). As these musical tunes are one of the heritages of ancient Christians, these are regarded by Syrian Orthodox Christians as one of the distinctive traditions, which characterises their group. Women are unable to become priests and are not allowed to inherit this musical tradition. This official ruling means that priests and senior deacons can only pass their musical knowledge to male juniors and, consequently, access to the modal system is confined to men. However, nowadays, only a small number of boys are interested in being ordained as deacons.

Although women are excluded from such musical education, there are more girls than boys attending classes for studying religion and learning hymns. Young women are more interested in teaching voluntarily in Sunday school and other courses for religious education than men are. It is not only community's religious education, but also the

church services in which women are eager to participate. Women play a dominant role in their communities' religious activities, and yet, are unable to have a position which officially allows them to be involved in both liturgy and musical tunes. Due to such discrepancy between religious representations and actual roles which women take in religious practices, all the three communities, with which the present discussion is concerned, share the view that women can learn and sing independent hymns in public, particularly those which are not categorised according to the eight weekly modal system. The maintenance of the survival of their musical tradition is seen as a source for establishing their Syrian identity, and, therefore, women's participation in musical activities is encouraged. Consequently, the only opportunity open to women at present to sing with a congregation is to join a Choir.

Christians seek historical evidence which proves women's participation in the Choir and explain the importance of women singing hymns. They maintain that they follow the teaching of St. Ephreim (d.373), who is the prominent Father for the Christians:

St. Ephreim introduced Syrian Christians singing hymns. He composed Syriac poems in accordance with the doctrine of the Church and wrote hymns. Christians were charmed with the elegance of the diction and the melody which were found in his hymns. By singing hymns, he encouraged Christians to keep their faith. He wrote hymns for a women's choir and taught them how to sing (Comments by young and middle-aged women).

As his hymns have been transmitted orally only by the Syrian Orthodox Christians and have survived until present day, this makes it possible for them to follow teaching of the Saint, who acknowledged women's choir. Another important point which is suggested in this account is that St. Ephreim was always close to the laity. He adopted the method of preaching to the laity through the teaching of hymns, which were composed of Syriac poems in accordance with the doctrine of the Church and which charmed the Syrian Christians. Such contributions by St. Ephreim to the laity are acknowledged by Church authorities. The Archbishop of Aleppo says: St. Ephreim taught Christianity through hymns which touched people deeply. His hymns convey profound meanings expressed by simple words. They encouraged his followers, not only the educated, but also the common folk (Ibrahim, 1996: 11). Musical practice of hymns is therefore one of the

proofs that women and the laity have succeeded in maintaining the traditions of Syrian Christians.

### **The Community in al-Mālkiya**

Although Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Mālkiya, Qaḥṭāniya and Aleppo share the view that hymns are the heritage of the laity and an proof of endurance of their group, each community shows a different attitude towards women becoming representatives of their musical tradition. First, the case of the community in al-Mālkiya is discussed. The distinctive character which this community shows is that the Choir, which is composed of single women, is allowed to read the liturgy with Syrian Christian musical tunes in the weekday services. This is not allowed in the other two communities. In evening services, the inception of the liturgy, sung to the melody, is given by a group of male deacons, and is answered by a choral refrain, which is conducted by a group of the women. Many of these women are teenagers, and their leaders are middle-aged single women. A few knowledgeable male deacons read the liturgy with the women during the services. Male deacons and priests are eager to teach the women how to read the Syriac liturgy with its tonality.

The al-Mālkiya community were the first Syrian Orthodox Christians who requested the Archbishop to ordain female deacons. Their proposal was acknowledged in 1997. Single women who had learnt religious discipline and were able to read Syriac were ordained. This system has gradually penetrated into other communities within the diocese, such as that in Qaḥṭāniya. However, female deacons are not included in the promotion system of male deacons in the Church. The Church establishes three grades for the male deacons' participation in spiritual life. Some of them are further trained and become priests. In the society of Syrian Orthodox Christians as well as others in Syria, masculinity and femininity are measured by their ability to procreate, i.e. a 'true' man/woman having children. Men can marry and become priests, and, therefore, they are able to pursue both social and religious values and serve in churches without sacrificing their masculinity. By contrast, in the case of women, only single women are

allowed to serve in churches as deacons. Female celibacy has no social value. When they marry, they have to give up serving in churches and become mothers.

Why is only a single woman allowed to be a deacon? Why does female deaconhood become important to the community? Men explain the reason: "Young women will become mothers and are expected to transfer their knowledge to their children. Therefore, single women are encouraged to study religious discipline by singing hymns and learning the Syriac liturgy." Single women carry the social virtue of female virginity, which should be maintained until their marriage in order to keep their family's honour. Their celibate chastity and obedience to God, which is shown by playing active roles in religious life, are associated with the Virgin Mary. Single women are expected to become mothers and contribute to the community by teaching their children its religious traditions, such as hymns, liturgy and the Syriac language. These women learn such traditions from older generations and pass them on to the coming generations. They take on the role of intermediaries between generations, as the Virgin intercedes on behalf of present day Christians, and try to maintain these markers, which define the characteristics of the community and prove its endurance. A female deacon becomes an official representative of the single women's chastity. Therefore, this role is highly valued in both social and religious domains.

As Davis (1984: 29) has noted, men utilise Mariology to explain women's involvement in spiritual activity. Women do not show much interest in such theoretical discourses on the Virgin as they consider that their becoming mothers loosens their identification with the Virgin. The potential role of present single women is to transfer the community's cultural heritage to her future children, but this is hardly ever mentioned by the women. They do not think that celibacy permits single women to devote herself to the Virgin. For women, the change of their social position from single to married means to abandon their virginity and prepare to become mothers. Therefore, it is totally different from the situation of Immaculate Conception of Mary which made it possible for her to be a mother without losing her virginity.

Women understand that their life stage defines which community's activities they can join. For women, affiliation to the Choir symbolises their status as single women. When they marry, their legitimate union leads them to motherhood. They are able to affiliate to a married women's group, which also constitutes one of the community's activities. Their social position is elevated above that of single women. However, they hardly play any religious roles in the official domain. Their roles are rather more confined. Married women often ask for intercession by the saints, in order to solve problems of their family members, by fasting and going barefoot to a church. Elevation of their social position and their religious dedication do not make it possible for women to satisfy all the qualities which the Virgin Mary fulfilled, i.e. virginity, chastity, motherhood and dedication to family and children. Women, therefore, do not regard themselves in any stage in their lives as being close to the Virgin.

Men's discourse on single women's role in church activities is different from what women think of as theirs. Men introduce a Mariological explanation and try to connect single women's potential roles of reproduction and child education with those of the Virgin in order to allow single women to be involved in church services, otherwise there is no opportunity for women to take a position in the official Church hierarchy. Such ideological representation of women, which is presented by the men, has little affect on women who do not develop their sense of femaleness through the Choir activities. As Strathern suggests, what female actors feel and think about femininity formulates their internal identity (Strathern, 1988: 59-65). They consider that female gender identity is associated with women's roles in domestic and social domains. Women regard Choir activities as religious and social activities to unite the community in faith and confirm its distinctive characteristics, i.e. musical traditions, which reinforce their claims to historical continuity in Syria. Men expect the female Choir to carry such political messages. For 'political' reasons they allow women to enter what is ordinarily a male domain.

In fact, this is not the only activity in which women play important roles in constructing community identity. For example, as discussed in Chapter 2, women's weekly visit to the church of the Virgin Mary in the old quarter in al-Mālkiya enables

the community to remember its past, which is the source for unifying the community. Their memory confirms their identity as the descendants of the survivors of the 1915 siege in Āzakh, during which the Virgin miraculously saved the Christians. By visiting the church from where oil miraculously sprung, they refresh their memory that this church archeologically proved that Syrian Christians are original inhabitants of the region. Their claim to their land in al-Mālkiya was supported by divine power, owing to the fact that the government abandoned its plan to demolish the church of the Virgin Mary after finding that the miracle was genuine. Women's regular visits to the church of the Virgin contribute to recollection of the community's past, and are closely related to the community's protest against the Kurds.

Christians are afraid of being incorporated with the Kurds due to their political ambition of becoming independent of Kurdistan. Kurds maintain that Kurds and Syrian Christian are ethnically in the relationship of 'brothers'. However, the Mālkiya Christians conceal the fact that they used to be in close relationships with Kurds before the massacre of 1915. The fact that Christians spoke Kurdish is one of the examples of how they shared cultural traits with their Kurdish neighbours. Christians recognise that they cannot ignore the Kurdish claims and, therefore, strive to establish a separate identity from them. The state might oppress the Kurdish political movement and the Christians might be persecuted as constituting part of Kurdish population. The only means to differentiate them from Kurds is their religious heritage, i.e. Syriac and hymns, which Christians have maintained and which Muslim Kurds cannot share with them. These traditions are also able to prove Christians' different ethnic and cultural origin from that of Kurds: Syrian Christians, whose language is Syriac, derived from ancient Aramaic, are ethnically Arameans, who dominated Syria in ancient times.

Thus female Christians in al-Mālkiya are a driving force to solidify their collective identity. Their religious activities convey political messages to claim their community's endurance and Syrian origin, which are supported by the Virgin. As the Mālkiya Christians believe that their community has survived under the patronage of the Virgin, women's dedication to the Virgin and Mariological ideology by men provide women with an important role of manifesting community's identity through musical

activities. Furthermore, the reason that such a role is allocated to women is related to the fact that political movements in al-Mālkiya are restricted due to its strategic location being close to the Turkish and Iraqi borders, and its importance as a military base and as the centre of Syria's oil production. In this situation (the Government censors political movements), women who are outside the Church hierarchy are not regarded as representatives of the male dominant community, so are more capable than men of carrying political messages.

The importance of Syriac hymns as an ethnic marker is borne out of the fact that their everyday language cannot be an identity marker. They used to speak Kurdish before their emigration from Turkey. The present older generation can understand Kurdish, but try not to speak it. As they did not transmit Kurdish to the younger generation, who are educated in Arabic, the latter cannot understand Kurdish. Their common language is now Arabic. Syriac has had and still has a limited circulation in the community and has a role only as the liturgical language. In fact many people have only a limited knowledge of classical Syriac. Historically speaking, classical Syriac ceased to function as an everyday language hundreds years ago (Block, 1997: 363). Singing in Syriac, which can appear incontestably as an 'invented tradition', is the only way that every one can participate and prove that Syriac has been their language.

### **The Community in Qaḥṭāniya**

The Syrian Orthodox Christian community in Qaḥṭāniya faces problems similar to those of the al-Mālkiya Christians. Their population has decreased since the early 1980s when they started to emigrate abroad, whereas the population of their neighbour Kurds, who constitute the largest population in this area, has increased due to their high birth rate. Moreover, the government allocated houses in Qaḥṭāniya to an Arab tribe, the 'Gamar, whose villages used to be along the River Euphrates, but were demolished in the 1970s due to the construction of the Tabqah Dam. These Arab immigrants, as well as a local Arab tribe, the Jowala, have increased their numbers. Syrian Orthodox

Christians feel that they are becoming a small group of the area and, therefore, are anxious about the increase in populations of other groups.

Such fear also derives from their historical experiences. Christians believe that the conversion of their ancestors to Islam occurred due to political oppression and that this diminished their population. They maintain that: “once Christians converted to Islam, they abandon cultural traits which used to be shared with their fellow Christians.” This indigenous notion of ethnicity is that one’s religious affiliation defines one’s ethnic identity (*qawmīya*) and, therefore, Syrian Orthodox Christians (*Suriyān*) who became Muslims and forgot the religious and cultural traditions of the Christians are no longer considered to be ethnically *Suriyān*.

The present population consider themselves as eye-witnesses to the conversion and, therefore, their interpretation is considered by them to be the ‘correct’ version. At the time of the religious intolerance in Turkey in 1915 and afterwards, many Syrian Orthodox Christian boys and girls in Ṭur ‘Abdīn were helped or abducted by Kurdish and Arab Muslims and were brought up as Muslims. Some good foster parents of these children, later, gave them opportunities to chose whether they should return to the Christian faith or not. Some of them became Christians again. Others remained Muslims. Many young women were forced to marry Kurdish and Arab men. Consequently, these women as well as their children, who were automatically affiliated to their fathers’ parilateral descent groups, and so became Muslims.

An example of former Christians who were brought up by Muslim foster parents is presented below. This information is based on that given by a Syrian Orthodox Christian family in Qaḥṭāniya. One evening, they received two male visitors speaking Arabic in a local Arab tribal accent different from the one Syrian Christians spoke. The household head said to them, “hello, *ibn ‘ammi* (it means literally my FBS, but in this context, it means a paternal male relative in general). Come in!” Young women, who were the daughters of the household head, came into the reception room and exchanged greetings each other. Then they left the room. I asked to the girls who were these visitors. Their explanation was the following:

At the time of the religious intolerance in 1915, our grandfather (FF) escaped Kurdish attack and fled with his mother from his natal village Arbo in Ṭur 'Abdīn to a village called Gergeshamo near Qaḥṭānīya, where he knew his MB lived. His family members were separated because they fled in all directions to wherever they could find shelter. The father of our visitors was our FFFBS, Yusef. He was brought up by an Arab family in Qaḥṭānīya. When he became eighteen years old, his foster family asked him whether or not he would like to return to his natal family. His foster family knew our FF was in Gergeshamo. Yusef spent six months with his family. Yet, they did not get along well. So, Yusef returned to his foster family and then married five women. Our visitors are his children.

Even though the host and his visitors were relatives, the host family regarded them as Arab Muslims and kept a distance between themselves and the visitors. Women usually sit together and talk to male relatives when they visit the women's family, and this is an expression of their closeness. However, the sons of Yusef, an ex-Syrian Christian, were not regarded as men with whom young women were allowed to have intimate conversation. Due to different religious affiliations, there is nothing shared between the descendants of converted Muslims and their Christian relatives other than biological ties. For Syrian Orthodox Christians such kinship lost its social meaning. Like Yusef and his sons, converted Muslims and their descendants abandoned Syrian Orthodox Christian culture and adopted local Muslim tradition. They switched from monogamy to polygamy, abandoned the language of their natal group, i.e. Ṭoroyo (a Syriac dialect spoken by people whose origin is Ṭur 'Abdīn) and adopted a local tribal Arabic dialect which their affiliated group speaks. Such evidence suggests that Syrian Orthodox Christians who converted to Islam, willingly or unwillingly, are permanently separated from their natal Christian group. Their historical experiences enforce the indigenous theory of ethnicity. Marriage, language and religious tradition, such as the liturgy and hymns, which only the Christians have maintained, are therefore regarded by them as ethnic markers.

Syrian Orthodox Christians encountered many cases of conversion to Islam. These individual experiences contribute to developing their view that their neighbour Kurds, who used to live in the southern part of Ṭur 'Abdīn, had been Syrian Christians and converted to Islam a few hundred years ago.<sup>1</sup> This argument is supported by the

observations of an English traveller, Southgate, who visited Ṭur 'Abdīn in the nineteenth century. He referred to these former Christians converted to Islam as the Kurds and mentioned that they remembered their Christian origin (Southgate, 1844: 84). However, contemporary Kurds do not remember their Christian origin and have no interest in tracing it. Syrian Orthodox Christians demonstrate their domination in the past and try to emphasise how religious affiliation is closely related to ones' ethnic identity.

Although Christians maintain that Kurds were ex-Syrian Christians, they try to conceal the fact that Syrian Orthodox Christians who lived in Ṭur 'Abdīn shared secular culture with their neighbours, the Kurds. In fact, the similarity between these two cultures is still visible. For example, the characteristics of Syrian Christian folk dances which are open-circle and line dances linking the arms of the participants tightly and including bounces, jumps and a strong rhythmical swinging of the arms are shared with Kurdish dance (Siloah, 1980: 317). Syrian Christian dance also has similar steps to those of Kurdish dance. The double-headed drum and *mizmar* (a wooden clarinet) are the most important instruments in both Kurdish and Syrian Christian secular music. They maintain that these have been Syrian Christian traditions, which Kurds imitated. Syrian Christians, however, conceal apparent evidence that they might be identified with Kurds. For example, old Syrian Christian wedding songs in Kurdish, which express their sorrow of a bride's departure from her natal family, are never sung and are remembered only by elder Syrian Christian women. According to Monawad, in the first half of the nineteenth century, English travellers reported that Syrian Orthodox Christians and Kurds dressed alike in Ṭur 'Abdīn and in the city of Mardin (Monaward, 1992: 134). The present Christians have abandoned their own folk costume and now wear Western clothes. Only remnants of traditional clothes remain among the old women. For example, their underwear which are still sewn by Christian women are a petticoat and a pair of bloomers which have only Kurdish names, *bun krāske* and *sarkābe*. These examples suggest that Syrian Christians and Kurds used to have a common cultural heritage.

Moreover, as Sykes reported, many tribal confederations in Ṭur 'Abdīn were composed of Kurds, Christians and Yazidis (Sykes, 1908: 470-474). The present

Christians forget, or refuse to admit, that many Christians in Ṭur ‘Abdīn used to ally themselves with the Kurds before 1915. The collective amnesia of the Christians is not only limited to the history of their former political alliance with the Kurds, but also, as mentioned above, includes their loss of memories that there used to be little cultural differences between them and the Kurds. Kurds regard Syrian Christians whose families were originally from Ṭur ‘Abdīn as Christian Kurds who used to speak both Kurdish and Ṭoroyo, and share cultural characteristics with Muslim Kurds. For the Kurds, religion is not a determinant for defining one’s ethnicity. Since Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and Christianity had spread throughout the Kurdistan before the rise of Islam, the Kurds believe that there are Kurds who have religions other than Islam. According to them, the contemporary Kurdish population is composed of Muslim Kurds (80 % of the population), Yazidi Kurds (10%) and other Kurds, such as Christian Kurds and Jewish Kurds (10%).

It is my contention that Syrian Christian musical practice, as an expression of their group traditions, is a form of political expression within the church services and conveys a message for promoting ethnic identity. As Blacking has noted, music as a non-verbal expression within ritual is politically significant for generating collective consciousness (Blacking, 1995: 199). Syrian Orthodox Christians develop a consciousness of the political significance of their musical tradition and the Choir becomes one of the means of articulating their social identity.

Although hymns are sung by both male and female community members in Sunday Mass, the Choir in Qaḥṭānīya is composed solely of young single women. Qaḥṭānīya community members do not use the discourse on the Virgin Mary, as those in al-Mālkiya do, in order to acknowledge that only single women participate in the church services. Unlike the Mālkiya community, there is no involvement of male deacons in teaching women how to recite the liturgy and sing hymns. Consequently, the Choir members in Qaḥṭānīya do not participate in reading the liturgy in weekday church services. However, both men and women advocate women’s participation in Choir activities, which is supported by the antecedents of St. Ephreim who had trained the

Choir of young women for services of the Church. By reference to such a precedent, the Choir women take the initiative in organising their activities.

Table 2. Differences of Musical Practices between the Three Communities

| Community/<br>Characteristics | Al-Mālkiya                              | Qaḥṭāniya                                       | Aleppo                                                |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| Choir members                 | Single women                            | Single women                                    | Single women & Men                                    |
| Choir teachers                | Male deacons & middle-aged single women | Young single women who have knowledge of Syriac | Middle-aged single woman who have knowledge of Syriac |
| Ideology supporting           | Mariology                               | St. Ephreim trained female choir                | St. Ephreim trained female choir                      |
| Emphasis                      | Syriac musical tradition                | Syriac musical tradition                        | Unity of the community as Middle Eastern Xns          |
| Language of Hymns             | Syriac/ Arabic                          | Syriac                                          | Arabic/Syriac                                         |

The local priest gives a relatively free hand to the Choir, even though he often sits with them and is involved in their training. Women in their early twenties play a leading part in singing as well as teaching early teenage girls. Due to their knowledge of classical Syriac and religious discipline, which they learnt in the courses organised by community members in activities at the Centre for Religious Education in their parish,

some of them are ordained as female deacons. These leaders give priority to the singing of Syriac words correctly. They read poems in turns at the beginning of the training session and then set the poems to music. The juniors memorise the texts under the supervision of their seniors. They can sing the hymns without liturgical mistakes. Their knowledge of a Syriac dialect, i.e. Ṭoroyo, which is their everyday language, helps them study hymns in classical Syriac. However, Ṭoroyo, which is different from classical Syriac, is not a literal language. Furthermore, they do not regard Ṭoroyo as 'proper Syriac' due to the fact that it has adopted many words from other languages such as Turkish, Kurdish and Arabic, which are the languages of other ethnic groups. Classical Syriac, whose origin they believe is older than these languages, maintains the *original* form of their language and it is therefore important for Christians to learn classical Syriac hymns to claim their origin in the pre-Islamic period.

Young people, both men and women, are involved voluntarily in activities for teaching children both their liturgical language, i.e. classical Syriac, and hymns in activities of the Centre for Religious Education, which is the only place for the Christians to be allowed by the government to organise community activities. Similarly, young female leaders in the Choir emphasise the importance of teaching both the liturgical language and music, both of which are representatives of the enduring cultural traditions of Syrian Orthodox Christians. Therefore, they teach the meanings of words which appear in hymns and give instructions in order for the Choir members to pronounce the words correctly. These young leaders take on roles to articulate the idea of the community's identity through educational activities. They are proud of maintaining such a heritage and believe that as far as their maintaining such traditions, they are able to differentiate themselves from their neighbour Muslims and claim their rights as Syrians. Even though the young people have less knowledge of the history of their community than older generations remember, it is a shared view that the loss of their religious tradition means the extinction of their community. This suggests that the Qaḥṭāniya Christians do not attempt to construct their religious identity, which may separate them from the wider society of Syria. Rather they use classical Syriac and Syriac hymns as means of articulating distinctive features of their traditions, which is the

heritage of ancient Syria, in their struggle for rights with the society. In the activities of the Choir, women are acknowledged as being able to articulate such ethnic markers in public, i.e. in the Mass. Even though their activities are officially acknowledged as religious ones, their musical practice is a covert strategy for maintaining their community, whose existence is threatened both from outside and inside.

### **The Christians of St. Ephreim Church in Aleppo**

Both Choirs in Qaḥṭāniya and al-Mālkiya try to maintain their musical traditions, which they believe they have had for over 1,500 years. Despite the similarity of the means, which they use in order to claim their rights and identities, these two communities show different attitudes towards women's official participation in church services and present different expectations of the roles which each Choir plays. The Choir of the St. Ephreim church in Aleppo has the musical style quite different from that of the other two Choirs. Moreover, in its practices it tries to pursue not only the collective identity of Syrian Orthodox Christians, but also the ideal of unifying Middle Eastern Christians. However, their understanding of the community's history and current social situation which they face has to be examined in order to appreciate their relationship to the current activities of the Choir.

As Syrian Orthodox Christians admit that there are two communities in the diocese of Aleppo. One is the community which is composed of people who emigrated from Urfa in 1924 and the other is the community whose members are composed of people who emigrated from different places in southeastern Turkey after the 1915 religious intolerance in Turkey. The latter have established themselves in the outskirts of Aleppo, in what is called as the Suleimaniya quarter, where they constructed the church of St. Ephreim. Later, their population increased due to immigration of Christians from the Syrian Jazirah region. The agricultural boom in Jazirah, which had started in the 1940s, made Aleppo as an important agricultural business centre and, consequently, many Christians who sought business opportunities, as traders and mechanics, moved into Aleppo.

However, in 1895, the Suleimaniya quarter had contained only sixty-seven Christian houses surrounded by an orchard. The Syrian Orthodox Christian population at that time was only twenty-six among 726 Christians in the quarter (Mustafa Vali, n.d:448-9). In those days, this area had only a small population. Memories of the present Christians exaggerate the situation: "at the beginning of the twentieth century, the family of Salim 'Aazar was the only big merchant family who had kept the Orthodox faith in Aleppo." This account explains the situation of the Syrian Orthodox Christians when they immigrated to Aleppo after 1915. They believe that their co-religionists in Aleppo had lost their population due to the government's oppression of Christians and their subsequent emigration. Consequently, when the immigrants arrived at Aleppo, they found that only a small number of Syrian Orthodox Christians were left in Aleppo.

There is evidence which supports this view of the Syrian Orthodox Christians. As Marcus (1989: 40-48) has noted, the Catholic missionaries working in Aleppo from the 1620s, promoted a campaign to establish commercial privileges, which was supported by the French and English consulates and traders who employed Christians in Aleppo as translators, clerks, salesmen, etc. They offered these workers extraterritorial privileges as foreign nationals, i.e. exemption from taxes imposed on *dhimmi-s*, i.e. non-Muslims, by the Ottoman government. However, due to the increase in the number of these 'privileged' Christians, the government saw them as potential trouble-makers, so they oppressed the Christians and abolished their privileges. This resulted in their emigration. By the beginning of the twentieth century, their community had become drastically reduced. Their history reminds Syrian Orthodox Christians of their present isolation in the big city of Aleppo; similar to the situation in the past. Their population is decreasing due to their immigration abroad, and they have become a small group surrounded by Muslims, with whom they have little personal contact.

Partly, due to their knowledge of the history of Christians in Aleppo, they have started to adopt a defensive strategy, i.e. a Christian congregational unity in order to defend themselves and secure their social position. The youth of St. Ephreim church, including its Choir members, participate in activities such as lectures and church service

in various churches in Aleppo, which belong to different denominations. For example, they organise meetings with young people of different denominations and discuss how the Churches will be able to celebrate Easter on the same day by adopting a standardised calendar. Such meetings provide them with opportunities of getting acquainted with people belonging to other Churches, and discussions which may allow to establish their unity. These movements are supported by the Church authorities. The Middle Eastern Council of Churches has promoted the vision of Christian unity. The Council declared that there was no theological differences between Chalcedonian (Malkites) and non-Chalcedonian (Syrian Orthodox and Nestorian) Churches, although the division between the two occurred in the Byzantine period (451 A.D.). There are eleven Christian denominations of Oriental and Orthodox Churches in Aleppo. The Council encourages the denominations to hold joint prayer sessions which emphasise the unity of the Churches. The Archbishops and priests from these Churches speak to the congregation about how they are interested in looking for the common fields of activities among these Christians. They also answer the questions regarding their attempt at unity. In a joint prayer session held on 6 June 1998, the Archbishop of the Syrian Orthodox Church said:

Each Church has developed its tradition over one thousand and five hundred years. Our tradition is the soil which has cultivated us. Therefore, we cannot abandon it. In this historical context, we are able to say that the attempt of the Middle Eastern Council of Churches for our unity has just started. Keep your eyes on the activities of our Council.

This statement suggests that cultural and religious traditions which have been nurtured by people in the different denominations are the sources of their identities. The Church authorities promote two contradictory strategies: they try to maintain the distinctive traditions of each Christian community on the one hand, and, on the other hand, take a positive attitude and look at possibilities for their approaching a Christian unity across the boundaries between the denominations. As far the musical activities of the St. Ephreim church Choir are concerned, such official activities encourage the hymn singers to feel that they are in touch with the inherited musical traditions of their own community. At the same time, the official idea of a Christian unity suggests to them that they can express this idea in their musical practices by adopting musical characteristics which are practised in other Churches. For the Christians, to keep the Orthodox

Christian faith is a means of maintaining the integrity of the community. Their history tells them that the Syrian Orthodox Christian community in Aleppo had dissolved as a result of their having exchanged their conversion to Catholicism for money and liberation from their previously oppressed *dhimmi* status. Therefore, Syrian Orthodox Christians suggest that their identity and their traditions, which define the characteristics of the community, have to be maintained. However, considering their social status in the society of Aleppo as a small group, they promote a strategy for aspiring cooperation with all Christians in Aleppo. Musical practices of the St. Ephreim Choir express contradictory aspects in their identity construction.

In order to examine how they are establishing their identity through musical practices, a comparative method is adopted. By comparing the ways of singing hymns between the Choir of the Qaḥṭāniya community and that of the St. Ephreim church in Aleppo, it becomes clear how the St. Ephreim Choir tries to realise the ideal of unity of Middle Eastern Christians. As discussed above, the musical practices of the Qaḥṭāniya Choir focus on maintaining their endured musical tradition. By contrast, the Choir of the St. Ephreim church seeks techniques and hymns which contribute to refining their musical expression. The St. Ephreim Choir is innovative, while the Choir of the Qaḥṭāniya is 'traditional'. In order to explain such differences, which are expressed in their singing, I will examine how the two Choirs sing a hymn which is called *Airam-rmokh*, i.e. 'I will exalt Thee', differently. This hymn is sung by both the Qaḥṭāniya Choir and that of the St. Ephreim at the first part of the Sunday Mass.

At the beginning of the Mass, the sanctuary curtain is drawn aside with the hymn of *Bnuhrokh hosai-naan noohro*, i.e. 'By Thy light we behold light' being sung. The priest swings the censer contained burning incense. Some Syrian Christians explain that the fire in the censer symbolises God: The censer itself symbolises the Virgin Mary who conceived Jesus: Its lid is in the shape of a church dome under which the congregations gather. The Church building symbolises a censer in which the congregation are contained during the Mass. This implies that they are united in their communication with divine power. The priest says with a loud voice:

Mary who brought Thee forth, and John who baptized Thee shall be suppliant unto Thee [o]n our behalf. Have mercy upon us ( Samuel, 1967:20).

Then, the first part called Responsory of Mar Severus starts. The Choir and the congregation sing 'I will exalt Thee'. This hymn summarises the Christian doctrines.<sup>2</sup>

The followings are my transcriptions of recorded hymn, 'I will exalt Thee', which was sung by the Qaḥṭānīya Choir and the St. Ephreim Choir in Aleppo (see Figure 8). The discussion is focused on the musical style and the practice of the Choirs in both churches rather than those of the whole congregations. These two churches use the same tune, i.e. the tune of Mardin. The Syrian Orthodox Church uses five different tunes named after the areas where these Christians have lived over centuries. The tune of Mardin which is one of these tunes has been used in churches in Mardin and Ṭur 'Abdīn area in Turkey. The majority of both the Qaḥṭānīya and the St. Ephreim church congregations are originally from this area. Since Syrian liturgical books lack musical notation, the Choir and the congregation depend on the cultural resources of their seniors for learning the melody.<sup>3</sup> In both Qaḥṭānīya and Aleppo Choirs, singers are taught by the traditional method of repetition and memorisation. A leader sings the hymns, phrase by phrase, and the Choir repeats them until they are memorised. This knowledge is contained only among Syrian Orthodox Christians. The Christians believe that Syriac hymns show the most salient character of ancient culture of Syria as they are a very conservative and hereditary oral tradition and have changed little since ancient times. This hypothetically homogeneous continuity of their culture is a source for claiming that Syrian Orthodox Christians are descendants of the original inhabitants of Syria. However, the Choir in Aleppo extends beyond this hypothetical homogeneity.

The hymn of 'I will exalt Thee' is cast in ABBBBB structure, even though the B part progresses with variations. Since Syrian hymns are musical settings of poetry, the correspondence between words and music brings the variations of refrained phrase B in which the melody does not follow the poetic line programmatically. Syrian music does not conform to a system of absolute pitch. Even though the pitch of Qaḥṭānīya version is slower than that of Aleppo in the recorded sounds, which I used for the transcription, these examples should not be understood as the representation of the pitch. In

Qaḥṭānīya, the tempo is constant throughout, whereas the Aleppo Choir changes it due to the skill of their emotional expression.

The introduction of the Western keyboard into the Choir of Aleppo seems to have reduced the number of tones they use. The Aleppo Choir, however, have a good command of accent, tempo and phrase due to their training. These skills which provide the music of Western Europe with one of its main sources of mood portrayal and the mixed chorus, including young men attach great importance to harmony. This is a new attempt far away from the Middle Eastern music tradition in which there is no steady progress to one peak of aesthetic tension in the course of a performance (Al-Faruqi, 1975: 10-11).

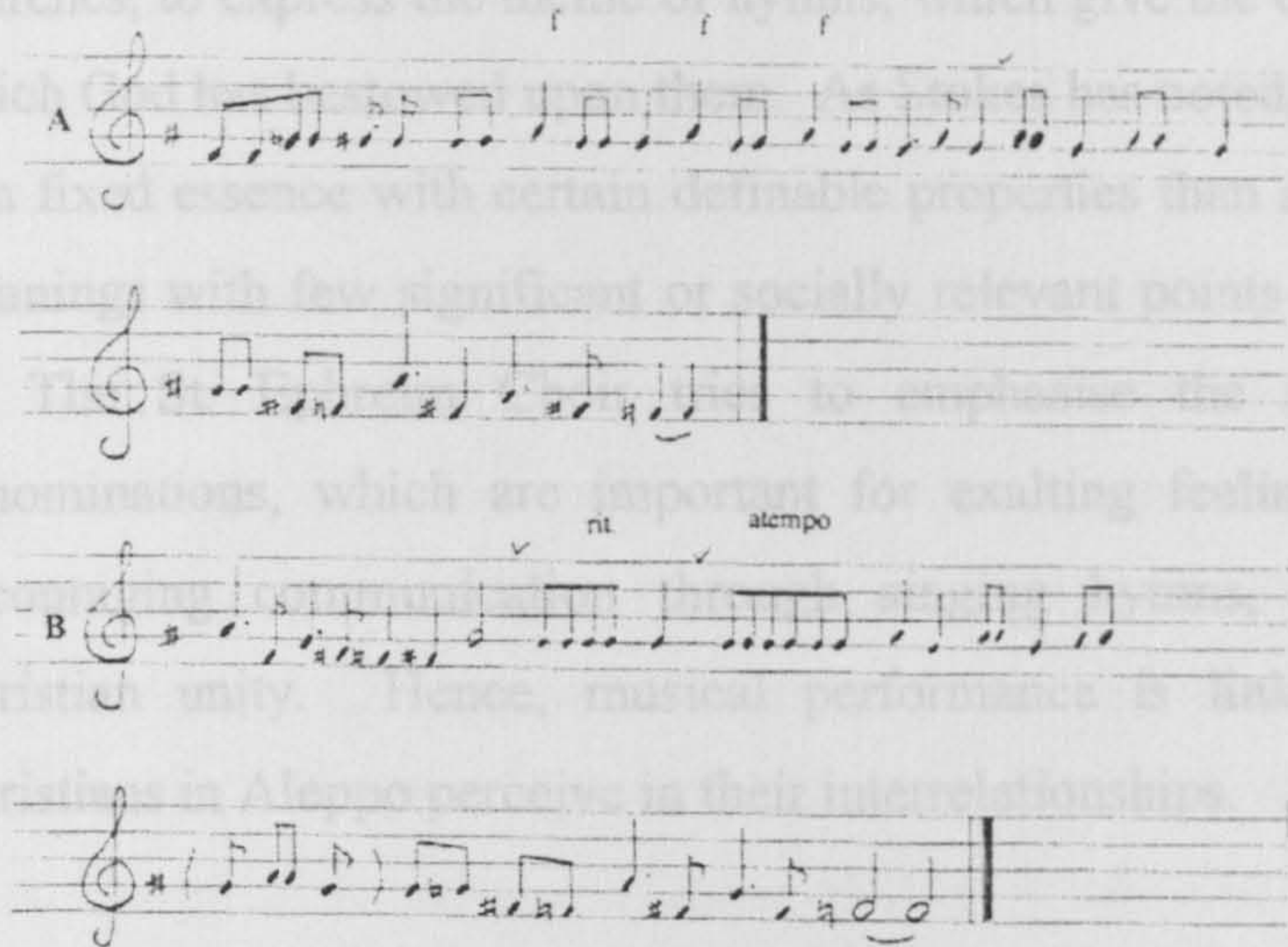
By contrast, the Qaḥṭānīya Choir maintains the monophonic texture of the hymn. They do not use any musical instruments. The succession of parts progresses with no attempt to achieve one single climatic point. The quarter-tones are in practice in Qaḥṭānīya. The breath of division of this musical step is a crucial ingredient in the peculiar flavour of the Qaḥṭānīya Choir. Their voices are monotonous without forced or throbbing voices. They do not pay any regard to accent (Julian, 1908: 1109). These characteristics of musical practice of the Qaḥṭānīya Choir reflects a traditional way of singing Syrian Orthodox hymns.

The St. Ephreim Choir in Aleppo uses interval intonation, change of tempo and tone, and polyphony, which are not introduced into the musical practices in Qaḥṭānīya. Members of the St. Ephreim Choir describe such musical orientation by using a term, *tausī'a musīqī*, i.e. musical embellishment. They believe that these musical skills enhances the aesthetic value of the traditional hymns such as 'I will exalt Thee', which have endured since early Christian times. They also consider that good performers are endowed with the emotional power and technical skills to move the congregation in the Mass. They perceive that, technically, a performance, which has correct intonation, rhythmic accuracy and good judgement of tonal emphases, expresses the theme of the hymns. Such musical skills enhance the feeling that the hymn singers, as well as the

congregation, constitute a harmonious whole in their communication with the divine power.

Figure 8. Hymn Airan-rmokh, 'I will exalt Thee'

Example 1. Hymn Airan-rmokh sang at St.Ephreim church in Aleppo



Example 2 Hymn Airan-rmokh sang at St. Mary church in Qahtāniya



The Choir consider that such unity of the congregation might be able to integrate Christians in Aleppo, if they could share the same aesthetic value shown in the hymns. Therefore, members of St. Ephreim Choir attend services in other churches across the boundaries of denominations and listen to the hymns. They perceive the importance of the musical skills, i.e. *tausī'a musīqī*, which are incorporated into singing in other churches, to express the theme of hymns, which give the congregation religious feelings which God has bestowed upon them. As Stokes has noted, we need to look at music less as a fixed essence with certain definable properties than as a wide field of practice and meanings with few significant or socially relevant points of intersection (Stokes, 1994: 7). The St. Ephreim Choir tries to emphasise the shared musical skills across denominations, which are important for exalting feelings of a common faith. By encouraging communication through singing hymns, they attempt to establish a Christian unity. Hence, musical performance is linked to the social alignments Christians in Aleppo perceive in their interrelationships.

Such social and religious orientations encourage the St. Ephreim Choir to stress *musical training*. While the Qaḥṭāniya Choir gives priority to singing *Syriac words* correctly, as it is very important for them to preserve it as their own language in order to prove that their community having endured since ancient times. Indeed, many of St. Ephreim congregation in Aleppo know little of classical Syriac. Even though traditional Syriac hymns are regarded as poetic and an expression of their religious aesthetics, it is questionable whether or not the Choir members fully understand the literal meaning of the hymns. They prefer singing of Arabic hymns whose meaning the congregation understand.

Different orientations between the two communities toward classical Syriac are thus operative. Churches in the Jazirah, whose congregation are originally from Ṭur 'Abdīn, conduct their services by using both classical Syriac and Ṭoroyo, i.e. Ṭur 'Abdīn Syriac dialect. In the Mass in the St. Ephreim church, by contrast Arabic is used as the first language and classical Syriac has only a supplementary role. The reason why Arabic is used, even for reading the liturgy, is due to the fact that the St. Ephreim congregations is composed of people who have different origins. Syrian Christians

immigrated from Mardin have spoken in Arabic since their time in Mardin. Those who used to live in the area of Āzakh had only spoken Kurdish. Only those who emigrated from Ṭur ‘Abdīn to the Jazirah and later moved into Aleppo spoke both in Ṭoroyo and Kurdish. However, the Christians in the Jazirah learnt Arabic in order to retain their rights when they had to struggle against Kurdish and Arab tribal power. Currently, some people who have their origin in Ṭur ‘Abdīn are interested in maintaining Ṭoroyo. Due to the historical fact that the Christians immigrated to Aleppo from different regions and so spoke different languages, i.e. Arabic, Kurdish and Ṭoroyo, Arabic, as the lingua franca of Syria, became an important communication tool between the community members and with other populations in this big city. Therefore, the classical Syriac has less importance in this community. The Aleppo community seems to have adopted the popular language, Arabic, as their liturgical language, similar to the Vatican II Council of the Catholic Church, which replaced Latin with each country’s own language. By contrast, the Qaḥṭāniya community seems to have re-erected their classical language as their liturgical language to show that they are the descendants of the original ‘Byzantiniāns’.

Many of the Choir members in Aleppo, therefore, are unable to understand the precise meaning of traditional Syriac hymns which they sing. This is one of the reasons why they emphasise the musical skills and musical form in the vocal composition performed by the chorus. However, they want to emphasise the poetic and religious aspects of hymns and, consequently, try to introduce more Arabic hymns which they can understand and give them religious and spiritual elation. They attempt to adopt Arabic hymns sung in other Middle Eastern Churches as well as their religious and musical forms. The Coptic hymn ‘*Ma Ahli*’, ‘What redeems me’, is one of the Arabic hymns accepted by the present Archbishop of Aleppo at the request of the Choir.

Their attempt to introduce new hymns, whether they are new compositions or hymns sung in other Churches, has not been a total success. For example, the Choir tried to introduce a new Arabic hymn of ‘Mary the Virgin’ composed by a musician in the Choir. The melody of the hymn adopted popular Arabic musical tunes, to which the youth are accustomed and easily express emotional attachment. After mastering this

new hymn, the St. Ephreim Choir held a session to sing this hymn in front of the Archbishop, who was to make a decision whether or not the Church should adopt it. He said, “ the coming concert is the first and the last time you sing this hymn”. Although he tried to concede to the requests of the Choir to introduce new hymns as far as possible, it is not possible for the Church authorities to acknowledge the hymn whose melody ignored the tonality of Syrian Church music. The musical tonality, which has been handed down over generations, is a means to claim their cultural origin going back to ancient times and their rights as Syrians.

When all their efforts were in vain, and their requests were refused by the Church authorities, some of the youth blamed the Church: “whatever we wish, we are all in the hands of our Archbishop and his dictatorship.” This reveals that there are divisions between the Church authorities and the congregation. However, though the Church authorities may appear autocratic, in fact, they do not have enough power to impose their decisions. In the above example of the Archbishop’s attempt to impose his opinion, the Choir were reluctant to accept his judgement. They do not think their attitude toward the hymns erodes the distinctiveness of the tradition of their community, as far as they respect traditional Syriac hymns and practice them. However, the Choir members try to find a way in which they can emotionally engage with music. What they try to introduce into their practices are hymns which are written in Arabic with popular musical melodies, which Middle Eastern Christians can share. Therefore, they regard their activities as inter-denominational. By doing so, young people aspire to create the unity of Middle Eastern Christians as a future-oriented Christian identity. They try to express this idea in their musical practices by introducing hymns whose language and musical style are popular among the young. Ironically, such movements bring them in contact with increasing Arabisation and, consequently, reduce the distinctive characteristics of Syrian Orthodox Christian music, i.e. Syriac and musical tonality.

The Syrian Orthodox Church authorities promote the movement toward the unity of Middle Eastern Christians and introduce the idea to the laity in order to secure their social position in society where each denomination is composed of a small group in the wider society of Syria. However, for both the clergymen and the laity, including young

people, their musical traditions are the sources for claiming the endurance of the Syrian Orthodox Christian community in Syria. The Choir members are in a dilemma regarding how to maintain Syrian Orthodox Christian musical traditions, and at the same time to promote the idea of the Christian unity in their musical practices. The acknowledged strategy by both the clergy and the laity is to sing their own traditional hymns with the shared musical skills among Middle Eastern Christians, i.e. *tausī'a musīqī*. Objectively speaking, such musical orientation also brings with it Western musical influences, such as polyphony and the reduction of the number of traditional quarter tones. The St. Ephreim Choir seems to grope for ways of expressing the ideal of Christian unity without losing their distinctive musical traditions.

## Conclusion

Syrian Orthodox Christians of the three communities, which have been discussed above, strive to establish their rights in Syrian society by presenting their own version of the cultural heritage of Syrian Orthodox Christians. They are afraid that religion (Christianity) might separate them from the wider society of Syria and might be used by the government as a pretext for persecuting them. However, as they concealed their memories of their past in Turkey, they have nothing but their religious traditions, i.e. Syriac hymns, which have been handed down over generations, to prove the endurance of their group since ancient times in Syria. In this sense, the musical practices of the Choirs are community activities which reflect political ideas of their group/ethnic identities.

The Christians in the Jazirah region, i.e. the al-Mālkiya and Qaḥṭāniya Christians, are anxious about being ethnically incorporated with the Kurds. One day, Kurds might be subdued by force due to their political ambitions and Christians might be persecuted with them. Although Christians conceal the fact that they used to have had close relationships with Kurds, Kurds maintain that Syrian Christians are their 'brothers' and imply that they are ethnically Kurds. The only way for the Christians to differentiate themselves from Kurds is to claim their religious heritage and clarify their Syrian origin.

To lose their traditions means for Syrian Christians to lose their ethnic identity or to choose alternative ones, either Kurdish or local Arab identity.

In al-Mālkiya, despite the segregation of women in the Church hierarchy, single women's participation in the community's musical traditions is encouraged. Sending political messages through women's Choir activities is a safer way for reducing the community's risk of political persecution. By contrast, in the community of Qaḥṭāniya, there is no distinctive role allocated to single women and their Choir. The Qaḥṭāniya Christians clearly state that the disappearance of their religious traditions would mean the extinction of their community, as a separate entity and possibly their assimilation with the Kurds. Through Choir activities, the community can stress its endurance, its Syrian origin and their independence of the Kurds.

Three Christian communities have different styles of singing through which their identities are constructed. The attitude of both al-Mālkiya and Qaḥṭāniya Choirs towards their musical traditions is that their music is entirely their own and is not shared by others. By contrast, the Choir of the St. Ephreim church in Aleppo tries to find a way of establishing Christian unity in the future, without jeopardising the traditions of Syrian Orthodox Christians. Their musical practices reflect their struggle for establishing two contradictory identities. In their singing, they develop skills which are shared with other Middle Eastern Churches. As a result, their musical expression of traditional Syriac hymns, is however unable to escape from influence of Arab music culture and Western musical techniques, which are easily accepted by young people.

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## Chapter 6. Notes

<sup>1</sup> The conversion of Ṭur 'Abdīn Syrian Christians occurred in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries due to political oppression. The former Patriarch Barsoum reported that 6,000 to 8,000 Christians in the area of Muḥllamīya in the southern part of Ṭur 'Abdīn converted to Islam (1963:352). In 1924 when the Patriarch wrote the book, the total number ranged from 12,000 to 15,000 (ibid.:353). Considering these figures, it seems that a large portion of the population of Muḥllamīya Christians became Muslims in the beginning of the seventeenth century.

<sup>2</sup> The translation of the hymn is the following;

I will exalt Thee, O, King, my Lord, the Only-begotten Son, the Work of the heavenly Father, who are immortal in Thy nature; Who by Thy grace came for the life and salvation of all mankind, and did become incarnated of the Holy and Glorious pure Virgin, Mother of God, Mary; Who did become man, being God without change, and was crucified for us. O, Christ, our Lord, Who by Thy death did trample our death destroy it, Who are One of the Holy Trinity and are worshipped and glorified in the unity of Thy Father and Thy living Holy Spirit, have mercy upon us (Samuel, 1967: 29).

<sup>3</sup> The first intensive attempt to transcribe Syrian Orthodox Church music is the transcription of the Bet Gazo, the texts of the modal stanzas of the chants. Five specialists of these Christians from different local churches discussed the tunes of each chant. The result was that the Bet Gazo with a transcription published by the Syrian Orthodox Church in 1996. However, this book does not come in use into local communities.

## Chapter 7

### Syrian National Identities: The Syrian Orthodox Version versus the Identities fostered by the Syrian Regime

#### Introduction

I have discussed various attempts of Syrian Orthodox Christians to establish their rights as the *original* inhabitants of the region where they now live in order to construct secure identities in Syria. In their increasing concern about their Syrian origin, many people have become interested in the ancient history of Syrian Christians and try to discover links between ancient Arameans and contemporary Syrian Christians. They have developed their group identity based on Aramean history and their language, which have endured in 'Greater Syria' since ancient times. Consequently, Syrian Orthodox Christians do not regard themselves ethnically as Arabs. As the regime promotes a Syrian-Arab identity, they feel that the government-fostered national identity does not acknowledge them as 'Syrians'. The Christians are anxious about this situation and so construct their own version of Syrian national identity, in which their community assumes a crucial role as descendants of original inhabitants of Syria. By doing so, Syrian Orthodox Christians try to promote themselves as one of the ethnic groups in Syria and integrate themselves into Syrian society.

The Syrian national identity advocated by Syrian Orthodox Christians is affected by Syrian-Arab nationalism propagated by the regime. The government promotes a secular Syrian-Arab nationalism, which combines two ideologies: Arab nationalism, which emphasises Arab unity, and Syrian nationalism, which is based on the prospective unity of the members of different groups in Syria. There used to be political conflicts between Arab nationalists and Syrian nationalists, who both advocated different ideologies for establishing the identity of Syrians. However, the present regime stresses the compatibility of these two ideologies in order to integrate supporters of both beliefs and ethnic groups. The regime emphasises the two characteristics of Syrian identity:

Syrians are Arabs who have inherited Arab and Islamic cultural traditions (Arab nationalism); these traditions are shared by inhabitants in 'Greater Syria' (Syrian nationalism). Being influenced by this propaganda, Syrian Orthodox Christians attempt to construct a Syrian identity in which they play a crucial role in integrating different ethnic groups in a Greater Syria. Ancient Aramaic is the language which used to be a common language of people in Greater Syria and historically speaking, their language and cultural traditions have contributed to constructing the culture and language (Arabic) of present Syrians. The Syrian Christian version of Syrian national identity tries to establish the rights of all the ethnic groups in the territory of Greater Syria. A comparison between the Syrian Christian version of national identity and that propagated by the regime is required in order to understand why Syrian Orthodox Christians, who are not only intellectuals, but also ordinary people, attempt to create such discourses. The data presented here was collected during fieldwork between 1997 and 1998.

### **The Development of Syrian Orthodox Christian Identity**

The construction of Syrian Orthodox Christian identity has been influenced by ideologies of nationalism since the Ottoman period. The ideology of nationalism was introduced by Ottoman intellectuals in the early nineteenth century and some Syrian Orthodox Christian intellectuals became influenced by these ideas. One of the most famous activists is Na'ūm Fāiq in Diyarbakır. He attempted to revive their interest in their religious traditions and classical language, Syriac, in order to spread the idea of group solidarity at the beginning of the twentieth century, a time of political tensions in Turkey. He tried to popularise the idea through school education and the publication of Syrian Christian magazines (Syrian Orthodox Church, 1944: 182-184).

In the 1930s there were two political ideologies: Arab nationalism and Syrian nationalism, which were initially opposed. Syrian Christians supported the latter. The Boy Scouts movements, which were supported by Syrian nationalists, flourished in the urban areas among Syrian Orthodox youth in Aleppo, Qāmishlī and Ḥassake. Christians

were afraid that their political rights would be threatened by Arab nationalism, which was based ideally on the unity of all Arabs and their 'glorious' history, culture, Islam and the Arabic language. By contrast the SSNP (Syrian Social Nationalist Party) claimed Syrian identity was derived from the shared history and tradition of Greater Syria. By participating in the Boy Scouts activities Syrian Orthodox Christians began developing the idea of their ethnic origins as ancient Arameans whose language they had maintained.

Young people led these activities because they had had a modern education in Arabic in Syria, which older generations had not had a chance to obtain, and, consequently, were able to absorb a growing trend toward movements of nationalism (Shambrook, 1998: 30, 68, 163, 220, 221). Education seems to have distanced between the young people and the older generation, who only had basic education in Turkish. One of the famous activists was a Syrian Orthodox school teacher, Shukri Sharmugri, who lived in Qāmishlī and followed the ideas of Na'ūm Fāiq. He became the leader of Syrian Orthodox Christian youth. He tried to promote the idea of the historical identity of the Syrian Christians by involving them in the Boy Scouts activities. These young people were influenced by Syrian nationalism, which enhanced the consciousness of their group's identity. They became interested in activities which stressed the distinctive traditions of their community, including the classical language of Syria, Syriac.

Many Syrian Orthodox Christians became involved in Syrian nationalism. Given Syria's unstable situation, such political alignment was a risky one. In the face of the rising ideology of Arab unity, represented by the Syria's unification with Egypt in 1958, and the expansion of Ba'ath party (a Socialist Reformist party), the political alignment of Syrian Christians with Syrian nationalists (SSNP) left the group vulnerable. They learnt that political alignments are risky strategies for the construction of their ethnic identity. Instead, contemporary Syrian Christians try to promote their own version of Syrian national identity.

## **Identities fostered by the Regime**

After the collapse of the Syria's unification with Egypt the Ba'ath party seized power in a coup in 1963. Political and ideological changes, which occurred before Hafez Asad took power, are related to the two facts. Arab unity had lost its dynamism and the 1967 War against Israel provided opportunities for Ba'athists to entrench themselves in the army. Consequently, Ba'ath leaders, who promoted Pan-Arab unity, were gradually replaced by the party's army officials. Personal and group rivalries were the most conspicuous features until Hafez Asad took over power in 1970 (Roberts, 1987: 82-99). The Party had lost its Pan-Arab dynamic and had no definite ideological direction. Asad needed to establish an ideology which would strengthen his power and integrate Syrian society.

One of the strategies which Asad promoted was to advocate Arab nationalism through Syria's struggle with Israel. The government currently celebrates Asad's political 'victory' in the October War in 1973 with Israel. In fact, the October war was a military defeat for the Arab side, since Israel attacked sites vital to the Syrian economy, such as oil refineries, airports, electric power stations and military bases (Rondot, 1985: 126-28). The economic loss to Syria, as well as damage to its political pride, was enormous. Syria lost its most important allies, when Egypt embarked on a separate cease-fire with Israel and accepted the mediation of the United States. Other Arab allies were also uncertain as to the correct response. Following the 1973 war, relations with Iraq had deteriorated, Saudi Arabia was uncommitted, and Jordan came to depend for its security on Western powers for maintaining a balance of power between the Arabs and Israel (Seale, 1988: 267, 462). As a part of his internal and diplomatic survival strategies, Asad fostered an image of a stubborn Arab leader and the only effective challenger to Israel (ibid.:267-276). Paradoxically, in spite of the military setbacks (and through them), Asad's regime sought legitimacy through Syria's struggle with Israel, portraying Syria as the vanguard of Arab nationalism (Hinnebusch, 1995: 220).

The anniversary of the Sixth of October, therefore, celebrates Asad's leadership in promoting Arab nationalism. Pupils, teachers and public sectors employees are

obliged to attend parades commemorating the 'victory' over Israel. They wave flags of Syria and the Ba'ath party, portraits of Asad, maps of Arab countries, and banners with such slogans as 'Hafez Asad, The Leader of the Arabs', symbols representing the unity of Syrian Arabs under the ideology of Arab nationalism. This commemoration has been enacted over two decades and is, therefore, a cyclical event creating the opportunity for people from all over Syria to confirm Syria's role in the Arab community, and enhance their solidarity as Syrian Arabs.

Another strategy for enhancing Syrian Arab identity is to emphasise Arab Islamic traditions shared by Syrians. However, the present Ba'athist regime emphasises its secular identity, which is close to earlier view of a Ba'athists' leader, Michel Aflaq, who maintained that Islam is a *culture* for Arabs rather than a *faith*. Islam is revealed in the Qurān, which is written in Arabic and, therefore, embodies Arab values. Islam is used as the sublime expression of secular Arab nationalism (Seale, 1988: 30-1). However, the use of Islam as a political tool is a recent phenomenon. It dates from the late 1970s to the 1980s when some Sunni merchants and the Muslim Brotherhood expressed active opposition to the government. They were defeated in Hama in 1982. In the 1970s the government nationalised large section of the economy which came under the control of the Ba'ath party. Asad's group, Alawis, have heavily infiltrated the party from where they can obtain special privileges in tendering for public service contracts. This created tensions between the Alawis and Sunni merchants who had long dominated commerce (Roberts, 1987: 111). Hama became a 'showpiece' of massive state repression and was intended to be interpreted that way. The dynamics of opposition in Syria during the 1980s are complex, but it was clear that increasing economic dissatisfaction with the regime's inability to provide for the people in the face of a failed nationalisation policy was partly fuelled, sustained and rationalised by religious beliefs. The government tried to conceal economic dissatisfaction by rationalising its heavy handed oppression (the town of Hama was flattened) as a suppression of dangerous religious dissidents. Even though at the moment there is no particular Islamist movement inside Syria, they may cause problems in the future (cf. Hinnebusch, 1993: 185-187; Lobmeyer, 1994:84-86; Perthes, 1995: 136-7). Since Islamists are afraid of brutal repression by the regime and their opposition activities have become rare, the regime is

able to use religion as its political tool to promote the unity of Muslims. Since the early 1990s, the regime has encouraged the development of businesses in the private sector, which is the base of the economy prescribed by the Qurān, and has protected private investors, including *suq* traders on which urban Islam has its political base. Islamic feasts and the construction and renovation of Sunni mosques (for example the renovation project of the Umayyad Mosque) are conducted under the patronage of the President Asad, as part of his policy of countering the Muslim Brotherhood and reducing the potential threat of the Sunni Muslims toward Alawis.

The regime attempts to create ideological links between Arab nationalism and Islam. Syrian mass media and intellectuals, who support the government propaganda, regard Arab nationalism as an idea developed in Arab Islamic culture. For example, a newspaper article introducing discussions on the conference on the subject; 'the notion of the Arab at the end of the twentieth century', which was held at the University of Damascus on 4 April 1998, emphasised the connection between Islam and nationalism. The discussion at the conference hinged on the notion that Western nationalism was introduced by [Ottoman] middle class intellectuals. However, some Arabs mentioned that this notion was already present in Islamic ideology and that it had been developed among both the Arabs and the West; whereas Marxism and Imperialism, whose origin was in the West, had already lost their validity in most countries. The aim of the Arabs is to reconsider Islam in the light of new Arab nationalism (Tishreen, 4 April 1998). This article does not explain how they found the idea of nationalism in Islam. However, it suggests that although nationalism is a secular idea, which developed in both Western and the Arab worlds, nationalism for Arabs has been and should be nurtured within Arab Islamic culture. The ideology of Arab nationalism in contemporary Syria found its ideological base in the society where Arab Islamic culture has nurtured.

The regime tries to describe similar characteristics which are found in both current reform movements, i.e. the Tishreen Corrective Movement (*al-ḥaraka al-tishrīniya*) promoted by the President Asad, and the reformation movement of Islam led by the Prophet Muhammad. The government presents through its media, in a rhetorical mode, the similarity between the President Asad's reform movement and the political

and economic leadership of the prophet Muhammad at the 'Gazwat al-Badr, the fight of Badr (Tishreen, 25/1/1998). Religious sheikhs emphasise the character of the Prophet as an able political and economic leader by looking at the effect of 'Gazwat al-Badr on the ancient Arabian economy (e.g. a Syrian TV programme 16/1/98, 13:45). Governmental propaganda and the religious authorities construct the nationalists' subjective version of 'Gazwat al-Badr and use it as a symbol of Asad's Corrective Movement (cf. Eickelman, 1996: 29; Fox, 1993: 8; Handler, 1990: 29).

The regime attempts to find similarities between Asad's economic difficulties and political isolation at the time of the October War and the aftermath and those of the Prophet Muhammad at the time of the fight of Badr. When the religious movement of the Prophet Muhammad had reached a deadlock and he had little hope of increasing his followers in Mecca, he became isolated and emigrated to Madina (*Hijira*). Due to his outstanding ability as a political leader, he controlled a major commercial route by intercepting caravans of Meccans at Badr, in the month of the Ramḍān 624, and won the first and decisive military victory for integrating Arabs (Rahman, 1966: 18-22; Hitti, 1964: 116-118). Similar to the Prophet's effective leadership, the stand taken by Asad since the time of October War, was to pursue victory against Israel (despite Syria's isolation) and to encourage the unity of the Arabs in the *Tishreen* Corrective Movement, and thus promote Syria as the vanguard of Arab nationalism. The regime tries to connect current Arab nationalism and Arab Islamic traditions, both of which are shared by Syrian Arabs.

The regime also attempts to combine Arab nationalism with Syria's territorial demands, primarily by cooperation with the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), which used to be rivals of the Ba'athists. This makes it ideologically possible for the regime to link its claim on the territorial unity of 'Greater Syria' to Arab Islamic unity. For example, the authorities tend to use the commemoration of the October War to remind people of Israel's invasion into Arab land and appeal for the return of the occupied Golan. The authorities say that the persistent claim of Syria for a return of its land and their firm attitude in opposing the Israeli occupation have increased the sentiment of Arab solidarity, and have consolidated their faith (al-Kassan, al-Thawra, 11

October 1998). Here, the regime maintains that Syria's struggle to stress its territorial integrity appeals to advocates of Arab Islamic unity.

The main stance of Asad's policy toward the occupied land was to show how Israel threatens the territorial sovereignty of Syria. Asad presented his view at an interview on French television. He said that the peace process, launched by the American initiative, has supported the principle that peace should be accompanied by a return of the occupied land. Netanyahu, however, wants to take away this land and keep it in the hands of Israelis. This means that he has tried to substitute peace for an agreement of regional security without the return of occupied land; otherwise, he would withdraw from the peace process. According to Netanyahu's policy, Israel might invade Syria justifying it as a military action to establish regional security. Asad further stated that Syria would refuse to accept Netanyahu's justification for his actions, because Syria respects the will of 'our' people and UN resolutions (al-Ba'ath, 16 July, 1998). This interview was broadcast many times on Syrian television both in Arabic and English, although the real voice of the interviewers and Asad was erased from the programme.

Asad insisted on a comprehensive peace to restore rights over the territory to their original owners. When Asad accuses Israel of having an aggressive and cunning policy aimed at obtaining both power and land, he demonstrates his hard-line policy against Israel. It encourages Syrian citizens to believe that Israeli conspires to cause divisions among them and provides an interpretative framework for people to understand new critical situations. For example, during the deterioration of Syria's relation with Turkey, the latter accused Syria of backing the PKK in October 1998. People in Aleppo and the Jazirah, both of which are close to the Syrian-Turkish border, became worried about potential conflict between Syria and Turkey. They claimed, "it is Israel which encourages Turkey to make trouble with us". This view of the common people is congruent with that of the Syrian government, i.e. that Israel is behind the crisis (News talk radio, <http://interactive.cfra.com>). Similarly, Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Mālkiya believe that the missionary work of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Brethren of Lord in their town is fostered by Israel so as to disturb Syrian Orthodox Christians and split up their community. Political paranoia is both a function and a cause of

difficult geopolitics and cannot be rejected as 'untrue'. Like religious belief it is a Durkheim social fact which has definite social effects.

A second strategy of combining Syria's territorial integrity with advocates of Arab Islamic unity is expressed by the notion of a historical *Bilad as-Sham*, i.e. Greater Syria. The regime attempts to portray the state of historical Syria as a real political entity, i.e. *Bilad as-Sham*. Greater Syria includes large parts of the ancient Arab Islamic Empire, Syria and Lebanon, and it is assumed that they formed a geographical, cultural and economic integrated area, before the area was carved-up by the colonial powers in 1920. Thus, Greater Syria has a territorial implication and reality. Asad used the notion of a historic Syria to reconstruct the unity of the former classical community in contemporary Syria. This classical community, i.e. *Bilad as-Sham*, is perceived by people in Syria as 'real Syria', which does not correspond with the demarcated borders of the modern states, but is defined as a community linked by the Arabic language, Arab Islamic culture and the territory occupied by them. Such distinctive characteristics of *Bilad as-Sham* are portrayed as a means for confining membership within the community and creating the unity of people in this region. Thus, *Bilad as-Sham* with its territorial implication becomes a political entity which defines Syria's origin. In the present political situation where the old *Bilad as-Sham* is divided between present Syria and Lebanon, and where Lebanon has been in turmoil, the Syrian government regards Syria and Lebanon as one community based on language and culture, which act as factors for integrating the two societies. Asad did not draw a line between the unity of classical Syria (*Bilad as-Sham*) and the aspiration towards Arab unity (Seale, 1988: 349). He did not expand on the territorial implications of *Bilad as-Sham*, as this raises Syria's complicated relations with Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine, which are historically regarded as parts of *Bilad as-Sham* (Pipes, 1990: 190).

The historical and cultural unity of Syria and Lebanon is evoked to justify Syria's intervention into Lebanon. Despite careful avoidance of language suggesting the political unity of Syria and Lebanon, people in Syria from different religious and social backgrounds understand that Syria's attempt to establish a close relationship with Lebanon is on the regime's political agenda. As Asad indicated, Syria has to defend

herself against a possible Israeli invasion of Damascus. Syria had experienced such a crisis twice, at the time of the October War and in the Lebanese civil war in 1982. Israeli armies launched attacks against the Syrian positions in the Lebanese mountains and reached a position from which to threaten Damascus (Cobban, 1991: 39, 42). As its defence strategy, the regime, therefore, uses the notion of a classical community and homeland to justify its military intervention in Lebanon, the pretext being to protect the land and people of Lebanon threatened by Israel. The Arabic transcript of Asad's interview on French television clearly stated that, 'historically speaking', the Syrians and Lebanese, are the same people, who speak the same language, and have experienced the same situation. They acknowledge that Lebanon is a separate state (*dawla*). The consensus among the Syrians is that they will intervene in conflicts in Lebanon in order to establish good relations between the various sects in Lebanon. Asad stated that he was determined to accomplish this task, even though it meant that a large number of his soldiers would be hurt and even killed during the operations as well as 'our Lebanese brothers' (al-Ba'ath, 16 July 1998).

Such beliefs in belonging to a wider *Bilad as-Sham* are promoted by an elementary school curriculum, pupils pay visits to families of soldiers who were killed during the 1982 Lebanese civil war. These visits provide an occasion for children to listen to stories by families of the deceased. The government aims to teach children to praise the families of these soldiers who are now martyrs, due to their contribution and dedication to the nation, i.e. *Bilad as-Sham*. Children's individual experiences of visiting these families are embedded in the national contexts of commemorating martyrs. The President also meets the children of the martyrs, praises the bravery of their fathers and wishes these children success on Martyrs' Day on the sixth of June 1998 (al-Ba'ath, 7 June 1998). Formal educational activities allow each child to share and participate in the state's view of martyrs and give expression to the idea of a nation based on the classical community, i.e. *Bilad as-Sham*.

As Anderson points out such systematic historiographical campaigns deployed by the state are a characteristic device for constructing the nation's origin, and for legitimising its policy (1983: 200-205). The regime takes on the role of guardian of the

past, in which Asad's leadership is assumed to be a centripetal force for emphasising Arab Islamic policy and traditions and reuniting the classical community of *Bilad as-Sham*. However, as the regime has fostered Syrian identity based on Arab Islamic traditions, this fails to provide Syrian Orthodox Christians with a sufficient base to acknowledge their rights in the state. They are thus obliged to construct their own version of Syrian national identity. An analysis of nationalism, therefore, requires one to examine the relationship between state propaganda and people's collective sentiments, which are the core of ethnicity, and on which modern nation states are founded (Smith, 1999: 13-15).

### **Syriac-Aramaic as Original Unifying Language of Syria**

As the Arabic language is regarded as a cultural marker to promote Syrian Arab nationalism, Syrian Christians try to use the history of the Syriac-Aramaic language, as a marker of cultural unity of Syria. They believe that they all belonged originally to one Syriac-Aramaic language family. Syriac-Aramaic is the symbol of their associations.<sup>1</sup> Ancient Aramaic was the language spoken in Galilee when Jesus taught there. (Palmer, 1995: 1).

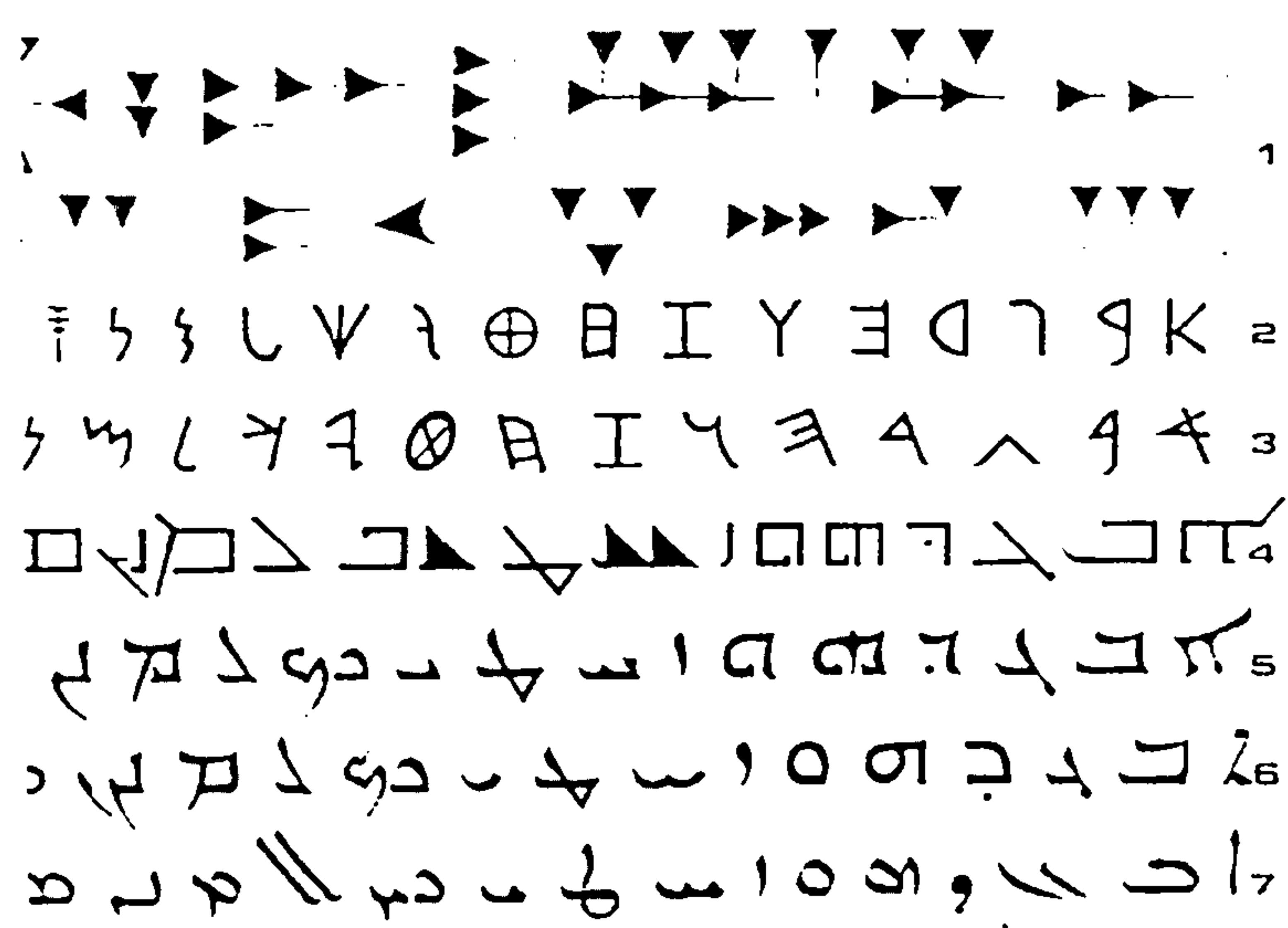
Syrian Orthodox clergymen and intellectuals use local and Western theological, historical and archaeological sources to try to discover the origin of Syriac-Aramaic and to establish a line in its development. It is a process of cultural enactment through which they perceive that Syriac is a remnant of the ancient language of Syria and, therefore, it is to them, a way of validating its connection to their Syrian origins. Such a history argued 'within' the context of ethnicity is therefore distinct from the history of professional academics (Hobsbawm, 1992: 3). The sources used here were obtained from personal interviews with Syrian Orthodox Christians; ordinary conversation with them and their Muslim neighbours, and books and articles written by Syrian Orthodox clergymen, laymen and Muslims in Syria. I am therefore presenting here a popular view of history. Yet in order to explore indigenous theories of language and ethnic origin,

mention must be made of academic discussions. Popular history makes selective use of academic sources.

Syrian Orthodox Christians maintain that their liturgical language, i.e. Syriac, is actually an unification and a direct descendant of the original scripts of the region. There is a famous chart of alphabetic scripts which Syrian Orthodox Christians use to decorate the walls of their offices and houses. It shows a putative development of Semitic alphabets (figure 9):

- Form 1. The Cuneiform Scripts
- Form 2. The Phoenician Scripts
- Form 3. The Old Aramaic Scripts
- Form 4. The ‘Square’ (Hebrew) Scripts
- Form 5. The Estrangela Script
- Form 6. The Eastern-Aramaic Scripts
- Form 7. The Western-Aramaic Scripts

Figure 9. The Development of Semitic Alphabets: The Syrian Christian Version



The message conveyed by this chart is that all of these languages were used in 'Greater Syria' and there is a direct line of language development from ancient to modern Syriac-Aramaic. Cuneiform was used for the Sumerian and the Akkadian languages which eventually developed into Form 1, i.e. the Babylonian and the Assyrian dialects.<sup>2</sup> Form 2 developed when the Aramean tribes expanded their territory from Mesopotamia to the Phoenician border. Form 3, which was Old Aramaic, adopted a Phoenician linear alphabet which developed into the Aramaic style. Form 4 was New Hebrew script which Syrian Christians regard as an Aramaic script, *al-Tarjim*. Form 5, which is still used for writing church scripts, is regarded by Syrian Orthodox Christians as the most authentic Syriac-Aramaic scripts as it dates from ancient times. Modern Aramaic has developed into Eastern and Western Syriac dialects which are contemporary liturgical languages. Form 6 is used among East Syrians, such as Nestorians and Chaldeans. Form 7 is used by West Syrians, i.e. Syrian Orthodox Christians. This chart suggests that the ancient Arameans, whom Syrian Orthodox Christians believe to be their ancestors, took important roles in the development of the language.

Syrian Orthodox intellectuals emphasise the changes which took place in the Hebrew scripts that are found in the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> Syrian Orthodox Christians say that the first five books of the Old Testament, written before the Exile, were in Old Hebrew. The texts which were written after the Israelites' return from the Exile follow the Aramaic tradition. To a certain extent Syrian Orthodox Christians are right. Scholars also agree that Aramaic had an influence on Hebrew writing after the Exile.<sup>4</sup> Syrian Orthodox Christians say that during their Exile in Babylon Israelites used Aramaic and, therefore, after the Return to Palestine, they spoke in Aramaic and started to use Aramaic scripts.

Syrian Orthodox intellectuals insist that the language Jews call New Hebrew is actually *al-Tarjim*, i.e. translation (from Aramaic). The New Hebrew script is called by Syrian Orthodox Christians as the Syriac 'Square' scripts, which, they say, can be found today in writings in the Synagogues. These Aramaic scripts which were used during the time of the Exile, and so are termed *al-Athui*, the Assyrian (Shahin, 1997[1911]: 3-6).

By claiming that one of the most important Jewish traditions, i.e. Hebrew, traces its origin to ancient Aramaic, this makes it possible for Syrian Orthodox Christians to refute the Jewish claim that they have a unique cultural tradition which is proof that God claimed them to be his 'chosen people'. Syrian Orthodox Christians can thus present Hebrew as one of the branches of Aramaic, and claim that Aramean culture had influenced Hebrew culture. Some Muslims interpret this as a true origin of Hebrew and that it denies the primacy of modern Israelis over their 'promised land'.

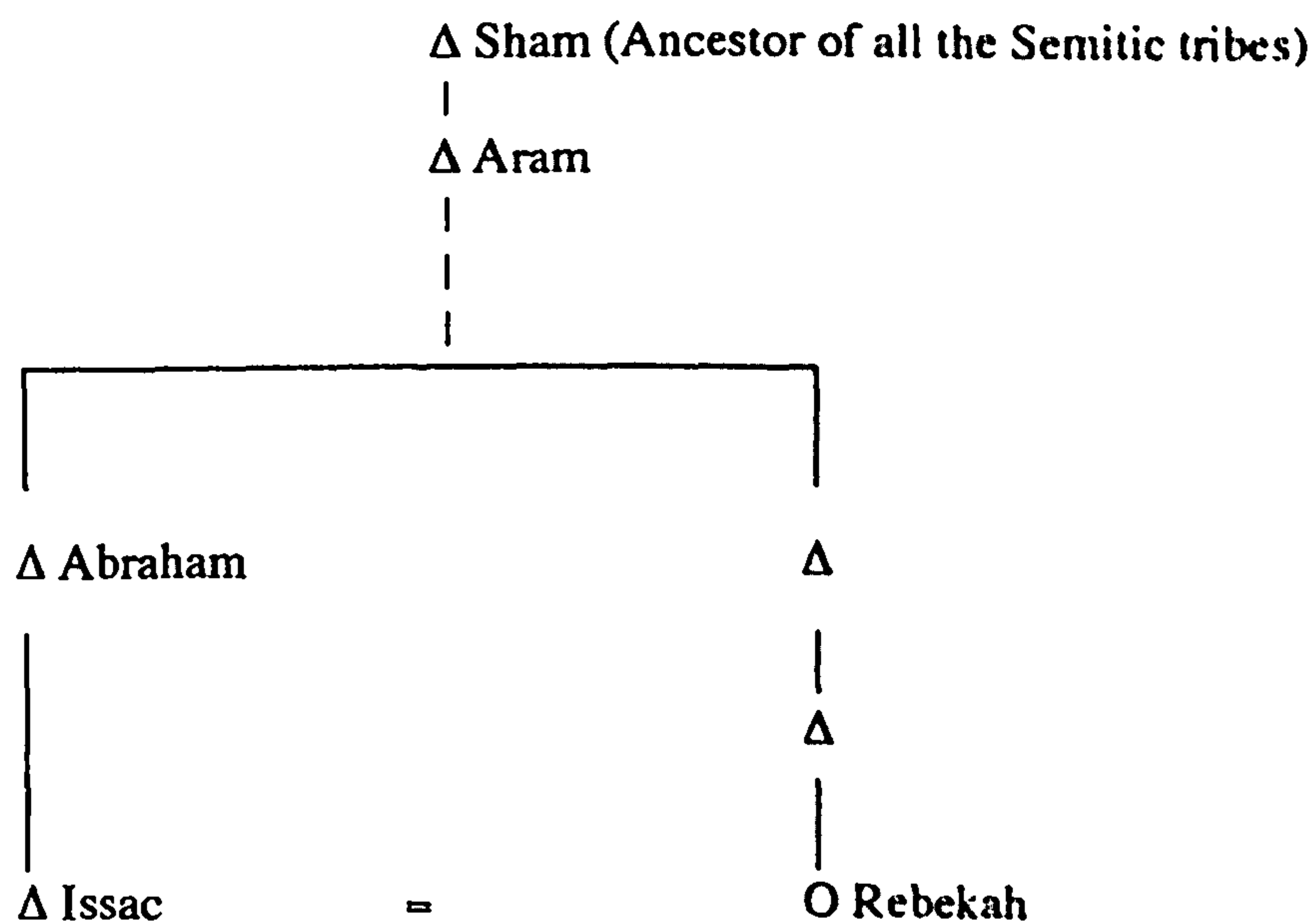
Syrian Orthodox Christians believe that Aramaic, like Arabic today, was a written language as well as a spoken language and used to be one of the most important unifying cultural features of people in the Fertile Crescent. Therefore, ancient Syria had extensive communities which were linked by the use of Aramaic. One can observe that this argument is similar to government propaganda that Arabic is a centripetal medium through which *Bilad as-Sham* is conceived as a community. Syrian Orthodox Christians seek Syria's origin in pre-Islamic Syria. Syriac-Aramaic, i.e. the language of Syrian Christians, which has been kept alive until the present day, is used as an argument to prove Syria's cultural origin. As retainers of the ancient language of Syria, Syrian Orthodox Christians can acquire membership of the present community of Syria. However, because of their position in the current Syrian political situation, it is not possible for them to openly describe their ancestors as the dominant people in ancient *Bilad as-Sham*. This argument can easily lead to the political idea of Pan-Syrianism based on an Aramean cultural unity which is quite different from the prototypical unity being promoted by the Syrian government in its interpretation of the past. The chart of alphabetic scripts exemplifies Syrian Christian cultural identity and supports their argument that they are the descendants of original inhabitants of Syria.

### **Descent-Genetic Origins: The Syrian Version of Biblical History**

As Arab Islamic history supplies the key for creating the relationship between the leadership of Prophet Muhammad and that of Asad, Syrian Orthodox Christians also look for historical proof that God had chosen their ancestors, i.e. ancient Arameans, to

be the original inhabitants of Syria. They refer to the sacred texts of the Old Testament. They need this sacred history in order to ensure their right to their land and to reconstruct the thread between their past and present on which their identity is based. The Biblical history presented here is a reconstruction from the perspective of the Syrian Orthodox Christians and is analogous to the way the regime advocates Arab nationalism in its relationship to Islam. Therefore, it reflects these Christians' concern to reinforce their social position in Syria rather than as a religious and academic investigation into Biblical history. My purpose here in examining the Syrian Christian version of Biblical history is to identify the symbols of their ethnic identity and investigate their view of contemporary politics as reflected in their reconstructed history.

Figure 10. Abraham's Aramean Origin



One discourse widespread among Syrian Orthodox Christians concerns the need to identify their place of origin as being that of Abraham. Syrian Christians have lived for centuries in the eastern part of Turkey, i.e. Harran in Biblical terminology, and Iraq, i.e. Mesopotamia. Abraham who had been in Ur in Mesopotamia, left his homeland and kin, and travelled to Harran. Abraham came from the same region that Syrian Christians

believe to be their homeland. Therefore, Abraham is regarded by them as their ancestor (Genesis 11:31; 12: 1; 15:7). The stories of Abraham are cast as history by Syrian Christians, but the only information we have about Abraham is found in the Old Testament (Magonet, 1992: 23). However, for Syrian Orthodox Christians, the stories depict both geographical and genealogical history.

Syrian Orthodox Christians find evidence to show Abraham's Aramean origin (e.g. Koriah, 1970: 3). Abraham's son Issac married Rebekah, his FBSD (father's brother's son' daughter) (Genesis 24: 1-4; 15 ,27, 50, 58, 62). Issac and Rebekah were patrilateral kin (Figure 10). Genesis identifies Rebekah as a member of the tribe of Syrian of Paddan-Aram or Aram-Nahraim, i.e. Arameans who occupied the region of Harraan (Genesis 26: 20). Syrian Orthodox Christians believe Arameans were one of the major people in those days since Genesis mentions a group of Arameans in order to explain Abraham's descent. Syrian Orthodox Christians also mention Abraham's descendants as being descendants of Aram, son of Shem who was the ancestor of all the Semitic tribes, including the Arabs (Genesis: 10:22). Thus, Arameans are seen to be ancestors of the people in the Fertile Crescent and the original inhabitants of the region. Yet, Abraham is also regarded as the father of the Jews. The sacred texts they draw upon are the Hebrew/Israelite ones. Syrian Orthodox Christians present their theory of their descent and genetic origin as being the same as that of the Jews who were also of Aramean origin. However, Syrian Orthodox Christians generate a marker to differentiate themselves from the Jews. They maintain that it was the Jews who split from the Arameans. Syrian Christians need to link up to Syria, as a place, with the ancient texts, which could cast the Jews as enemies of the Arameans.

The land of Canaan which God gave to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 12: 7) is the area of today's Palestine, Israel, Lebanon and parts of Syria. His descendant, Joseph, a grandson of Issac, travelled from there to Egypt. Moses' Exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Palestine happened in approximately 1200 B.C. (Grollenberg, 1988: 105). The return of Jewish tribes from Egypt to Palestine and their expansion created territorial disputes between Jews and Arameans. The Jewish tribes occupied the land between the Mount Ephraim and Galilee (Aharoni, 1979:87).

Archaeological and historical studies of the Arameans suggest an expansion of Aramean tribes into Palestine. Before the end of the second millennium B.C., Arameans became the dominant force in the area and they began establishing kingdoms throughout Syria.<sup>5</sup> A book about the ancient history of Syria written by a Muslim historian, al-Ashuqar, which now circulates among Syrian Orthodox Christians, and whose view they support, mentions the origin of the ancient Arameans. According to this historian, at the beginning of the ninth century B.C., the tribe, i.e. the Akhlamū, was called the Akhlamū Arameans, *al-Akhlamū al-Aramīyūn*.<sup>6</sup> He argues that al-Akhlamū was a tribal confederation, and Arameans were one of the tribes in al-Akhlamū tribal confederation. The name Aramean gradually became popular in reference to the tribal confederation. It means that the Arameans surpassed other tribes in the confederation and represented the whole tribal group (al-Ashuqar, 1981: 196-7). Many scholars have identified the Akhlamū as Arameans or have proposed that the Arameans were at least a part of the Akhlamū tribe. The important thing for both Syrian Orthodox Christians and other populations in Syria, such as al-Ashuqar, is that the Arameans originally came from the land of Syria, and constituted a tribal confederation of Bedouins who were scattered in the area of the Euphrates, and gradually expanded their territory.

Syrian Orthodox Christians describe how ancient Arameans were stubborn fighters against the Jews. In the time of David, the most powerful state in southern or central Syria was an Aramean kingdom, Aram Zobah. Its king, Hadadezer, fought against David (2 Samuel 8: 3-8; Chronicles 18: 3-8). This king organised the anti-Jewish alliance of small Aramean states. The Arameans had developed a unified coalition against the Jews 3,000 years ago (al-Ashuqar, 1981: 198). This indicates a significant constant that Syrian-Arameans have been supporting the unity of Syria with an anti-Jewish campaign. Syrian Orthodox Christians describe the ancient Arameans as defending Syria against Jewish invasions. They even consider that the Old Testament, which was recorded by Jews, exaggerated the victory of King David and Solomon over the Arameans (2 Samuel 8:5). Yet, Syrian Christian intellectuals acknowledge that the battles between Arameans and Israelites may have allowed Jews to gain influence over Aramean territory in the western part of Syria. However, Syrian Orthodox Christians believe that Syria never submitted to the Jews, because the strategic places, such as the

commercial centre, Tadmor (Palmyra), and a centre for military operation, Hama, were never controlled by the Jews, and had remained in the hands of Arameans. They assert that the eastern parts of Syria, the Euphrates region, which is regarded by Syrian Orthodox Christians as their homeland, never belonged to the Israelites. As the sacred texts cast the Jews as enemies of their ancestors, Syrian Orthodox Christians reconstruct the history of Syria portraying it as one of fighting against the Jews. By doing so, they support present policy of Syria which presents Asad as a stubborn leader confronting Israel.

In the reign of Solomon, Israelite political power reached its peak, but declined later in his reign. Conversely, by the middle of the ninth century B.C., the Aramean kingdoms became powerful.<sup>8</sup> Syrian Orthodox Christians believe the influence of the ancient Arameans reached as far as the land of Canan, the Lebanese mountains of the Phoenician border which separated the Mediterranean coastal region in the south-west, and present Jordan and Beqa' valleys. Israel was then no longer a threat to the Arameans. As a result, Arameans had influence on the Fertile Crescent, from Mesopotamia to Canan, which overlaps with the territory of *Bilad as-Sham* in the present political terminology of Syria. Aramaic became the everyday language in the Fertile Crescent.

The strategy of Syrian Orthodox Christians stresses the prominent cultural and political influence of the Arameans over Syria. Although the identification of Syrian Christians with Arameans is an idea which was introduced at the time of an upsurge of nationalism in Syria in the 1930s, the argument has become more refined in the current situation. This idea is entertained by ordinary people, even though they are not able to present their history in either a systematic or a chronological way. Even intellectuals do not present the whole history. They tend to discuss only part of their history in order to claim how they are able to trace their origin and traditions back to those of ancient Arameans.

In order to prove that their community has endured in Syria, they ought to be concerned with the threads between ancient Arameans and present Syrian Christians.

They are concerned with identifying from where the name of the 'Syrian', *al-Suriyān*, is derived. Metropolitan Gregorios Saliba Shamoon suggests that the 'Syrian', *al-Suriyān*, is not confined to a group of people whose origin are Aramean and who speak Aramaic, but it also means that they are descendants of ancient 'Christians' (Shamoon, 1981: 149). The former Syrian Orthodox Patriarch Mor Ignatius Yacoub III suggested a new interpretation, which has become the official view of the Syrian Orthodox Church today. According to the former Patriarch, the name of the 'Syrian' was derived from Cyrus, the King of Persia (559-529 B.C.) who conquered Babylon (539 B.C.) and liberated the Jews by permitting them to return to Palestine. Later, the Jews who converted to Christianity believed that Christ, 'the liberator of captive mankind', resembled Cyrus, their liberator from their Exile. This connection between the two events relates the Christians' name to Syria as it is derived from Cyrus. Mor Ignatius Yacoub III also indicates the connection of 'Syrian' with the Christians from a different perspective. In the cosmopolitan Syrian capital of Antioch, where Paul and Barnabas started their preaching in about 40 A.D., people in Syria became the followers of the Messiah, *Christos* in Greek, which was the official language in those days (Acts 11: 26). These followers in Syria came to bear the name Christians and therefore, the term 'Syrians' became to be synonymous with Christians in Syria (Yacoub III, 1980a: 6, 29; Keriah, 1976; 5).

From wherever the word 'Syrian' is derived, the Church authorities maintain that threads between the ancient Arameans and present 'Syrian' Christians can be substantiated. However, they try not to relate their argument to that of Christians' political identity. For example, Metropolitan Ishāq Sakka clarifies this by saying that 'Syrian' has neither political nor nationalist meanings, but the word specifies Christians (Sakka, 1985; 24). In order to examine their usage of the term 'Syrian' Christian, one example is presented below, which was produced in an article about 'the identity of Jesus Christ' written by a Syrian Orthodox priest. One of his attempts was to prove Jesus' identity from the viewpoint of ethnicity and origin. When he discusses the nature of Jesus as a human being, he quotes the words of the Patriarch Zakka, 'Jesus is a Syrian'. This is confirmed by Luke 2: 1-2 which stated that Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Judea for registration at the time of Quirinius, who was the Governor of Syria. Jesus



Abraham, which means that the person has an ethnically Syrian-Aramean origin. This example suggests that in their discussion the religious identity of 'Syrian' Christians cannot be separated from their secular/ethnic identities.

To recapitulate, Syrian Orthodox Christians consider 'Syrian' Christian identity from three different dimensions. First, the 'Syrians' are ancient Arameans and their descendants originated in the Fertile Crescent, i.e. the land of Arameans (e.g. Figure 11, a map entitled "The Aramean land; the homeland of the Syria[n]s" has compiled by Assad Sauma-Assad in 1991). This is a definition of their ethnicity. In this usage, the connection between the 'Syrians' and the territory of the ancient Arameans is unavoidable. Moreover, they often substitute Syria for the territory of ancient Arameans.

Second, 'Syrians' are Christians whose origin is in Greater Syria. This means that Arabs who used to be Christians and, later, converted to Islam are former 'Syrian' Christians. In this sense, 'Syrian' Christians and some local Arabs have a common origin. The strategy of the Syrian Orthodox Christians is to maintain that the original inhabitants of Syria were 'Syrians', who are ancestors of both indigenous Syrian Arabs and Syrian Orthodox Christians. Therefore, Syrian Orthodox Christians share their origin with other people whose ancestors were the original inhabitants of Syria. By claiming this, the Christians can prevent segregation by contemporary Arabs on ethnic grounds. They maintain that people who share a 'Syrian' origin are descendants of original inhabitants of Syria and those who do not share the 'Syrian' origin are people whose ancestors later immigrated to Syria. This strategy is useful in presenting them as a group who play a crucial role in integrating the inhabitants in Syria. Third, 'Syrian' denotes religious identity and the word is used in order to denote Christians, Muslims and Jews. Their identification of who are 'Syrian' Christians is complicated due to the various claims based on the grounds of their origin, ethnicity and religious identity. They are able to encompass descendants of ancient Arameans and ancient Christians as *original* inhabitants of Syria. By doing so, they construct a broader sense of Syrian national identity.

Syrian Orthodox Christians suggest the origin of people in Syria can be identical with those of Syrian Orthodox Christians. As they have maintained the cultural traditions of pre-Islamic Syria until to this day, they assume a crucial role of promoting a national identity based on the unity of ancient community of Syria. Their discussion is strongly effected by the government's propaganda concerning shared language and culture, whose relationship to religion plays an important part as a unifying force. Syrian Orthodox Christians present traditions which had been shared by people in Syria in contrast to the regime fostered identities: Syriac-Aramaic v.s. Arabic; Syrian-Aramean history v.s. Arab history; Christianity v.s. Islam. In the Syrian Orthodox Christians' attempt at presenting an alternative Syrian national identity, they integrate various groups in Syrian under the name of 'Syrians'. However, there is a problem. Do Syrian Orthodox Christians regard other Oriental and Orthodox Christians in Syria as descendants of original inhabitants of Syria? They claim that all these Christians are descendants of ancient Christians in Syria. However, all these Christians do not share Aramaic origin. People who are originally either Armenian or Greek Orthodox Christians do not think that they share the same ethnic origin with Syrian Orthodox Christians. In order to construct a shared identity with other Christians in Syria, a Byzantine Christian identity may be required consideration as the Middle Eastern Council of Churches promotes the unity of these Christians (Chapter 6). Syrianism presented by Syrian Orthodox Christians has the potential to cultivate Syrian identity/identities among different groups in Syria.

## Conclusion

In the government fostered identity of Syrian Arabs, Arab Islamic traditions and history play significant parts in imaging a classical community of *Bilad as-sham*, which used to be a territorial entity. These cultural markers hinder Syrian Orthodox Christians from constructing their identity within this framework. They require alternative discourses for anchoring their own group's history to that of Syria's, so as to place themselves in Pan-Syrian culture. Syrian Christians advocate their own version of Syrian national identity. They make two claims: 1.) that their liturgical language, i.e. Syriac-

Aramaic, is the direct descendant of the original unifying scripts of Syria and was the 'lingua franca' of Syria in the pre-Islamic period, and 2.) that Syrian-Arameans were in this region, i.e. *Bilad as-Sham*, before the Arabs, and that the sacred texts prove their political influence in the region as well as their descent and genetic origin. They claim that descendants of the original inhabitants in the region share the history and cultural traditions of Syrian-Arameans.

They maintain that the ancient Jews were themselves Arameans. If so, this makes them 'kin' to the Israelites and so could exclude them on political grounds from the mainstream of contemporary Arab nationalism. Therefore, Syrian Orthodox Christians have decided to cast themselves as 'enemies' of Jews, as defined by their ancient texts, and link up with Syria as their place of origin. This could, of course, cast Syria as being the 'enemy' of Jews since the ancient times. In this sense, Syrian Orthodox Christians side with Asad's regime in its alienation of the Jews. Syrian Orthodox Christians support the regime's anti-Israeli campaign by constructing a different discourse for unifying Syrians against Israel. It is possible to say that the national identity advocated by Syrian Orthodox Christians is based on secular Syrianism, even though they use the sacred texts for reference.

In order to maintain their version of Syrianism, Syrian Orthodox Christians have to prove that the culture of pre-Islamic Syria, i.e. that of ancient Syrian-Arameans, until to this day, constitutes part of contemporary Syrian culture. In order to prove it, many Syrian Orthodox Christians are interested in tracing the origin of words which are used in both written and spoken Arabic. They insist that Syriac words, idioms and names of places which are now retained in Arab culture are the proof that the local 'Syrians' had a great influence on the Arabs and contributed to the development of Syria. One example is *Dimashuq* (Damascus), in Arabic which is derived from *Dem Shoq*, in Syriac, 'drink blood'. The late Patriarch Mor Ignatius Yacoub III said that Syriac words and expressions are found in both literary and colloquial Arabic. He said that even famous Arab writers use Syriac words in their writing. Some Arabic idioms presented by Arab writers, who have a good command of Arabic, are grammatically incorrect, but are influenced by Syriac. This proves that these idioms have been used before the time when

Arabic was introduced into Syria (Yacoub III, 1980b: 55-6).

Although the political authorities, as well as moderate and intellectual Muslims, maintain that Syrian-Arab culture has developed its distinctive characteristics in the process of the local culture of Syria meeting up with the Arab-Islamic culture from the Gulf, Syrian Orthodox Christians do not accept such a view. The amalgamation of these two cultures means that Syrian-Aramean culture had an influence in the past, and its present existence and influence on present Syrian culture are ignored. These Christians maintain that the importance of present Syriac-Aramaic culture in Syrian society must be recognised, if a broader sense of Syrian national identity is accepted and, consequently, the political rights of Syrian Orthodox Christians are to be acknowledged.

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## Chapter 7. Notes

<sup>1</sup> At the early stage of their ethnic movements, Syrian Orthodox Christians regarded Syriac as a symbol of the historical continuity of their group and, therefore, an important marker for unifying them as an ethnic group. However, they had not at that time identified Syriac with Aramaic (Shahin, 1997[1911]: 1-4). In the current political context, it has become very important for Syrian Orthodox Christians to trace the threads between Syriac and ancient Aramaic, in order to trace their origin back to pre-Christian period.

<sup>2</sup> One cuneiform script was used to write more than one language, and a language was written in more than one script (Mitchell, 1988:13).

<sup>3</sup> Texts for the Old Testaments came into existence only in the fifth century B.C., the period of before and after the Jewish Exile (Grollenberg, 1988: 83).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Hebrew documents from Qumran were dated between the first centuries B.C. and A.D. contain two types, i.e. a formal hand stemming from the Aramaic in the Persian Empire of the fourth century B.C., and a series influenced by the Aramaic vulgar scripts of the third century B.C. (Cross, 1961: 135).

<sup>5</sup> The first reference to 'people of Aram', which appears in a Near Eastern text, is in one of the topographical lists on a statue base that form the funerary temple of Amenopolis III at Thebes (Pitard, 1987: 82).

<sup>6</sup> The name of the tribe, al-Akhlamū, appears in Assyrian documents. According to an Assyrian text, this tribal confederation occupied the territory near the Euphrates, i.e. northern part of Syria, in the fourteenth century B.C. and fought against Assyrians between 1325 and 1311 B.C. The al-Akhlamū had expanded their territory and reached the northern Tigris in the twelfth century B.C. which abutted on Assyria (Adamthwaite, 1996: 93, 94, 96).

<sup>8</sup> The state of the Damascus Arameans was called 'Aram' by its inhabitants (Pitard, 1987: 90). Other Aramean kingdoms in Syria, such as Hamah, which maintained a considerable strength in the west, Bet-Adini in Harran, Bet-Agusi near Aleppo and Bet-Bahiani in Tell Haraf became powerful (Sader, 1987: 287-289). The king of Damascus, Bir-Hadad I, was involved in a boundary war between Israel and Judah (1 Kings 15: 16-22; Chronicles 16: 1-6) and captured the trade routes to the Mediterranean coastal cities in the early ninth century B.C. King Hazael of Damascus (844/42-800 B.C.) captured most of Israel's territory in the east of Jordan at the beginning of the reign of Jehu (841-811 B.C.) (2 Kings 10: 32-33) and had continued his oppression into the reign of the Israelite King Joahaz (814-798 B.C.) (2 Kings 13: 3, 22) (Pitard, 1987: 107 109, 120).

## Conclusion

“Since 1948 almost 200,000 people from my church have been dispersed through the two Americas, Europe and Scandinavia. Regardless of their merits and qualifications, they have nearly all started their lives in their new countries as refugees. How can a small community scattered in this way maintain its own character, spirituality, tradition, heritage and language, and also hope to extend its long history? It is a tragedy not only for my church but also for other churches that have lost members of their congregations in the same way.” (Mor Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, Archbishop of Aleppo, 2001: 8)

Christian *millets* (communities) or *ṭawā'ifa*, in the Ottoman period were theoretically protected by the Empire provided they agreed to submit politically. The implementation of Ottoman Islamic practices was subject to the vagaries of officialdom at a local level. Syrian Orthodox Christians, who emigrated from Ṭur 'Abdīn and Āzakh, recall that they had maintained relatively independent status during their time in Turkey. For example, at times there were alliances between Syrian Orthodox Christians and Kurds and at others hostilities arose. Christian raided Kurds and Kurds raided Christians. The separation of Christians from Muslims was institutionalised, in the form that Christians had contractual relationships with powerful Muslim leaders, who were also agents of the government. Christians in the Ottoman Empire were forced to display signs of their subordinate position and had various social restrictions placed on them. When oppression accelerated some Christians converted to Islam (Cragg, 1992: 20-1). However, the Ottoman political system did not exclude Christians from the Empire.

An important change occurred after the 1915 Christian massacre, in that Christians were deprived of the right to co-exist with their Muslim neighbours. The reason behind this change in status could be traced to the enmity built up since the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the Ottoman Empire began to decline and, ultimately, the Christians living there had achieved protégé status under the protection of the European powers. As European protection was intensified, it gave the Christians hopes of modifying their subordinated status. However, as I have discussed in Chapter 6, this foreign protection invited Christian suppression in Aleppo by the Islamic government and, consequently, the decline of the Christian community due to defection and emigration. In eastern provinces, as European pressures and pretensions intensified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, local Muslims viewed with suspicion the Syrian Orthodox Christians, who were enjoying foreign protection.

Apart from physical pressures, in the process of modernisation the introduction of the idea of nationalism changed the foundations of traditional Ottoman society. Modern education, whose model was imported from Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and which was different from the traditional Islamic one, contributed to generating a young elite who became capable of introducing new forms of political expression during the reformatory years of the Empire (Erlich, 2000: 48-9). New education was geared towards shaping the ideal of nationalism and generated young people who were able to participate in activities for challenging the political establishment. The introduction of the idea that a nation is composed of people who share culture generated a view that Christians who are unable to share Islamic culture are not the subjects of the Empire. Thus, Christians in the Empire, including Syrian Orthodox Christians, were excluded from the formation of the new state. Conflicts between Syrian Orthodox Christians and their Muslim neighbours, i.e. Turks and Kurds, were exacerbated. It is the upheaval brought about by the spirit of nationalism that destroyed the traditional tolerance between the different religious groups on Turkish land. This culminated in the 1915 Christian massacre.

Since the collapse of the traditional Islamic political system and the rise of nationalism, cultural pluralism became difficult to sustain. Therefore, even after the enforced emigration to Syria, Syrian Orthodox Christians have been anxious about emergence of a strong force for Arab nationalism, whose assumption is that Syrian Arab nationality is defined in terms of shared Arab Islamic culture in a given territory, i.e. 'Greater Syria'. Syrian Orthodox Christians needed to be accepted as a group, whose rights were acknowledged, in virtue of the cultural attributes which they claimed to share with other Syrian citizens.

When referring to Renan's discussion on 'social memory', Gellner (1987) stresses that the concept of shared 'culture' covers obscure internal differences of a nation and reveres its ethnic homogeneity. Current nationalism in the Middle East shows distinctive characteristics of shared 'culture', which cannot be seen in the model of Western Europe. As Islam constitutes an important aspect of the culture of the Middle

East, the history of the Islamic movement and that of modern Arab nationalism can hardly be separated from each other. Eickelman (1976) and Gilsenan (1990: 192-214) discussed the problem that economic and political changes deprived the local 'middlemen' (who had been prominent in pre-national mode of the communities), from their roles as a mediators between men and God, of both spiritual power and authority. Consequently, a heavy stress on transcendent scripturalism becomes one of the characteristics of current nationalist and Islamic movements. For example, Asad, like Nasser in Egypt, who subordinated Islamic institutions and practices in his attempts to prove that he was running a secular bureaucratic state, nevertheless used Islam and Quranic verses as a resource for official legitimisation of his leadership and promotion of Syrian Arab nationalism (cf. Zubaida, 1989: 154). Intellectual inheritance of Arabic and Islamic knowledge is important for becoming a political leader in the Middle East and for political authenticity to be acknowledged. The authenticity of family cliques, or hereditary dynasts, such as those of Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Jordan, is safeguarded, genealogically, in terms of their relationship to the Prophet Muhammad and by genealogical succession of social and Islamic knowledge by means of lineal face-to-face transmission (Shryock, 1997). Noble genealogy, Prophetic authenticity and transcendent scripturalism are important cultural elements shared by people in a nation and promote their integrity and the idea of ethnic homogeneity of the nation, which conceals internal differences existing in the nation. They are adopted not only by politicians, but also by local tribes - for example, Shryock's study of Jordanian Bedouins (1995) - for constructing their identity in the context of a national identity.

Syrian Orthodox Christians use these concepts to prove that they share culture with other populations in Syria. Similar to political leaders and ordinary Muslim population, Syrian Orthodox Christians emphasise their political authenticity in the context of modern nationalism. The Christians refer to holy texts and books of their ancient Fathers (for example, the Chronicle written by a 12<sup>th</sup> century cleric, Michael the Syrian). Syrian Orthodox Christians maintain that their language has been shared with other inhabitants of Syria and their genealogical link to Aram and Sham, who is the ancestor of all the Semitic tribes, indicates their shared origin with local Arabs. They try to maintain threads between their oral tradition and ancient texts and conceal/forget their

recent past in Turkey which may become an obstacle when claiming their Semitic tribal origin in Syria.

In order to claim Syria as their homeland, Syrian Orthodox Christians refer to the fact that there had been no political or cultural boundaries between their former homeland in Turkey and the area in Syria where they settled after the 1915 massacre. In fact, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, population movement from the eastern provinces of Turkey to the Syrian Jazirah had started. Syrian Orthodox Christians, who constructed villages on the present Syrian side, were not separated from their home community on the present Turkish side. Syrian Orthodox Christians in Turkey also emigrated to Aleppo and established regular contact with those in Aleppo in order to seek opportunities for their textile business. Although the border between Syria and Turkey was settled in 1924, both material and human resources had easily crossed over the border until the 1950s. Syrian Orthodox Christians in the Jazirah still believe that the political boundary is unable to separate Syrian Orthodox Christian villagers on the Turkish side from those in Syria. For example, information and opportunities for emigrating to Europe in the 1980s were brought to the Christians in Syria by those in Turkey. Syrian Orthodox Christians even believe that due to political tension between Syrian and Turkey and skirmishes between them, the actual border has changed its position, slightly, several times. So for Syrian Orthodox Christians, the cultural boundary and the political one have not been finally settled. The present political boundary prevents them, they believe, from being both culturally and politically congruent. They maintain that their forebears were residents of 'Greater Syria', which has had a cultural homogeneity with Syriac and Aramaic culture, and so now they believe that they have the right to reside in Syria, which is part of 'Greater Syria'.

In 2000, the Syrian Orthodox Church authorities stated officially that the English translation of *Suriyān*, i.e. "Syrian", which indicates the Church and its community, must be replaced by "Syriac". The reason is that the term "Syrian" means not only "Syrian" Christians, but also people who live in geographical Syria, whereas the term "Syriac" is applicable only to the Church and its people who use Syriac as their liturgical language. This statement contradicts with their previous one that Syriac is the language

of “Syrian” Christians, but does not indicate the people or their Church. The official view suggests that there are changes in the means for emphasising their Syriac tradition and the endurance of their community. They did not want to be identified as a religious group and so risk religious persecution, but wish to be seen as one of the ethnic group in Syria.

The three communities, which have been discussed here, bear some formal resemblance. They talk about the historical continuity of their community across time, even though individuals claim little memory of their medium-term past, i.e. their past in Turkey. At the same time, they claim links that go back some thousands of years by tracing the origin of their liturgical language, Syriac. However, Syriac had literally and orally a very restricted circulation in the past and there were changes, also, in their every-day languages due to their changes in domicile and attitude to neighbours. Table 3 summarises the changes of common languages in the three communities. The transformation of spoken languages is one of the examples of how they have concealed their past in Turkey, in which they shared languages and traditions with their Muslim neighbours. Their spoken languages such as Kurdish, Țoroyo (a Syriac dialect) and Armenian, were not written languages for the Christians. The Mālkiya Christians originally spoke Kurdish. Now they speak Arabic although the older generation appear to understand Kurdish. The Qaḥṭāniya Christians used to speak both Țoroyo and Kurdish. Now some older women, who did not receive formal education and had few opportunities to have contact with people other than the Christians, speak only Țoroyo and others speak both Țoroyo and Arabic. Kurdish is forgotten by them. Țoroyo is a dialect of Syriac, but it is not regarded as authentic Syriac owing to its adoption of Turkish, Kurdish and Arabic words. The Urfallis in Aleppo originally spoke Turkish and Armenian. Now they speak Arabic and most understand Armenian although the young appear not to use it.

Furthermore, the gradual shift from restricted literacy in Turkish, which was the Turkey’s official language and understood to a limited extent by the older generation, to a growing literacy in Arabic among the young have moved the different generations apart in formal educational skills. The few individuals who had some restricted literacy

in Turkish did not compile any records in that language, because the young were unable to read Turkish. For example, some Urfalli elders have meetings to read the Turkish version of the Bible written in Armenian alphabets. However, they compose an isolated group, as this language skill was not transmitted to the younger generations. Due to the changes in both spoken and literary languages, these languages are unable to become a means for proving their communities' historical continuity. Therefore, they require Syriac, which is the liturgical language of Syrian Christians and whose origin they attempt to trace back to ancient Syria, as the ideological foundation onto which they can peg their claim to be "Syriac" Christians and as the descendants of 'original' inhabitants of Syria. They learn the Syriac language and Syriac hymns assiduously, as they believe them to have been traditional for generations, yet their knowledge of what is an ecclesiastical, literary and classical language appears relatively rudimentary.

**Table 3. Changes of Common Languages in Syrian Orthodox Christian Communities**

| Community/<br>Characteristics             | Urfalli<br>(Aleppo)  | Qaḥṭāniya<br>(Jazirah)              | Mālkiya<br>(Jazirah) |
|-------------------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Origin<br>(in Turkey)                     | Urfa                 | Ṭur 'Abdin                          | Āzakh                |
| Common<br>Language<br>(before emigration) | Armenian/<br>Turkish | Ṭoroyo (Syriac<br>dialect)/ Kurdish | Kurdish              |
| Common<br>Language<br>(present)           | Arabic/<br>Armenian  | Ṭoroyo (Syriac<br>dialect)/ Arabic  | Arabic               |

Many Syrian Orthodox Christian peasants left their villages and emigrated to towns. Many Christians now become urban inhabitants and try to establish a new identity as urban professionals, which appears to be achieved not only by professional skills obtained through education, but also by abandoning their traditions. The social

differences created in the community due to attitudes towards people in professional and non-professional occupations divide the community. I have discussed how Urfallis in Aleppo and Qaḥṭāniya Christians make light of their traditional marriage customs and attempt to adopt wedding ceremonies similar to those of urban professionals in order to merge themselves with the urban population. Moreover, they started to allow marriages between close relatives, even first cousin marriages, which used to be regarded as taboo. Marriage of close relatives reduces the size of their social networks and makes them vulnerable to outside pressures.

Political alignments with opposition forces, which tried to slip from governmental control, have done serious damage to Syrian Orthodox Christian communities. Their historical experiences are kept alive through memories and are sustained through this current uncertainty. Contemporary Christians believe that the government's arrests of Syrian Christian intellectuals in 1980 was in retaliation on the dissidents who supported an ethno-separatist ideology. Their aim was to establish an autonomous territory for Syrian Christians by tracing origins back to the ancient Assyrian Empire. This contemporary understanding seems to be different from the anti-government movements of the 1980s. Then, professionals protested against the economic controls by the government (Perthes, 1994: 54). However, contemporary Christians reinterpret this incident in relation to the present situation where many of their professionals and intellectuals currently support an ethno-separatist ideology. This alarms other Syrian Orthodox Christians who fear that continuous investigations of the ethno-separatist movements by the regime's Secret Services might spill over and identify *all* Christians as rebels, meriting swift and brutal repression under the guise of religious persecution. Memories of massive state repression thus tend to increase their present anxiety. This anxiety has precipitated large scale emigration, referred to in Archbishop Ibrahim's statement at the Woodbroke-Mingana Symposium on Arab Christians and Islam in Birmingham: "Since 1948 almost 200,000 people from my church have been dispersed through the two Americas, Europe and Scandinavia" (Ibrahim, 2001: 8).

Therefore, the Christians have turned increasingly to a manufactured past so as to create a 'safe' ethnic identity. The change in the terminology instigated by the Church authorities, which addresses their group as "Syriac", is one such attempt. Syriac/Syrian Christians appear to have done four things. First, they have erased memories which reveal their refugee origins and their close relationship with their Muslim neighbours. Second, they have elaborated a whole recent (oral) past which emphasises unity and continuity in faith, which is contested by other evidence (literary and oral). Third, they have developed a whole new formal history for themselves based upon the supposed transmission of heritage, tradition, and language, as those of the *original* inhabitants of Syria. Fourth, they have developed their own version of Syrian national identity which embraces the various ethnic/religious groups in Syria.

Each Syrian Orthodox Christian community tries to present evidence to prove the apparent continuity of their community in the place where they now live in Syria, in spite of their refugee origins. The Christians in Qaḥṭānīya are attempting to prove the continuity of the Orthodox faith in the locality. Memories of their rapport with local miracle producing saints who demanded that Christians restore the old village churches, make it possible for them to claim that their local saints support their right to maintain their land and community in the area. This movement, as well as educational efforts to spread Syriac language and Syriac hymns, is symbolic of the community's continuity and demonstrates to Christians and outsiders that their community has endured in this land which has been their territory at least for hundreds of years.

The Mālkiya Christians maintain that they are the descendants of the survivors of the 1915 Turkish siege. This identity, however, defines them as refugees from Turkey. So the Christians in al-Mālkiya need to claim that their ancestors used to live in this area in order to insist that they are the descendants of 'original' inhabitants in this region. They recount that the Virgin enabled them to find a ruined fourth century church in al-Mālkiya and her miracle of oil springing out of the church ground was acknowledged by the state. Memories of these incidences gave credence to the Christians' land claims.

Urfallis, however, try to establish their rights to residence in a different way. While they regard themselves as Aleppienes (inhabitants of Aleppo), and wish to conceal their origin as refugees from Turkey, they identify themselves as the descendants of people in the ancient Christian kingdom in Edessa (present Urfa), where Aramaic was spoken. This affirms to them that the ancestors of present Urfallis had resided in geographically Greater Syria. However, this does not support the present-day Urfallis' right to be Aleppienes. They did find archaeological evidence that Aleppo was the land of ancient Syrian Christians. By constructing their past in such a way, they try to affirm the persistent existence of their community in the area and their right to remain in Aleppo.

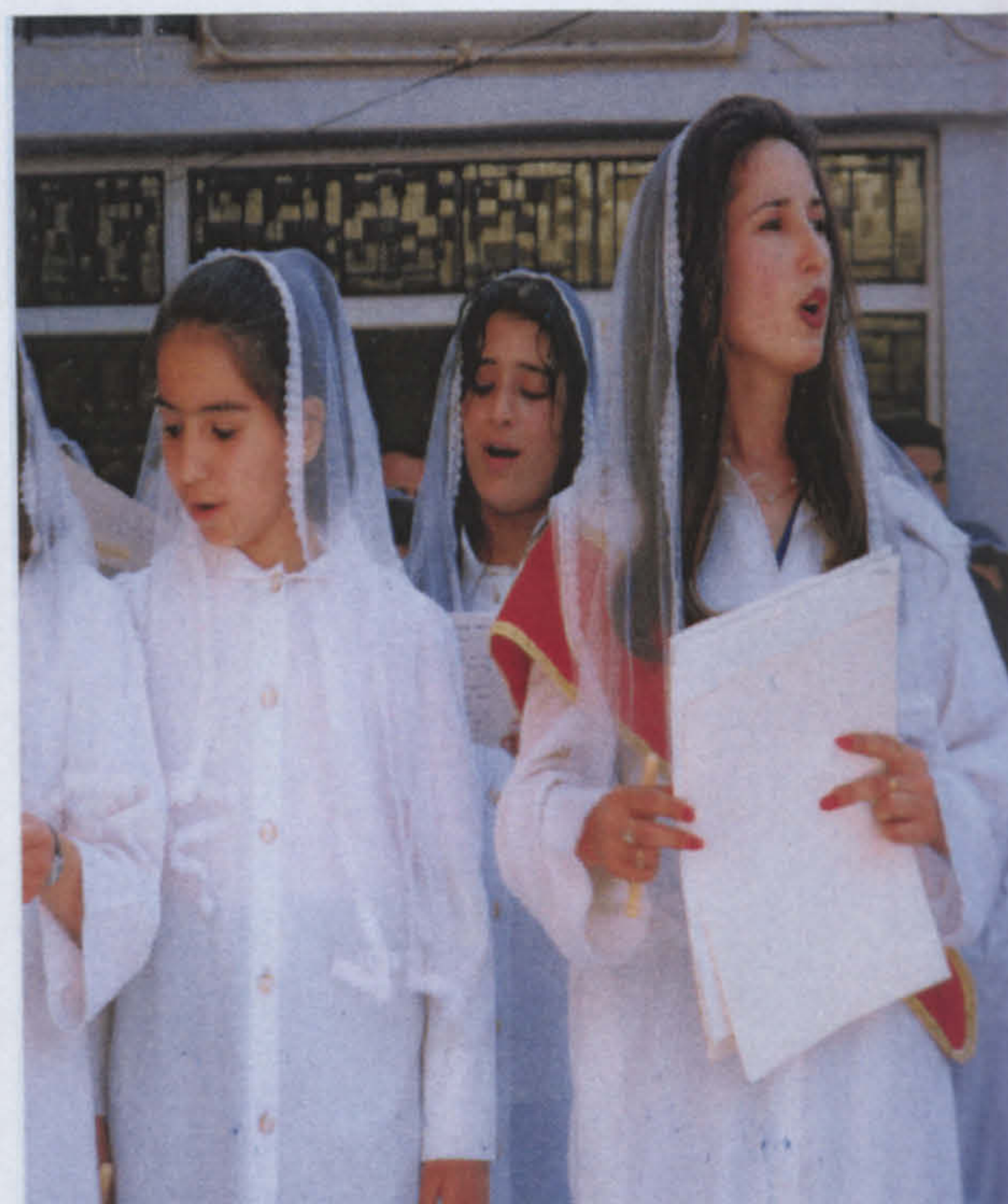
This thesis has been an investigation of ethnogenesis of a very specific kind: To show how a group has concealed its own short-term history through a type of amnesia whilst 'recollecting' long term pasts. It is a classic case of 'the invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Inevitably certain formal cultural differences between the Syrian Christians and their Muslim neighbours tend to be emphasised, whilst in reality the cultural *practices* appear to be similar and even becoming more similar (e.g. close kin marriages). The problem the Syrian Christians experience is that whilst in practice their everyday local culture is not that dissimilar to their Muslim neighbours, their religion sets them apart. They inevitably turn to 'history' and tradition in the mists of time to minimise the differences that religion imposes. 'Tradition', 'heritage' and 'descent' may be the last strategy of the weak and marginalized.



A parade of celebrating a victory of the October War over Israel



A baptised baby and her godmother



The Qaḥṭānīya Choir

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