
Dan Lundberg

Welcome to Assyria – your land on the Cyber Space

Music and the Internet in the establishment of a transnational Assyrian identity¹

Music — Media — Multiculture. Today and tomorrow is an interdisciplinary research project that examines music and dance as organisatory factors in multicultural Sweden.

In contemporary society, music has a key role as an indicator on, as well as means of change. By studying music many trends and patterns of change in society at large can be detected at an early stage. This concerns the increased diversification at the local level as well as the opposite trend towards an increased homogenisation at the global level. The project focuses on cultural meetings, trans-cultural processes and the role played by the increasing mediaization of music — not least in the maintenance of ethnical and other networks.

We can via a number of concrete case studies learn how certain ethnic and other groups in a multicultural society via expressive forms of culture such as music and dance *create, maintain* and not least *transmit* and *emphasise* their cultural identity. But case studies also allow us access to the processes by which music and dance develop and change.

In this article one of the case studies of the MMM-project will be discussed: the Assyrian ethnic group in Sweden.

The Assyrians

History books tell us that the Assyrian Empire existed between ca. 2000 B.C. and 612 B.C. This means that Assyria ceased to exist almost 2,700 years ago. Assyria was one of the most powerful empires of that period, with a nucleus, which stretched from the Nile in the west to the region between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea in the east.

¹ This article is based upon one of the case studies of the research project Music — Media — Multiculture (MMM) at the Royal Swedish Academy of Music in Stockholm.

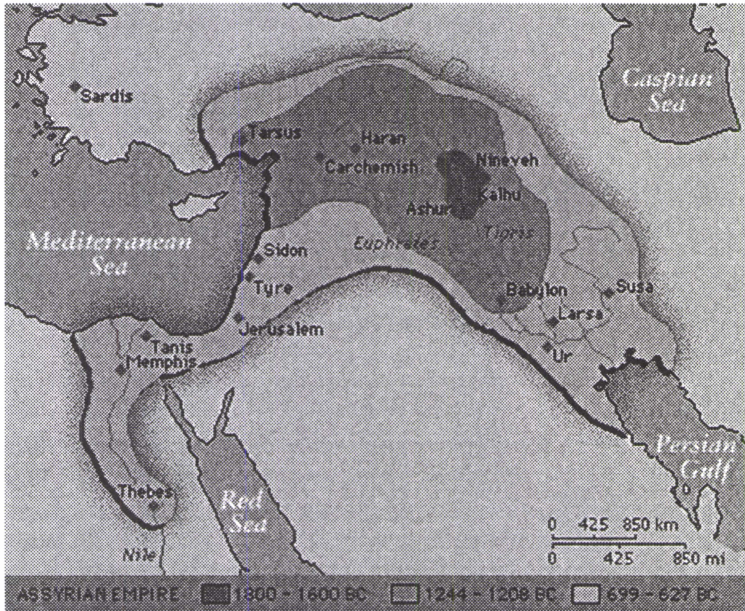


Figure 1. Historic map of the Assyrian Empire (Source: Assyrian Picture Archive).

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

Today some Assyrians want to use an alternative calendar, which starts from the foundation of the first Assyrian Empire. At the time of writing, the present year (1998) is therefore the year 6748. New Year's Day falls on the 1st April and is celebrated by Assyrians all over the world.

Originating in the town Assur (Ashur, with East Assyrian spelling, on the map above) on the Tigris in what is now Iraq, the Assyrian high culture gradually expanded with highly developed commerce, architecture and literature. The Assyrians used cuneiform script, inscribed on clay slates and other durable material, which is why we have so many written sources documenting commerce in ancient Assyrian times (2000-1750 B.C.). In the Assyrian Empire dialects from the Akkadian language groups were spoken. The written languages were Babylonian and Sumerian.

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

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

However, in the 1900s — and above all during the last twenty years — a new Assyria has come into being; not as a geographically defined nation (never before have the Assyrians been scattered all over the world to such an extent as they are now), but

as a virtual reality — a Cyber land — a community which exists through societies and networks throughout the world.

Assyrians/Syrians in Sweden

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

The first Assyrians/Syrians to arrive in Sweden were part of a group of ca. 200 Christians from Lebanon who were allowed into the country as the result of a request from the World Council of Churches and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. The group was gradually spread out over about fifty places in Sweden. However, Södertälje (20 miles south of Stockholm) soon became a kind of centre for the Assyrian/Syrian immigrants. Between 1972 and 1976 four more groups of refugees from Lebanon were admitted. A certain number of family reunions were also permitted during this period. In 1970 the first Syrian Orthodox congregation was formed in Södertälje.

Between 1974 and 1978 the migration of Christians from Turkey increased enormously. One reason for this was the conflict in Cyprus, which raised the level of tension between Muslims and Christians in Turkey. The increased immigration into Sweden was also due to the fact that West Germany had stopped immigration from the Middle East and Turkey and had also sent guest workers back to their homelands. Many Assyrian/Syrians then chose to apply to come to Sweden from Germany. In 1978 it was estimated that there were ca. 7,000 Assyrians living in Sweden. During the 1980s and early 1990s Assyrians/Syrians from Syria and Lebanon dominated immigration. In the Swedish Immigration Board's statistics these Christian immigrants who mainly come from Lebanon are classed as stateless citizens. During the years 1989 to 1990 this group numbered nearly 5,000 people.

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

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

The homeland

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

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

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

The aim of this article is to give an example of how a group of people, with music as an essential tool, can establish and maintain a cultural community across national boundaries with the help of present-day technological means of communication.

The Assyrian immigrant group in Sweden is particularly interesting in several respects.

- For Assyrians there is no "homeland" to return to. The dream of the old *Beth Nahrain*, or Mesopotamia, seems like a utopia to most of them. They realise that life in the diaspora is not of a temporary nature and that they will probably continue to live there for several generations. From this follows that much of their cultural activities has to be "networked" in one way or another.
- Assyrian national music has actually developed quite recently. Profane music was forbidden or condemned by the Syrian Orthodox Church, and only since the 30's has there been a production of what the Assyrians themselves call "national music".
- Sweden has become one of the most important centres for the development of this music.

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

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

"we" — a sense of community built on an ethnic and cultural foundation?

Assyria – a virtual community

As I started to make interviews and recordings with Assyrians in Sweden, I soon found out that many of the younger Assyrians referred to the Internet as a source or media for their national cultural expressions such as music, art, literature etc.

I looked up some of the recommended web-sites and the result was absolutely amazing. After half an hour in front of my computer I realised that it was possible to find almost anything imaginable in connection with Assyrian culture on these home pages: chat-sites, cook-books, historical research, language courses, libraries, music samples, football teams, music stores, book stores, magazines, picture archives and even radio- and TV-stations, transmitted live on the Internet.



Your Land on the Cyber Space

Figure 2. Welcome to Assyria "Your land on the Cyber Space" is the red, high-lighted message on Nineveh On-line's home page (June 5, 1997).

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

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

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

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

In the article *To take place: pedagogics of space and movement* the Swedish ethnologist Orvar Löfgren (1995) presents an ironic picture of how post-modern man is portrayed in sociological literature as ever-moving, place-disconnected, media-addicted etc. But the Assyrian virtual reality should not be described in terms of "homelessness" and "transitoriness". Maybe the 1990s' Swedish zappers and surfers can be seen as homeless nomads in a timeless and spaceless media world, trying to escape from life's reality. But what the Assyrians are doing is just the opposite: in an unstable existence in exile round the world, Internet web sites and home pages can truly be seen as a kind of virtual *home* – fixed points where common values and common culture can be established and shared with others.

What is the size of this World then? Using Alta Vista to search the World Wide Web on the 20th August 1998, the search term "Assyrians" generated 6087 hits on the net while "Assyria" generated 9021. "Nineveh" generated 5692 hits. The Swedish spelling "Assyrien" generated 443 hits, mostly on Swedish and German web sites.

So, it seems as though Assyria really exists in some way. Assyrians throughout the

World are using the new possibilities of the "net" to create the different kinds of data bases and connections needed to constitute and mark out a community.

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

In a global perspective it is easy to see that most nation-states seems to be cast in the same mould. The first step is to create uniformity in language, customs, ways of life – the kind of phenomena that are normally referred to as culture in the anthropological sense of the word. But aside from culture in itself, it is also important to create mutual tools for achieving this uniformity; the political ambitions and endeavours to fulfil the goal of a uniform culture. For this purpose every nation needs its own mass media, institutions for historic and linguistic research, culture industry and not the least – their own music.

A result of the Assyrians not living in a nation of their own is that they lack this type of cultural tools. Therefore international networks like Internet are of immense importance to them. On the "net" it is possible to create accessible "national" information stacks. Great efforts are made, both by idealists and professionals, to write articles and link pages, publish music, literature and picture archives. What becomes obvious when studying how this is actually carried out on the Internet is that at almost all levels of this nation construct, music seems to play an important role.

Who are the Assyrians then?

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

— Are you all Christians, I asked.

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

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

A quick inquiry showed that the people round the table represented four different Christian churches: the Evangelical Lutheran Church (myself), the Church of the East (Nestorians), the Chaldean Catholic Church and the Syrian Orthodox Church (Jacobites). Within the group that call themselves Assyrians we also find people belonging to several other Christian churches, although none of these was represented at our table in Södertälje.

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

Sweden, who instead claims a religious identity, as Syrian Orthodox Christians.

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

IDENTITY

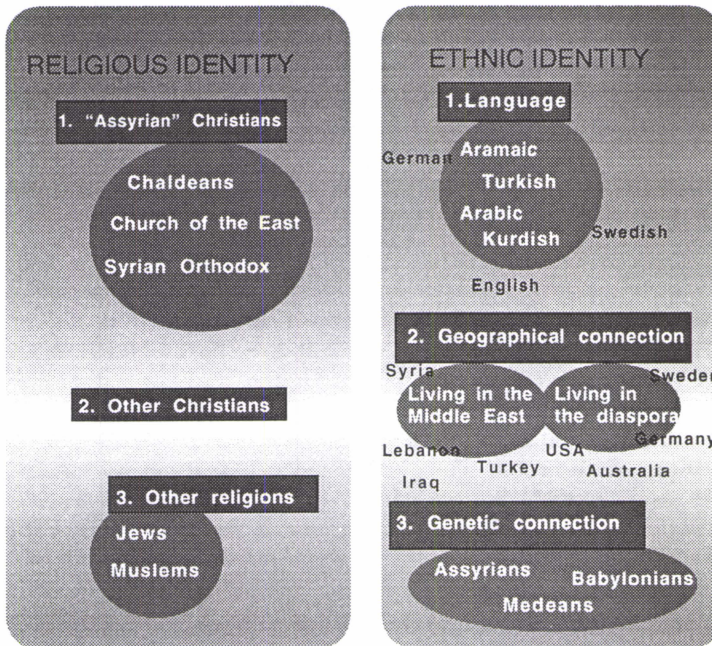


Figure 3. Religious or ethnic aspects on Assyrian identity.

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

Language

The East Assyrian and West Assyrian languages are very different from each other. It is possible to compare with the difference between French and Italian. The written

language *suryoyo* or *ktobnoyo* (the "book language") that was common for both West and East Assyrians has until recently been used only in the religious context.

During the two and a half thousand years that have passed since the fall of the Assyrian kingdom, many of the Aramaic speakers have abandoned their own language and taken over the languages of the dominating groups in their area. The most important languages are Kurdish, Turkish and Arabic. Many of the older Assyrians in Sweden speak very poor Aramaic, often Turkish is their mother tongue. The complex situation is well mirrored by the fact that every issue of the Swedish/Assyrian magazine Hujâdâ is published in five languages: Suryoyo, Swedish, Turkish, Arabic and English.

The numerous language courses that are available on the Internet with titles like "Teach Yourself Assyrian" or "Learn Assyrian On-line" are obviously efforts to overcome these problems.

Another way to strengthen the language is the production of language-songs for children, for instance Juliana Jendo's *Alap Beth*, an "alphabet-song" on the pattern "A" for Assyria, "B" for Beth Nahrain etc.

Like other expressive forms of Assyrian culture, language courses and language songs are available on the "net", together with food, cookbooks, literature, magazines, songs, pictures and radio and TV etc.

A glance at the face of one of the apartment buildings in one of Stockholm's southern suburbs confirms the need for TV programs in home languages. On each and every balcony parapet there are huge parabolic dishes directed towards the sky. Via satellite receivers it is possible for Turks, Arab, Latin Americans etc., in Sweden and elsewhere, to watch the same TV programs as their fellow countrymen in the home lands – at the same time.

There are Assyrian TV-channels in the USA, but not in Europe. A minor exception (two hours a week) is the Assyrian transmissions on the Kurdish satellite channel MED-TV based in Germany, which started 1997. Swedish Assyrians have pointed out that this lack of Assyrian TV is a threat to Assyrian culture. Assyrian youngsters watch Arabic and Turkish TV and listen to Turkish and Arabic music. This could lead to a standstill in the development of Assyrian music.

But as mentioned before, there are some American/Assyrian TV companies that broadcast their programs on the "net". For instance "Assyria Vision KBSV-TV23" and Nineveh On-Line's "Beth Nahrain Vision".

A musical rebel

The fact that music has a central position in people's cultural identity is not new. Only in Sweden, several studies of dance and music in minority groups have been carried out in recent years. It seems that music has a special potential as a tool for creating and reinforcing ethnic identities (cf. Ronström 1992, Hammarlund 1993, Lundberg 1994).

Still, the Assyrian case is of special interest. What distinguishes the Assyrians from many other groups is that the larger part of their "national" music is produced in the diaspora.

The Syrian Orthodox Church has, since the church father St. Afrem in the second century, considered music as sinful. The church condemned music-making in other contexts than the church ceremonies.

In August 1997 the musician and composer Gabriel Assad died. Gabriel was born 1908 in Midyat in Tur'abdin, in the south east of what today is Turkey. Among the

about three and a half million Assyrians living in the diaspora all over the World; Sweden, Germany, USA, Australia and of course in the countries in the north part of the Middle East (Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq), Gabriel Assad was held to be a national hero, a musical political rebel.

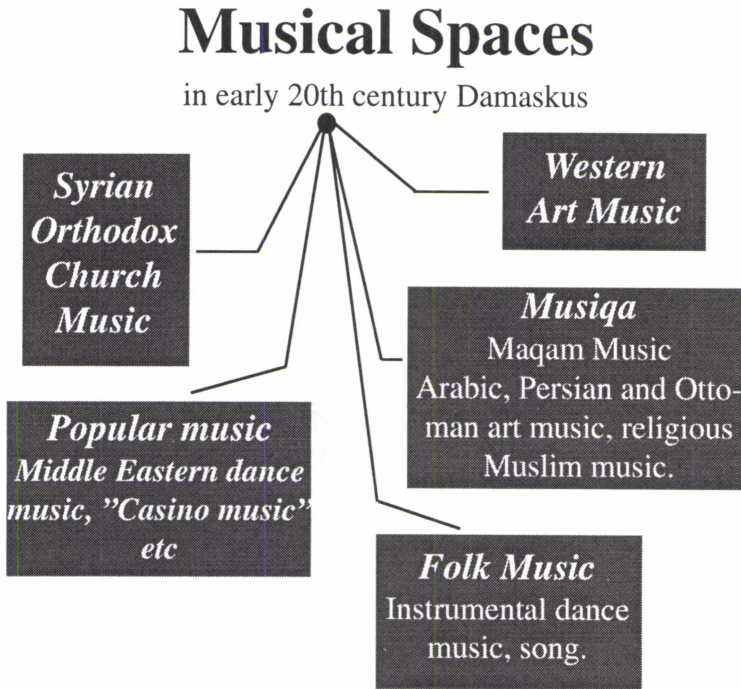


Figure 4. Musical spaces in early 20th century Damaskus.

During the disturbances and massacres on Christians in the Ottoman Empire throughout the First World War, the Assad family fled across the Syrian border to Damascus. In Damascus Gabriel's father earned his living as a merchant. Young Gabriel, however, had other plans for his future life. His dream was to become a musician. But this kind of work was not at all considered appropriate for a young Syrian Orthodox Christian at this time.

The Christian minority in Syria has a very rich tradition of church music rooted in the very first Christian churches of the second century. Beside the church music there was of course folk music, which they shared with other peoples in the area: Kurds, Arabs and Turks. One could also find Turkish/Arabic popular music "Casino music" in Damascus, as well as in other large cities in the Middle East. Among the upper classes in the urban surroundings, Arabic, Ottoman and Persian art music were parts of the musical life.

For the Christians of Tur'abdin in the Ottoman empire, Syria, which was under French mandate, was regarded a political "free-zone". And the French were looked upon as liberators. It is reasonable to assume that this is mirrored in Gabriel Assad's choice of musical education. Western music had high standing and represented political forces that were not considered hostile by the Christians.

Gabriel Assad succeeded in his mission to make music available to Assyrians

outside of the church. In the struggle for liberty, patriots like Gabriel Assad and the poets Naum Faik and Juhanon Salman, considered music and poetry as important means to unite people. Today when the nationalistic endeavour has been taken over by new generations of Assyrians, the old songs and poems have been given new symbolic content. The literal meanings still allude to the sufferings of the people or their glorious past, but as a phenomenon they also symbolise the early struggle for a nation.

In the song *Forah tho with "I was a pinioned bird"* (lyrics by Fawlos Gabriel and music by Gabriel Assad), an orphan boy, symbolising the Assyrian people, describes how he was saved from his helplessness (cf. Hammarlund 1990):

I was a bird who lost my feathers
I jumped on the ground with my wings clipped
But wonderful bread I found
And a water-spring to drink from

Today, the musical heritage of Gabriel Assad is carried on by a small number of musicians/composers in different parts of the world. Among the most well known in the West-Assyrian community are Nouri Iskander in Aleppo and two "Swedish" Assyrians – Joseph Malki and Habib Mousa. Their consciousness of the importance of music in the maintenance and construction of an Assyrian identity is obvious.

"If this would have been possible without music!!?? No way! No way! Only God knows what would have happened, I swear. I have been living here since 1970 and I know. Through the music I know almost all the families here, and I know...." (M.DL970303).

That was the answer from the Assyrian musician and composer Joseph Malki when he was asked if it would have been possible to organise the Assyrians in Sweden without using music as an attraction at the meetings. Music is the centre around which much of the activities in the Assyrian society evolve.

The idea of an Assyrian nation is not new. But it has become a more realistic goal in the last years. Internet means new possibilities for transnational communities but at the same time it locks out those that do not have access to relevant equipment and competence. A consequence of this limitation in accessibility is that the virtual Assyria has become a concern of academics and the wealthy, educated middle class Assyrians in Western Europe and the USA. There is certainly a paradox embodied in the fact that the Assyrian inhabitants of the Middle East, who in many respects are to be seen as the hart of the national idea, are not able to take an active part in the new national processes because of their lack of technical and economical resources. As the Assyrians in the Diaspora are uniting – tuning their musics together – they are at the same time creating a gap between themselves and the culture that they are trying to recreate.

Expressive specialists

The situation for the expressive specialists has changed a lot over the thirty years that the Assyrian minority has been living in Sweden. The changes does not only concern music in it self, but also it's meanings and aspirations. We can actually follow the work of three generations of Assyrian musicians here in Sweden.

Gabriel Assad had genuine and outspoken political aims with his music – to make music available to ordinary Assyrians outside of the church. Through music he wanted

to create an Assyrian spirit of community. Habib Mousa and Joseph Malki, both born in Syria in the 40's, migrated to Sweden in the 70's where they carried on Assad's work using music to bring Assyrians together in organisations. Today the situation is different. One of the most popular Assyrian "pop groups", both in- and outside the Assyrian community in Sweden, is *Qenneshrin* (The Eagle's Nest). The members of the band are young (between 19 and 23) and mostly second generation immigrants. For Qenneshrin music is much more a natural means of expression, not something that you have to struggle for. The political meaning of music-making is not as apparent for Qenneshrin as for musicians in the older generations. Assad could not allow himself to use Arabic or Turkish elements in his music. Instead he moved towards Western art music. Malki on the other hand often uses characteristics of Arabic/Turkish popular music, but argues that this is fully motivated by the "fact" that all Middle Eastern music traditions have their roots in Syrian Church music. For Qenneshrin music seems to be much less complicated. They borrow freely from different sources and have no problem with adopting influences from other Assyrian bands in the USA and Australia as well as from Turkish and Arabic music.

–What is Assyrian music, I asked one of the band members.

–Well that's when we sing in Assyrian I suppose. The music is always a mix, was the frank answer.

Qenneshrin do not have to motivate any Assyrian origin in what they play or sing – at least not to themselves. But of course the strong Arabic influence is a problem to the older generations that had to fight for their right to a music of their own.

Still, if one compares Qenneshrin with other young Swedish music groups, there is an important difference. A heavy burden of expectations rests on their shoulders. When the father of Nabu, one of Qenneshrin's two keyboard players, was asked what he would do if his son came home one day and said he was going to stop playing Assyrian music and start to play hard rock instead, he answered with a single word: Catastrophe! But the risk that "The Eagle's Nest" should become hard rockers is non-existent. A far greater problem, which is often discussed in Assyrian musical contexts, is the influence from Turkish and Arabic music which poses a constant threat. Arabic and Turkish pop music is spread to Assyrian youngsters in Sweden through satellite TV channels and other media, and this is reflected in the repertoire of the youth bands.

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

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

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

NP: And Kurdish too, sometimes.

ED: Yes, sometimes Kurdish, in fact ...

GM: But we prefer not to play Kurdish music.

DL: Why's that?

ED: It's to do with history. (Interview with three members of Qenneshrin: Emanuel Demir [ED], Gabriel Masso [GM] and Nabu Poli [NP], 26th February, 1997).

The reason why they are not keen on playing Kurdish music is because of the political conflicts which still exist among the Christian minorities and the Kurdish Muslims,

particularly in South East Turkey. But since many Assyrians lived in Kurdish villages where Kurdish music and language dominated the folklore, there is still a need for Kurdish repertoire at parties. "It depends on the family", says Nabu Poli, and continues, "some families grew up close to Kurds, so then we have to know their music. Otherwise they get Kurdish musicians for their weddings". What is important in this context of course is that the audience, even if they are Kurdish-speaking, are Assyrians. It is hardly likely that a Kurdish family would want Assyrian musicians at their parties.



Figure 5. Qenneshrin playing at the Mix Music Café in Stockholm on the 8th October, 1997. Photo: Dan Lundberg.

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

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

ED: Yes, of course, we listen.

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

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

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

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

NP: By ear, by ear mostly.

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

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

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

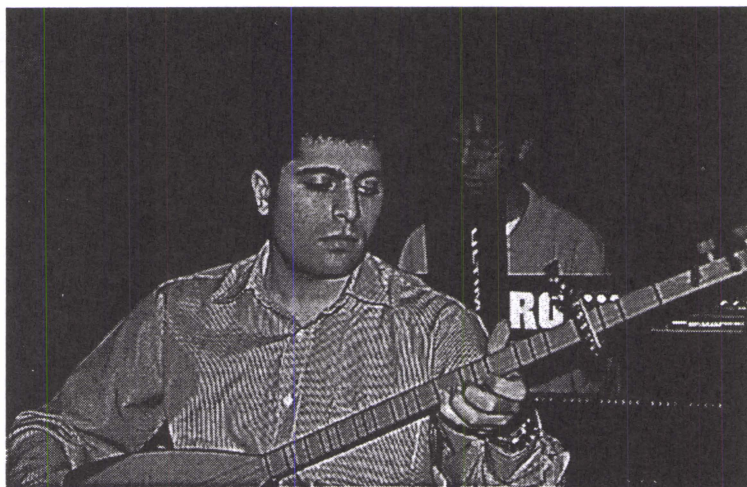


Figure 6. Emanuel Demir and Nabu Poli at the Mix Music Café in Stockholm on the 8th October, 1997. Photo: Dan Lundberg.

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

One would perhaps also be inclined to assume that the music rebel Gabriel Assad

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

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

* * *

The benefits of the new media are easy to see. Assyrians all over the world suddenly have the opportunity to create and distribute common cultural expressions. For a people without a geographically determined "home land" the Internet seems to be an efficient way to establish a nation. Still it is important not to have an over-confidence in the new media. It is necessary to remember that the indispensable technical equipment locks out lots of people from taking part, not only in the Middle East.

It is also adequate to wonder if such an anarchistic, fast expanding and uncontrolled media as the Internet is suitable for creating uniformity. In January 1997, it was estimated that 50 million pages of text had been put out on the World Wide Web. The estimated speed of expansion (which is increasing all the time) is now 10% per month. We are living in an ongoing information explosion which is perhaps most obvious in our contacts with Internet.

Right now nobody is interested in controlling what is published on the net, which means that many different kinds of Assyrianisms will compete at the same time. Another problem is how to find things. The enormous amount of information makes search engines, link sites, etc essential so that we don't lose our way in the jungle of information. This means that the producers of this kind of electronic meetingplaces are very important. Today Assyrian music is distributed on the Internet mainly via American link pages. This puts strong pressure on, for instance, the Swedish/Assyrian music producers to present their products on the net and to get them exposed on the right link pages.

The electronic networks and media have given birth to a new virtual Assyrian nation. The new possibilities for organisation provided by the Internet entail a homogenisation of the cultural expressions. But the media also limits the available expressive forms. Moreover, it not only changes the modes of cultural expression; it also alters the course of the cultural flow. The "mother country", in a creative cultural perspective, is to a great extent transferred to the Diaspora and then, reunited on the Internet.

If you go to the Internet address <http://users.aol.com/assyrianme/songs/linda3.wav> you will hear the East Assyrian singer Linda George in "Malikta Shamiram" (translation below by Robert Oshana.). Like many other Assyrian pop songs, the text deals with the homeland in the Middle East and the title Queen Shamiran awakes associations to the old Assyrian Empire. An impossible dream of a mother country which is now reincarnated as "Your Land on the Cyber Space".

Malikta Shamiram
(Queen Shamiram)

Oh young men. Oh gentlemen and young ladies.
Listen (all of you). I will tell you a story about your country.
I am..., I am a dove from Nineveh.
I have flown (and came) from Nineveh
Let me know, let me know oh -homeless (landless) person
Where are the patriotic son's of Ashur.
Let me know. (all of you), let me know, oh homeless ones.
Where are they? The patriotic sons of Ashur?

For thousands, for thousands of years I've been flying.
With hope of returning to my country keeping me alive.
In Ashur, in Nineveh and Arbel, Garmoo.
One voice, I heard calling us all.
It said: show them, show them the son and the daughter.
That way, to the country of — our mothers — and — our fathers

References

- Hammarlund, Anders 1990. Från Gudstjänarnas berg till Folkets Hus. Etnicitet, nationalism och musik bland assyrier/syrianer. In Swedish (From the Mountain of the Servants of God to Community Cultural Center in Sweden). In Owe Ronström (ed.) *Musik och kultur* (Music and Culture). Lund (Sweden), Studentlitteratur.
- Lundberg, Dan 1994. *Persikoträdgårdarnas musik*. In Swedish, with an English summary (Music of the Peach Gardens). Department of Musicology. Stockholm University.
- Lundberg, Dan & Krister Malm & Owe Ronström 1996. *Music – Media – Multiculture. Today and tomorrow*. Project website. (<http://www.musikmuseet.se/mmm>), Royal Swedish Academy of Music
- Lundberg, Dan 1997. *Ett virtuellt Assyrien*. In Swedish. (<http://www.musikmuseet.se/mmm/cyberland>), Royal Swedish Academy of Music.
- Löfgren, Orvar 1997. Att ta plats: rummets och rörelsens pedagogik. In Swedish (To take place: pedagogics of space and movement). In Gunnar Alsmark (ed) *Skjorta eller själ? Kulturella identiteter i tid och rum*. (Shirt or soul? Cultural identities in time and space). Lund (Sweden): Studentlitteratur.
- Ronström, Owe 1992. *Att gestalta ett ursprung. En musiketnologisk studie av dansande och musicerande bland jugoslaver i Stockholm*. (In Swedish, with an English summary). Department of Ethnology. Stockholm University.
- Slobin, Mark 1993. *Subcultural Sounds. Micromusics of the West*. Hanover & London: Wesleyan University Press.

Interviews

- M.DL970226:2 Interview with members of the music group Qeneshrin. In the home of the Poli family in Tumba, south of Stockholm, Sweden. Dan Lundberg.
M.DL970303 Interview with Joseph Malki from the Assyrian National Association in Sweden. In Södertälje, Sweden. Dan Lundberg.
M.DL970310 Interview with Gabriel Assad. In the nurcing home in Rinkeby, north of Stockholm, Sweden. Dan Lundberg.

Internet addresses (a selection)

- Assyria Vision: <http://www.betnahrain.org/kbsv-tv23.html>
Assyrian Foods: http://value.net/~stoma/Book_Assyria.html
Assyrian Information Medium Exchange - Music Page:
<http://www.edessa.com/music/music.htm>
Assyrian Martyrs: <http://aina.org/martyr.htm>
Assyrian Music Dealers: <http://www.cs.umu.se/~dprhi/assyri/index.html>
Assyrian Picture Archive: <http://www.toptown.com/hp/xshadow/p.htm>
Assyrian Server: <http://www.cs.umu.se/~dprhi/assyri/index.html>
Assyriska FF (Swedish/Assyrian football-team):
<http://www.cs.umu.se/~dprhi/assyri/aff.html>
Bar Ebroyo CyberLibrary: <http://www.netadventure.com/~soc/BHCybLib.html>
Download Assyrian Fonts: <http://www.nineveh.com/atorfont.exe>
Learn Assyrian On-line: <http://hometown.aol.com/assyrianme/songs/assyrian.html>
Midi Composers Exchange: <http://www.nineveh.com/midi>
Nineveh Cyber TV: <http://www.nineveh.com/nctv.htm>
Nineveh On-Line: <http://www.nineveh.com/>
Songs of Assyria: <http://hometown.aol.com/assyrianme/songs/assyrian.html>
Swedish Assyrian Magazine "Hujådå": <http://www.algonet.se/~hujada/>