

Why The Assyrian Academic Society?

by Dr. Edward Y. Odisho

It was back in 1981 when I first arrived in the United States after the bitterness of displacement from the native homeland, and began to communicate with some of my intimate Assyrian friends with the hope of bringing together our educated people, especially university graduates and other distinguished self-educated individuals, to organize a forum for academic, educational, professional, and social activities. The activities were meant to attract the attention of our younger generations to the brilliant accomplishments of our forefathers in both the Pre-Christianity and Post-Christianity eras of our long history, and also to unite the efforts of our intellectuals to initiate other educational and academic endeavors so as to bridge the gap of almost five centuries of hibernation after the Mongol invasion of our homeland and until the arrival of the Christian missionaries in late 18th century and early 19th century.

I seize this opportunity to point out briefly, albeit emphatically, that the missionaries did extend to our people in the Hakkari Mountains and the Urmia Plain some very good services, but at the same time they did some, intentional or unintentional, disservice that rendered the unity of our Assyrian people more vulnerable and fragile. The good services were typified in the attempt to maintain the language by reducing one of the local dialects to writing and then to succeed in elevating it to the status of a new standard written language. To achieve this, they founded printing presses, opened schools and helped people to acquire literacy in the native tongue. This, in itself, is a remarkable service that should be highly commended and retained in memory. The disservice assumed the form of triggering and deepening the religious fragmentation by encouraging yet more religious denominations that were not previously known to the Assyrians. This is in no sense meant to imply that all the Assyrians should have remained the followers of the Church of the East. I am a Christian and I have no denominational preferences though

I strongly believe that our unity would have been more solid and intact if the Assyrians (or all the Aramaic-speakers for that matter) had remained what they were before the arrival of the missionaries. Nevertheless, - be it as it is - to be with different religious denominations, is now a fact and we should, therefore, interpret the fact in terms of the more genuine tenets of our faith. The faith is the same, the language is the same, the history is common, and the psychological and cultural frame of mind is identical, so why should we ever allow the foci of disunity to expand at the expense of the vast and sacrosanct arenas of unity.

Since the arrival of the missionaries, the Assyrians have had tides and ebbs in their educational and literary movements. An observer can easily notice two major tidal waves of literary efflorescence. The first coincided with the turn of the century till the First World War, while the second covered the decade before the Second World War and the two decades after it. Most of our good quality newspapers, books and other literary achievements appeared during those two periods. It is also not surprising to notice that the peak of our nationalistic resurgence has coincided with those particular times. For certain historical and geographical reasons, it was in Iran where the literary efflorescence was far more emphatic than in Iraq or elsewhere.

It is now sad to see that our literary achievements in 1970's and 1980's would represent an ebb rather than a tide in that the number of our writers has dwindled and that there has hardly been a wide-scale and impressive literary movement like the one we had in Iran, and to a lesser extent in Iraq, in 1950's and 1960's. Most of our surviving writers and poets have their roots in the first half of the twentieth century. The fact that most of them have died or are functionally unproductive due to old age, tolls the alarm bell to signal the dryness of our literary fountain.

In today's world, the general and specialized educational standards of our younger generations have been upgraded, but unfortunately not in the mother tongue. There are only few of us who are privileged by being highly educated and also skilled in the Assyrian language. Our so-called young writers or poets are, most of the time, too inexperienced in the techniques of literary and artistic performance, very poorly versed in Assyrian, or even in non-Assyrian languages, and quite unfamiliar with the literary and artistic accomplishments, in particular the masterpieces, of other nations of the world.

Also the Assyrians, both in the homeland and in diaspora, have improved their socio-economic status and deepened their feeling of nationalism, though occasionally with a strand of sentimentalism. What is sad, however, is their dispersal throughout the world and the insecurity they experience in the Middle East. Even in the countries of diaspora where they have a sense of political security, they still suffer from the economic unpredictability and cultural incompatibility. All those conditions have led to a lack of interest in areas, especially of humanities, outside the scope of their specialization, and the absence of tolerance for research and exhaustive investigation in all aspects of our literary, historical, social, and even political life. Thus our writings, discussions, talks and arguments have become shallow, superficial, and repetitious. So much so, that objective evaluations and creative contributions are rarely encountered. For instance, our talks in history rarely go beyond the personal halos we have created around some of our ancient kings. Our folklore is reduced to an every-other-day performance of Khigga and Shaikhani. Many of our self-admired singers can hardly play a musical instrument or know what voice-training is. And many of our self-proclaimed musicians barely master the fundamentals of notation or cultivate their skills by embarking on some theoretical courses in music. Certainly, one should not forget those three or four of our capable and innovative musicians who have, unfortunately, been forced to retreat to the corner of negligence and the brink of hopelessness due to the lack of appreciation and encouragement of

their works. How many writers/poets can produce yet another Epic of Kateeny the Great of William Daniel or compose musical pieces equally original with his Ninive and Shara? How many can match the musical knowledge and skill of Nebu Issabey and Shoora Michaelian.

Having lived with the members of my Assyrian people, both in Iraq and in the United States, and experienced every aspect of their daily life, I think we should stop and think of the need for a new approach to our literary, educational, social and political life. It is imperative to consider the following issues. First, we should try to be as objective as possible in conducting our activities. We should evaluate every activity not only in terms of our Assyrian values and standards, but also in terms of values and standards that are broader in scope and greater in validity. It is this kind of evaluation that will determine the quality of a certain accomplishment. No accomplishment will be of genuine value or appreciation if it is not based on research and objective comparison. Second, and in the light of the suggested objectivity, every Assyrian should try to find out exactly how much he/she knows in a certain field of knowledge or how much he does not know. The tragedy is that those who claim knowledge in a certain field, do not know how much they exactly know, and those who admit that they do not know much, do not exactly know how much they do not know. Specialization in a particular field coupled with an investigative methodology is certainly an asset for a positive development in all of our social, educational, academic and political institutions. Third, we should strictly abide by the motto of "the right man for the right position of responsibility." We should take care of all of our educated people and convince them to be nearer to their national associations and societies.

There are certainly many reasons that have driven many of those people away from involvement in everyday activities. But those of them who are good only for lip-service should realize that to salvage what is left of our language and heritage deeds are more important than words. Moreover, those who are incompetent and cannot spare some

time for voluntary work should never present themselves as candidates for positions of responsibility in our community organizations. They should know that real and creative work can't be achieved by proxy or in absentia. What our community organizations need, are individuals who talk about work and manifest devotion to it, individuals who promise donations and abide by their promises, and individuals who indicate support and offer it in abundance. When these kinds of individuals exist then our community will be vibrant and capable of competing in educational, cultural, academic, and political accomplishments with other ethnic communities and peoples. Fourth, members of our organizations and parties, including the Assyrian Academic Society, should be sincere and wise enough to identify common objectives and reasonable solutions before they get entangled in personal arguments that usually end in splitting their organizations. Fifth, every Assyrian should practice self-education to the extent that he/she is capable of cultivating independence in passing judgments. Because if our judgment is based on who our brothers/sisters or relatives are, what our socio-geographic origins are, and who our political and religious idols are then we are bias and immature to behave independently and objectively. The Assyrian Academic Society, which is not an institution of academicians, but an institution of university graduates who have academic training and maintain interest in academic activities in various fields of knowledge, was born out of necessity to initiate a new approach to our literary, cultural, social, and political life. Inasmuch as the political life is concerned, A.A.S. is involved only on individual basis and through advisement and consultation to those who feel they need them rather than through actual practice of day-to-day politics. It is also imperative to clarify that although A.A.S. is a non-political organization, its members as individuals are entitled to entertain their own political views and publicize them in circles outside those of A.A.S. This is why the A.A.S. is organizationally not affiliated with any religious, social or political institutions. Its main goal is to recruit, both as members and supporters, as many Assyrians as possible to serve their people and themselves in the best and the most appropriate manner. There is room for everyone who thinks that the interest of his

people is far more important than his own personal or organizational, overt or covert, interests.

Towards those goals, it is fair to say that A.A.S. has achieved some of its objectives. It has brought together a good number of university graduates with different specializations who are now working in unison to satisfy the educational, cultural, and professional needs of our people. It sponsored and conducted a good number of scientific, artistic, and educational activities presented by outstanding Assyrian and non-Assyrian intellectuals. An aspect of pride is the strong belief in co-operative work with most of the existing Assyrian organizations each to the extent to which it believes in the objectives of the A.A.S. It is for all the above reasons that A.A.S. was founded and it still exists.