

**Madawi Al-Rasheed, Iraqi Assyrian Christians in London: The Construction of Ethnicity, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, N.Y. (1998)**  
*Reviewed by Francis Sarguis*

*“I am an Assyrian. I am not an Iraqi Arab.”* This declaration, intended to impart authenticity with conviction, is uttered by many modern Assyrians. The author attributes this mantra to an Assyrian immigrant in London. According to Al-Rasheed (holder of a Ph.D. in anthropology), it is what prompted her to undertake the present study.

It is important to note at the outset the limits – whether expressed or *de facto* -- of the assignment undertaken. According to the title, this study is about *“Iraqi Assyrian Christians in London”*. In fact, it might have been more accurate to describe it about *“the Assyrian community in London, the majority of which is from Iraq”*. But no doubt this never occurred to the author, since she characterizes those modern Assyrians who are not from Iraq as merely *“a very small Iranian Assyrian sub-group amongst them.”* Yet however imperfect her definition of the target group, the author’s professed objective is to examine its *“construction of ethnicity.”* To this reviewer, it is open to question whether that purpose was achieved.

In fairness, the reader should keep in mind that this does not pretend to be a work of history, nor even a work about “Assyrian nationalism.” It is more a work of micro-cultural anthropology. The author sets out to analyze the process by which Assyrian immigrants are *“constructing an ethnic identity which distinguishes them from other Middle Eastern immigrants in Britain”*. While the distinction may be opaque, it is apparent throughout that Al-Rasheed seeks to differentiate between ethnicity and nationality.

The author confesses to an early misunderstanding. As she was about to begin her field work, in the early 1990’s, she had erroneously assumed that Assyrians did not want to be identified as ‘Iraqis’ because they did not want to be associated with the villainous image projected to the world by the Baghdad regime. However, she would soon learn that Assyrians were not simply reacting to current events, and that this *“... was part of a process which had its roots in Iraq [well] before Assyrian migration to Britain.”*

The author, herself a non-Christian Arab, enjoyed the encouragement of senior colleagues in the field of cultural anthropology (from Oxford University and other esteemed institutions). Typical of this support is Professor Peter Clarke of London who, with unexplained exuberance, points out in the Preface that this is *“... the only thorough study of the formation of Assyrian ethnicity in Britain ...”* While this may be *“the only [such] study”* for Assyrians in Britain, this reviewer is obviously more guarded in assessing its “thoroughness”.

Furthermore, whereas it is felicitous that Al-Rasheed decided to undertake this project, certainly it cannot be characterized as breaking entirely new ground. At least two earlier studies of the diaspora quickly to mind (and there surely are others). Both were undertaken by Dr. Arian Ishaya, an Assyrian cultural

anthropologist now residing in California. In The Role of the Minorities in the State: History of the Assyrian Experience (1976), Ishaya examines the Assyrian community in the Canadian prairies. Her effort shifts southward in Class and Ethnicity in Rural California: The Assyrian Community of Modesto-Turlock, 1910-1985 (1985), comprising her doctoral dissertation. Al-Rasheed appears to be unaware of these prior works. While it is true that neither of those studies were formally published, it is interesting that none of Al-Rasheed's interviewees made any mention of Ishaya to her. By contrast, and somewhat a reflection of the book's shortcoming, its Index includes no less than ten references to an ersatz Assyrian scholar. It is unsettling to imagine the narrow and partisan eye view Al-Rasheed afforded herself. Of course, one works with what one has, and it would be unfair to be harshly critical on this point. After all is said and done, the author does not lack for seriousness of purpose, but one cannot resist the conclusion that the end product would have been far superior if only she had been provided better sources.

It will not be news that modern Assyrians lack a robust intellectual tradition. Al-Rasheed herself acknowledges that a great deal of what she has learned about Iraqi Assyrians is anecdotal, and based on their personal emotions. But she is certainly handicapped by the burden of selectivity. She was deprived the opportunity to look at a reasonable cross-section of the subject group. Admittedly, modern Assyrians do not have much "*political presence*" anywhere. But to take just one example, the author gets it very wrong when she writes of the USA diaspora that "[t]he most important association ... is the recently established Assyrian National Congress, a para-organisation which comprises all Assyrian political parties and religious bureaux." (58). In truth, many Assyrian activists, whether in the U.S. or elsewhere, view the "Assyrian National Congress" (ANC) as largely a one-man enterprise. One can confidently say that the majority of Assyrians would vigorously dispute Al-Rasheed's description of the ANC as tantamount to an umbrella group.

What is perhaps even more egregious in this context is Al-Rasheed's apparent lack of awareness about either the Assyrian Democratic Movement (and its very active Assyrian Aid Society), or the Assyrian Democratic Organization (especially prominent in the author's own European backyard, particularly in Germany, Holland, Sweden, Belgium, and Austria). Through actual balloting and other official declarations in the Middle East and in the West, the ADM is generally recognized as the only credible political organization in Iraq; it is also the only one which appeals to many Assyrians in all countries of the diaspora (including Britain). As for the ADO, it is especially prominent among the Assyrians of Syria. No doubt Al-Rasheed's intentions are honorable. But the limitations of her research sources and the obviously narrow perspective of her interviewees inevitably yields a skewed end product. It is difficult to think that a study on "*construction of ethnicity*" hampered by such limitations can achieve the legitimacy one hopes for.

Unlike some of the established scholars in the field of cultural anthropology (who are non-Assyrians), Al-Rasheed examines *ethnicity* in a “multivariate” perspective. This eclectic approach should strike the lay reader as eminently sensible, although it will be a challenge to many when they read that “*ethnicity does not reside in the fact that people may speak a specific language or profess a different faith [from that of others].*” If that be the case, then the mantra of our own fathers and grandfathers has surely been leading us down the primrose path. For better or for worse, most Modern Assyrians do in fact point to their language and to their religion as the two pre-eminent pillars of their identity.

According to the author, the Assyrians in Britain number some three thousand, most of them in London and vicinity. In large part, they came there as immigrants from Iraq beginning in the 1950’s. Their core settlement is the borough of Ealing in northwest London. Many of the earliest arrivals had served the British as levies, and had worked at the R.A.F. base in Habbaniya. In his professorial manner, Peter Clarke of London is quoted as saying that while they had a strong sense of *Assyrian nationhood*, their sense of *ethnic identity* was weak.

While it is by no means at the core of the book, Al-Rasheed draws interesting contrasts to some of the other immigrant communities in the London area. For example, the ten thousand Armenians in the region are divided over the issue of anonymity. Many Armenians wish to remain ‘invisible’, and they resent attempts to highlight their cause (177). The author notes that, unlike Assyrians, Armenians come from a number of Middle Eastern countries, and in London they are very dispersed residentially. If comparisons are of any use, the author finds more parallels between the Assyrians in Britain and the Yemeni Arabs, who number some 15,000 – both of the groups seeking little notice and publicity until more recent times.

Al-Rasheed maintains that “in response to the context of migration, Assyrians developed elaborate discourse which explains to themselves and to outsiders who they are.” She dubs this process the “*narratives of peoplehood*”, whose components include mythical and objectively observed criteria. She elaborates as follows:

*“Assyrian narratives are not concerned with historical precision. Assyrians take it for granted that they are ‘the descendants of the ancient Assyrian people’ and that their church language is ‘that of Jesus Christ’. When they make these assertions, they are not concerned with whether the name ‘Assyrian’ refers to a civilisation or a population which may have consisted of different ethnic groups. Nor are Assyrians concerned with the scholarly debate regarding the language spoken by Jesus. ... The investigation of the narratives of ethnicity show how far ethnic discourse and history can diverge and how much people feel things that are not there and conveniently forget realities that have existed.”*

In passing, the author manages to hit several hot buttons. She points out that “defining ethnic boundaries has become a serious concern for Assyrians” (152). But in this vein, she notes:

*“In some texts, over ambitious nationalists went as far as to regard all Christian churches whose liturgical language is Syriac-Aramaic as belonging to the Assyrian nation. These groups are considered to be religious denominations rather than national and ethnic groups.”* (149)

She notes that according to such claims “... the ‘Assyrian nation’ is doctrinally divided into five main ecclesiastically religious sects: The Assyrian Church of the East (the Assyrian national Church), the Chaldean Church, the Assyrian Orthodox Church (Syrian Jacobites), the Assyrian Catholic Church (Syrian Catholics), and the Maronite Church.” [emphasis added] However, she acknowledges there is broad or total disagreement by members of the last four groups that they have any “Assyrian blood.” The claim of Assyrian identity in the modern context is an ever-morphing spectacle. Although it is an essential question, Al-Rasheed can be excused for not delving into the morass.

Based on her examination of “*the Assyrian press not only in London but also elsewhere*,” the author identifies four dominant themes: (1) the secular versus the sacred; (2) the rise and fall; (3) the betrayal; and (4) ethnic boundaries. (153) Her examination of these themes is not concerned with their accuracy or historical validity. She approaches these as “*a genre of historiography*,” which are better illuminated “*by reference to the present reality of Assyrian life*.”

The work’s intellectual construct is not altogether clear. There are far too many pedantic generalizations, and some fundamental contradictions. For example, when she speaks of the Assyrians as “*of a single religious faith*”, is the author referring solely to members of the Church of the East, or does she mean the more generic Christianity which includes all five of the confessions just mentioned above? Elsewhere in the book, she alludes to the impracticality of bundling five different confessions into a cohesive whole. More than likely, all of her face-to-face interviews were conducted exclusively with members of the Church of the East. It is only *en passant* that the author offers that there are “Chaldeans” amongst the subject group. At least in the context of her London study, Al-Rasheed should have distinguished between the Chaldeans who strongly profess their “Assyrian identity”, and the Chaldeans who do not. Furthermore, she devotes considerable space to the self-serving explanation of Assyrians who consider the Chaldeans part and parcel of ‘Assyrian ethnicity’. It is valid for her to describe the Assyrian position on this, but shouldn’t she also offer the other view which, after all, is the one held by the majority of Chaldeans? When visiting London, this reviewer had occasion to participate in the religious services of both the Chaldean Church and the Church of East, and their similarities are inescapable. But based on personal experience, and on the palpable polarization between a majority of the two groups, the trivialization of the Chaldean population is incongruous with the author’s aim to capture a fair

representation of Assyrian self-image. At the very least, there should have been more explanation of the dichotomy.

There are countless other threads left dangling, and too many critical questions left unasked. Just to name one instance, Al-Rasheed refers to “the historical process which led to the identification of Assyrians as ‘Assyrians’, a name of recent appearance” (xix-xx) When one turns to Chapter 2 for elaboration, one finds mostly a rehash of tired arguments put forth by the differing populations at loggerhead.

While this reviewer has offered several criticisms, Al-Rasheed’s work nevertheless deserves to be welcomed by the Assyrian community. Unlike those still living in the disadvantaged Middle East, the condition of diaspora Assyrians is such that they could (if they resolved to do so) give impetus to a serious intellectual movement. Yet unlike parallel immigrant communities (most prominently, the diaspora Jews and Arabs, but also the Armenians and the Kurds), Assyrians have generally failed to carry out this responsibility. Rather than elucidating their history or “ethnicity” at the demanding level of scholarship, most appear satisfied to dwell on the pomp of ancient dynasties now largely banished to departments of archaeology. It is not surprising, therefore, that the critical task of explaining modern Assyrian “narratives of peoplehood” is left largely to non-Assyrian social scientists.

Many modern Assyrians will be quick (as I have sometimes been) to take issue with many of the findings of non-Assyrian scholars in their work on modern Assyrians. But in the end we are indebted that there are at least some scholars who recognize in our current culture and people something to justify their research. Therefore, while Al-Rasheed’s effort is not (and cannot be) completely satisfactory, it is not inconsequential that she has devoted considerable energy to the subject of Assyrians. She appears to have tackled the task with objective intent, and free of any partisan agenda. She could not have known about (and some would say she simply finessed) the always contentious definition of modern “Assyrian” identity. Her effort deserves thanks. Assyrians prepared to pay the somewhat hefty purchase price (US \$90) will find the book a generally enjoyable reading experience.