

ASSYRIAN/SYRIAC SCHOLARLY ACTIVITIES IN SYDNEY

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Sydney was the center of many international conferences and activities pertinent to the history, language and culture of the Assyrian/Syriac speakers. From June 26th through June 30th were the days of the *Eighth International Congress for Syriac Studies* better known as *Symposium Syriacum*. From July 2nd through July 5th were the days of the *Sixth International Conference on Christian Arabic Studies*. The first day of each forum was for registration and/or formal receptions. Between the two conferences, all the day of Sunday, July 2nd was exclusively devoted for a *Genocide Seminar* entitled ‘Assyrians After Assyria’¹ to highlight the *massacres of the Syriac-speaking Christians*.

Symposium Syriacum is one of the largest and most important international forums dealing with studies and research on different aspects of the history, religion, culture and language of Syriac speakers. Some 60 studies were presented by different scholars affiliated with a wide variety of academic and religious institutions from different countries including, Australia, Belgium, Britain, Canada, Egypt, France, Germany, Holland, Hungary, India, Lebanon, New Zealand, Sweden, United States, among others. The presenters included many high-ranking religious personalities from different Christian denominations. There were many scholars known to our Journal as contributors or as friends- Drs. Amir Harrak, George Kiraz, J.F. Coakley, Abdul-Massih Saadi and Gabriele Yonan who all were very active during the conferences. Interestingly, perhaps, the oldest participant in the conferences was Rev. J. Sanders who at the age of 82 was very dynamic and vibrant. It was of interest to notice that the Lebanese participants in the forums were the largest in number; doubtless, the number implies an increasing concern for Syriac language and Syriac studies. Apparently, this concern was rewarded by the decision to hold the next meetings in Lebanon in 2004.

The proceedings of the Congress progressed daily in the form of two concurrent sessions with each session having two back-to-back presentations. There were usually four concurrent sessions in the morning and four in afternoon. Obviously, it was a very heavy load for the participants to attend to, but this was the only arrangement to accommodate for so many valuable presentations.

Any international conference in any area of specialization is the place where and when scholars from different parts of the globe meet together to listen to each other and exchange the latest information and findings. Of equal

¹ Some readers may remember that this was the same title that Professor Simo Parpola, of Finland, used for his presentation at the 1999 Assyrian National Convention in Los Angeles.

significance is that participants discover the colleagues with whom their scholarly interests and academic pursuits are most compatible. This discovery of compatibility usually results in future collaborations and exchange of knowledge among scholars. Looking at such international forums from a social and humanitarian angle, they usually afford the opportunity for many scholars to meet each other in person after years of acquaintance in absentia only through reading each other's publications.

I have been to many international conferences during the last three decades of my academic career because such conferences are the most academically, socially and personally rewarding occasions. As a linguist, I have been more aligned with conferences on linguistics, phonetics and sociolinguistics; I have never attended *Symposium Syriacum* before. This was my first attendance and it will never be the last. Throughout the Congress, I felt I was at home among distinguished scholars most of whom had native languages other than Assyrian/Syriac, but they all loved it as the language of a great civilization. Caring for the promotion of the historical, religious and academic role of Assyrians/Syrians is a sign of veneration for a language whose role in serving the human civilization is no less than Greek and Latin.

The *Conference on Christian Arabic Studies* seems, at least in my view, a less well-defined academic forum than *Symposium Syriacum*. It accommodates for almost any type of studies related to Christians and Christianity in the context of Arabic language, culture and civilization. The most significant objective of such a Conference is a better understanding of Christian civilization and Christianity when in contact with other religions, languages and civilizations. The proceedings of the Conference comprised 11 non-concurrent sessions each one consisting of two back-to-back presentations.

On Sunday, July 2nd, a one-day *Genocide Seminar* was held by the Center for Comparative Genocide Studies, Macquarie University in conjunction with the Department of Semitic Studies, the University of Sydney. The major sponsor for this event was *The Assyrian Australian Academic Society (TAAAS)* with further sponsorship from several Assyrian religious, social and business institutions. The Seminar consisted of seven presentations tackling different aspects of the life and history of the Syriac-speaking people with particular emphasis on the genocide to which they were exposed especially before and during World War I. Nicholas Al-Jeeloo, an 18-year young and bright Assyrian student was one of the speakers whose presentation was entitled: *Who are the Assyrians?* His presentation, which should have come at the very beginning, was placed towards the end for reasons not clear to me. Dr. Gabriele Yonan spoke about *Germany's Impact on the Assyrian Holocaust*; Dr. Edward Odisho highlighted the significance of the *Cultural and Linguistic Genocide*; Dr. Fuat Deniz dealt with the *Maintenance and Transportation of Ethnic Identity*; and Dr. Abdul Massih Saadi handled the *Aftermath of Genocide: from Survival to Revival*. The three non-Assyrian speakers Dr. Rancho Donef, Stavros Stavrides and Panayiotis Diamadis played an important role in placing the genocide in broader contexts of the Ottoman

persecution of the Christians, in general, and the Assyrian, Armenians and Greeks, in particular. Certainly, Mr. Diamadis was the organizing power behind this Seminar in conjunction with the Assyrian Australian Academic Society led by Suzy David and Lounarda David.

One of most significant observations about all those high level academic activities, especially the two international forums which included many non-Assyrian/Syriac nationals, was the fact that all the forums were socially contextualized and embraced by the various local Christian churches and clubs. On June 28th, there was a service at the *St. Gabriel Syrian Orthodox Church* followed by a reception; on June 29th, there was a reception and dinner at the magnificent *Edessa Hall* of the *Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East*; on July 1st, was the attendance of a Holy Mass in the *Maronite Syriac Liturgy* at *St. Charbel's Monastery* followed by a reception; on July 2nd, a reception was hosted by the *Assyrian Australian Academic Society* at *Nineveh Club*; and finally, on July 3rd, a reception was hosted by the *Coptic Orthodox Church of New South Wales*. The reason why I stated the above social occasions that went along with the two conferences is deliberate; it is simply to highlight the significant role communities can play in maintaining a culture, a language or a religion. Without the social contextualization and embedding of academic activities, academicians and scholars alone can hardly succeed in the revival and maintenance of the language of Jesus and the culture and civilization radiated through it. In fact, as an Assyrian, this is the first time I notice the tremendous involvement of my fellow Assyrians in the support of international forums. All Assyrian/Syriac speakers should learn a lesson from their brethren in Australia that their efforts to revive, maintain and promote their linguistic, cultural and religious identity should be in close conjunction with all international scholars who are willing to serve their cause.

On a more personal note, I attended the Sydney conferences sponsored partially by my university, the *Northeastern Illinois University*. I also had the moral support and encouragement of the editorial board of the *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies*. Once, I made up my mind to travel, I was determined to make the most of it both academically and socially. Academically, instead of one presentation, I worked on two, one for each conference. My presentation at the *Symposium Syriacum* was entitled '*The Role of Aspiration in the Transliteration of Loanwords in Aramaic and Arabic*'. The study focused especially on the transliteration of the Greek letters < τ κ > as the Aramaic letters < ܬ ܕ > and the Arabic letters < ط ق > instead of the letters < ܬ ܕ > and < ܬ ܕ >, respectively. A scientific explanation based on the cross-language perception of certain phonetic features and the transformation of those phonetic features [pronunciation] into orthographic [writing] was developed. My presentation at the *Christian Arabic Studies* was entitled '*Andalusi Arabic in a Christian Context: Phonological and Morphological Feedback*'. This study had two focal points: firstly, it tried to clarify to the readers that Andalusi [rather than Spanish because not all Spain was dominated by Arabic] Arabic represented the

first instance when Arabic was imposed on a Latin-speaking Christian population; therefore, Arabic should be affected by Latin. Secondly, the Arabic-Latin contact resulted in mutual exchange of especially phonological and morphological types of features that are unnoticed in the contact of Arabic with other non-Latin languages. The specific changes that Arabic underwent in Andalusia afford much insight into any comparative studies involving Arabic. Besides these two presentations, I created the time to conduct other activities. Before my arrival in Sydney, I had no knowledge about the *Assyrian Genocide Seminar*, but when my friend Dr. Gabriele Yonan and I discussed the theme of genocide, she was very interested in my understanding of the linguistic and cultural dimensions of the genocide. She insisted that I should join them. Thus, the program was rearranged and I was asked to dwell on the genocide from the linguistic-cultural perspective; and that I did. I was also listed as the chair for one of the sessions in the *Christian Arabic Studies*; that, too, I did.

Finally, on the social side of my journey, I met many friends and relatives. Foremost, I met my friend *Professor Rifaat Ebied* whom I have not seen for the last twenty-five years after I left England in 1975² and he then ended up chairing the Department of Semitic Studies, the University of Sydney. It was such a great occasion to see Rifaat not just because he is an old friend, but also because he did such a magnificent job in running both of the conferences and all the administrative, academic and social responsibilities attached to them. To a large extent, the striking success of the two conferences was credited to him alone.

² At the time R. Y. Ebied was a Lecturer in the Department of Semitic Studies, Leeds University and I just received my Ph.D. in Phonetics and Linguistics.