



Classical Syriac, Neo-Aramaic, and Arabic in the Church of the East and the Chaldean Church between 1500 and 1800

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1. Introduction

A striking feature in modern Assyrian and Chaldean churches is the fact that often more than one language is used in the Sunday liturgy. Usually, part of the liturgy is in the Classical language, the traditional vehicle for the liturgy of these churches, but often important parts of the liturgy are in Arabic or Neo-Aramaic. In addition, one may hear Persian, Dutch, Swedish, English, French or German—depending on the countries where the liturgy takes place and from where the participants originate. The easy shifting between languages is continued during coffee afterwards, when a variety of modern spoken languages are used. It seems likely that this use of multiple languages is a long-established feature of these churches. One of the objects of this contribution is to investigate how three languages, Classical Syriac, Neo-Aramaic, and Arabic, were used in the Church of the East and the Chaldean Church between 1500 and 1800.

The Assyrian Apostolic Church of the East and the Chaldean Church, the two churches that are the subject of this paper, originated in the church that around 1500 was known to outsiders as the “Nestorian Church”. In 1553, the “Church of the East”, as it called itself, experienced a first split when part of the church had a counter-patriarch consecrated in Rome. Although this early union was followed by a three-century history of broken and renewed unions that only in 1830 reached their final form, 1553 is commonly seen as the beginning of the uniate Chaldean Church.¹ It is these two communities, whose mutual boundaries remained fluid for much of this period, that form the context of the language discussion in this paper.

It is also this period of increasing uniatism that sets the period for this study, a time that more or less coincides with the advent of Ottoman administration in the Mosul and Diyarbakir provinces, where most of the Church

¹For a detailed history of this period including the spread of uniatism, see Wilmshurst 2000; Habbi 1966; Lampart 1966; Murre–van den Berg 1999b and forthcoming (a).



of the East communities were found. This period is characterized by a relatively stable political and economical situation, and it is likely that at least part of the increasing manuscript production within the Church of the East can be explained from these circumstances.² Thousands of manuscripts from this period have been preserved and, although often studied only to the extent of a short entry in a catalogue, form the basis of this investigation into the language use in this period. In addition, observations on the use of language in these communities are taken into account, often dating to the 19th or early 20th century. A discussion of the 19th century, although also characterized by Ottoman dominion, increasing uniatism and significant literary production, is not included. In this period the activities of American Presbyterian, British Anglican, and French Roman Catholic missions gave rise to new developments such as the introduction of general education and printing. For this reason the language situation in this period deserves separate treatment.³

In this contribution the three most important languages of the Church of the East and the Chaldean Church are considered. Initially, a focus on Classical Syriac and Neo-Aramaic seemed appropriate for a conference on Aramaic. However, the linguistic situation in the 16th to 18th centuries would be grossly misrepresented if Arabic would not be included. Other languages could have been drawn into the picture—one could think of Ottoman Turkish, Azeri Turkish, Persian, and Kurdish. It is likely that these languages, in their spoken and written forms, also formed part of the linguistic milieu of the Church of the East. However, written evidence pertaining to the period under discussion is scarce or absent, which not only complicates a responsible discussion of their status, but also suggests that their importance within these Christian communities was less than the three that are indeed reflected in the sources: Classical Syriac, Neo-Aramaic, and Arabic.

In the first part of this paper I will present an overview of the use of these three languages in the Church of the East and the Chaldean Church. What language is used in which texts, and what do we know about the accompanying spoken languages? In the second part of the paper I will suggest a possible explanation for the distribution of the languages described in the first part.

2. The Use of Classical Syriac, Neo-Aramaic, and Arabic

The vast majority of texts produced in the Ottoman period in the Church of the East are in Classical Syriac. In practically all types of texts, Classical Syriac specimens form the majority, and most of the genres are completely

²Wilmschurst 2000: 8–15. His book further includes a helpful list of manuscript catalogues and a list of dated manuscripts based on these catalogues.

³See Murre-van den Berg 1999b and forthcoming (b).



dominated by Classical Syriac. The overwhelming majority of Syriac manuscripts that were copied in this period were the products of earlier ages: the liturgical books (lectionaries, church books, hymnals), theological and philosophical treatises, grammatical, hagiographical, and historical works. Although some of these texts date to the early periods of Classical Syriac literature, texts from the 12th to early 14th centuries are particularly well represented.⁴ The standardized liturgical texts (church books and lectionaries) form the majority of this group of manuscripts. These were needed in every single church and so were produced in large quantities.⁵

During the 16th to 18th centuries, this Classical Syriac heritage was renewed and expanded in several ways.⁶ The most productive genre was that of the hymns, a genre through which the themes of the time were most easily integrated into the traditional liturgical forms. Most of these liturgical hymns, often of the *'unīlā*-type,⁷ were written by poets from the lower clergy, monks, or priests. Occasionally, members of the higher clergy such as bishops and patriarchs used these hymns to put their personal stamp on the liturgy. Just to mention a few of the most productive authors: the priest 'Attaya bar 'Abdo of Athel (active between 1521 and 1562),⁸ the Chaldean bishop and later patriarch 'Audisho' bar Yuhannan of Gazarta (d. 1570),⁹ and the prolific poets from Alqosh: the monk Sargis bar Wahle (active around 1500),¹⁰ the priest Israel, son of priest Hormizd of Alqosh (active between 1590-1610),¹¹ as well as one of his descendants (probably great-grandson), priest Giwargis of Alqosh.¹²

⁴See Baumstark 1922, with references to the manuscripts and editions available in his time. Note that also today many of these texts, especially those of the later periods, have not been edited. For a recent evaluation of the Classical Syriac literary tradition, see Van Rompay 2000.

⁵For a near contemporary description of the liturgical manuscripts of the Church of the East, see Badger 1852: 16–25.

⁶Macuch 1976. Baumstark's overview, albeit concise, is still useful (Baumstark 1922: 329–335). In Assyrian overviews, in which the 19th and 20th centuries are better represented, the period between 1500 and 1800 has not received much attention either; compare, e.g., Sarmas 1969–1970: vol. I, pp. 176–205 (including the 13th and 14th centuries), vol. II: 236. See also Brock 1989. So far, Brock seems to have been the only one to pay attention to linguistic characteristics such as morphology and lexicography.

⁷One of the genres of later Classical Syriac liturgical poetry marked by four-line strophes, end rhyme, and, usually but not always, seven-syllabic metre; see Baumstark 1922: 303–304. A small selection of the poetry of the later period is found in Cardahi 1874.

⁸Baumstark 1922: 332; Macuch 1976: 37. 'Attaya bar 'Abdo is also known as a copyist (Wilmshurst 2000: 409; Ernakulam L22, written in 1563 for Mar Abraham, bishop of India).

⁹Baumstark 1922: 333; Macuch 1976: 38–39. A few of his poems have been edited or translated; compare Vosté 1931 and Cardahi 1874: 80–85.

¹⁰Baumstark 1922: 330–331; Macuch 1976: 35–36. His main work was edited and translated by Budge (Budge 1894 and 1902).

¹¹Baumstark 1922: 334–335; Macuch 1976: 48–49; Cardahi 1874: 96–100. He is traditionally equated to the founding father of the Shikwana scribal family, although no manuscripts of his hand have survived; see further Wilmshurst 2000: 243–245.

¹²Baumstark 1922: 335; Macuch 1976: 49; Cardahi 1874: 130–135. The scribal family



Compared with the considerable amount of poetry from this period, Classical Syriac prose writing appears to have been less popular. The earlier genres of theological, devotional, or historical treatises lost their attraction to the writers of the time and few new prose genres replaced them. One of the notable exceptions is the work of another Chaldean bishop and subsequent patriarch, Yosep II of Diyarbakir (b. 1667, d. 1731).¹³ He actively propagated Roman Catholicism in his writings, not only in his poetry, but also in translations and newly composed treatises.

Most of the prose of this period, however, consists of texts that were written in connection with specific, often personal, circumstances: letters, manuscript colophons and inscriptions. Although few letters have survived from this period, they provide sufficient evidence to conclude that letter writing was an important aspect of Classical Syriac writing, representing a genre with its own literary conventions and style. The most famous letter that has survived was written by four Indian bishops of the Church of the East in the early 16th century,¹⁴ whereas correspondence with Rome on matters of uniatism, partly in Classical Syriac, has been preserved in Vatican archives.¹⁵

As a literary genre and well-attested specimen of late Classical Syriac prose writing, manuscript colophons have been largely overlooked. The colophons of this period usually consist of rather long essays (often two to three pages) in which the scribe places all persons involved in the production of the manuscript (himself, ecclesiastical authorities, and donors) in the ecclesiastical, religious and political contexts of the time. In the manuscript catalogues, these colophons have often been excerpted and abbreviated, mainly in view of the historical data that could be culled from them—especially in the few cases in which a separate historical note had been added. Despite their formulaic nature—which is far less static than one might expect—the colophons yield a wealth of information on linguistic and literary themes, as well as on less researched historical topics such as the history of popular religion and the prevailing social structures.¹⁶

A corpus of texts that displays similar characteristics and also provides a considerable amount of Classical Syriac writing is that of the inscriptions. These are found on both the outside and inside of churches and monasteries, on gravestones, and sometimes on private buildings. Like the colophons,

tree of the Shikwana family (Wilmshurst 2000: 243–245) suggests that Israel of Alqosh had no grandson named Giwargis, but that he did have a rather illustrious great-grandson of that name. This Giwargis of Alqosh was a prolific scribe and secretary to two succeeding patriarchs, Eliya X Maraugin and Eliya XI Denha, between 1676 and 1727. I propose that he be identified with the author Giwargis of Alqosh.

¹³Macuch 1976: 42–44. For a recent study, see Teule 2004.

¹⁴Baumstark 1922: 332; Macuch 1976: 37; Assemani 1725–28: 590–599. See further Murre–van den Berg 2005.

¹⁵Giamil 1902. For further letters in Classical Syriac, see Rödiger 1840.

¹⁶For a preliminary study and further references, see Murre–van den Berg 2006a.



many of these inscriptions not only provide us with historical data on the history of Syriac Christianity of the time (for instance when and by whom monasteries and churches were built or rebuilt), but also increases our knowledge of the use of Classical Syriac, the literary conventions, and the religious and social customs of the times.¹⁷

Compared with the wealth of Classical Syriac materials from the 17th and 18th centuries, Neo-Aramaic texts occupy only a very modest position. In this small corpus, religious hymns constitute the majority of written texts—in Neo-Aramaic, too, poetry was the main vehicle of expression. The genre of the *durekyātā*, a popular type of church hymn, has been extensively studied by Alessandro Mengozzi, especially in his edition of the major works of its two most important early authors, the priest Israel of Alqosh (poetry dated to 1611)—who probably is the same person as the author of Classical Syriac hymns—and the priest Yosep of Telkepe (poetry dated to 1662–1665).¹⁸ Mengozzi has shown how their work is firmly rooted in the Classical Syriac heritage and is connected, in form as well as content, to earlier forms of liturgical poetry. From the 18th century onwards, the authors of the *durekyātā* come mainly from Chaldean circles.¹⁹

The Neo-Aramaic corpus of this period includes at least four other genres, two of which are also attested in manuscripts of this period. The first of these is very limited, and consists of notes in two grammatical manuscripts from the Alqosh region, probably dating to the 17th century.²⁰ These notes, consisting of Neo-Aramaic parallels to Syriac grammatical tables, give the impression that the scribe or author tried to increase the grammatical usefulness of the manuscript by supplying parallels in the spoken language. Although further study is needed, the notes suggest that Neo-Aramaic was seen as a language not only distinct from Classical Syriac, but also open to parallel grammatical analysis.

A second group consists of a few pieces of Bible translation. The only example dating to our period is a complete translation of the Gospel lectionary, made by another priest called Israel of Alqosh, probably a late descendant of the earlier Israel. Two 19th-century copies of this translation have survived the turmoil of World War I, and these put the original date of the translation to 1769. These copies, together with two early 19th-century translations

¹⁷Harrak 2004. For some inscriptions, see Fiey 1985; Harrak 2003; and Duval 1885.

¹⁸Mengozzi 1999, 2002; both works are also important sources of further bibliographic references.

¹⁹Mengozzi 1990, 1993; Saccagno 2005.

²⁰The notes are found in Cambridge Ms. Add 2015, containing the Classical Syriac Lexicon of Hunain and ‘Ananisho’ (Wright 1901: 546–548: “Nestorian *sertā* of the xviith cent.”) and London Add. 25,876 (Wright 1870–1872). It seems likely that the scribe of the latter manuscript, deacon Homo, son of priest Daniel of Alqosh, is also the author of the Neo-Aramaic notes. For the most part the notes are consistent with what we know about the Alqosh dialect of the time (Mengozzi 2002: 24–57), but forms closer to other dialects of northern Iraq occur as well.



(of Genesis 1–8 and of parts of the Gospel lectionary) were transmitted via the American Protestant missionaries who collected local Bible translations with a view to their translation project. Both Gospel lectionaries contain exegetical comments that deserve further study.²¹

Three remaining groups of texts are attested only in late 19th-century manuscripts, and were written at the request of Western scholars such as Eduard Sachau and Albert Socin.²² The first of these is the secular genre of the drinking and love songs (*zmiryātē d-rāwē*), belonging to the realm of popular culture, the fireside, weddings and such. Here the influence of Kurdish looms large, and it is highly likely that these songs had their origins in times long before their written codification in the late 19th century. Fabrizio Pennacchietti has contributed significantly to the study of this genre.²³ Pennacchietti also studied the genre of the Neo-Aramaic dialogue or contest poems, the *sugyātā*: a very old and traditional genre of Classical Syriac, but also attested in Neo-Aramaic. Like the *zmiryātē d-rāwē*, these dialogue poems were transmitted only in 19th-century copies, but undoubtedly go back to an earlier period.²⁴ A third group of Neo-Aramaic texts that deserve further study are the folk tales collected and edited by scholars such as Adalbert Merx and Albert Socin.²⁵ I assume that these, too, reflect pre-19th-century traditions of storytelling, and that many of these, like the popular songs, are part of the common heritage of the region rather than characteristic of the Christian communities.²⁶ These texts reflect a variety of Neo-Aramaic dialects, including those of Alqosh, Upper Tiari and Urmi. In this they differ from the relatively homogeneous corpus of literary texts from the 17th and 18th centuries that all reflect that particular dialect of Alqosh.

Alongside the rather limited manuscript transmission of earlier Christian Arabic writings,²⁷ Arabic once again became a vehicle of expression in the Church of the East and Chaldean circles.²⁸ The majority of Arabic texts, however, originated in Chaldean circles, and the few texts from Church of

²¹Murre-van den Berg 2006b.

²²Mengozzi 2002: 2–3.

²³Pennacchietti 1976. For texts, see Lidzbarski 1896; Socin 1882.

²⁴Pennacchietti 1993, 2005; Brock 1984.

²⁵Merx 1873; Socin 1882.

²⁶Merx 1873, *Vorwort*.

²⁷Although it is difficult to obtain a good impression of Christian Arabic manuscript transmission (not many separate catalogues exist), catalogues like Mingana 1933–1939 and Troupeau 1972–75 suggest that most manuscripts from this period come from Egypt and Western Syria; the scribes of the Church of the East do not seem to have contributed significantly to the transmission of the earlier Christian Arabic tradition which included important authors from the Church of the East.

²⁸Georg Graf's overview (Graf 1951: 94–113) remains the most complete introduction into this field. On Christian Arabic in general (including linguistic and text-critical issues, see Samir 1982. On spoken Christian Arabic of the region, see Jastrow 1978–81 and Abu-Haidar 1991.



the East authors almost all seem to have been written in connection with attempts at unions from that side. Chaldean authors were much more active in the field of Arabic writing, and besides the ever popular genre of the religious hymns (which however was less popular in Arabic than in Classical Syriac and Neo-Aramaic), we find examples of biography, autobiography and travel writing.²⁹ Theological treatises were translated or freely reworked from Latin and other Western sources, making it possible for Latin Christian traditions to find their way into the Chaldean Church. In the second half of the 18th century, inscriptions in Arabic also became more frequent, especially after 1743, when many churches that had been destroyed during the invasion of Nadir Shah were rebuilt.³⁰ Many of these inscriptions are in *garshuni*, i.e., in Syriac instead of Arabic script, like many of the Arabic texts of this period.³¹

One of the most prolific authors in Arabic was Mar Yosep II, the second patriarch of the Chaldean Church in Diyarbakir, whom I have mentioned in connection with Classical Syriac writing. He also contributed a couple of hymns to Neo-Aramaic literature, but is perhaps best known for his work in Arabic. Herman Teule, who analyzed his important *The Book of the Magnet*, concludes that Yosep might have composed it on the basis of Arabic translations of Latin texts, which he then also reworked in Classical Syriac. Yosep's autobiography indicates that he had received a thorough education in Arabic in Mosul, in addition to his Syriac training in Telkepe and ongoing contacts with Latin missionaries in Diyarbakir.³² Another noteworthy author in Arabic was the priest Ilyas bin Hanna al-Mawsuli. His travelogue, which covers the years between 1668 and 1683, tells us about his journey to Jerusalem and Southern Europe, and concentrates on his twelve-year stay in Mexico and Peru, where he visited monasteries and churches as well as clerical and worldly authorities. The avowed purpose of his text is to show the victory of the Catholic faith in South America, although mercenary and political motives seem to have constituted the main purpose of his travel.³³ The priest and subsequent bishop of Diyarbakir (between 1714 and 1727), Basilius 'Abd al-Ahad, wrote a biography of the Patriarch Yosep I, the first

²⁹On autobiography in Arabic, including examples dating to the 9th to 19th centuries, see Reynolds (ed.) 2001.

³⁰Harrak 2004.

³¹*Ibid.* See also Briquel Chatonnet 2005.

³²Teule 2004. On the Catholic contribution to Arabic literature, see further Graf 1951: 171–271.

³³For a translation of this text, see Matar 2003. On Eliya al-Mawsuli, see further Graf 1951: 97–99. The text, a fascinating mix of religious, political, economic (e.g., on silver mining), biological and ethnographic facts divers, deserves further study, especially on the question whether or not Matar's suggestion that Eliya al-Mawsuli was in some way connected to the Ottoman administration (Matar 2003: 45–46) can be supported further. Either way, the account is also interesting in connection with the history of the Chaldean Church in the Ottoman period.



Chaldean patriarch of Diyarbakir.³⁴ The teacher and priest Hidr ibn al-Maqdisi Hurmuz from Mosul (1679–1751) contributed religious hymns in Arabic and Classical Syriac, in addition to an Arabic-Syriac-Turkish dictionary and an account of his journey to Rome. He also translated from Latin into Arabic, for instance Bellarmino's *Doctrina Christiana* and perhaps also Thomas a Kempis' *De imitatione Christi*.³⁵

To sum up: in the 16th to 18th centuries, when relatively stable political circumstances made a cultural and literary renaissance possible, Classical Syriac, Neo-Aramaic and Arabic were the main languages used in the Catholic and traditional parts of Church of the East. The surviving evidence suggests that Classical Syriac was the preferred language of writing. However, Neo-Aramaic, and Arabic also began to be used.

3. *The Function of the Languages*

How then can this linguistic diversity best be explained? What was the function of these three languages within the Christian communities of northern Mesopotamia? I will start my discussion of these questions with the role of Classical Syriac, and show how this language functioned as the dominant literary language of the Church of the East and the Chaldean Church. Next, I will analyze the use of Arabic and Neo-Aramaic vis-à-vis Classical Syriac and vis-à-vis each other.

In my opinion, the most important issue is the position of Classical Syriac. When I started to study this period, I tended to see Neo-Aramaic as the important innovation, and Classical Syriac as a literary language in decline, struggling in the face of new competitors such as Neo-Aramaic and Arabic. The forgoing must have convinced you, as it has me, that this is a complete misreading of the situation: whatever one might think of the literary qualities of Classical Syriac poetry of this period (dismissed as tedious and uncreative by 19th and early 20th-century scholars), the language is without any doubt the preferred literary language of the two communities originating in the Church of the East.

What were the main reasons for the use of Classical Syriac? First and foremost, it was the language of the liturgy. In this period, as in most phases of the history of the Church of the East, the texts of the fixed parts of the daily liturgy were all in Classical Syriac. This was true also for most of the hymns sung during the service, which included recent compositions. Significantly, the emerging Neo-Aramaic poetry was also to a large extent inspired by Classical Syriac liturgical poetry.³⁶

³⁴Graf 1951: 99–100; Chabot 1896. Cf. also the autograph Add. 3286 (Zakho 1704) with translations from Syriac into Arabic *garshuni* (Wright 1901: 891–897).

³⁵Graf 1951: 105–109; Macuch 1976: 44–47.

³⁶Mengozzi 2002: vol. II, 17–20, 104–123.



Secondly, Classical Syriac was the language of the wider literary heritage of these churches, its theological, devotional, historical, philosophical, and grammatical writings. Although these writings may not have been read by the majority of church members, they were accessible to the educated elite by virtue of their continuous transmission in the Ottoman period. We may assume that parts of the clergy, monastic as well as secular, were well at home in these older texts and consciously continued to include these in the literary heritage of the community.

Thirdly, in the Ottoman period, Classical Syriac was the preferred language for new texts. This immediately becomes clear when we compare the amount of contemporary writing in Classical Syriac, Arabic, and Neo-Aramaic. Classical Syriac contributions constitute the majority in all genres, especially in those of hymn writing, colophon writing, letters and inscriptions, i.e., the most productive genres of the time. This suggests that for the scribes of the time, Classical Syriac was a suitable and versatile instrument for whatever needed recording, in poetry, colophons, and inscriptions.

Who used Classical Syriac? There can be little doubt that it primarily was the language of the educated elite of the Church of the East and the Chaldean Church, that is, the language of the clergy, from deacons to patriarchs. It was the clergy who had been trained in the use of Classical Syriac, and who became versed in it to different degrees: from being able to recite the liturgy with minimal understanding, to being able to understand complicated texts and write and converse in the classical language.³⁷

However, it would be wrong to assume that the use and understanding of Classical Syriac was restricted to the clergy. The regular attendance of daily and weekly liturgies implied that all parts of the population, including women and children, took part in the communal reciting and singing that were part and parcel of the church services. The recitation of these parts of the liturgy was trained in informal schools run by priests and deacons, building upon the many lexical and grammatical correspondences between the classical and the vernacular language.³⁸ Although this would probably not have enabled the lay public to literally translate parts of the liturgy into the corresponding Arabic or Neo-Aramaic, it seems probable that many of the so-called illiterate acquired a basic albeit passive competence in the classical language. The high esteem in which the Classical Syriac literary tradition was held by the larger population is further confirmed by the fact that both clergy and laity contributed significant amounts of money and

³⁷I have not found any definite proof that Classical Syriac was spoken in this period, but 19th-century data suggest that it is probable that some clergy spoke the language, compare, e.g., Sachau 1883: 355 on the linguistic competence of one of his informants in Mosul, Micha, who “fliessend Alt-Syrisch sprach, schrieb und dichtete.”

³⁸Little is known about the educational system before the Protestant missionaries arrived, but missionary sources indicate that there were small schools where young children were learning to read in several villages; cf. Smith/Dwight 1834: 354; Perkins 1843: 185.



resources to the writing and preservation of Classical Syriac manuscripts.³⁹ Rephrasing the above, one might say that in the 16th to 18th centuries, Classical Syriac had the advantage of being the language of a long communal history and a sanctified religious tradition, that is, it was a language highly charged with symbolic meaning, the use of which underlined the religious and historical unity of the community. This high status of Classical Syriac brought considerable practical advantages: its long use as a literary vehicle had made it into a fully standardized language that could easily bridge major differences between the languages spoken within this community.

When put like this, the question of Neo-Aramaic and Arabic writing has to be reversed: the question is not why Classical Syriac continued to be used by the educated elite, but rather, how Neo-Aramaic and Arabic managed to encroach on this domain that practically and symbolically was well-covered by Classical Syriac. What made it possible for these “new” languages to take over some of the functions of Classical Syriac?

There can be little doubt that Classical Syriac was not the first language or “mother tongue” of any of those that used it. The 19th-century situation, for which more data are available, suggests that most of the children within the Church of the East and the Chaldean Church were raised in local varieties of Neo-Aramaic. In many cases, a second and perhaps a third language, such as Arabic, Turkish, Persian, or Kurdish, would be acquired later in life, especially by the men.⁴⁰ We may assume that in the 16th to 18th centuries the linguistic situation was not fundamentally different. The relatively wide range of languages spoken by these communities would not have been coupled with a high level of literacy in a written language; few lay people would have been able to read and write. At the same time, 19th-century data show that a large body of oral literature (in Neo-Aramaic, Arabic, and Kurdish) was transmitted within this community, reflecting widespread “oral literacy” that should not be disregarded. Thus, what needs explaining is not the emergence of the 19th-century Neo-Aramaic songs and stories—these largely represent long-standing local oral traditions that were recorded at the request of Westerners. What needs explaining is the use of written Neo-Aramaic in the 16th to 18th centuries, alongside the increasing use of Arabic.

The use of Arabic, clearly, cannot be compared directly with Neo-Aramaic. Written Arabic could boast a long literary tradition, exceeding Classical Syriac in prestige and cultural impact. Although this prestige was often connected directly to Islamic traditions, Arabic had a distinct history of its own within the Christian communities of the Middle East, within the Syriac churches and within the Church of the East in particular. Although this

³⁹On women’s contributions, see Murre-van den Berg 2004. Among the male donors there is also a significant number of laymen.

⁴⁰Murre-van den Berg 1999b: 88–91.



earlier tradition of Christian Arabic does not seem to have been particularly well known in the circles that again started to write Arabic, it may be assumed that its literary prestige favoured the use of Arabic.

However, more was at stake. When comparing the linguistic situation of the 17th century with the ecclesiastical context, there is a striking correspondence between the Arabic-speaking regions and the regions that were to be influenced by the Catholic movement at an early stage. It was in towns like Diyarbakir, Mosul, and Mardin that the uniate movement gained its first adherents,⁴¹ and although all of the early converts to Catholicism were also well-versed in Classical Syriac and probably spoke a form of Neo-Aramaic, important parts of the early Chaldean communities were either primarily Arabic-speaking themselves or living in a largely Arabic-speaking context. In other words, uniatism was most successful among those who spoke Arabic as their first or second language.

This was more than a matter of language only: Arabic was the language of the towns and the larger villages, whereas speakers of Neo-Aramaic tended to belong to the tribal groups in the Hakkari Mountains or the villages further away from the city centers. Roughly put, conversion to Catholicism took place more often and more easily among the Arabic-speaking people of the towns than among the Neo-Aramaic speakers of the mountains. This suggests that conversion to Catholicism can be interpreted as part of an early modernization movement that attracted those parts of the Christian community that, by virtue of their knowledge of Arabic, were inclined to look beyond the confines of their strictly local language and identity.⁴² Thus, the use of Arabic within the Chaldean community may be seen, not only as a practical choice following from the shared language of a considerable part of its clergy and lay people, but also as a conscious decision to distinguish itself from the “rural” and “tribal” connotations of the Aramaic-speaking Church of the East.

This tendency was reinforced by the fact that Arabic had become the language of the Catholic movement in the Middle East. The uniate movement among the Greek (Rum) churches, among the Maronites, among the Armenians and the Syrian Catholics, supported by considerable Latin missionary efforts, had created a body of Catholic Arabic literature that delineated and supported the emerging Middle Eastern Catholic community. Thus, for the Chaldeans of northern Mesopotamia, Arabic not only distinguished them from their “heretic” counterparts, but also linked them closely to their

⁴¹Wilmshurst 2000; Murre-van den Berg 1999a.

⁴²On the connection between modernization, the use of Arabic and the attraction of Catholicism in the Middle East, see also Heyberger 1994; Masters 2001. Both offer detailed analyses of the various factors involved in the uniate movement, which further included direct influence of the Ottoman administration as well as church-political, theological and devotional considerations.



new co-religionists in the wider Middle East.⁴³ Not surprisingly, therefore, much of the literature in Arabic is concerned directly with the new Catholic identity, be it via theological treatises, translations of Western literature, travelogue, or autobiography.⁴⁴

Thus, whereas the use of Classical Syriac can be explained from religious, traditional, and practical reasons, and the use of Arabic from the emergence of the new Catholic identity, what explanations can be provided for the use of Neo-Aramaic? Can it also be tied to some kind of regional or religious identity? This link is certainly less conclusive than for Arabic: for the traditionalists in the Church of the East, Classical Syriac was the logical choice and there are no indications that in this period Classical Syriac was beginning to lose ground. However, the most important pieces of Neo-Aramaic writing of the 17th and 18th centuries come from the Alqosh region, in times when the traditionalist patriarchs, by sponsoring manuscript writing and liturgical renewal, opposed the ever-growing influence of Catholicism. This rise of traditionalist self-awareness in the 17th century coincided with the emergence of a distinct Neo-Aramaic literary tradition that began to distance itself from the parallel oral tradition of Neo-Aramaic.⁴⁵ The appearance of individual authors like Israel of Alqosh and Yosep of Telkepe, the start of a manuscript transmission including a fairly standardized orthography, the acceptance of the *durekyātā* as a liturgical genre, and the first attempts at grammatical comparison with Classical Syriac all took place somewhere in the late 16th and early 17th centuries.

It is not easy, though, to understand the exact relationship between the two developments: the rivalry with Catholicism on the one hand, and the emergence of a Neo-Aramaic literature on the other. Did the rivalry with Catholicism stimulate new developments in the field of the vernacular, or did the openness to Catholicism in one part of the church and the emerging new literature in another spring from the same context that encouraged new developments in the Eastern parts of the Ottoman Empire? The second explanation is supported by the fact that in the Jewish community of Nerwa (not far from Alqosh) Neo-Aramaic began to be written in roughly the same period, indicating a more generally shared awareness of the potentials of the vernacular languages and oral traditions than only in connection

⁴³Teule 2004; Graf 1951: 171–271. This is further confirmed by the interesting fact that one of the treatises by Yosep II after his death was transcribed in a *serto* hand, probably for use in the Syrian-Catholic community; cf. Wright 1901: 853–860, Add. 3281, 1725.

⁴⁴Perhaps Graf was right in even detecting a kind of fruitful rivalry with the other Uniate Christians; he noted “das Bestreben, den Wettbewerb mit den anderen, durch die Union geistig-kulturell gehobenen Orientalen aufzunehmen” (this in striking contrast with the “Nestorians” who in his opinion were stuck in “Lethargie und Unfruchtbarkeit”—at least in the realm of Arabic literature), cf. Graf 1951: 96.

⁴⁵On the interferences between oral and literary traditions in the East Syriac context, see Mengozzi 2002: vol II, 82–85.



with Roman Catholic influences.⁴⁶ However, Roman Catholic influence on the emergence of vernacular literatures has been documented elsewhere,⁴⁷ and although this influence is usually restricted to those communities that responded positively to Catholic missions, it is not unlikely that in this case, where the Catholic communities tended towards the use of Arabic, the use of vernacular Aramaic was stimulated precisely in open rivalry with the Catholic missions.

Among the patriarchates of this period, especially Mar Eliya X Yuhanan Maraugin (1660–1700) in Alqosh opposed the increasing influence of Catholicism in his region and it is well possible that he also stimulated the use of the vernacular as a literary language.⁴⁸ Although the *durekyātā* are not explicitly anti-Catholic, they positively affirm the traditional Church of the East theology and identity, and may thus have been actively used (at least in the 17th and early 18th centuries) in the rivalry between the two groups. Ironically, the *durekyātā*, because of their links to the Alqosh-region, became a firm part of the Chaldean identity once this region had converted to Catholicism in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

4. *Concluding Remarks*

We need not think very deeply to realize that the complex linguistic situation of the 16th to 18th centuries probably repeats earlier contexts in which the various types of Aramaic were spoken and written. In fact, the virtual monolingual situation of some modern European countries (albeit more of an ideal than a reality), in which one single language is used both to write and to speak, and in a variety of different contexts, is clearly the exception worldwide. The rule is complex situations such as the one described in relation to the Church of the East in the Ottoman Empire, where a variety of languages compete in a variety of domains. Situations in which people handle three to five different languages are as common today as they were in history, whereas language always is more than just an instrument of communication: it is always thoroughly connected with identity (including various forms of religious, ethnic, and cultural belonging) and history. The languages of the Church of the East and the Chaldean Church form an excellent example of this.

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⁴⁶For some remarks and further literature on the parallels between Jewish and Christian Neo-Aramaic literature, see Sabar 2005.

⁴⁷Compare, e.g., the contemporary example of Amharic in Ethiopia. See Cooper 1976.

⁴⁸Wilmshurst 2000: 242.



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