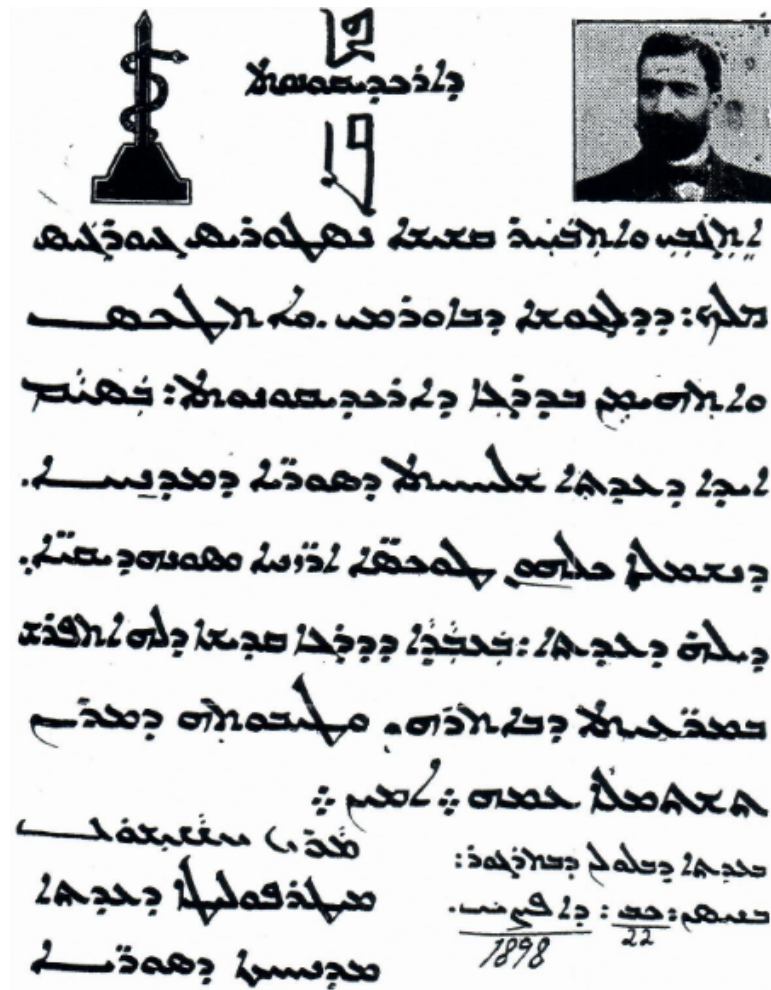


How Assyrian found its way into the Title of the Church of the East

Fred Aprim
July 25, 2021

Lately, there have been debates on social media in connection with the word “Assyrian” in the church title “Assyrian Church of the East”. Documents clearly show that the collective decision to add “Assyrian” to the title of this 2000 year old Church was reached during the 1976 Church of the East Synod. The change occurred because of the influence of the late Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV, who presided over the synod.¹ Mar Dinkha favored this change; in fact he was already using it when he was a bishop of Iran (as the sample documents in this article show).

This article does not intend to get into the issue of the ethnic characteristic of the Syriac (Aramaic)-speaking adherents of this Church, because numerous documents, one of which is included below,² have been presented in the past showing that these people were Suraye (Asuraye), Atouraye thus Assyrians.



1 <https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2021/They%20are%20Sobbing%20in%20Their%20Graves.pdf>
2 Diploma of ordination of Rev. Nestoris Gewargis Malik as Archdeacon 1898.

This article will furthermore not get into how the Vatican labeled the adherents of this Church who had converted to Catholicism as Chaldeans first in Cyprus in 1445 and later in Alqosh, Northern Iraq (Assyria), because the documents proving this are plentiful.³ Last but not least, this article will not address why certain Church leaders used a seal that stated “patriarch of the Chaldeans,”⁴ because the title “Chaldean” is religious in nature and church leaders used it for one reason or another. However, nothing could change the fact that the Syriac-speaking Christians who lived, and continue to live, in northern Mesopotamia (Assyria) for over 4000 years are Assyrians ethnically.

The Church of the East was established in Edessa (Osroēnē) in the first century of the Christian era. According to Dr. Esho Marcus, a former Editor of the Voice From the East, the official magazine of the Church of the East, it is from Edessa that the message of the Gospel spread. Edessa was a small kingdom, a buffer state between the Roman and Parthian Empires. In the second century, this church began to be organized. The teaching of the church spread to the Persian Empire. In the third century, the Church in the Persian Empire took in Christian refugees from the Roman Empire, where they were not welcomed. Streams of refugees turned to Persia to escape persecution in the Eastern Roman Empire. From around 280 AD, Mar Papa began to organize this Church, and the Metropolitan seat of Seleucia became the Church’s headquarters.^{5 6} This Church of the East (Church of Persia) with its center in Seleucia-Ctesiphon was geographically beyond the Western churches.⁷ It was an independent Church and had nothing to do with the Christological controversies of the 4th and 5th Centuries. Nestorius, the Archbishop of Constantinople from 10 April 428 to August 431, was the center of controversy, because of his views on the nature and person of Christ led to his condemnation as heretic by the Council of Ephesus in 431. The Church of the East had not participated in the Council of Ephesus in 431 or the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and was not aware of them, because of the conflicts between the Roman and Sassanid Empires. However, in time, the Church of the East supported Nestorius—though not necessarily the doctrine ascribed to him—and refused to denounce him as a heretic. The "Nestorian" label was initially a theological one, applied to followers of the doctrine of Nestorius; however, it was soon applied to all the churches within the Persian Empire with little regard for theological consideration.

The Church of the East was never ethnic in nature – it was called so due to geographical location, which was defined as all the regions of which the Romans knew to be to the east of their own border. Although this could be deceptive since the east to different nations, kingdoms, and empires meant different regions in different periods. At any rate, the early Church had adherents who were Arabs, Jews, Persians, Turkomans, Indian, Chinese, Mongols, and of course the Syriac-speaking Assyrians. The Church remained known as the Church of Persia (not “Persian Church,” as it is called erroneously), Nestorian Church, Eastern Church, Ancient Church of the East or Church of the East until around the early 20th Century.

Rev. John Stewart stated that before the Great War (WWI), there were many missions from different churches, including Church of England, German Protestant, Russian Orthodox, American Presbyterian,

3 <https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2002/Chaldeans%20are%20Assyrians.pdf>

4 http://www.urofthechaldeans.com/2018/12/clarifications-regarding-chaldean.html?fbclid=IwAR3_1j9dwmm22EA4um7A0aqkqWdvQuk0YPmAdcD9_WOQ65CBrue62aakQ8U

5 Marcus, Esho D.M.D, B.D.S. The Forgotten Glory. 1982.

6 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papa_\(bishop\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papa_(bishop))

7 Moffett, Samuel, A History of Christianity in Asia. Vol. I. Second Revised ED. 1998. P.193

etc. seeking to influence and help the members of the Church of the East.⁸ Whatever the hidden intentions of these missions were, that is another issue. In 1868, the Mission of the Archbishop of Canterbury began again to acquire momentum. The term “Assyrian Church” was used by this mission in the late 19th Century.

ANGLO-CONTINENTAL SOCIETY; FOR THE YEAR 1891.

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Strangely, in his book *An Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church*, Rev. William Ainger Wigram (Head of Mission from 1902 to 1912) failed completely to mention the name “Church of the East.” This is understandable if we consider the fact that he lived with the Assyrians in the mountainous region that was part of the historic Assyrian homeland. Therefore, it was not surprising that he used the term “Assyrian Church,” since he was staying among the Assyrian mountaineers.

Wigram was clear with what he meant. He stated:

The writer has throughout used for the Church in question the name "Assyrian." There is no historical authority for this name; but the various appellations given to the body by various writers ("Easterns," "Persians, Syrians, Chaldeans, Nestorians) are all, for various reasons, misleading to the English reader. To the ordinary English Churchman of today "the Eastern Church" is the Church to the east of him-viz. the Greek Orthodox; the Church of the old "Eastern Roman Empire," of Constantinople, with her great daughter, the Russian Church. The name "Eastern," however, as applied by those Greeks, meant the Church to the east of them-beyond the oriental frontier of the Roman Empire. To speak of "the Persian Church " is to do as much violence to ancient facts, as to speak to-day of "the Turkish Church (meaning thereby some one Christian in the Ottoman Empire) is to disregard modern facts. "Syrian," to an Englishman, does not mean "a Syriac-speaking man"; but a man of that district between Antioch and the Euphrates where Syriac was the vernacular once, but which is Arabic speaking to-day, and which was never the country of the "Assyrian" Church. "Chaldaean" would suit admirably; but it is put out of court by the fact that in modern use it means only those members of the Church in question who have abandoned their old fold for the Roman obedience: and "Nestorian" has a theological significance which is not justified. Thus it seemed better to discard all these, and to adopt a name which has at least the merit of familiarity to most friends of the Church to-day.⁹

The birth of this term “Assyrian Church” makes sense, as some argue. Consider how certain travelers stayed with the Kurdish people and soon they began to call the historic Assyrian regions “Kurdistan” (Land of the Kurds).

The Late Patriarch Mar Shimun did use the Assyrian name in some capacities. See for example the Mar Shimun petition to the League on Nations in 1933. Again, the Patriarch is not saying “the Assyrian Church of the East.” The Patriarch is saying “the Catholicos Patriarch of the Assyrians” or “Patriarch of the East.”¹⁰ One example here:

As from Patriarchate, Mosul,
c/o Y.M.C.A., Baghdad,
August 16th, 1933.

*To the Secretary-General,
League of Nations,
Geneva.*

I humbly beg leave to send you a copy of my report, with copies attached of the official documents, and translations of various speeches, and a copy of a report made by an eyewitness of many years' experience of this country and its people. I have made my report in this way not to express bitter feelings, but that the League and the world may make unbiased judgments.

Since writing this report so much has, and is taking place, such as massacre of the women, children and old men which were left in the villages, the robbing and burning of the latter, as revenge taken by the police and Arab army, and certain Kurdish and Arab tribes, because of their defeat and failure to subdue the spirit of the Assyrians who resisted the Government's policy, first by leaving the country to prepare for the exit of all, according to the alternative policy which the Government officials told them (see report of meeting held in Mosul July 14th, 1933).¹

The Government received this decision from the leaders and a copy was sent to me (copy attached to my report).

The circumstances of my forced detention in Baghdad made it difficult to tell the outside world, but I have been able to send out letters and cablegrams through various friends as in this case, with the hope that they reach their destination. So far I have received no acknowledgments.

I beg your help in that an International Commission will be sent out to investigate both sides of this question at the earliest possible moment.

I fully realise that this communication is not coming to you through the proper channels as laid down in the League's regulations, but under the circumstances I have no other alternative.

*(Signed) ESHAI SHIMUN,
By the Grace of God, Catholicos
Patriarch of the Assyrians.*

9 Wigram, William Ainger. An Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church. 1910.
10 https://biblio-archive.unog.ch/Dateien/CouncilDocs/C-535-1933-I_EN.pdf

And another below:

The first meant starvation and persecution. The second spelt disaster. The third was the only possible alternative to those Assyrians unable to agree to the Government's policy.

Attached is a letter which those who crossed the frontier into Syria sent to the Minister of the Interior of Iraq.

No British official now left to deal with the Assyrian case, has any real first-hand knowledge of my people, or what they have suffered during the past nineteen years.

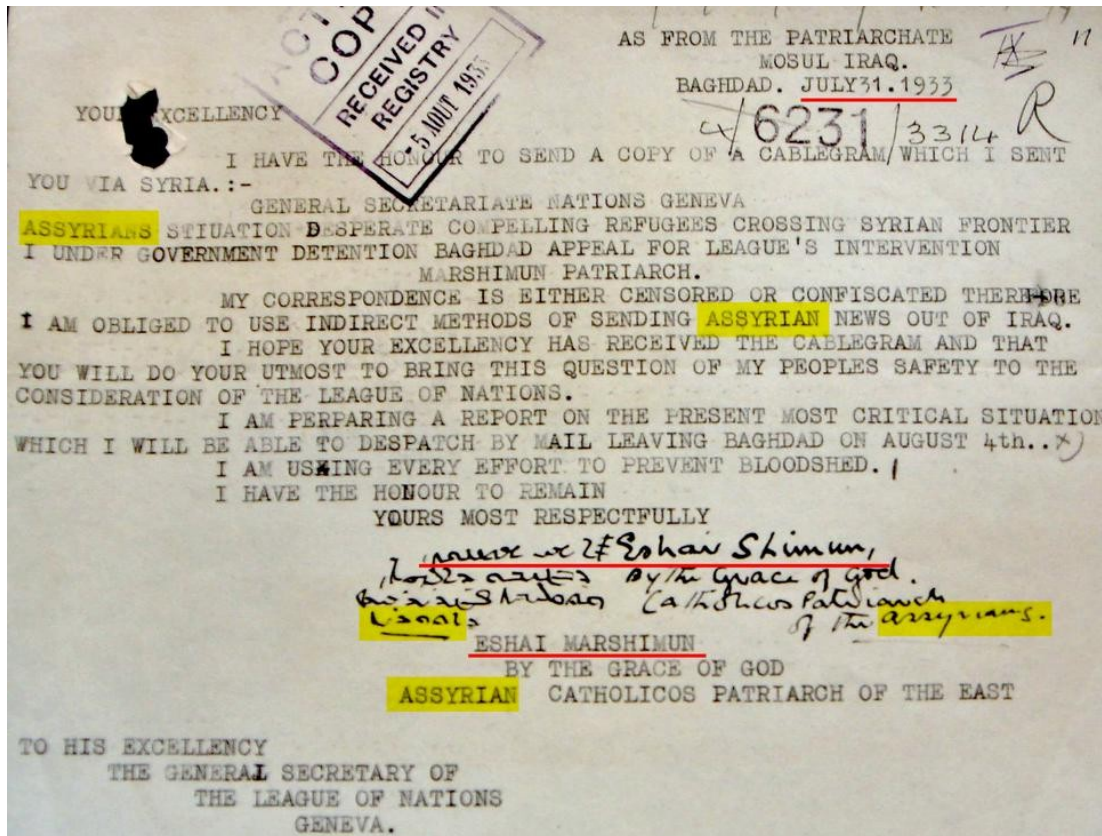
The League of Nations betrayed us

- (1) By giving our old lands and homes to Turkey ;
- (2) By handing us over to an Arab Government.

At the moment of closing this report I have knowledge of the burning of an Assyrian village, the local papers are full of news of fighting between Assyrians and Arabs on the frontier, the deporting of some of my relations and Assyrian notables from Mosul, and carrying away of cattle and other properties from the villagers.

*(Signed) ESHAI SHIMUN,
By the Grace of God, Catholicos
Patriarch of the East.*

The Late Mar Shimun sent many petitions trying to bring attention to the Assyrian tragedy. See here:¹¹



Later, we have the Mar Shimun's Assyrian National Petition to the United Nations in 1945, which is in

the same style, where the patriarch prints “Catholicos Patriarch of the Church of the East and the Assyrian Nation”, but he signs it as “Patriarch of the East”.

In consequence of the last War (World War I), they are now settled in many countries, viz.: Iraq, Syria, Iran, Russia, United States of America, and other countries. If such a home were granted them under an international organization that is to be set up, they would congregate in that home, which would enable them to live free from want and fear, and to preserve their Christian faith, their language, and their ancient culture. The Assyrians are a peaceful people and anxious to live with all their neighbors in peace and amity, and to cooperate with them to the fullest extent, irrespective of religion or creed. With this end in view, I offer my prayers to the Lord God of Hosts for an early termination of the present conflict (World War II), the success of the conference of Allied Nations, and the international organization that is to evolve therefrom.

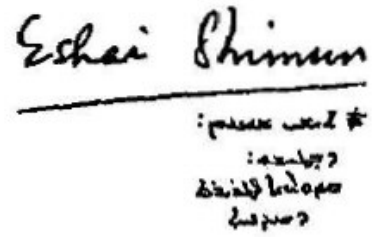
I have the honor to be, Excellency,

Yours very truly,

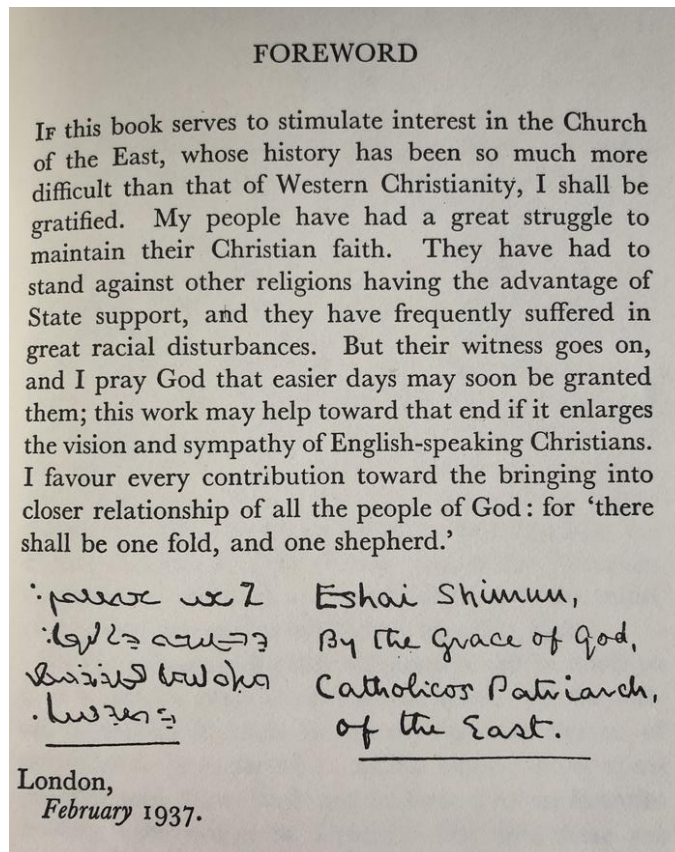
ESHAI SHIMUN

By Grace,
Catholicos Patriarch of the Church
of the East and the Assyrian Nation

Dated May 7, 1945



However, we see also that he did not use the term “Assyrian” in the church title. For example, in 1937, he wrote the below foreword.¹²



12 Vine, Aubrey. The Nestorian Churches. London, Reprint, 1937.

On July 28, 1968, the consecrations of both Bishop Mar Narsai (for the diocese of Beirut, Lebanon) and Bishop Mar Youkhanan (for the diocese of Khabor, Syria) took place. The patriarchs of the Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, and Catholic churches and many government officials were in the audience. Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun presented a sermon about the history of the Church of the East. In his sermon, Mar Shimun never mentioned the word “Assyrian” as the church title. The Patriarch referred to it, repeatedly and accurately, as “the Apostolic Church of the East” or “the Church of the East.”¹³

Two points must be considered here: First, consider that Patriarch Mar Shimun was very young (only 25 years old) when he began writing the 1933 petitions. Second, the above examples reflect the known fact that Patriarch Mar Shimun, just as so many before him, was granted supreme leadership, temporal as well as spiritual. Therefore, it was not unusual for Mar Shimun to use titles such as the “Catholicos Patriarch of the Assyrians”, “Catholicos Patriarch of the East”, or “Catholicos Patriarch of the Church of the East and the Assyrian Nation” in his communications because he was the leader of his Church and people. However, we can see in all his letters and petitions that he did not present the Church as “The Assyrian Church of the East”. There is a difference between the titles he mentioned earlier and the title “The Assyrian Church of the East”. By the way, the Late Mar Shimun ended that tradition of the supreme leader when he officially later gave up his temporal power.

The spirit of nationalism was re-blossoming among the Assyrians, especially those in Iran, where they found in the Shah of Iran a tolerant leader. They began to use the Assyrian name in one capacity or another in their speeches, letters, and communications. The founders of the Assyrian Universal Alliance (AUA) in Iran were planning their official establishment.¹⁴ The Assyrian Youth Cultural Society (A.Y.C.S.) of Iran was active from the early 1960s and part of their activism was to fight for the rights of their fellow Assyrians in Iraq after the 1963 Coup of the Arabist Abd al-Salam ‘Aarif in Iraq that toppled Abd al-Kareem Qasim, the only good leader Iraq had during the years of the republic. Mar Dinkha was very close with the AUA founders and the AYCS in Iran, first as a priest and later (from 1962) as the bishop of Iran. He began to use the title “the Assyrian Church of the East” on his letterheads.

In 1975, as campaigns by Assyrian candidates for the Iranian parliament began, Bishop Mar Dinkha used his position and asked Shlimon Bet Shmuel (who was living in Iran at the time) to sing couple of patriotic songs in a rally that the AUA was organizing at Sharqi Ashouri hall in support for Homer Ashourian, one of the AUA’s early fathers. Ashourian was running against the incumbent representative Dr. Wilson Bet Mansour who has been a member of parliament for some 8 years already. Shlimon sang two songs: Orkha d’ Nineveh (Nineveh’s Road) and Takhrina Shimma d’ Atour b’Iqara (Remembering the name “Assyrian” with pride). The two songs caused much enthusiasm among the gathered and tilted the support towards Ashourian who later won the parliamentary seat.¹⁵ Mar Dinkha played political favoritism by officially backing the AUA official.

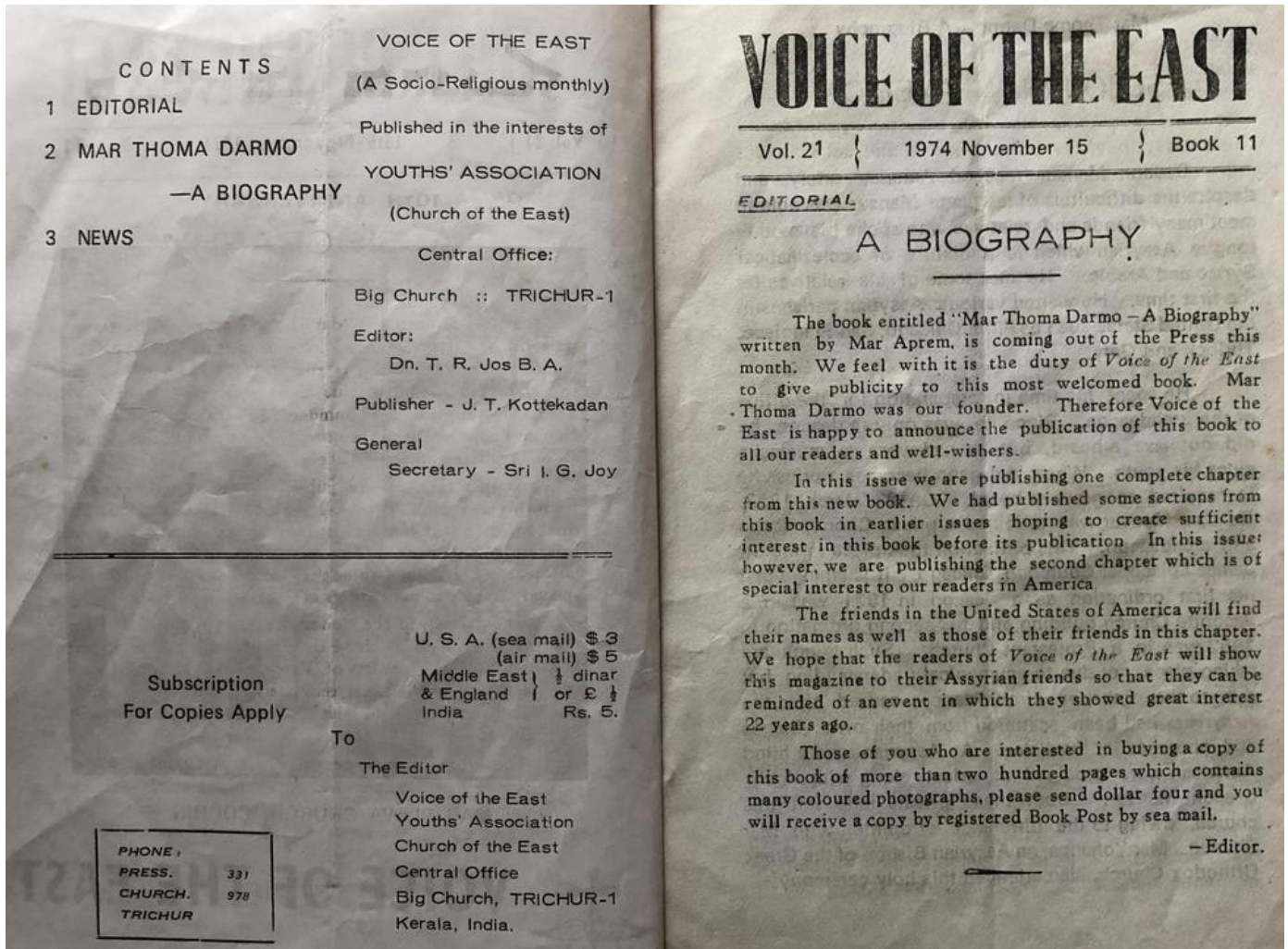
13 Sermon by Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun in Lebanon on July 28, 1968. Courtesy of Dr. Esho Marcus. <https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/1999/Sermon%20of%20Mar%20Eshai%20Shimun,%20Beirut,%20Lebanon,%20July%2028,%201968.pdf>

14 The *Assyrian Universal Alliance* was officially founded in Pau, France where the first congress was held on April 13, 1968.

15 Information provided by Singer/Song Writer Shlimon Bet Shmouel via phone.

The inclusion of the term “Assyrian” in some manner in the title of the Church of the East was arbitrary. Different bishops used it at their own discretion. Some bishops wrote “Church of the East (Assyrian)” while others wrote “(Assyrian) Church of the East.” Placing “Assyrian” in parentheses is how it is originally in many documents i.e., this author did not insert or create them.

On the other hand, we have official church publications that maintained the original title. The Nov 15, 1974 issue of the official church magazine published in India under the name “Voice of the East” shows clearly in two locations that the name of the church is “Church of the East”.



Also, during the troubled 1960s years of the Church, several letters were written by the clergy and the churches committee members. We could see that almost all bishops signed their names as bishops of “the Church of the East.”

Bishop of Baghdad Esho Sargis signed his letter as “Bishop of the Church of the East.”

ce and your influence to remain upon the people. If you agree with that I am writing then please look carefully into contents of the letter written by the Kirkuk's dioceses and look of it very deep as the same being the request of all our people in Iraq.

In conclusion let us pray Almighty God to help us to do will and to work in the field of His Son, Amen.

Your brother in Christ,

Sd/- ESHO SARGIS,
By grace of God,
Bishop of the Church of the East.

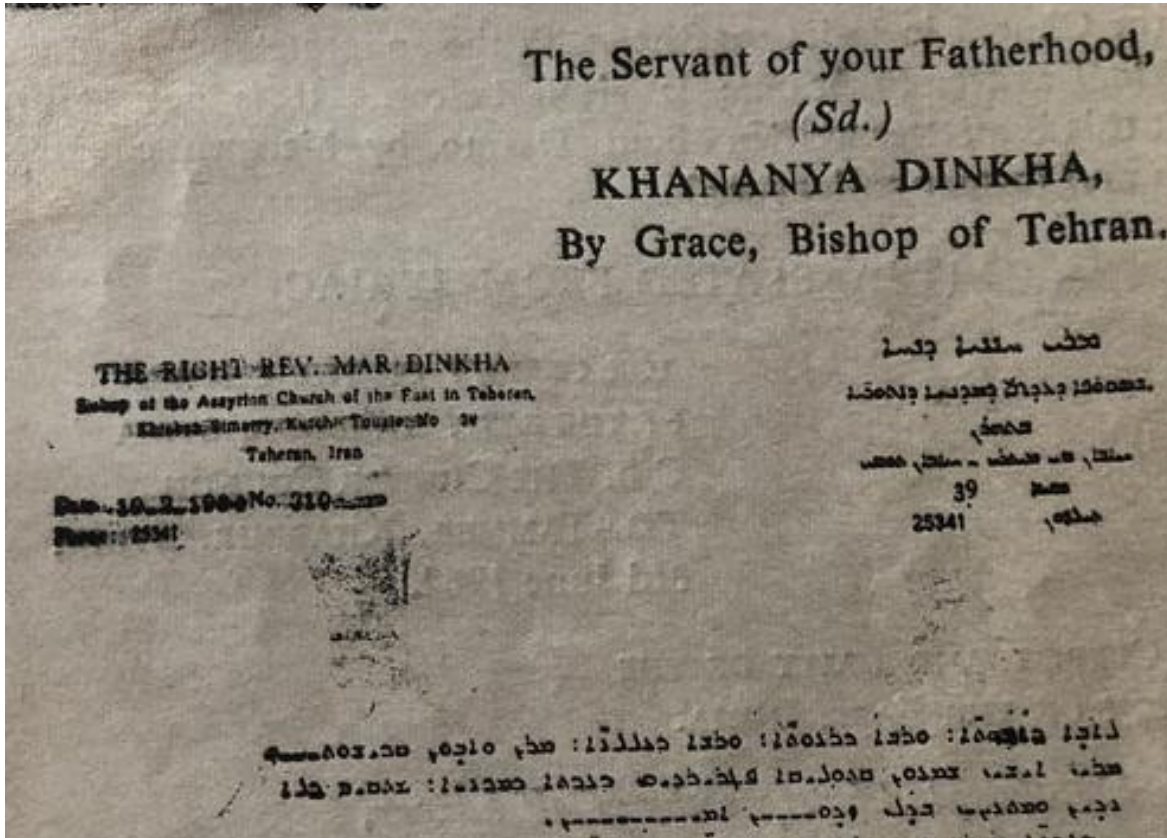
Bishop Philipose Youkanan signed his letter as "Bishop of the Church of the East."

ke you up and to turn you from the sinful acts and repented.

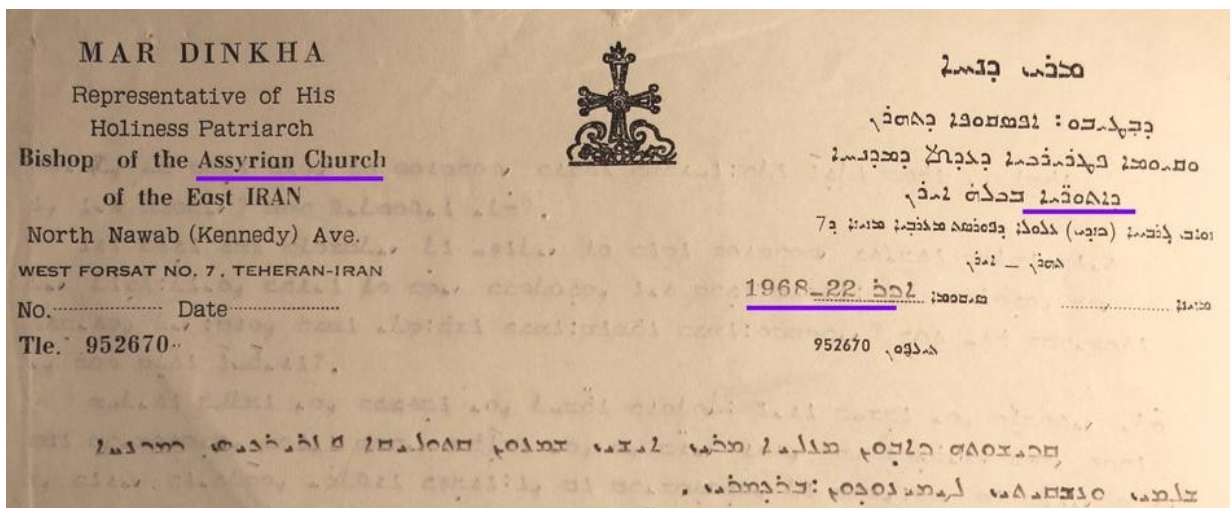
(Sd.) PHILIPOSE YOKANAN
By Grace Bishop of the Church of the East.

must not even appear to incline our hearing to us, even though they be words of truth which for it would be a disgrace unto us that those rebelled against God should become our

However, the Bishop of Iran, Mar Dinkha, signed his name as “Apisqopa d ‘Eeta d’ Madinkha d’ Atourayeh” or “Bishop of the Assyrian Church of the East.” Again Mar Dinkha took advantage of the freedom enjoyed by the Assyrians in Iran, the influence of the AUA and A.Y.C.S. and continued to use the Assyrian name in the church title.



And that trend continued in 1968.¹⁶



The diocese of the Church of the East were generally named after the saints and included the term “Nestorian” in the title and/or “Church of the East.” The Assyrian name was never in the OFFICIAL title of the church of the East in Iraq. In fact, “Assyrian” was not in the Church title in Syria or Lebanon either. According to Dr. Marcus, Archbishop Mar Narsai DeBaz expressed his dissatisfaction with the decision of adding the term “Assyrian” to the title. The archbishop criticized certain Assyrian nationalists for interfering in the Church affairs.¹⁷ However, many church committees might have taken the name Assyrian Church Committee of such and such, though the official church title did not include “Assyrian”.

The letterhead and signature of the late Metropolitan of Iraq Mar Yousip Khnaneesho below is one example. The letterhead says “The Archbishop See of the Church of the East (Nestorian) for the Assyrian Sect in Iraq”. Mar Yousip signed the letter as “Yousip Khnaneesho, Archbishop and Head of the Assyrian people in Iraq.” The church title is not “the Assyrian Church of the East.”¹⁸



17 Personal conversation between Mar Narsai and Dr. Marcus shared on the phone by Dr. Marcus with this writer on July 22, 2021.

18 Of course, this title “Assyrian sect” was set by the Iraqi government to weaken and destroy Assyrian nationalism.

Also, the resting place of the late Mar Yousip Khaneesho, Metropolitan of Iraq who passed away in 1977 clearly indicates that “Assyrian” was not in the title of the Church in Iraq yet. The description states, “Mar Yousip Khaneesho, Metrapoleeta d’ ‘Aeeta d’ Madinkha b Iraq” (“Metropolitan of Church of the East in Iraq”).



Mar Giwargis Sliwa, the current patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East ignored the word “Assyrian” in his letterheads while he was the Archbishop and the patriarchal vicar in Iraq. This is a clear indication of his stance on the matter. He changed his stance after Sept 18, 2015, as He was consecrated as the new patriarch and had to abide by the title that has been officially applied in 1976. His 2005 letter while an archbishop to the committee that was established to renovate the Assyrian

Dinkha's influence on the bishops was instrumental in OFFICIALLY adopting the new name, i.e. "Assyrian Church of the East". There was no such official change in the Church title while the late Patriarch Mar Shimun was at the helm of the Church.

Assyrian thinker and activist Yousip Canon told me that he met Mar Dinkha during that visit of the new patriarch to Iraq. Raabi Canon told Mar Dinkha that the addition of "Assyrian" to the church title was wrong. Mar Dinkha responded that it was the right thing to do, because it was no different than the Armenian Orthodox Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Russian Orthodox Church. Raabi Canon told Mar Dinkha that as far as the Assyrian national movement, this step was counterproductive because Armenia, Greece, and Russia were recognized states. In fact the Armenian, Greek, and Russian in their example were initially meant to relate to the geographical regions of those churches. The Assyrian case was different since Assyria was not yet recognized on the world map and the church would be seen as an ethnic or national church when it clearly was not.²⁰ And since our people belong to different churches and are ethnically labeled differently, because of complications and misunderstandings, applying the national name to one church would backfire as the members of the other churches would see it as if the members of this Assyrian Church of the East are the true Assyrians and not them.²¹

The correct names of many churches we know were linked to their locality – they were never intended to be recognized as national churches. We have the Church of Rome (not Roman Church) and the Church of England. In early church history, we read that our church was referred to as the Church of Athur (Church of Assyria) or the Church of Adiabene (Arbil region). Under such church titles, many non-Assyrians could easily be its members, including Hindus. The Church of England has members in South Africa and the Church of Rome has members throughout the world.

Furthermore, Dr. Nicholas Al-Jeloo argued, "... in the case of the Greeks, Armenians and even Copts, the majority of their people are Orthodox and the Catholics and others are a small minority. So when they sometimes claim exclusivity by saying "the Greek Church", "the Armenian Church" or "the Coptic Church" they have some justification in that." Others argued if the Chaldeans or Suryanis (Syriacs) wanted to use the Assyrian name nobody is stopping them from using it. Al-Jeloo argued, "... but that is not a good argument at all. That's because it naively pretends to be ignorant of prevalent Middle Eastern mentalities, as well as the uncompromising pride and egotisticality of religious leaders."

For the Assyrian national cause specifically, many have argued that adding "Assyrian" to the church title proved to be a destructive decision, as recent past has shown. Insinuating that the so-called Nestorian church was "the" Assyrian church, the Assyrians alienated members of the Chaldean Catholic Church and the Syriac Orthodox or Catholic Churches who saw themselves ethnically as Assyrians. John Hajjar argued, "When the patriarch of the Church of the East, claims a secular post as a national leader, then automatically members of other churches would not relate to him, especially with the more the term "The Assyrian Church" is used, the name Assyrian got associated with the religious doctrine of the Church of the East. and many outsiders are associating the two together. And this got many Chaldeans and Syriacs to distance themselves from the Assyrian name, simply because they don't follow that religious doctrine."

No one can deny the fact that the late martyred Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun was a nationalist. He served his church and people since he was 12 years old, until his assassination in 1975.²² The Late

20 There are Indo-European members of the Church of the East in India even today.

21 Phone conversation between Raabi Yousiph Canon and this author on July 20, 2021.

22 <https://www.atour.com/history/1900/20000717b.html>

patriarch was the temporal leader – he represented nation and church. This was a recognized position from the Ottoman Era as Assyrians were part of a millet system. It was for that reason that the late Mar Shimun presented petitions to the League of Nations, United Nations, and many powerful states and personalities. However, the late patriarch also believed in the universal nature of the Church of the East. It was for that reason that the late Mar Shimun established new non-Assyrian congregations, such as the congregation of Seattle, Washington. The Mar Shimun was under a lot of pressure from certain groups to add the term “Assyrian” to the name, but he did not make that change officially.

If we look at the events from 1976 onward, we can sense a more dangerous polarization in the various segments of the Syriac-speaking Christians from adding “Assyrian” to the Church of the East title. While there were issues between the Church of the East with both its branches, Nestorian and Chaldean; the clergy and members of the Chaldean Catholic Church slowly began to take steps to separate themselves as ethnically different. The same happened in the case of the Syriac churches where the Aramean movement countered with greater zeal than ever before.