

THE TUROYO LANGAUGE TODAY

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I. The Turoyo Language and its Speakers

Turoyo (native from: Tūrōyo) is a Neo-Aramaic language which is spoken by a Christian population in an area called by the traditional name of Tur Abdin (native from: Tur ^CAbdIn). This area is situated in the central part of Mardin province in South Eastern Turkey. The center of the Turoyo language area is the district town of Midyat (native from: Midyad). In Tur Abdin linguistic and religious affiliation coincide to a very high degree —with the exception of one Kurdish speaking village (Kerburan) the whole Christian population of Tur Abdin proper speaks Turoyo. The predominant denomination among the Tur Abdin Christians is Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite).

The 1975 census gives 16905 inhabitants for the town of Midyat. Until 1970 Christians and Muslims in Midyat were approximately equal in number (Anschutz, 61). However, they were largely segregated in two different parts of the town, the Muslims in Astal, the Christians in Midyat Proper. Basing ourselves on the above data provided by Anschutz we can thus estimate that about 7000 to 8000 Turoyo speakers were living in Midyat in 1970. At the same time there existed 16 entirely Christian villages and some 22 villages with a mixed population of Christians and Muslims. The total of Turoyo speakers in Tur Abdin in 1970 can be estimated at 20,000 (Anschutz, 21).

Besides the Turoyo community still residing in the original homeland a large diaspora had established itself since the end of World War I. The Armenian genocide in 1915/6 had severe repercussions for the Christians of Tur Abdin; although this did not lead to a complete annihilation of the community, a number of Turoyo speakers were murdered. As a consequence to these tragic events and the subsequent hardships of the Ataturk regime thousands of Turoyo speakers emigrated to Syria and Lebanon where especially large communities existed in Qamishle in North Eastern Syria, right across the Turkish border, and in Beirut. In the fifties and sixties another wave of emigration set in; it was directed primarily towards the

larger urban centers in the western part of Turkey, and in particular Istanbul where an estimated 20,000 Turoyo Christians settled down until the sixties.

At the same time West Germany started to import foreign labor on large scale. One of the countries which catered to the booming West German economy was Turkey, and this opened up a new possibility of emigration to the oppressed Christians. Thousands of them seized the opportunity to emigrate to Germany as "Gastarbeiter" (foreign laborers). This first generation is by now firmly settled and on its way to assimilation. When, a few years later, Germany cut the import of foreign labor because of economic recession, the Turoyo Christians willing to emigrate had to look for different strategies. The reasons compelling them to leave their own native country had not become any weaker -- on the contrary, the large Kurdish majority that surrounds and pervades Tur Abdin was steadily increasing its pressure on the Christians minority. The Kurdish policy consisted in taking over Christian property by mostly illegal means, thus infiltrating the Christian villages and slowly pushing out the remaining Christians. The Turkish authorities viewed this activity with an attitude that oscillated between indifference and sympathy. Thus during the seventies Turoyo Christians started to flock to Germany again, this time as political refugees asking for asylum. They argued that, as Christians, they were persecuted minority in Turkey, without the possibility of maintaining their cultural, religious and linguistic identity and, in fact, without any efficient protection of their lives and properties as well. The German authorities flatly denied that there was any racial or religious discrimination in Turkey. The demands for asylum were turned down and many refugees were sent back to Turkey where they faced imprisonment, while others remained in Germany for years as their legal action dragged on. Even when the military seized power in Turkey and did away with the last remnants of democracy the German authorities kept to their tough position, although refugees from other persecuted minorities (e.g., Yezidis) and political refugees also began to arrive in increasing numbers. In the meantime, however, other European countries had taken notice of the discrimination of Christians in Turkey and acknowledged their right to asylum. Sweden was the first country to officially open its doors to the Turkish Christians, and during the seventies several thousands of Turoyo Christians were accepted into the country and granted asylum.

The present situation of the Turoyo diaspora in Europe can be summarized like this: After years of generously accepting Christian and

other refugees from the Middle East, Sweden has recently reversed its policy and now is turning refugees back. In Germany, on the other hand, Christian refugees have won a number of law suits in recent years and have been granted asylum individually while others have been denied it. But still there is no general regulation applied to the whole community. And still new refugees are arriving. The first years of military régime had brought about a certain alleviation of the Tur Abdin situation: The military kept a very close control over the Kurdish area, which reduced Kurdish aggression against the Christian minority. But this was a side effect and certainly not desired by the Turkish authorities, and more recently the situation of the Christians started to deteriorate again. In September 1984 another huge wave of refugees arrived in West Germany; at present it is still uncertain how German authorities are going to treat them.

Of all the countries which witnessed an immigration of Turoyo refugees, Sweden was the only one that went beyond mere toleration. In fact, Swedish authorities actively helped to resettle the Turoyo refugees, organized Swedish language courses and helped the people to adjust to the new surroundings. The most interesting move, from linguistic point of view, was the decision to introduce the Turoyo language instruction into those Swedish schools which were frequented by Turoyo speaking children. This, however, proved to be very difficult because Turoyo is an unwritten language without any literary tradition. There existed no teaching materials nor any other kind of printed texts except the studies which had been written on Turoyo by the orientologists. In 1983 the Swedish National Board of Education published a first Turoyo schoolbook for children. It is called "Turoyo Qorena" ("Come let's read!") and is written in a modified Latin alphabet. The committee which produced the book was headed by Dr. Yūsuf Ishāq who carries a Ph. D. in Semitics from the American University in Beirut. Although not himself a Turoyo speaker but a native from Bartilli in Northern Iraq, he actively and expertly directed his committee and overcame all the difficulties inherent in this kind of pioneer work.

The chances for a long term survival of Turoyo language are closely tied up with the fate of the original homeland, Tur Abdin. If the emigration of Turoyo speakers from Tur Abdin continues at the present rate the language will die out in its original habitat within about two to three decades. The diaspora is not likely to maintain the use of Turoyo for more than two generations. There is a real danger, therefore, that in about

fifty years from now one of the most beautiful Semitic tongues of modern times will become extinct. For the time being, however, Turoyo is not in imminent danger. On the contrary, the presence of thousands of Turoyo speakers in Western Europe, most of them fairly recent arrivals, brings Turoyo within easy range of semitists and linguists. It is now possible to study Turoyo without leaving Sweden, Holland or Germany.

II. Some characteristics of Tūrōyo as compared with other Neo-Aramaic languages
(all data are from village dialects)

a) in phonology:

- 1) retention of the pharyngeal fricatives /h/ (voiceless) and /ħ/ (voiced):

afro	"earth"
ħamro	"wine"

- 2) retention of the fricative variants of the so-called "Begadkefat" of Aramaic as /f/, /w/, /t/, /d/, /x/, /g/:

kafno	"hunger"
dahwo	"gold"
saṭwo	"winter"
ḏdḏo	"known"
baxyo	"weeping" (noun)
raḡlo	"foot"

- 3) loss of Aramaic consonant gemination with compensatory vowel lengthening:

sāmo	"poison"
šāto	"year"
ṣēzo	"goat"
gēlo	"grass"

- 4) at the same time, development of a different type of consonant gemination which is morphologically conditioned:

karme	"vineyards"
āk-karme	"the vineyards"

grəšle	"he pulled"
grəšše	"they pulled"

5) unconditioned shift of *ā > ō (word finally -o):

hmōro "donkey"

ālōho "God"

b) in pronoun and noun morphology:

1) development of a definite article which is prefixed to the noun and carries the main stress:

m. sg.	û-bayto	"the house"
f. sg.	î-šāto	"the year"
pl.	âk-karme	"the vineyards"

(In the plural there is no gender distinction; the initial consonant of the noun is doubled, thus, e.g., âq-qayse "the sticks, âṣ-ṣēze "the goats etc.).

2) development of the enclitic personal pronouns functioning as copula in nominal sentences:

ōno	"I"
harke-no	"I am here"
hat	"you"
harke-hat	"you are here"
hīye	"he"
hīya	"she"
harke-yo	"he/she is here"

γ) in verb morphology:

1) all tenses are formed from original participles; there are no tenses based on an original infinitive or verbal noun.

2) the three so-called verb stem of Aramaic still transpire in Tūrōyo verb stem formation:

	Present	Past	
"p ^e çal"	gōrēs	grēšle	"to pull"
"Paççel"	mhāləq	mhālaqlə	"to throw"
"Aççel"	mākrex	mākraxle	"to make turn around"

- 3) For each stem there is a synthetic passive which is derived from the respective reflexive stem of Aramaic. (The passive thus is not formed analytically by means of modal verbs)

Examples:

	Present	Past	
"Ethp ^e çel"	m grēs	grīs	"to be pulled"
"Ethpaççal"	mihāləq	mhāləq	"to be thrown"
"Ettaççal"	mītakrex	mtakrex	"to be turned around"

- 4) in the p^eçal there exists an intransitive inflection which has a present identical with that of the transitive verbs but a different past of the pattern "fāççəl-":

	Present	Past	
Transitive	gōrēs	grēšle	"to pull"
Intransitive	dōmex	dāmex	"to sleep"

III. The linguistic situation in Tur Abdin and South Eastern Turkey

Mardin Province is among the areas claimed as part of Kurdistan by the Kurdish nationalists, and in fact a majority of people in that province are Kurdish-speaking. Turkish, the official language, is not native to Mardin province and is spoken mainly by teachers, civil servants and the military. There are two important linguistic minorities, Arabs and Turoyo. Some of the Arabic dialects of the area have been described by Jastrow (see especially Jastrow 1978 and 1981). As explained earlier, the Turoyo area occupies the central part of Mardin province. A few Chaldean villages which speak an Eastern dialect akin to that of Iraq but completely different from Turoyo have survived in the easternmost part of Mardin province near the

Iraqi border (district of Silopi). Other dialects of the Eastern group may have become extinct without ever being recorded. Even until 1950 the Eastern dialects were closer to the Turoyo area than today, due to the Jews of Cizre who spoke Neo-Aramaic dialect of the Eastern type (Nakano); some of them, however, may also have been Arabic-speaking. Thus Turoyo and the Eastern dialects must have been less than 50 km apart until one generation ago, but apparently they were in no direct contact. Another dialect of the Eastern type was discovered by Jastrow in 1970 near Pervari in Siirt province (Jastrow 1971). In its general appearance this dialect clearly belongs to the Eastern group but it shares with Turoyo one general feature, viz. the preservation of the pharyngeal fricatives /ħ/ and /ʕ/.

The only Neo-Aramaic dialect closely related to Turoyo was discovered by Jastrow in 1968 in Diyarbakir. It had been spoken originally in a single village called Mlahsō, situated in the Lice district of Diyarbakir province. Being situated well within Armenian territory, the village was destroyed during the Armenian holocaust, and most speakers were killed. A few survivors were still living in 1968, and I managed to collect some material on this nearly extinct dialect. Mlahsō Aramaic shares with Turoyo the unconditioned shift of *ā > ō and the preservation of this pharyngeal fricatives /ħ/ and /ʕ/. However, word stress is on the last syllable, and long vowels in closed syllables have not been shortened. Compare the following data:

Mlahsō	Turoyo (villages)	
hmōrō	hmōro	"donkey"
dōmɔd	dəmɔd	"they sleep"
dōmɔx	dōmɔx	"he sleeps"
qɔmle	qəmlə	"he got up"

the interdental spirants have not been preserved but shifted to sibilants, e.g.:

Mlahsō	Turoyo	
tlōsō	tlōtō	"three"
lɔd	lɔd	"hand"

A paper on Mlahsō Aramaic is in preparation.

Finally a word should be added on dialect differentiation within Turoyo. On the whole, variation can be described as slight, and complete mutual understanding is nowhere impaired in the Turoyo area. Nevertheless, there is a clear distinction between the dialect of the town (Midyat) on one hand and the village dialects on the other. On the phonological level, Midyat Turoyo is characterized by the shortening of /ī/, /ē/ and /ū/, /ō/ in pre-stress open syllables to /i/ and /u/ respectively. Note that /a/ is not shortened. Examples:

Villages	Midyat	
k-ōbe	k-ōbe	"he gives"
k-ōbēli	k-ubēli	"he gives me"
dāmīxi	dāmīxi	"they slept"
dāmīxīna	dāmīxīna	"we slept"
nōtūro	nūtūro	"watchman"

on the other hand, Midyat Turoyo has preserved a phonemic contrast between the short vowels /i/ and /u/ which are merged into /e/ in most village dialects. In the lexicon, too, a number of differences can be noted, especially in the field of loan words. In general, Midyat tends to borrow from Arabic while the villages tend to borrow from Kurdish.

IV. Turoyo scholarship

Turoyo made an early appearance in Semitics owing to Prym/Socin, a large collection of texts with German translation. This work was remarkable for its time and continues to be a valuable document since it allows a glimpse at the language as it was more than 100 years ago. However, the usefulness of the work is marred by two serious shortcomings: First, the single informant from which the authors obtained their texts spoke a mixed dialect vacillating between Midyat and village forms. Second, notwithstanding their elaborate phonetic transcription, the authors made a considerable number of notational mistakes on the phonemic level in writing down the texts dictated by the informant. Basing himself on Prym/Socin, Siegel produced a diachronic study which is full of errors and misunderstandings because it combines wrong data of the source with erroneous conceptions of the author. The book thus is of little help to the study of Turoyo.

After this early start Turoyo fell into semi-oblivion from which it was rescued only during the late sixties when Hellmut Ritter published

three volumes of texts in various Turoyo dialects together with a German translation. The texts were transcribed from tape recordings which Ritter's informants, young Turoyo students at Istanbul University, had made for him in Tur Abdin. The same author produced two more transcripts but not live to see them in print. The first was a Turoyo dictionary which, however, did not contain any verbs. It was published in facsimile in 1979, eight years after Ritter's death. The second, much larger, manuscript is entitled "Verbalgrammatik". It contains a very detailed description of verb morphology and, in addition, all the lexical material pertaining to the verb. It is to be hoped that this second manuscript which contains incredible wealth of data will eventually find its way to the printing press.

The present author was first introduced to Turoyo studies by Ritter. As a doctoral dissertation he produced a synchronic description of the phonology and morphology of the village dialect of Midin (1967). This work has been out of print for some time but a reprint is scheduled for early 1985. After years devoted to Arabic dialectology the present author has recently returned to Turoyo studies. He has begun to collect new data from informants residing in Germany with the aim of producing a description of the Midyat dialect. This, in his view, will close another important gap in Turoyo studies.

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