

SYRIAC COMMUNITY & SOWA



“Simplifying the complex, Syrian Aramean or Syrian/Syriac Aramaic refers to a group of indigenous people of the old Syria.”

THE SYRIACS (ALSO CALLED SYRIAN(C)-ARAMEAN) PEOPLE

Understanding Syrian Aramean community requires discovering the history of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch and all the East (SOCAE) that goes back to the early apostolic days, a member of the Oriental Orthodox Family (Issa & Issa 2009), from the Land of Mesopotamia 'the cradle of Western Civilization, her sacred language (Aramaic/Syriac), her Holy See (established in Antioch in the year 37 by St Peter, and due to uncertainties in the region moved to different places and now in Damascus, Syria), her martyrs throughout the centuries starting with the early antiquities until these current days (e.g. SAYFO 1915 between 500-700,000 individuals, and destruction of her monasteries and churches, also the uprooting of her people from their homeland), and her present status (diaspora).

Indeed, when looking at SOCAE there is a vital need to look at the Church, her Aramean/Syriac people and their homeland, which brings forth a story of wonderful, delightful, magnificent, innovative, and creative people, yet mistreated, oppressed, harassed, maltreated, persecuted, displaced, evacuated, relocated, and uprooted from their homeland. Thus, the following paragraphs will carry within their lines the story of the Church looking in the story of the people and their homeland Mesopotamia.

Mesopotamia was located between the land of Persia to the East, the Mediterranean Sea to the West, Armenia, Greece, and Asia Minor to the North, and Arabia to the south – this whole land was known the land of the people of ARAM or Aramean People. Indeed, some of these tribes were named either the people of Babel, the people of Ashur, the people of Adom, but all the people were referred to as the people of 'Aram' or 'Aramean People' (Manna 1900). History tells us that the Aramean People (who later and following Christianity were named Syrians/Syriacs to differentiate the pagans from Christians) are the indigenous people of Syria and Mesopotamia (the land between the two rivers), the cradle of Western civilization.

The Arameans spoke Aramaic. There is no doubt that Aramaic was the language of the Jews during the Apostolic Age as well as during several centuries prior to this period and extending as far back as 500 B.C. The Jews even wrote some of their Holy Scriptures in Aramaic or in Aramaic characters. The Dead Sea Scrolls which were discovered in 1947 by His Eminence Mar Athanasius Y. Samuel, then Archbishop of Jerusalem, confirm this fact. This language, therefore, was used as the liturgical language in this Church.

The dialect of the Arameans (Aramaic) became the common language of that area. Still later, just before and after the beginning of the Christian era, Aramaic underwent a particularly rich evolution. This evolved new form of Aramaic known as "Syriac", the language of the amalgamated or unified Syrian People (Issa 1995). SOCAE language (ARAMAIC) spread to the neighbouring peoples and became the lingua franca of the region. After converting to Christianity, the East and West-Aramean People adopted the term "Syrian" "Soraye" which simply means 'Christian' which became both a lingual and a group designation (Issa 2014).

Despite the common language, culture, heritage and history, and due to the diverse events in the region, such as, disagreement on dogma, colonialization, and the arrival of Missionaries to the region mainly from Rome, the Aramean People, the "Syrian" "Suryoye" "Soraye" suffered and various groups were established from the One Apostolic Orthodox Church (e.g. Syriacs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Maronites, etc...). But the historically correct name for these groups is Aramean (Manna 1900.a). Even the land of Mesopotamia is known as the land of Aramean People (Manna 1900.a)

Since the end of the Aramean kingdom of Osrhoene (Current Urfah in Turkey to the Northern of Aleppo), the Aramean People have been without any state of their own. They have been constantly victimized through different religious massacres discrimination, ethnic cleansing, and persecutions, either at the hands of rulers, at the hand of different empires, regimes or missionaries and other churches for hundreds of years, so that they have become a minority in their own land and area (Issa 2014).

Indeed, the people of Mesopotamia from where the people of SOCAE originate suffered immensely at the hands of several empires, including the Ottoman Empire, named after Osman, its first ruler, who in the early 1300s expanded it from a tiny part of northwest Turkey to a slightly less tiny part. This empire ruled for 500 years, which is longer than the entire history of Roman Empire, ruling over the Middle East, North Africa, and South Eastern Europe for centuries. It was probably the last great non-European empire until it began declining in the mid-1800s, collapsed after World War I, and had its former territory in the Middle East divided up by Western Europe. The war changes the region out of recognition, ending the Ottoman centuries and bringing into existence the modern territories of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine (now including Israel), Jordan and Iraq (Rabo 2014).

The atrocities by the Ottoman Empire were excessive, and destructive, described and recorded by Issa et al. (2017), including the issues that have been most prevalent in the Republican [Turkish] past and nowadays:

- The persecution and expulsion of the Ottoman Greeks, as well as deportation;
- The destruction of the Ottoman Armenians and Syriac [Syriac, Chaldeans, and Assyrian].

As a result of these atrocities, the majority of the surviving SOCEA people fled the region and are now scattered in diaspora migrating to the USA, Canada, and Australia, amongst other countries.

This persecution did not stop with the end of the Ottoman Empire – in the contemporary and recent history we have noticed the ongoing persecution, destruction of monasteries and churches, also the uprooting of people from their homeland in areas such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, which had resulted in a new wave of migration from the motherland.



In countries where Syriac Orthodox diaspora established themselves, often their experience of integration includes reflection about religious minorities and the unsettled question of whether religious, cultural, or even civilizational difference constitutes the salient category of belonging and alterity in Australian identity-politics. Such uncertainty over the salience of categories and the meaning of difference shapes Syriac Orthodox efforts to procure recognition as an indigenous ethno-religious minority. Not only the experience of diaspora in the West, but twentieth century encounters with secular nation-states throughout the Middle East have convinced Syriac Orthodox Christians that such recognition is necessary for them to survive as a self-consciously imagined community in secular modernity. But survival depends upon more than just political and legal recognition. Political longings cannot be disentangled from existential longings (Taylor 1994). The self in the self-other relation of recognition is constituted by that relationship and like for many others, for Syriac Orthodox Christians this recognition within its specificity within the Australian society, is a vital human need.

For Syriac people in the Diaspora, building a collective memory is vital to creating cohesion between dispersed groups and maintaining a sense of individual belonging. Fixing on a place of origin, possibly transformed into a goal of pilgrimage, helps to structure the community and to preserve identity links. Other elements contribute to it, among which the evocation of the past of persecutions and massacres, which feeds an "ethics of sacrifice".

Attachment to the "language of origin" is also a central element of what defines Syriac identity; reason why it is crucial to make significant efforts to maintain language learning in countries of exile like Australia.

Towards the end of the 1960s, migration of Syriac Christians accelerated. It started with the war between the Turkish state and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) which caught Syriac Christians in the middle. Already before the war broke out in full in the 1980s, some had settled as labour migrants to Europe, easing the way for others to follow as asylum seekers when the situation in Tur 'Abdin became increasingly dangerous.

By the early 1990s, the Syriac population of eastern Anatolia had shrunk to a couple of thousand people who feared Kurdish oppression as much as Turkish restrictions on their religious and cultural life. The communities in Europe and Australia received further Syriac Orthodox from the Jazeera- (Hasaka Province) region. While socio-economic motives played a role, some came as asylum seekers. The civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990) provided the impetus for yet another group of Syriac migrant. Though part the revolutionary violence was specifically targeted at Christians, the upheaval provided another impetus for migration. Their numbers in the diaspora were augmented by Iraqi and Iranian Syriac - Aramean who fled the consequences of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s.

In the final stages of this war, Iraq's brutal suppression of Kurdish political opposition also targeted Syriacs/Aramean and other Christians in the region (Chaldean, Assyrian) villages in North Iraq, whereas the occupation of Kuwait in 1990, the American military intervention of 1991, and the ensuing economic boycott made living conditions in Baghdad increasingly difficult. All of this encouraged Christians to leave the country.

Soon after the US-led invasion of 2003, Iraq spiralled into a bloody civil strife during which Christians were among the express targets of the violence. Many more Christians fled the country, or, if that was not possible, sought refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan that remained relatively stable. In 2014 and 2015, the rise of ISIS (Daesh) many more Syriac Christians from their homes in Mosul and the Nineveh plains, in the Jazeera region and in Homs and its environs. All the citizens of the village of Bartleh, in Northern Iraq, were uprooted overnight and had to walk long distances to reach a safe place. For places like Mosul and Homs, this meant the end of long and stable periods of Christian presence, for the Jazeera region it meant the uprooting of Christians whose parents and grandparents had found refuge there after the horrors of the Sayfo1915 (Genocide). No Syriac Christian has able to return to Mosul since 2015. Though, some of the community returned to Bartleh, but the resurgence of ISIS, the Kurdish, and the Turkish make them fear for their lives from more than one side.

The immediate result of all these migratory movements was the relative strengthening of Syriac communities outside the Middle East, and thus the increased weight of the diaspora vis-à-vis the remaining communities in the Middle East. While both nationalists and clerical leaders encouraged their flocks to remain in the region, many people chose what they thought would be best for their children, moving to countries (Murre-van den Berg 2019).

In Australia, although as recorded by the Melbourne Museum "Syrians Born in Victoria was first counted in the 1891 censuses 142", first Syrian Aramean immigrants arrived and settled before 1968, while others followed in form of various waves of migration. The most notable of these waves resulted from the Lebanese Civil War (1975 to 1990), and the aftermath of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. More followed after the 2014 ISIS invasion of Northern Iraq, and the Syrian war where the Australian Government opened the immigration to some 12,000, amongst whom there were people from Syriac Orthodox Church who settled in Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania, South Australia, and Queensland.

Syrian-Aramean community is as diverse as any other group in Australia and is made up of Arameans migrants and refugees from Mesopotamia that, following the Sykes-Picot agreement (1916), was partitioned into: Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, and Turkey. In addition, several of the Syriac Orthodox Church members from India have also migrated to Australia starting 2000, with a common language and relevant cultural features. Proud of their culture, these refugees and migrants have integrated and greatly contributed to the Australian society and way of life (Abdo-Attia 2016).

Syriac community in Australia, both from the Middle East and India amounts to about 12,000 people (Abdo-Attia 2016). A figure that have increased following the migration from Syria and Iraq, also the ongoing arrival of skilled workers from India.

Finally, it is important to state here that the SOCAE people are always grateful to the governments and countries who have opened their arms to welcome them as citizens, and they are always urged by their spiritual leaders to be active members in their new countries.

SOWA AT A GLANCE

NAME

Syrian Orthodox Women Association (SOWA)

REGISTRATION

Incorporated Association. CAV: A0051892V

YEAR OF ESTABLISHMENT

30th June 2008 (although the Association had been active for many years before this date, this is the day when it was formally registered with Consumer Affairs Victoria).

MEMBERSHIP

Contributing members- 100

Participating members- around 1,000 (distributed in various councils, among others: Greater Dandenong, Casey, Frankston City Council, Moreland, Brimbank, Hume, Darebin, and Whittlesea. We also have a small community in Geelong.

Structure: SOWA has an Executive Committee. Although in the past it used to meet in St Aphrem Syrian Orthodox Church, located in Reservoir (Victoria), due to the fluxes of Syriac refugees' arrivals in the past three years, mostly in the South (Casey and Dandenong) and Frankston, Hume and Whittlesea, the Committee meets in church halls in those areas to be closer and better attend the needs of these new arrivals.

Often, the Committee meets in the private homes of the members.

No staff. All work relies on a committed Committee and regularly active volunteers.

ETHNIC COMPOSITION

Arameans from the land of Mesopotamia, now migrants & refugees from today's Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and other Middle Eastern countries. No specific data available.

ORGANISATION VISION AND MISSION

Vision: SOWA's vision is to achieve excellence in delivery of services to its members, leading to their full participation in the Australian society through:

- Information and educational programs
- Leadership & parenting programs
- Assistance to all Syriac Communities in breaking down barriers and building their capacity to engage within the wider Australian Multicultural community.

Mission: The Syrian Orthodox Women's Association (SOWA) is a non-political body dedicated to serving the welfare needs of members from Syriac speaking backgrounds in Victoria. SOWA is a space where women migrants and refugees from Syriac speaking backgrounds to support each other, thus, aiding in the settlement process in Australia.

GEOGRAPHIC COVERAGE

Victoria

PRIMARY PURPOSE

A broad range of social, linguistic & cultural, historical, educational, community support, religious activities. SOWA also support, in a smaller scale, training of women for Income Generating Activities (IGA).

IMPACT

Since its establishment, SOWA has worked with migrants & refugees from Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and other Middle Eastern countries, to enhance their opportunities for social engagement and participation in various events within the community.

For the past 6-7 years, the focus of the Association are the newly arrived refugees, from Syria, Iraq mostly, but also Lebanon and Turkey. We accompany senior people (men and women), women and mothers, as well as young people, in their journey to integration in Australia.

SOURCE(S) AND TYPE OF FUNDING

Most funding comes from SOWA's fundraising campaigns and direct commitment of its members.

Approx. total budget received in grants: Between 2008 and 2020, SOWA has received less than 10,000AUD.

Sources:

- Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) -between 2,000-3,000 AUD to organize the Fest-
- Department of Health and Human Services Victoria (around 5,000+700.00 AUD received for settlement services to Senior members and family of the community).



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BUILDING COMMUNITY HARMONY: SOWA'S WORK

GOVERNANCE

SOWA's Executive Committee meetings: In Dandenong and Endeavor Hills, SOWA Executive Committee requested on many occasions to have access to a room in one of the Community Centres to meet. This was not an option unless SOWA paid, but the organization has no source of income other than member and community contributions. Due to this limitation, often the Executive Committee and any other ad hoc group meets in the private homes of its members.

ACTIVITIES

SOWA is in first place, an Association that responds proactively, as well as reactively to the needs of the community. For the past 6-7 years, most of SOWA's work has been in support of the newly arrived refugees (2013-2020), mostly from Syria and Iraq, but also from Lebanon and Turkey. Every 3-4 weeks SOWA organizes a social evening for the Seniors and social evening for women (main purpose: to get them out of isolation and accompany them in the process of developing a sense of belonging and engagement with/within the Australian context -what the country offers, their obligations & rights- while maintaining our identity).

The concept of "harmony" is at the centre of SOWA's mission. For that reason, the Association always tries to involve other communities and cultural institutions in its social activities (e.g. SOWA invited mayors, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, MRC-Settlement & Family Services, the Victorian Council of Churches or senior management from the Arab Bank, to its Festivals in 2010 and 2018).

SOWA works around a plan of permanent activities conducted at different moments around the year targeting different groups within the community (e.g. Christmas, Easter, etc.), and timely activities organized on regular basis depending on the needs and opportunities offered in different seasons (e.g. Monthly Evening Family Gathering, Excursions, Monthly kids activities, and BBQ on a nice weekend).

SOWA support to Syrian Orthodox in Jazeera, Hassakeh Province, Syria

SOWA has been supporting Syrian Orthodox well before the war started in Syrian in 2011, both in Syria and Australia.

All funded by fundraising campaigns, in Syria, some of the key areas of SOWA's support include:

- **Education:**
 - ❖ Children Sponsoring (Jazeera, Hassakeh Province, Syria).
 - ❖ School libraries (funded through fundraising campaigns in Australia).
- **Food security:** monthly contribution for groceries for families undergoing extreme hardship.
- **Capacity building & Income Generating Activities (IGA):** funding of a knitting workshop in Kamishly - (Jazeera-Hassakeh Province), run and managed exclusively by women, to train, develop confident and encourage women to work independently.

COVID-19 Community response

Although unlike other communities in Australia, we do not have information available in our language -Syriac, as the language is not as yet considered an official language¹ by the Australian Government. However, the Archbishop, in co-operation with the committees continues to provide relevant information, and we are in communication with our members, inform them about the changing circumstances, what they need to do. We also use Facebook to pass on messages.

Covid-19 is having an important impact on remittances to our families in home countries. Whilst money senders' services have been a system utilized in the past, it remains expensive and priority was given to relatives and friends traveling to home country and neighbouring states. The great impact of the virus on traveling makes this option currently impossible.

At a time when COVID-19 is taking its toll on many countries, U.S. Sanctions on Syria, and the US 'Caesar Act' sanctions applied from 1st of July 2020 made it impossible to help our relatives and community members! On 21st August 2020, H.H. Moran Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, the Supreme Head of the Universal Syriac Orthodox Church, appealed to the United Nations² to address immediately the humanitarian crises faced by the Syriacs/Arameans in the Northern and Eastern parts of Syria where water is being used as weapon.

Limited Funding and other types of support

A subject of debate within SOWA is around the question of whether asking or not for support. A resilient community that over the years has self-supported its community members brings at times the perception among some of the members that the community work is their responsibility. Others, acknowledging that, consider that is the right of SOWA, as a recognized community entity, to ask for existing institutional support.

One way or another, SOWA has received little or not available funding (e.g. on one occasion SOWA applied for a 20k grant and received around 2,000AUD) since its first started working for the community. It is important to understand that a good proportion of the membership of SOWA are newly arrived refugees with little or no income so relying on membership fees for the sustainability of the Association's activities is not an option.

Whilst SOWA's contribution to Syrian (Aramean) people make an impact on their lives, many remain unsupported, without any visibility of their situation in the Australian society. SOWA's support is valuable, particularly at ensuring their safety, but it proves to be a heavy and lengthy financial burden on the community, bearing the responsibility to assist while uncertain immigration processes take place.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GOVERNMENT TO SUPPORT-COLLABORATE WITH THE COMMUNITY VIA SOWA

- Recognizing and valuing this Community equally and at the same level as other diaspora communities in Victoria and Australia.
- Ensure that institutional support provided to newly arrived community members is offered in the appropriate language for everyone (e.g. case workers of Syrian (Aramean) speaking).
- Ensure that institutions providing support to newly arrived refugees/migrants include in their staff, at least a member of the community to ensure cultural adequacy (trust: often newly arrived persons, particularly those who have fled violence and conflict, initially struggle to trust community outsiders).
- Turn SOWA into a Government ally for the purpose of:
 - supporting newly arrived refugees to seek employment.
 - directing newly arrived refugees to mental health services that will support them in healing from trauma.
 - To include SOWA's women and youth members in the training and courses such as leadership, media, interpreting & translating services, etc.

The Syriac community and SOWA case study was developed with the generous contribution of Adibeh Abdo-Attia.

Adibeh Abdo-Attia, author & publisher, has over 40 years working as an advocate for CALD communities and human rights defender, as well as contributing to the development and achievements of the Australian Tax Office, the Australian Electoral Commission and as a Producer/Broadcaster for 3ZZZ Show and 3CR. Adibeh sits on numerous committees and has been instrumental in the establishment of Jewish Christian Muslim Association, Victorian Council of Churches and The Centre of Dialogue. She won a Syrian Ambassador award for her work within the Arabic & Syriac (Aramaic) community and was the recipient of the ATO Harmony Hero Award. She has published books to a multilingual audience (Syriac Aramaic, Arabic & English), has been a speaker at several conferences and frequently writes articles for numerous Arabic websites and magazines.

¹<https://www.respect.gov.au/resources/cald-materials/>
<https://www.business.gov.au/About-us/Other-languages>
² ENS25/20 of 21st August 2020 signed by HH Moran Mor Ignatius Aphrem I, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, the Supreme Head of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church, copy of the letter can be viewed here https://www.facebook.com/MorignatiusAphremI/photos/pb.55842500880187-2207520000_3113162698781475/?type=3&theater