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TRANSLOCAL COMMUNITIES

Music as an Identity Marker
in the Assyrian Diaspora

Welcome to Assyria, "Your land on cyberspace", is how the Nineveh Online[1] greeted its visitors to its home page for the first time in 1997. It sounded really fascinating – as if virtual reality had become part of the real world, and that ancient civilisations could get a second chance on the Internet. Today, perhaps we are less impressed by the Internet, and less inclined to consider the possibility of it serving as a means of communication and a meeting place. But the discussion in the 1990s about the Internet as a virtual space or a parallel cyber-reality was truly interesting and important. The name of the website was obviously a humoristic way of pointing out that a town that ceased to exist more than 2 500 years ago could be reborn in a new modern and virtual form. Anyway, at the end of the 1990s, the Assyrians in Sweden and the USA were out early trying to establish and maintain a transnational community that connected groupings[2] and individuals living in the diaspora. At that time, they were pioneers, while today, everybody seems to use the Internet for similar reasons.

In this article I will use my experience from studying the Assyrian communities as a point of departure in a discussion of how groupings, affinities or communities can emerge around and in modern networks such as the Internet. When looking back at the development of the Internet,

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1   http://www.nineveh.com

2   'Group' is a central term in the language of sociology. The distinction is often made between primary groups, where the members are in direct contact with each other, and secondary groups, where the members only enjoy indirect contact. In this article, I will hereafter use groupings as a broader term for collectives of individuals who gather around roots/origins, e.g. ethnic groups, or around a mutual interest. 'Grouping' is here primarily an analytical tool and does not proceed from the members' own affinities and categorisations, even though they coincide in most cases.

it seems as if the cyberspace that was announced on the home page of Nineveh Online has become less virtual over the years. Today, we live in both worlds – using the Internet for shopping, reading, finding information, communication, playing, dating, and so forth. The border between the virtual and the real often appears to be diffuse and unimportant.

Why did the Assyrians use the Internet earlier than many other possible groupings? Maybe they had a better reason than most ethnic groups, being a people without a political or geographical homeland. What, then, is Assyria? Is it a region, a nation, or an organisation? Well, what is a nation, exactly? What does it mean when some people call themselves Assyrians – a people?

'Cyberland Assyria'. To me, it sounded like a vision of the future, or possibly a video game. The idea is of course that with the opportunities that global electronic networks put at our disposal, our experience of reality changes. The 'real' world now has a rival. Through virtual realities, such as 'The Internet World', we are forced to consider the question: What actually is a nation, a community, a union or an interest grouping?

Fig. 1 – The Internet gave Assyrians an opportunity to become part of a cultural community.
Illustration by Ann Ahlbom-Sundqvist

Does Assyria exist? Yes, but not as a nation in the old sense, where we imagine a country with geographical borders – a specific region inhabited by people who call themselves Assyrians. Certainly, the ancient Assyrian Empire – 'the land between the rivers' – Beth Nahrain or Mesopotamia, can still be pointed out on a map. But for more than 2 500 years the region has been in the hands of other nations.

When the creators of Nineveh Online's home page welcome us to cyberspace, it is obvious that they are referring to something very different from a specific geographical region. Obviously, the Internet exists, and Nineveh Online's home page exists. And through this and many other knowledge and information banks, Assyria also exists.

In the new debate on mobile, displaced, fragmented life worlds, media technologies have an important explanatory power. Through them we can dissolve the boundaries of time and space. In the future we will live in media worlds and fantasy landscapes, which lack a

concrete, systematic foundation. We surf the net and zap between channels. (Löfgren 1997)[3]

The ethnologist Orvar Löfgren presents an ironic picture of how postmodern man is portrayed in sociological literature. But Assyrian virtual reality should not be described in terms of 'homelessness' and transitoriness'. Perhaps the Swedish zappers and surfers of the 1990s can be seen as homeless nomads in a timeless and spaceless media world, trying to escape from life's reality. What the Assyrians are doing is just the opposite: In an unstable existence in exile round the world, Internet websites and home pages can truly be seen as a kind of home – a fixed point where common values and common culture can be established and shared with others.

When we discuss the role of music as a symbol of identity, the Assyrian immigrant group in Sweden is particularly interesting in several respects. Above all, the Assyrian group differs from most other ethnic groups in Sweden in three essential areas:

- For Assyrians there is no 'homeland' to return to. The dream of the old Beth Nahrain, or Mesopotamia, seems like a utopia to most of them. They realise that life in Sweden is not of a temporary nature and that they will probably continue to live here for several generations. In addition, the uniting national concept of an origin in the ancient Assyrian Empire is in itself far from unproblematic.
- They have deliberately chosen an ethnic identity as Assyrians rather than the Syriac identity, which has religious associations. When we in Sweden distinguish between Assyrians and Syrians, we do it on grounds that have never applied to the surroundings from which these people come. The term 'Syrian' refers to the Syrian Orthodox Church, while Assyrian refers to an ethnic kinship with the inhabitants of the ancient Assyrian Empire. (In the Swedish language the distinction is more obvious since there are two terms for the English 'Syrian': *Syrier* = native of Syria, and *Syrian* = Christian from the Middle East.)
- Within the group, Assyrians themselves have actively worked to establish and cultivate distinguishing ethnic marks, in particular language and music. Basically, the Assyrian/Syrian group is far from homogeneous. People differ from each other in language, ethnicity, and religion, depending on which part of the region they come from.

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3   Translated by the author.

In this complex situation in permanent exile and with no great hopes of ever being able to return, a strong nationalistic movement has burgeoned, based on the idea of a common Assyrian identity. What means are used in the attempt to create an Assyrian 'we' – a sense of community built on an ethnic and cultural foundation?

When I have interviewed Assyrians about the relation between music and identity, all of them in different ways have pointed out the important role that so-called 'national music' plays for Assyrian identity. But what do they mean by national music? For Syrian Orthodox believers, no specifically Assyrian music existed outside the Church until after the First World War.

TRANSLOCALITY

It is easy to observe that the new awareness of an Assyrian community is connected to the development of the networking possibilities of the Internet. The diaspora suddenly became visible, and the access to information was almost unlimited. Discussions of connections between music, identity and new understandings of place have been examined in several studies and anthologies. One of the earliest was Martin Stokes' *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place* (1994). More recent publications that can be mentioned are Connell and Gibson (2003), Whiteley, Bennett and Hawkins (2004) and Inglis (2006). Electronic networks give individuals and groupings that are geographically spread out over practically the whole world, possibilities to share cultural expressions, values, and thoughts in an uncomplicated way.

Translocality in the sense that I am using it here in connection with cultural activities involves a sense of concurrency between many different local groupings of actors. This results in a feeling of affinity or community. In the case of music making, translocality means that many similar local practices are to be found at the same time in different places – that the music in one or many respects is of the same kind – that the actors are aware of each other's existence and that they experience themselves as part of a larger community. The last criterion is perhaps the most important one: that actors have a feeling of being part of a community, imagined or real.

Fig. 2 – What does 'meeting people' mean today?
Illustration by Ann Ahlbom-Sundqvist

ORGANISATION OR NATION

What is required to establish and maintain an organised community of the kind that a nation represents? Well, a large proportion of the work is concerned with creating homogeneity. 'One language, one people, one culture', was the recipe for European nationalism. Nationalism in Europe emerged during the Romantic era, taking as its starting point the ideas of thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and German philosophers such as Johann Gottfried von Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte.

Idealism regarded history as the realisation of a plan from a higher power to attain a state of perfection in the world. A well-known example is Hegel's historic scheme of how the 'soul of the world' (God) step-by-step realised his plan through the special missions of different nations throughout history (Larsson 1994: 151).

A nation was seen as a collective whole. Each nation had its own language and way of being – its own 'national character'. This national character did not always show itself spontaneously, but it was assumed to be present as a hereditary characteristic in people of the same nationality. It was up to intellectuals to capture or possibly even awaken the 'soul of the people', which was manifested in the language and in the popular culture.

> "Now we have created Italy, then we have to create Italians", an Italian statesman is reported to have said in the 1860s. At that time there were also many resolute utopians in the North who wanted to remould their country's inhabitants into a people with a common language and a common culture – the conditions were different but the goal was the same. These visionaries particularly emphasised the key role of archaic popular customs. Folklore collectors and ethnologists of every sort and description were therefore credited with special authority and legitimacy. By collecting and analysing artefacts, myths, folk tales, folk tunes, songs and much more besides, these folklore archaeologists endowed the nations with form and content. They gave their findings to museums and archives to preserve and display. Thus the museums and archives also took over part of the mission of portraying the nation to the populace. This mission is still one of their most important functions. (Ronström, Malm and Lundberg 1997)[4]

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4   Translated by the author.

From a global perspective, it is easy to see that most nation states seem to have been cast in the same mould. Nationalism, quite simply, is a very international phenomenon. We can toy with the idea of introducing a 'do-it-yourself nation kit' on the market (see Löfgren 1989: 7ff.). What would we actually need to include in such a kit? Folklore collections, libraries, and museums are only part of what is needed to achieve community and homogeneity on a national level.

Our 'D.I.Y. nation kit' could take the form of a filing cabinet with four different compartments. In two of the drawers we find people's 'lived reality', in the other two we find their 'oral reality' (see Ronström, Runfors and Wahlström 1994). In one of the drawers for lived reality we find such fundamental elements as language, manners and customs, folk tales and much more. The second drawer would contain models for various activities that bring people together. What the contents of both these drawers have in common is that they exist without our having to think about them. Our language and our way of being also provide the basis for other cultural, scientific and political activities. In the remaining two drawers, we find models for people's oral reality. This is where theories about lived reality and documentation of our common culture belong, as well as ideas about how or why a specific culture is, and ought to be, a certain way. It is in one of these drawers that we find libraries, archives, and research centres. The last drawer, which provides the finishing touches to our D.I.Y. nation kit, contains the political, philosophical, and ideological tools that are essential for the creation of a 'national ideology'.

THE D.I.Y. NATION KIT

1 **Language and practices**
   Based on language, manners and customs (clothes, food etc.). Also includes the establishing of national symbols, legends, folk tales and heroes.

2 **Common activities**
   Includes cultural practices (for example, music, dance and theatre), sports activities (clubs, associations, teams and national sports), participating in the same cultural sphere – reading the same magazines, listening to the same radio programmes, watching the same TV programmes, sharing the same religion and religious practices.

3   **Historic/scientific documentation**

Research into a common history and origin, establishing one's own libraries, archives and museums. A common history of popular heroes, kings, and champions of liberty.

4   **National ideology**

Making people aware of the nation's common demands for the above. Creating one's own information net, mass media. Establishing one's own cultural institutions and sports institutions.

Fig. 3 – The D.I.Y. Nation Kit.

Illustration by Ann Ahlbom-Sundqvist

For a Swedish citizen or a citizen of another Western 'nation', many of the above items are institutionalised, self-evident phenomena. We have a common Swedish language and we hardly need to reflect on how or why it came into being. We talk of a Swedish cultural life, even if it is difficult to state precisely what such a thing consists of. We base our Swedishness on historic heroes and the works of national poets, composers and artists. We do not have to prove that we have a historically based right to call ourselves Swedish and to live in Sweden. Much of this established Swedish identity is due to the fact that we have schools, libraries and archives, which are based on a national concept, through which the Swedish language and cultural heritage is preserved and protected.

Since Assyrians lack this type of nationally unifying institutions (due to the fact that they do not live in a state of their own), the construction of an international network has enormous significance. The Internet has now made it possible for groups other than states to build up 'national' information banks. Throughout the world, Assyrian idealists are putting in a tremendous amount of effort writing articles, producing link sites, and publishing music, literature and pictures.

EAST AND WEST ASSYRIANS

From a linguistic, and perhaps also ethnic point of view, there is a sharp dividing line between East Assyrians and West Assyrians. The differences are most apparent in their religions and languages. Since people from both regions now call themselves Assyrians, there is a considerable risk of

confusion. Among those who call themselves Assyrians in Sweden today, an overwhelming majority are of West Assyrian origin; that is, they speak Turoyo and belong to the Syrian Orthodox Church. In America, on the other hand, the majority of Assyrians speak Aturaya and belong to the Church of the East. At the present time, the flow of information via the Internet concerning Assyrians is dominated by American East Assyrian sources. By using the terms 'East Assyrians' and 'West Assyrians' whenever possible, I hope to minimise the risk of confusing these two groups. At the same time, there is no doubt that East Assyrian web sites are read by many West Assyrians, and vice-versa (the predominant Internet language is English, of course). However, it is important to remember, particularly where information about language (articles, language courses, etc.) is concerned, that we are talking about two very different dialects, and that individuals from one language group do not normally have a complete understanding of the other dialect. The linguistic situation is perhaps the most decisive difference between the Assyrian's lived reality and the oral reality. In the lived reality, we find a colourful diversity of English, Swedish, German, Turkish, Arabic and Turoyo. In the oral reality, on the other hand, 'Assyrian' in its different variants reigns supreme. While it has a common symbolic value, its potential as an international means of communication is poor.

In this study, an attempt is made to follow the process by which a 'virtual Assyria' is being built up with the help of modern electronic networks. The focus is on the role of music as an organising factor in multicultural societies. This gives us the possibility to see music as a central theme, running like a scarlet thread through the creation of an Assyrian national identity. Music is present, in varying degrees and in different ways, in every part of the Assyrian communities.

COMMON ACTIVITIES.
THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN THE BUILDING OF A NATION

> If it would have been possible without music!!!??? No way! No way! God only knows what would have happened, I swear. I've lived here since 1970 and I know. I've gotten to know nearly all the families that live here through music and through parties, and I know. (Joseph Malki, interview 3rd March 1997)

This was the Assyrian musician and composer Joseph Malki's answer when asked if he would have been able to organise the Assyrians in Sweden in the 1970s if he had not been able to entice them to meetings with music and dance. Music plays the role of a pleasure-filled hub around which a large

Fig. 4 – One of the youth groups are performing at a party in Södertälje, Sweden.
Illustration by Ann Ahlbom-Sundqvist

part of the work and activities of the group's societies revolve. What makes music so special is that it can have several simultaneous, parallel functions. Music can function directly as a centre for activities – for dancing or for music making – and at the same time form a link to other people in other places. Music is an important part of our cultural identity.

The East Assyrian singer Linda George sings the song *Malikta Shamiram* (by Peter Jasim). Like so many other Assyrian popular songs, the lyrics are about the home country in the Middle East, and the title, *Queen Shamiram* brings to mind the ancient Assyrian Empire.

Malikta Shamiram (Queen Shamiram)

O young men
O gentlemen and young ladies
Listen (all of you).
I will tell you a story about your country.

I am ...
I am a dove
From Nineveh.
I have flown (and came) from Nineveh

Let me know
Let me know oh homeless (landless) person
Where are ...
The patriotic sons of Ashur.
Let me know (all of you).
Let me know, o homeless ones:
Where are they,
The patriotic sons of Ashur?

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For thousands, for thousands of years I've been flying

With hope
Of returning to my country keeping me alive.
In Ashur,
In Nineveh and Arrbel, Garmoo
One voice
I heard calling us all.
It said, Show them,
Show them the son and the daughter.
That way,
To the country, of our mothers and our fathers.

Linda George lives in the United States and is the idol of many young Assyrians, particularly in Sweden, despite the fact that most of them cannot understand the Aturaya dialect.

It is extremely common for cultural expressions to take on a special significance among people living in exile: Music, dance, food, and above all, language become far more important and are far more visible in the new context. Our identity can of course display itself in a variety of ways, as an individual awareness, for example, or as a collective identity as members of a group. Music can be an individual pastime or a uniting symbol that bonds people together. Music has this double function in Sweden when Assyrians meet together in societies, for instance. The role of music in the activities of immigrant societies has been described by several ethnomusicologists and ethnologists. One example is Jan Sverre Knudsen's dissertation, *Those That Fly Without Wings: Music and Dance in a Chilean Immigrant Community* (2004), which discusses the role of music among Chilean immigrants in Norway during the 1970s and 1980s.

What makes the Assyrians especially interesting is that for the most part their music has developed in the diaspora. Many of the most popular singers, musicians and composers (the majority, in fact) work in Sweden, America and Australia, and to a lesser extent, in Russia. One reason for this is that all profane music making was actually forbidden by their own Christian Church in the Middle East. As far back as the fourth century, music making outside the church walls was forbidden by St. Afrem, the patriarch of what would later become the Syrian Orthodox church. When growing nationalism burgeoned in Syria during the years between the First and Second World Wars, advocates of a free Assyria realised the significance of a national music of their own. Another reason is that there is often a greater need of uniting activities and symbols in the diaspora than in a 'home environment'. In multicultural societies such as Sweden, music is often an important identity and boundary marker that distinguishes different groups

from each other. Having a music of their own is a prerequisite for visibility in the multicultural arena.

An important part of the national struggle was to 'liberate the music' and to make it possible for music to be used outside the church. That profane music was considered sinful meant that the performance of instrumental folk music had been left to other minority groups in the region, mainly Kurds and Romanis.

The leading composer of the new West Assyrian music that was written during the 1930s and 1940s was Gabriel Assad from Damascus. Assad died in 1997, having spent his last years in Sweden. He is regarded as a popular hero within the West Assyrian group.

When the Assyrian societies were building up their activities in Sweden during the 1970s, Gabriel Assad's songs were like a backbone for Assyrian identity. He soon had his followers and a repertoire of Assyrian music gradually grew, with Sweden as one of its main bases. From an early stage, the 'expressive specialists' (singers, musicians, dancers, actors, etc.) became important symbols for the 'Assyrian idea'. That this is still the case is reflected by the fact that the president of the Swedish Assyrian National Federation at the end of the 1990s, Ninib Ablahad Lahdo, was and still is one of the best known singers among Assyrians the world over. In an interview published in the magazine *Hujådå*, Lahdo was asked by the journalist Demir Aho if it was due to the fact that he is a singer that he was elected president:

In your opinion, was it the singer or the person Ablahad Lahdo who was elected to the post of president?

> I don't think that people primarily chose the singer rather than the person because he is popular and well-known as a singer, even if there are certain people who may have reasoned this way. But for most of the others I think they chose the person Ablahad as president, because they think he's also capable of holding the position of president of the ANF. (Hujådå, May 1997)[5]

Of course Lahdo was not prepared to accept that people voted for him in his role as singer. But at the same time it is obvious, not least since the question was posed in the first place, that his role as a stage artist played a part. In the Assyrian group in Sweden there are very few, if any, active politicians or other types of visible figures in Swedish public life. Since the Assyrian community revolves around aesthetic forms to such a degree, the people

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5   Translated by the author.

that control these forms – the expressive specialists – automatically become the centre of focus. This fact separates aesthetically based communities, such as the Assyrian virtual world, from other types of nationalistic goals.

MASS MEDIA

"Even if we're on our own at home, when we put on the TV we become part of a cultural community (be it good or bad)", Peter Dahlgren wrote in an article as early as 1990. Today, this is even truer about our use of the Internet (Dahlgren 1990)[6].

A glance along the high-rise blocks of flats in Alby and Rinkeby (two Stockholm suburbs with a high percentage of immigrants) confirm the need for TV programmes in our own language. On nearly every balcony there is a huge satellite dish turned upwards towards the skies. Via parabolic aerials and satellite receivers, Turkish, Arabic, and Latin American immigrants in Sweden can see the same TV programmes as their compatriots in their homelands – simultaneously! These transnational links undoubtedly play a highly significant part in establishing and maintaining cultural frames of reference.

Fig. 5 – Recording session with a live audience in Södertälje, Sweden.
Illustration by Ann Ahlbom-Sundqvist

HISTORICAL/SCIENTIFIC DOCUMENTATION. THE RIGHT TO A HISTORY

The term 'Assyrian' denotes a national and ethnic identity. In calling oneself Assyrian one is claiming kinship with ancient Assyrian high culture, while the term 'Syrian' indicates membership of a Church. In Sweden, the 'name issue' has been the subject of discussions among representatives of the Syrian Orthodox Church, as well as among the Swedish authorities, historians and philologists. In 1982, the Swedish National Immigration Board and the

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6   Translated by the author.

National Council for Cultural Affairs published Bengt Knutsson's book *Assur eller Aram* (Assur or Aram). Among other things, Knutsson discusses the Assyrian/Syrian name issue. His scientific analysis of the 'right' to an Assyrian identity – the right to call oneself Assyrian – has extended the discussion to cover such questions as to whether kinship with the 'ancient Assyrians' can be proved (later also in Karlsson 1991). Paradoxically, today we can observe how Syrians in Sweden are now trying to find a language-based ethnic identity as Arameans.

Today, research and other attempts to find scientific proof of kinship with the inhabitants of the Assyrian Empire are presented to a large extent on the Internet. Assyrian libraries are being established mainly in America. Virtually every Assyrian home page on the Internet publishes (or provides links to) articles that try to describe the historical background to the Assyrians' situation today, as well as presenting research on the Assyrian Empire.

Research by historians and archaeologists into the Assyrian Empire forms a scientific background to the Assyrian national concept. Assyria is something to be proud of. On several Assyrian home pages, there are links to historic archives, lists of Assyrian kings, and reports from excavations.

The Assyrian martyrs perhaps play an even more important part in the awareness of a common history. On the 7th of August every year, 'Martyr's Day' is celebrated by Assyrians throughout the world, both East Assyrians and West Assyrians. The role of martyrs for the national identity is obvious: "Our beloved martyrs who gave their lives for their Culture, Language, and God" (Qisat'e Shakeen'e).

The Assyrian situation has been described in musical guise in many songs. Perhaps the most direct example is Evin Aghassi's *An Appeal to the United Nations* to a text by Givergis Aghassi on the *United Nations* record. In the last verse, the Assyrian people are likened to an eagle that is forced to live in exile in the mountains.

> The eagle lives in the mountains.
> He cannot show himself all at once.
> Don't break its flying wings –
> Until when – shall it be safe to fly.
> We shall cultivate with our own hands
> And earn our – daily (blessed) – bread.
> Just give us our freedom
> And we shall all live as neighbours.

National songs such as the one by Aghassi above follow a tradition that leads back to Gabriel Assad's almost revolutionary activities in Syria during

the 1930s and 1940s. But what were the sources of Gabriel Assad's 'new' Assyrian music? Assad, like his successor Joseph Malki, often emphasises the importance of Syrian Orthodox church music in this connection. In presentations of the history of Assyrian music, Assad's work is commonly regarded as a conquest. The Church deprived its members of their everyday music making and now, 1 600 years later, the people have taken their music back.

Although Assyrian national music was created during the 20th century, the link to Syrian church music gives it a kind of historic legitimacy. This fact is often pointed out by present-day Assyrian musicians:

> We have a musical legacy which goes back to the time before the Turks. Our ancestors sang this music. So these maqams existed. We know that Mar Afrem the Great and Bar Daisan taught these maqams, these scales in the church music, to pupils in Antioch and in Edessa and Nsi bin (which is called Diyarbakir today) as early as the 11th century. […] And then Arabic music, if you analyse Arabic music – we have eight maqams in our cultural legacy, they are bayat, rast, sigah, hidjas, nahavand, and saba; we have these eight scales in our music. The Arabs borrowed them. Many Arabic history books openly admit that we were the ones who created this sort of music. If we start out from this historical background, obviously I can say that it is our music that we have practised, it's our legacy. Plus that there are nuances that are not like Arabian, Kurdish or Turkish music. There are nuances and meaning in music, the musical sentence structure which distinguishes it from all of these.[7] (Joseph Malki, interview 3rd March 1997)

Malki also provides arguments for the Assyrians' right to music. In his discussion, he tries to produce historic evidence that modal music was used by Assyrians long ago to prove that the tonal language of Middle Eastern music is more Assyrian than Turkish, for instance. The fact that Assyrian high culture existed before the Ottoman and Arabic cultures is a strong argument in many Assyrian's eyes in the fight for their right to the music.

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7   Translated by the author.

NATIONAL IDEOLOGY. A POLITICAL COMMUNITY

The idea of an Assyrian nation was awakened in earnest after the genocide of Armenians and Assyrians in Turkey during the First World War. Many Assyrians fled from persecution to the region, which today is Northern Syria and was then a French mandate. There, the idea of an Assyrian state of their own developed. Cultural champions went into the breach that fought for a homogeneous Assyrian language and culture. One of the most influential among the West Assyrian group was the poet Naum Faik. Faik, who lived in America, wrote in lyrical terms about his ancient homeland, emphasising the Assyrians' historical ties to ancient Mesopotamian culture.

At this stage, resistance in this cultural liberation struggle was composed of Turks and Arabs, as well as the Assyrians' own Church. As early as the fourth century, profane music making had been forbidden by St. Afrem, the patriarch of what would later become the Syrian Orthodox church. Thus it was also partly a battle against the decrees of the Church that was fought by the nationalistic representatives. To 'liberate the music', to make it possible to use music outside the church, was an important part of this battle.

Within the Ottoman Empire, which was the dominating political power in the Middle East from the 15th century up to the First World War, religion provided the main basis for classifying people. Nationality, or whether someone regarded himself as Turk or Syrian from an ethnic perspective, was of less significance. In the Ottoman Empire, the most important political category was also a religious category: Muslims were inhabitants of 'The House of Islam' – *Dar ül-Islam*. The Ottoman ruling class was a mixture of Turkish military officers, certain members of the priesthood of the Orthodox Church, Jewish and Greek merchants and bankers, scholars and writers of Persian, Arab, and sometimes even Balkan origin, and others. It was not until the 16th and 17th centuries that the Ottoman ruling classes came to be dominated by Muslims. The subordinate classes, *re'aya*, consisted, like the ruling class, of a diversity of ethnically and religiously defined groups. Different Muslim congregations were organised in *millets* (approximately nation, body). Groups living in the Ottoman Empire that were part of a millet were allowed a kind of religious and ethnic self-government. Taxes were imposed but they were allowed to manage their own internal affairs. Even non-Muslims seem to have been organised in millets in certain cases (see Lapidus 1988: 324). The basic rule was that minorities with Jewish or Christian beliefs were to be left in peace as long as they kept a low political and economic profile and paid their taxes. Judaism and Christianity were regarded as brother religions since they, like Islam, were based on the Old Testament. This system also granted people the right to schooling and

religious education in their own language right up until the 19ᵗʰ century. The non-Muslim groups that lived in the Ottoman Empire were named *dhimmi* [protected people], *tai' fa* [group] or *jamat* [religious congregation], depending on how they were organised. Through local agreements with the Ottoman rulers, these groups were organised in millets or given similar rights to the members of a millet. The system encouraged ethnic and cultural pluralism and was one of the prerequisites that enabled multinational centres of commerce such as Istanbul to function within the Islamic world. The Christian identity was regarded as most important by Syrian Orthodox Christians in Tur'Abdin, and in fact the group of Christians in Sweden today who come from the Middle East and who call themselves Syrians are continuing along the same track. However, when part of this group of Syrian Orthodox Christians began to call themselves Syrians [Swedish *syrianer*], the basis for religious classification was set aside. (In recent years, however, Syrians in Sweden have begun to identify themselves as Arameans.)

The musician and composer Gabriel Assad began his nationalistic activities among Christians in Syria. When asked what he hoped to achieve with the national music, Gabriel Assad answered:

> My aim was to cause a revolution with music. And I thought I could do it, so that the songs and the music would belong to the people. And I reached this goal and that makes me very happy. I travelled around – through Syria, the whole of Syria, then Israel and Lebanon and taught the poems and music which you now find in Assyrian and Syrian schools. And all these people learned them.

Assad's nephew, Afram Some, (who acted as interpreter during the interview) added:

> He made a book. It was in 1952/53. The first book about music. He travelled around but he was very poor too. Nobody helped him, either financially or with anything else. But he went on fighting all the time. (Gabriel Assad and Afram Some, interview 10ᵗʰ March 1997)[8]

To reach out with his message Assad needed an organisational platform, and this was provided by a cultural centre that was founded in 1958 in the town of Qamishli in Northern Syria. Assad worked as musical director at the centre and could thereby intensify his work of composing national

8   Translated by the author.

songs. Through his educational work at the centre and by issuing records and books he was able to reach more and more people.

Music is a large and important part of the process of building an Assyrian nation. In certain cases, it acts as a 'lubricator' in processes that are designed to create a sense of community. Music undoubtedly plays an important part as a uniting force at meetings and parties. This is how Joseph Malki expresses his views of the role of music in society activities:

> So we began to organise parties in Motala, in Linköping and in Gothenburg where the Assyrians lived. The simple fact is, it all started with the help of the music.
> So you can say that by organising parties people were brought together?
> Well, that's how we attracted people. And people began to like each other. And began to get stronger ties, and love and relationships and people began to feel less isolated. The isolation was broken, and they felt that somebody cared about them. And music – I think that that is the greatest element one can use to show that people care for each other and have feelings for each other. (Joseph Malki, interview 3rd March 1997)[9]

But music can also be a medium through which the national idea can be spread, or it can be used as a pedagogical tool in language instruction, for instance. Perhaps these are the two most important aspects of music: Its ability to be both an actual part of culture itself and at the same time to serve as a transmitter and symbol of cultural community.

CONCLUSION

It has become relevant to ask: What is a grouping, a community or 'culture' in today's media-dominated world. Is it relevant to think of culture as a geographically defined unit anymore? Alan Lomax presented his cantometrics-model in *Folk Song Style and Culture* 1968. Lomax' model connected societies with musical style, but in a world that looked very much different from today's. Now many musical expressions have become global 'belongings'. The phenomenon has been called globalisation, internationalisation, acculturation and transculturation. Music is disconnected from its social
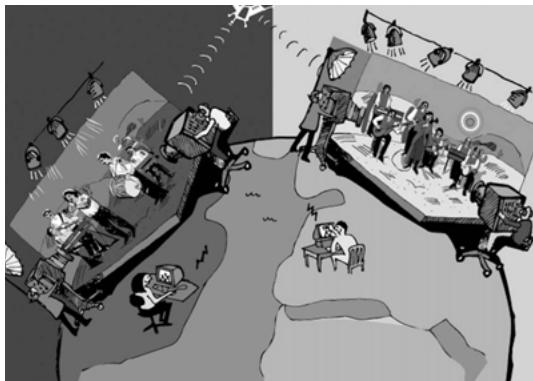
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9   Translated by the author.

Fig. 6 – Similar local practices exist at the same time in different places, and the actors have a feeling of being part of a community, imagined or real.
Illustration by Ann Ahlbom-Sundqvist

context and becomes available and given new meanings to others in new situations.

Anthony Giddens addresses this as 'disembedding mechanisms', (Giddens 1990), a process where de-culturalisation has also been described as 'uncoupling' (Lundberg, Malm and Ronström 2003). Disembedded cultural expressions turn up in new contexts. The new media provides new possibilities and music is perhaps the cultural form that has adjusted in the most total way to the new techniques. The mediatised musical forms seem to have gained infinite opportunities with the Internet.

At the same time we can observe another process that gives the impression of going in the opposite direction. Music is very often used or seen as a symbol or a marker of belonging. This means that at the same time as music is uncoupled from its original context, it is reattached to a new one. This can sometimes be seen as a contradiction. But the uncoupling is also a condition for the possibility of new connections in a global perspective.

The tension between global and local cultures has created a neologism 'glocalisation': The process where cultural expressions are created in a local context and the transforms into an often mediatised global form. After that, the global form can be re-localised in a new context. An oft-used example is rap music that entered the process of globalisation after being born and developed in the Bronx, New York, at the beginning of the 1970s. About 15 years later, young Swedish musicians and dancers (among many others around the Western world) took over the music and transformed it to fit Swedish conditions. The Swedish rap scene was highly influenced by the American, but still became a new musical expression with a strong Swedish accent.

In the case of the Assyrians, the logic of glocalisation is not the most appropriate. It is more a form of local-to-local phenomena. The situation

with the Internet, in many cases, seems to make the globalisation process unnecessary.

What does it mean to be a social grouping, a community? Many would refer to a sense of belonging, or affinity. To be Assyrian can on one level be simply to own an Assyrian passport (if that were possible): Citizenship. But on another level it is about an idea that Assyrians think in an Assyrian way, act in an Assyrian way, etc. A community in the later sense becomes a system of mutual references, values, and thinking patterns. The question of how we can have and receive that kind of knowledge has been discussed by many researchers in different disciplines. The most well-known is Benedict Anderson's ideas about imagined communities (1983). One of the most important qualities of a community is that it is experienced by its members as such. In the book *Music Media Multiculture,* music's role as catalyst in the process of creating such imagined communities is discussed. The music gives us a sense of belonging – perhaps one of the reasons why music has such a central position in different social movements – around sports, religion, and many other collective activities.

Technical conquests and progress have always changed the conditions for communication. Today, in the era of mobile telephones, nobody needs to keep meeting places or exact points of time in mind. "I'll call when I arrive", is often enough. We can presuppose that the person we are meeting will have his mobile on. "I am at the central station, going down the escalator. Where are you?" Times change, our behaviour changes and similar modifications often follow the new means of communication.

It is possible to be Assyrian without a geographically defined country. It is also possible to live in a local context in Turlock, California, in the USA and feel a strong belonging with persons in Södertälje in Sweden, the common denominator being an idea of participation in the same community. This gives new meaning to the concept of nations.

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