

The "Assyrians" of Armenia

The Assyrians of Armenia are one of the almost unknown minorities in Transcaucasia. This rather small ethnic and linguistic minority counts about 3,409 members (census 2001) and is nowadays mainly settled in Armenia's capital, Yerevan, and in the province of Kotayk in the small town of Arzni and in two villages in the province Ararat, in Dimitrovo (Koylasar) and Verin Dvin (Dvin Aysor).

The Assyrian population in Armenia goes back to the Russian-Persian war of 1826-28, in whose course some hundred Assyrian families moved from both northern Iran (Lake Urmia and Salmas district) and eastern Turkey (Hakkari district) to neighbouring Armenia.

Mainly living from agriculture and gardening, the number of Assyrians was increasing until the breakup of the Soviet Union.

The linguistic situation of this Semitic (Eastern Neo-Aramaic) group was heavily influenced by a rigorous language policy starting from the Tsarist period in the 19th century and even more during the Soviet period. Despite introducing "Assyrian" language teaching already in the 19th century in Koylasar (Dimitrovo) and later, in the 1920s in Soviet Armenia ("Assyrian language" in the common Urmia-Standard written in the Latin alphabet), the minority and language policy was repressive and forced Russification of all domains of daily life. Assyrian schools were closed in the 1930s. Many Assyrians have become at least bilingual, speaking preferably Russian and "Assyrian" and are rather Russified in linguistic and cultural behaviour, as e.g. in religion. With the beginning of the 1970s Armenia re-introduced "Assyrian" language – with the Syriac *Nestorian* alphabet - in the village schools. From the independence of Armenia in 1991 the linguistic situation of Assyrians has changed again – ranging from a former Russification, through a revival and renaissance of "Assyrian" in schools, to an Armenianization not only of the linguistic behaviour of the speakers but also of the school curriculum.

Nowadays the Assyrians are linguistically confronted with preserving and maintaining the spoken language and successfully teaching Standard "Assyrian" to the young generation, but also with the traces of Russification of the last centuries and a rather strong recent Armenianization.

The sociolinguistic, socio-cultural and linguistic status of the Assyrians of Armenia is the focus of an interdisciplinary cooperative project between the University of Salzburg and Yerevan State University. This paper will present the results of the first fieldwork trip in September 2007 which mainly centres on the documentation of sociolinguistic issues such as the linguistic behaviour, preferences and attitudes of Assyrians, on language domains and use in bi- or trilingual settings. Linguistic impacts of Russian and Armenian on "Assyrian" will also be considered - and thus also the various degrees and types of Assyrian bi- or multilingualism. The teaching of Assyrian in schools is a further aspect of efforts towards "Assyrian" language maintenance and positive attitudes towards the ethnic language. The "Assyrian" language in Armenia has to be regarded, however, as one of the endangered minority languages of the geographic-linguistic area of the Caucasus.

From the ethnolinguistic point of view, the interaction of Assyrian culture, tradition and language is investigated, as well as primary ethnicity features of the Assyrian population in the main Assyrian settlements in Armenia.

A more detailed linguistic description of the Armenian "Assyrian" will follow in subsequent years.