

Institution: University of Cambridge		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 25		
Title of case study: Endangered cultures and their vulnerability in a migration context		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014- (ongoing)		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Naures Atto	Senior Research Associate	01.10.2012 to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Assyrians and Yazidis, two minority groups in the Middle East, face unprecedented challenges in preserving their cultural identity in both in their homelands and diaspora communities. The rise of ISIS and other extremist groups has made the task of their cultural preservation and curation all the more urgent. Dr Atto has conducted significant research with these groups that has impacted directly on the ways in which they view, discuss, and preserve their cultural identities. Her projects have shown how the group-specific experiences of the Assyrians and Yazidis have been largely overlooked both by scholars and the wider public, and has demonstrated how research - and the participation of community organizations and individuals in its conduct, interpretation, and use - can significantly impact the survival of these two minority groups and their cultures in both the Middle East and in Western countries.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>One of the red threads in Atto's research is the vulnerability of Assyrians and Yazidis as stateless peoples. They fear extinction, have desperate hopes for a future and need to develop resilience strategies. During her Mellon postdoctoral fellowship at Cambridge [R2, R4], Atto studied the role of trauma and past suffering among the younger generation of Assyrians. This laid the groundwork for her subsequent interdisciplinary research, formulated in three interconnected projects, focusing primarily on the endangerment and vulnerability of minoritized yet indigenous cultures in the Middle East and their struggle for survival in the context of migration.</p> <p>The first project, <i>Aramaic-Online Project</i> (2014-2017), was funded by the Erasmus+ programme, and involved a collaboration between Bergen University, the Free University Berlin, the University of Cambridge, the University of Leipzig and Mor Ephrem Monastery. It revitalised the severely endangered Surayt Aramaic language (originally spoken by Assyrians in south east Turkey) by developing an online-course and additional language learning materials. Atto was the Cambridge PI. She hosted the first international conference on Surayt at Corpus Christi College (27-30 Aug 2015) where a new orthography for standardizing the writing of Surayt (Talay 2015) was developed; this has formed the backbone of efforts to revitalise the language. Atto's research and contribution to this transnational project led to the development of the first online course in Surayt at A1 and A2 levels, provided in English, German, Swedish, French, Dutch, Arabic and Turkish, consisting of 16 learning units, grammar boxes, cultural notes, exercises, and a glossary [R3]. Based on this work, Atto was involved in a successful follow-up application (Erasmus+ 2017-2020), aiming to develop the B and C levels of the online course, a digital corpus and a learner app <i>SuryoyoTalk - The Surayt language app</i>, available at the Apple Store and at Google Play.</p> <p>The second project, <i>The Gilgamesh project</i> (financed by the Swedish <i>Riksbankens Jubiliuemsfond</i>, 2017), was carried out in collaboration with O. Cetrez and S. Barthoma (Uppsala University). Atto's contribution focused on the vulnerability of Assyrian Christians and Yazidis during the recent wars in Syria and Iraq. This project made the untold experiences of minority refugees visible, illustrated how the fear of extinction is embedded in the collective narratives of these groups and has been expressed in different artistic forms.</p>		

Atto coordinated the project, directed a documentary film, organised an art exhibition and co-organised an academic workshop. For the documentary (*Pomegranate: Voices of Sinjar* [R6]), 12 former abducted Yazidi women by ISIS who were victims of rape and torture, were interviewed and filmed. Atto's research among the group revealed the resilience of victims, their coping mechanisms and the empowerment strategies they have developed through the emergence of activism among kidnapped Yazidi women, which has also been recognized in Nadia Murad's Nobel Peace Prize (2018).

The **third** project is *RESPOND: Multilevel Governance of Mass Migration in Europe and Beyond* (2017-2020), a Horizon 2020 grant that developed directly from the Gilgamesh project. RESPOND is a comprehensive study of migration governance in 11 countries in the wake of the so-called '2015 Refugee Crisis'. As the PI in Cambridge, Atto is looking specifically into the migration experiences of Assyrian and Yazidi refugees who have settled in the UK, Germany and Sweden. Besides research, Atto takes a central role in the main organization of RESPOND's impact activities.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- [R1] Aramaic-Online Project. (2017). *Surayt orthography*. Published online at www.surayt.com. [DOI]. (N. Atto was a co-author (2015)).
- [R2] Atto, N. (2016). What could not be written: A study of the oral transmission of Sayfo genocide memory among Assyrians. *Genocide Studies International*, 10(2), 183-209. [DOI]
- [R3] Talay, S. (2017). *Slomo Surayt. An introduction course for Surayt-Aramaic (Turoyo)*. Bar Haebreus Verlag. ISBN: 9789050470667 (N. Atto was a co-author). Published in four languages (English, German, Swedish and Dutch) and available as an online open source in seven language versions at www.surayt.com
- [R4] Atto, N. (2017). The death throes of indigenous Christians in the Middle East: Assyrians living under the Islamic State. In J. Cabrita, D. Maxwell & E. Wild-Wood (Eds.), *Relocating world Christianity: Interdisciplinary studies in universal and local expressions of the Christian faith* (pp. 281-301). Brill. [DOI]
- [R5] Gaunt, D., Atto, N., Barthoma, S. A. (2017). *Let them not return: Sayfo - The genocide against the Assyrian, Syriac and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire*. Berghahn. ISBN 9781785334986.
- [R6] Atto, N. (2018), director and co-producer, *Pomegranate: Voices of Sinjar*, Dragonlight Films (2018). [Link]

Outputs [R1-R5] have been peer-reviewed and printed by internationally recognised publishers and journals, and therefore meet the 2* minimum requirement.

Grants received

Aramaic Online Project (2014-2017), EC-Erasmus+ programme, Strategic Partnerships, project nr. 2014-1-NO01-KA200-000424 (EUR496,968 of which EUR70,668 UCam) PI Atto

Surayt-Aramaic Online Project (2017-2020), EC-Erasmus+ programme, Strategic Partnerships, project nr. 2017-1-DE01-KA203-003573 (EUR408,160, of which EUR88,905 Stockholm U.) PI Wardini

Gilgamesh: Untold Traumatic Experiences of Vulnerable Groups (2017-2018). Swedish Riksbanken's Jubileumfund - Kommunikations projekt (SEK497,700); PIs, Atto, Cetrez and Barthoma.

RESPOND: Multilevel Governance of Mass Migration in Europe and Beyond (2017-2020), EC-Horizon 2020 Programme - project no. 770564 (EUR3,310,405, of which EUR216,507 UCam)

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Atto and her research partners have addressed the endangerment, vulnerability and fragility of Assyrian and Yazidi communities and cultures by means of innovative digital resources,

museum partnerships, documentaries, and by influencing policy. These projects have had significant impact in three interconnected areas, in which Atto has played a strategic role:

a) Preservation of Surayt and development of institutional resources

The Aramaic-Online Project (2014-17) and its follow-up project (2017-20) have highlighted the endangerment of Surayt (the vernacular language of Syriac Christians in the region of Tur Abdin, SE Turkey) and the need to revitalise this language in a worldwide context. A new orthography and grammar [R1] which are the outcome of three workshops with the involved partners and the International Surayt Conference held at the University of Cambridge (27-30 August 2015), are increasingly being accepted and used by mother tongue teachers, authors and scholars. There has been a pressing need for a standard orthography and grammar because Surayt as a vernacular language has started being used in digital communication, in the church and in state schools, replacing partly the place of classical Syriac Aramaic. The lack of one standardised way of writing Surayt has made it difficult to communicate with this language in writing, which has accelerated also its endangerment especially in a diasporic context.

Online course: The online course is provided in 24 learning units covering all levels of CREF (A1-2, B1-2 and C1 levels) supported with a digital corpus equivalent for C2 level. The course was initially planned to be in English, German, Swedish and Dutch. Arabic, French and Turkish versions were added later. These languages have been carefully selected to reach as many potential learners as possible in the diaspora. For example, in the case of Arabic, many learners are resident in Sweden (*Gozarto familjföreningen*) having originally emigrated from North Syria. The project's influential revitalisation work was acknowledged by one of the leading scholars of this Aramaic language, Prof Otto Jastrow in his expert review report for the Erasmus+ Agency (2017: 6,7): 'The Aramaic-Online course is a major breakthrough for the preservation of the highly endangered Surayt language. [...] As a result there now exists a homogeneous, high quality and up to date tool for the teaching of Surayt which will be of enormous benefit for stabilizing the language under diaspora conditions and will attract younger people to study the language of their forebears.' [E1]

Textbook: A printed text version of the online course available in English, German, Swedish and Dutch. Eight hundred copies have been distributed to language teachers, members of the speaker communities and academics. The Södertälje Municipality's Mother Tongue Unit in Sweden purchased 75 copies for their teachers working in primary and secondary schools. The historical centre for Swedish adult education, *Arbetarnas Bildningsförbund* and the Gozarto Cultural Association for newly arrived Syrian refugees purchased 20 copies to distribute among their members. Furthermore, 1,000 French copies have been published on the initiative of the Patriarchal Vicar of Belgium, France and Luxembourg [E2] and distributed freely among the speaker community living in Belgium and France. The textbooks are also available as an open source on the project's website. To date, the books have been downloaded more than 7,235 times (English 2,502; German 1,346; Swedish 1,105; French 1,209; Arabic 564; Dutch 378). [E3] The textbooks are also available in English and German on the digital publication platform ISSUU. Recently, three follow-up books have been published: German B level textbook, a reader and a glossary with ca. 12,000 entries.

Learner apps: Two learner apps have been developed to support the online course and empower Surayt with modern IT-tools and programmes. The first lexical app, *SuryoyoTalk* was released in Dec 2019 on IOS. Within two weeks it entered the 'Top 5 educational apps' downloaded in Sweden. [E4] The Android version and the popular 'Hangman' game was released in October 2020. These updates will increase the number of users. The developer, joined the project later and we offered to make our material freely available to him [E4]. The second learner app *Surayt-Online* was released in October 2020.

Digital corpus/reader: Atto initiated and coordinated the subproject, '10 Authors, 100 Articles in Surayt' to develop new learning material in Surayt on modern topics. After training

more than 30 people in the use of the developed orthography and grammar for writing Surayt, 15 authors wrote more than 275 articles about different themes in a modern context. 178 of these texts are reviewed and included in a digital corpus. 10 of these articles together with grammatical notes, glossary, and exercises are configured as a Reader, which has been provided online and has been published as an open source. [E5]

b) Impact and further exploitation

A significant outcome of these projects is that the diaspora speaker communities have come to value Surayt more highly as a language and it is being revitalized in its use in everyday life. Classical Syriac Aramaic has been perceived as a sacred 'high' language because of its use within the Syriac Orthodox church, whereas Surayt has had a subordinate position, which had been one of the key reasons it was endangered. As a result of Atto's projects, many stakeholders (teachers, authors, clerics etc.), who had wanted to protect the status-quo around the promotion of classical Syriac, now see the importance of the survival of the Surayt language. This shift has been evidenced in the following ways [E6]:

- Surayt has been included as an elective course (15 ECTS) in the Master course in Semitics (*Neo-Aramaistik*) at the Freie Universität Berlin.
- Sami Dik (Germany) who was trained by the project is now teaching 30 children in a church school and 170 children in 12 German state schools.
- Odom Hanno (Turkey) who was also trained by the project has started teaching a distance language course in Surayt at Mardin Artuklu University in Turkey. In Spring 2020 13 students enrolled to the course.
- In Sweden around 95% of the teachers who once only taught Syriac now teach Surayt instead. Many teachers in Sweden were trained by the project team in Aug and Oct 2016 and now follow the project's orthography.
- Gabriel Aslan, the head of the Syriac Orthodox Church board in the Netherlands, has taught Surayt in the Twente province since 2018, replacing the teaching of Syriac. Aslan follows the standard orthography and methodology developed by our project. This concerns the teaching of 500 children in the church schools in the Twente region.
- Benjamin Barthoma (teacher, assistant principal in the Municipality of Jönköping, Sweden) has started on his own initiative a Saturday school for teaching Surayt to young adults, making use of the Swedish version of our Textbook; 10 people attended the second class.
- Several new books have been written in Surayt, as well as translations of books in other languages, using the project's orthography and grammar. They include: "Alice in Wonderland" translated by Jan Bet Sawoce (2015), "Music Heritage of Mesopotamia" (Assyrische Jugendverband Mitteleuropa, 2016), two series of children's books (5) for the age group 0-7 (by Helane Numansen-Mutlu, Bar Hebraeus Verlag, 2019 and 2020).
- The changing role of Surayt and its embrace by the speaker communities have also affected the use of Surayt in the liturgy of the Syriac Orthodox Church (to which 99 % of Surayt-speakers belong). In his testimony, Archbishop Polycarpus Augin Aydin of the Syriac Orthodox Church in the Netherlands writes: '... the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, in the Western European Diaspora, is now using about 60 per cent Surayt and 40 per cent classical Syriac in her liturgy.' [E7] This can be seen as a 'silent reformation'.

c) Empowering refugees

The Gilgamesh project has created a space for the stories of vulnerable refugees to be heard by a broad audience. Atto coordinated and curated the art exhibition 'Untold | Unheard | Vulnerable | Refugees' hosted by the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, Sweden (19 May - 21 Dec 2018). Twelve Assyrian and Yazidi artists displayed their artwork depicting the suffering of their people in the Middle East. Museum staff reported that 'the exhibition had an effect on our visitors, coming from the very powerful content. Museum staff overheard comments from visitors like; "very strong", "difficult/hard" and "touching". Unfortunately, the visitors notebook was torn apart and the content has disappeared. The technical producer of the museum wrote that: '...the feeling is that it was deliberately torn apart and the notes from the audience has disappeared, sadly. Only the cover of the

notebook is left and the perpetrator has written “fack” and crossed over “Untold” in the title [E8].

Atto and her colleagues have also produced the documentary film *Pomegranate: Voices of Sinjar* based on the testimonies of three female victims of the genocide perpetrated by ISIS in 2014, which was shown as part of the museum exhibition (19 May-31 Dec 2018), at the annual commemoration of the Yazidi genocide in Sweden (Arlöv, 3 August) and in the *Festival of Ideas* in Cambridge (20 Oct 2018). One viewer in Cambridge donated £1000 to the NGO Yezidi Emergency Support (UK) as a result of seeing the film [E9]. Another wrote in her testimony: 'The documentary made me realise that academic learning should be about understanding what it is to be both human and inhuman, and hopefully this world will be repelled by evil and look for good [E9].' Fareeda Khalaf, an ISIS survivor from the same village as the two women who appeared in the documentary, stated after viewing the documentary in Gothenburg that the documentary told her story as it is and that nothing should be edited. Another Yazidi woman activist and director of YAZDA Sweden, Delkhwaz Hacıy said in the discussion session after the viewing that so far this is the documentary that has affected her the most of all the many documentaries that she has seen about the Yazidi genocide [E9].

One of the Yazidi women that Atto interviewed for her research, Faheema Saleh, asked Atto to write an expert letter in support of her asylum application in the UK, which had been rejected several times, despite the fact that she is one of the victims of the 2014 Yazidi genocide. For her Upper-Tribunal case, Atto wrote an expert letter to the immigration tribunal (28 April 2019) based on her earlier research to support Ms Saleh in her asylum application in the UK. In May 2019, Ms Saleh was finally granted asylum. In her testimony, Ms Saleh wrote: 'Your letter helped me because it was a proof of my words, and also your explanation of the problems of minorities in the Middle East was understandable to the judge and she believed what you wrote because this was a part of your job' [E10]. Another Yazidi refugee Majhor Hagi revealed that judge C. E. Roblin gave weight to Atto's witness in her decision to grant Mr Hagi asylum in the UK: 'Although miss Atto has not visited the area again, I found her a persuasive witness who expressed the view that if the Appellant returned to Iraq the Appellant would be imprisoned for his ideas. He would also be at risk of being targeted by Islamists whose aim is the disappearance of Yazidi culture. I accept her witness.' [E10]. Mr Hagi was subsequently granted asylum in the UK.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[E1] Expert statement & assessment report by Professor of Arabic, Tallinn University (2017).

[E2] Testimonial: Patriarchal Vicar of Belgium, France and Luxembourg.

[E3] Download figures for apps.

[E4] Testimonial: App developer.

[E5] '10 Authors, 100 Articles in Surayt' (Book: Šlomo Surayt II - Qëryono - Lesestücke (Version v.1). Zenodo: [DOI](#) and Online: [Link](#)).

[E6] Testimonials from six mother tongue teachers; Semitics Masters course details, Freie Universität Berli.

[E7] Testimonial: Metropolitan of the Archdiocese of the Syriac Orthodox Church in the Netherlands.

[E8] Testimonial: Technical producer, Världskulturmuseet (Museum of World Cultures).

[E9] Feedback: *Pomegranate* documentary.

[E10] Testimonies from two Yazidi refugees in the UK.