

Youth-led preservation of Syriac Orthodox heritage in Syria

Dr Elias El Halabi

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1. Background and relevance

Sayfo ('the sword'), the Syriac genocide, also known as the Assyrian genocide, refers to the mass killing and deportation of Syriac Christians in southeastern Anatolia by Ottoman military forces and local Kurdish militias from September 1914 to 1920, resulting in 250,000–500,000 victims.¹ Around two million Armenians and Greeks were victims of similar genocides. The Sayfo was less well known because Syriacs and Assyrians did not have a political entity to advocate for their cause. The Turkish government refuses to acknowledge any of these crimes.²

For decades, the Syriac community and church were silent about the genocide. One of the probable reasons was that a big part of the Syriac population was still in Türkiye and raising this issue would be harmful to them. Nevertheless, a few books have been written about the Sayfo. However, on the centennial of the Sayfo, 15 June 2015, and the initiative of Syriac Orthodox Patriarch His Holiness Mor Ignatios Aphram II, the Sayfo was highlighted as a core issue for the Syriac Orthodox Church. A series of events took place and monuments erected to commemorate the Sayfo genocide and to advocate for justice and compensation for the victims.

'A whole century has passed since the massacres of [the] Sayfo, and the wounds are still bleeding. In witness to her martyrs, the Syriac Orthodox Church is committed to take a historical stand and to awaken the conscience of humanity, which is in a state of deep sleep, unaware that he who remains silent about the truth is a partner in the crime. The Church has made it a duty to remind the world of one of the most disgraceful and ugliest crimes of the twentieth century. This genocide will not fade away from human memory as long as there is someone who sheds light on it to open the blind eyes and deaf ears which we ought to wake up from the forgetfulness in which the international community has assumed.'

Quote taken from Sayfo 2014 decree, Issued by Patriarch Ignatios Afram II³



Photo credit: Logo of the Sayfo Syriac Genocide used by the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch. Used with permission.

¹ Centennial of the Syriac Genocide 1915-2015, *Sayfo a Testimony of Truth* (Beirut: Al-Masreq publication in cooperation with Syriac Cultural Center for Publications, 2016), 21.

² *Ibid.*, 22.

³ Sayfo 2014, Issued by Patriarch Ignatios Afram II, Damascus, Syria, on 11 December 2014: <https://tinyurl.com/39mt88mz>

Most of the Sayfo commemorative events were church-led or on the initiative of Syriac political activists. The '**Heritage Repertoires for Inclusive and Sustainable Development in Egypt, Syria, and Beyond**' project widened the scope of these initiatives and filled a gap by focusing on popular heritage and involving young people. This project aimed to gather and preserve the cultural heritage of the Syriac Christian minority in Syria.

Prof. Mariz Tadros is the principal investigator of an initiative funded by the British Council and British Academy, undertaken in collaboration with the Archbishop Mar Antimus Jack Yacoub, patriarchal vicar for youth affairs and Christian education in the Syriac Orthodox Church and Refcemi, the Coptic Orthodox Office for Advocacy and Public Policy, led by Archbishop Angaelos, the Coptic Orthodox archbishop of London, and papal legate to the United Kingdom. The project built the capacity of 50 young people in communities in Aleppo, Homs and Al Jezira where the Syriac Orthodox church has a presence, to gather, safeguard, share and more broadly disseminate their popular intangible heritage.

This project focused on gathering intangible Syriac heritage by recording videos and documenting transcripts of Senior citizens speaking about topics related to their ancient traditions, songs, Special occasions, events, food, and games. This heritage project collected relevant material such as photos, recordings and so forth. Young people were key actors in this project, serving as a bridge between the past and the future.

2. Rationale and methodology

This paper highlights young people's contribution to shaping and preserving Syriac heritage and assesses its impact on bridging the intergenerational gap. It gives particular attention to the memorial ceremony that took place in Aleppo on 15 June 2022.

Based on analysis of the data collected, and in light of videos and interviews undertaken via WhatsApp video conferencing with Maya Isa (the project coordinator in Aleppo), this paper analyses the distinctive features of the Sayfo oral history project. It focuses on issues such as identity, generations, memory, and mission. The element of Christian faith is a cross-cutting theme. The paper concludes with general remarks.

3. Interviews

Question 1) Tell us about your role as coordinator and the young heritage gatherers you have been supporting in Aleppo?

Maya used to see herself as an Al Jezira woman living in Aleppo. Her experience of the war in Aleppo has shaped her identity and she now considers herself an Aleppo woman of Al Jezira origin.

As a local project coordinator, she worked with two communities in Aleppo city from:

- St George's Church in the ancient Syriac neighbourhood.
- St Ephrem's Church in Al-Souleimaniyeh.

Both church communities are composed of survivors of massacres and their descendants from different geographical areas in present-day Türkiye and have kept their distinct traditions.

Question 2) The oral histories were based on interviews with senior citizens in Aleppo. How did the Sayfo genocide feature in their stories and what was difficult about undertaking these oral histories?

Apart from one person, most of the people interviewed during preparations for the commemoration we had previously interviewed about other topics. During this, they had talked about their ancestors a little, so we expected that they would have stories to share. When asked, they agreed to be interviewed about the Sayfo massacres. Below, we share some of the insights from our conversations, referring to them as 'melfono' and 'melfonito'⁴ to protect their identities.

Melfono 1⁵

He talked about the killing of 13 members of his father's family, and how his father survived the genocide. He talked about his father's memories, which despite their cruelty, did leave not him with anything but the love for all people.

⁴ Mefono (male)/ Melfonito (Female) means a teacher or erudite in the Syriac tradition.

⁵ He is a member of the church council and active in the humanitarian field.

Melfonito 1⁶

She was the only one who spoke about the Sayfo massacres during the heritage collection project. She talked about the sad story of her grandmother, who narrated the scene of seeing her father, her uncle and grandfather arrested and hanged for smuggling Armenian men.

Melfonito 2⁷

She talked about a massacre that took the lives of her cousins. In one hour, 17–20 young men were killed.

Melfono 2⁸

He talked about his father witnessing a massacre on the road while he was returning from his own father's quarry. He ran back home but was unable to speak for a month after witnessing this scene. He also mentioned the killing of his father's maternal uncle by one of his Muslim workers.

Melfono 3⁹ and his mother

They talked about how their father's family was killed. His mother talked about the killing of her own mother's family, and her stay at an orphanage in Deir al-Zafaran. She mentioned the escape of one of her relatives from the hands of pursuers, and later, her son suffocated because she put her hand over his mouth so that he would not make a sound and reveal their hiding place.

Question 3: What did these oral histories reveal about how people remember the Sayfo? What things did they talk about most and why?

Those interviewed talked about the memories of their ancestors, about the tragedy of the Sayfo and how the killings took place. They always described the ugliness of an act, rather than focusing on the murderers. In the full interviews, there were no negative mentions of the murderers, except in one interview only, and we did not show it in the commemoration ceremony. They were passionate narratives without tears, except in one interview.

⁶ She is an active member of the Confraternity of the Annunciation for Women.

⁷ She is an active member and church delegate in international conferences.

⁸ He is an engineer.

⁹ He is a poet, writer, and painter.

Question 4: How did the idea of a day of commemoration in church emerge? Whose idea was it? When did the idea first come up? How did the idea develop?

The idea appeared for the first time at the end of the first week of May. It was Bishop Boutros Qassis's idea, and he was contacted via WhatsApp. His idea was to invite senior citizens to give testimonies about their ancestors during the Sayfo massacres, with a simple meditation and prayer. Because of technical problems with the internet and some initial misunderstanding, I understood that it was about a spiritual, meditative and prayer meeting, and that it would be possible to show videos of interviews with the senior citizens. The bishop asked the heritage project team to prepare the event and involve university students from both churches in Aleppo.

Then, the work began by introducing the idea to the team members who started screening the recorded interviews, searching for any reference to the massacres. They only found one in the interview with a melfonito. The young people compiled a list of names of families mentioned in the narratives of the massacre and scheduled interview meetings with them. By this time, they had already recorded four interviews with five people.

Later, a female and a male university student were selected from each church to set up a working plan and agree on the message they wanted to convey.

The project team was composed of a group of young people who are deeply involved in the volunteer work in their communities.

The work began with reading books about the massacres – there were four books in total. The team filmed video clips of the cities where these massacres took place, searching for pictures of the Sayfo in the articles on the internet to support the narratives.

The final version of the meeting agenda gradually crystallised as they approached the day of the commemoration. There was flexibility in the work, and the final format was not completed until the last day, when they added a new video.



Photo credit: A photo of the heritage project team with the bishop and parish priest in Aleppo. The picture was taken the day of the memorial ceremony on June 16, 2022, by the heritage collectors and was provided by the project coordinator.

Question 5: What role did you play as coordinator? What role did the young people, bishop, and church members play in preparing for the commemoration? What obstacles did you face in the preparations?

The role of the Coordinator was to organise the work, define the goals of the project and explain them to the young people, coordinate the work of the heritage collectors, and define the roles and responsibilities amongst everyone.

We began by working with the young people, who prepared the videos and read books related to this subject to increase their knowledge. We then made sure that the heritage collectors were collaborating with a group of four university students from two church parishes.

The role of the youth team was to communicate with people in the area, making sure that they had information about the Sayfo. They also arranged and conducted interviews with local people, asking them questions about the massacre and how it affected their families.

They also had a lot of practical responsibilities, such as purchasing materials to be used throughout the project and at the event, transporting items between locations, building the meditation scene at the event, and ultimately preparing St. Georges church for the final event.

Bishop Boutros Qassis was also involved in the preparation for the event, providing encouragement and support to the team, as well as books and other materials to help their understanding.

In the last two days of preparations, the bishop was with the team most of the time and even extended a helping hand. He was the one who installed the projector correctly, when everyone else was unable to direct it at the screen. He followed up on the installation of the sound system, and logistics related to the venue, duration, electricity, lighting, and sound.

The most beautiful thing with Bishop Boutros Qassis and the priest – Father Ephrem Wazir, who also participated in the preparation – was that during the planning arrangements, they picked up brooms and cleaned the church floor to save time. He stayed with the team until they had finished their work. He encouraged the young people with caring words before, during, and after the event, and expressed his pride at having them there.

There were almost no major obstacles as the diocese was very cooperative in meeting all the requirements of the event (sometimes, the obstacles were issues related to electricity and securing supplies).

3.1 Ceremony programme

Question 6: Was this the first time that such a commemoration had taken place? What were the most powerful or touching dimensions of the commemoration?

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3.2 Most emotive moments

When Mawtini was playing with the pictures of the cities, people completed the song even though there was a power cut and the music and images stopped. The second was when showing the map of Syria with the names of the families; people's eyes were following the names. Despite the large number of families, after the commemoration, people told us the names of one or two families that were not mentioned. A lot of the people who were massacred in Syafo did not have proper burials and this has been weighing heavily on the conscience of their offspring. The ceremony was so deeply moving and engaging, so when it was time to deposit the dust on the symbolic coffin everyone in the church participated, although it was not obligatory.

Question 7: Can you describe the reactions to the day of the young people who organised the event, the bishop, yourself, and others? What feedback did you get?

What affected me was their pride in their Syriac ancestors and their cities of origin. It is true that everyone meditated on their city of origin, but this time they heard more than one story from more than one city. Thus, there was a sense of unity.

I felt that these two things gave them a sense of strength that did not exist before the commemoration.

The spiritual message gave them another way to think about not seeking revenge, especially Christ's message that we should put our sword back into its scabbard.

Their personal reactions were ones of pride and joy, especially after the encouraging words of the bishop, who said that the success of the event was beyond his expectations.

During the preparations for the meditation, there were mixed feelings of sadness and amazement because of what their ancestors had endured. The participants

in the ceremony were proud of them, but some were saddened by reading the books about the massacres.

Originally, the Bishop wanted a simple prayer ceremony. However, he was very pleased with the outcome, although it was contrary to the idea he had in mind. The more he was engaged in the preparations, the more he was excited about the event and proud of the result. More than once, he expressed his joy in this event.

3.3 People's experience at the event

The majority were enjoying themselves and were touched. They did not lose their focus on the commemoration, not even for a moment. Even during the power cut, they completed the song. There were sounds of intermittent crying here and there. There were many compliments and words of thanks. However, the heritage collectors were surprised by the irritated reaction of those who missed it due to a lack of information about the event and its agenda. Maya was later asked to talk about the meeting at one of the women's Bible study groups because many of them did not attend the commemoration meeting.

The most beautiful and clear acclaim was from the testimony of the Armenian Protestant Rev. Bishara Oglu,¹⁰ who was present and said:

'The evening is wonderful, rich in its substance, deep in its content, impressive in its presentation, honest in its set up, beautiful in its agenda items, sad, but not depressing.

It touched those who attended the event. It provided them with material to comprehend the occasion and to reflect on it with hope.

The teamwork was clear and effective. Attendees were attentive.

When the current was cut off, it turned out that the largest part of the attendees were singing along with the national anthem, so the interruption revealed the degree of actual interaction and continuation.

Prayers are excellent in terms of notions and material.

Mentioning places and stopping there was impressive.

Mentioning family names is a genius and touching idea.

¹⁰ He is the pastor of the Evangelical Armenian Church in Aleppo. He wrote this message to Maya on June 16, 2022 and it is shared with his consent.

Syria was present in every aspect of that rich evening's material. This reflects the sincere love and true identity of the celebrants.

My thanks, love, and appreciation to every team member.'

Question 8: Why was this event important? How did empowering young people in the heritage project lead to their initiative to prepare contribute to the preparations for the day? How did your knowledge of the senior citizens affect their decision to participate? How many people were in church on the day?

In the past, people used to enjoy security and prosperity. Later, the war began, and the economic crisis followed. For all these reasons, most of the Syriacs residing in Syria had little grasp of the suffering of their ancestors.

Around 100–150 people were present. Some came because of their previous experience with the heritage collectors. They were very engaged and impressed.

Question 9: How did you use the heritage you had collected for the project during the commemoration day activities?

One of the interviews contained material about the massacres, and through the relationships that the young people established with the people, we were able to do other interviews in a relatively short time and very quickly.

Question 10: How do we make the collective memory of the Sayfo known to the rest of the world?

I do not know if it is important for the rest of the world to know it, but perhaps I want it to reach the world and our people's offspring. So, they will know who they are and how their ancestors were able to fight evil with goodness. The patience of our ancestors and their adherence to the Christian faith will provide added value, and will provide them with spiritual and moral support in these difficult times.

In my opinion, it will happen through the perseverance of the commemoration with a firm message of love instead of fear and hatred, by speaking up with strength and weakness, joy and pain, instead of remaining silent about it and behaving as if nothing has happened. It will also be by focusing on the events, not on the perpetrators, and exposing the evil and malicious opinions that led to the Sayfo.

To make Sayfo known, it needs to be publicised. This requires the concerted efforts of talented people from all specialisations: drawing, sculpture, plays, literature, songs, poems, articles, and photography. In addition, it requires audiovisual means to explain to people how these massacres took place.

4. Analysis

4.1 Remembering the Genocide

Sayfo stories are typically narratives of bloody and terrifying memories. They were kept in the realm of deep silence for years. Survivors seldom spoke about them unless by mistake or when not sober enough. This state of denial is an indicator of deep trauma. One survivor told his son that when he was a child, he lost the ability to speak for a month because he witnessed one of these massacres, so he lost his ability to speak for a month. Others witnessed the slaughter of more than a dozen of their family members. The fear was so intense that a woman's child died of suffocation. What could be more traumatising? This explains why these atrocities were suppressed and were sometimes revealed unintentionally or on people's deathbeds.

This fear came from the clear power asymmetry in favour of the Ottoman and Kurdish perpetrators. In the village of Azakh, Syriac survivors stated that their enemies were afraid of the sounds of cannon shells that appeared to be coming from the direction of the church. No cannon was found there, but it kept the perpetrators away.¹¹ With the exception of Azakh, however, most of the time the Syriacs were helpless, subjected to persecution, forced displacement and mass killings. This power asymmetry also explains the excessive use of force, as well as killings in cold blood.

4.2 Christian identity

The Syriacs were convinced that their community was mostly targeted because of its ethno-religious identity. They believed they were killed because of their

¹¹ The full story is found in the book of Youssef Jebrael AlQess and Dr. Elias Hadaya: *Azakh Events and Figures*, (Beirut: al-Rafidein Publishing House, 2000), 66-67.

Christian faith. They perceived the victims as Christian martyrs and their survivors as custodians of the faith. This is in line with the long history of the Syriac Orthodox Church, which has always perceived itself as persecuted because of its non-Chalcedonian orthodoxy.

In the liturgy, time and space acquire new dimensions. The reflections and prayers written by young people were accompanied by pictures, and candles were lit in the five cities of Edessa, Nusaybin, Midyat, Mardin, and Diyarbakir while chanting the song Mawtani in Arabic and Syriac. So, a new map of the homeland was reconfigured, based on people’s legacies and not on the political settlements of the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

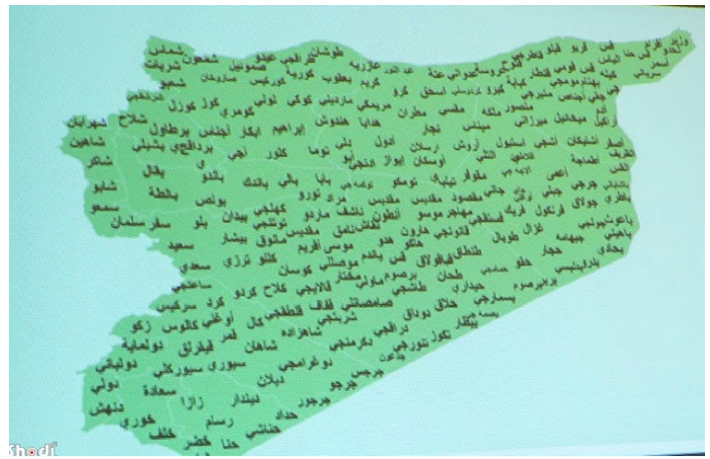


Photo credit – Left: Lighting candles in remembrance. Photo credit – Right: Map of Syria showing the Syriac family names. Produced by the heritage project’s team. The images were taken on the day of the memorial ceremony on June16, 2022, by the heritage collectors and were provided by the project coordinator.

The names of families displaced in the aftermath of the massacres were simultaneously displayed on the map. In the liturgy, the natives of the land reclaim their ownership of it by returning their swords to their scabbards, as Jesus commanded Peter to do. The liturgy culminated with a reading from the Book of Revelation (Rev. 7: 10-17) to affirm the whereabouts of their ancestors.

Depositing sand on the coffin was the final act of tribute to the martyrs. 'Survivors could not accept that many of the martyrs had not been buried, which could be seen as part of the denial they felt towards the massacres.



Photo credits Depositing sand and flowers on the coffin as part of the farewell. Photos taken by the Heritage collectors. Produced by the heritage project's team. The images were taken the day of the memorial ceremony on June 16, 2022, by the heritage collectors and were provided by the project coordinator.

With the proper burial ceremony of the symbolic coffin, the souls of their ancestors will now rest in peace because the new generation has acknowledged them and will cherish and defend their legacy. Now, the ancestors will rejoice as the new generation carries the torch of their Orthodox Syriac faith in peace with justice.

4.3 Intergenerational bridge

Young people were key actors in implementing this project and benefited from the project at various levels. Technically, they exhibited a sense of proficiency in the way they implemented the project. While working on the project, they started to unearth their roots and increasingly acquired greater ownership of the project. In doing so, they discovered their personal vocation. In fact, this project turned out to be a faith journey and an identity quest. The Sayfo project allowed the younger generation to bond with their ancestors. The reconstruction of the narrative of the Sayfo as embodied by the young people bridged the intergenerational gap from grandparents to parents to the current generation.

Maya, the project coordinator in Aleppo expressed during one of our meetings that because of the Sayfo commemoration, she was able to reconcile with her late parents with whom she was often at odds with. Furthermore, the scene of the coffin enabled her to realise what her brothers must have endured because they were not able to be present in the funeral of their mother. Her brothers were out of the country because of the war in Syria and could not be present at their mother's funeral.

'Now I [have] discovered why my parents used to behave in that way and why they wanted me to be raised in this particular manner.'

The project bridged the gap between the laity and the Church hierarchy. Maya was also able to understand why the kidnapped bishop of Aleppo, Mor Gregorisos Yohanna Ibrahim, used to insist on keeping the two liturgical and hymn traditions separate in the two main parishes of Aleppo. The congregations of St. Georges and St. Ephrems are descendants of survivors from two different geographical areas. Maya used to feel that they were two different Syriac Orthodox churches in one city. Now she recognises that they are one church from two cities with two different local traditions.

The impact of the Sayfo goes beyond reuniting people with their church. After attending the commemoration, a woman who used to come to church occasionally started to attend regularly. She later asked to enrol in Syriac language classes. When asked why, she said that it was a question of belonging.

5. Conclusion

The different testimonies from the participants and audience show clearly that the Heritage Project was more than just a project: it was a life-changing experience for each participant in the project, and a faith journey for those who participated in and contributed to this very important commemoration ceremony. It provided each local Syriac community with a feeling of kinship with the universality of the Syriac Orthodox Church. It created a bond of history, martyrdom and common vocation.

The young people have discovered that they are rooted in their land and are committed to their Syriac Orthodox faith. Most importantly, they have a cause to rally around and to advocate to the world. It has to be handed on to the future generations.

The testimony of Rev. Bishara Oglu is of particular importance since he was present as an external observer. As an ordained pastor, he was able to access the different elements of the commemoration clearly. The main Christian message reached him loud and clear.

One noteworthy observation is that, despite the long history of annual commemorations of the Armenian genocides, he did not make any correlation with them but perceived this ceremony as something genuine. He saw it from the lenses of the organisers and was moved by the originality of the approach. This

shows that the team succeeded in creating a particular identity for this commemoration event in particular and for the Sayfo heritage in general.

This project empowered the younger generation. They are able to draw pride and strength from what their ancestors have endured. They will no longer escape the legacy of the Sayfo as a historical event but are determined to face trials and tribulations that affect their everyday lives as Syriac Orthodox Christians because they have all the seeds of strength from their families to face evil with goodness and love.

Recognition was an important element of this commemoration event and heritage collectors project – it is an integral part of the identity and worth of every person and every community. The young people wanted the world to acknowledge the Sayfo as a decisive historical landmark of the Syriac people. The Sayfo was also a testimony of Christian faith and remembrance of the blood of Christ shed for the love of the whole world. Despite all the pain, the young people advocated for unconditional love, the peace that comes from above and divine justice. For all those who participated in this project or attended the commemoration, it was a life-changing experience, an identity quest and a mission to the world.

Finally, the success of this project was not restricted to the scope of its stated objectives. Its impact was broader and multilayered. The best way to conclude this paper is with the testimony of Shamiram, one of the project team members:

‘Today I felt something strange. Like everyone, I felt that the torch of love of our heritage was handed over to the youth. University students, thank you; thank you everyone – you left a mark. You allowed our people to [build a] bridge with their past. My heritage family, today, we were one family, one heritage, like every time we hold hands. I want to tell you that ‘today was one of the most wonderful experiences that I have lived’. It was a leap into the past, but it was as if it was on the wings of a dove of peace.’



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