Lebanese Syriac: A Forgotten Language & The Missing Piece of Lebanon’s Identity

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# Introduction

Lebanon is a peculiar case in terms of geographical influences on identity. Being situated near the center of the Middle East, many would expect that Lebanon’s culture and traditions at least somewhat align with those of its Arab neighbors. Even the Lebanese Constitution of May 23rd, 1926 declares that, “Lebanon is Arab in its identity and in its affiliation. It is a founding and active member of the League of Arab States and abides by its pacts and covenants" (Lebanese Constitution). However, in reality, it is unique from every other Arab-classified country. It’s the only one to not be situated in a desert, instead being mountainous and green, and its culture values and traditions feel entirely different from those of the Gulf, such as the United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia. Most of all, its people don’t believe that the country nor themselves are Arab; In a world values survey conducted in Lebanon during 2008 with a sample size of 3,039—close to evenly split based on religious faith and geographical origin—it was found that 67% of the total considered themselves Lebanese above all else, while only a mere 4% considered themselves Arab above all. This introduces the modern Lebanese debate of their heritage. The most popular stance is that the Lebanese are Phoenicians (also called Canaanites), a thalassocracy[[1]](#footnote-1) that occupied Lebanon between est. 3500-334 BCE. This opinion is mostly popular among the Christian sections of Lebanon, while many Muslims are against this stance, claiming it’s psuedoculturalism, and instead believe that the Lebanese inherit from the Arabs. This topic has been spoken about throughout the ages in Lebanon, however it is never explored linguistically. This is where the Lebanese Syriac language fits into the identity crisis. Lebanese Syriac, also called Lebanese Aramaic, was a language based on its ancient Semitic ancestor Canaanite-Aramaic, which was spoken by the Phoenicians. It was later Hellenized by the Greeks between 333-64 BCE, and then Christianized by the Romans during 64 BCE – 399 CE (Ministry of Tourism Lebanon). These transformations produced the Syriac language, a language created as an expansion for Greek in the churches to allow for the easier spread of religious ideas among the public. It was spoken in the now-named Provincia Syria, a region that extended from Canaan, which is now modern Lebanon, to upper Mesopotamia. Syriac was originally spoken alongside Greek, however following the breakout of the controversy of Christian Monophysitism est. 450 CE, Greek was gradually no longer being spoken, and Syriac became the main language of Provincia Syria and Lebanon. This continued for almost another two centuries until 634 CE, when the Muslim invasions of the Levant occurred. This historical event imposed the classical Arabic language on the people of Provincia Syria and most of Lebanon. Most of the churches had been killed off as the suppression of Syriac prevented them from expressing their religious ideas. One Christian sect, the Maronites, fled from Syria during the invasions to occupy Mount Lebanon, where the Muslims weren’t particularly interested in invading. As a result of this, Syriac flourished as the spoken language of Mount Lebanon up until the seventeenth century. Following that, influences from the rest of Lebanon resulted in Arabic being the preferred spoken language among new generations. Despite attempts to preserve the language by the Maronite Council, including the 1744 Synod that heavily restricted the translation of Maronite literature from Syriac into Arabic, the language was slowly sidelining into liturgic use. By the nineteenth century, Lebanese Syriac had been forgotten entirely among the Lebanese people, and was exclusively being used in the churches. Today it suffers the same fate. Although Syriac as a language is still spoken in several villages of Syria and Iraq, it’s western dialect that was specifically used in Mount Lebanon has been become extinct in its entirety. The idea that inspires this paper is whether the language plays a much more significant role in revealing the truth behind the Lebanese identity than most expect. This paper will explore to what extend the near extinction of Lebanese Syriac has impacted the Lebanese identity.

1. A thalassocracy is a seafaring nation that often traveled to nearby nations by ship and actively engaged in trade. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)