

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRYAN DENTON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Aramaic is still spoken in Malula, a cliffside village in south-western Syria. Elias Khoury, top right, whose granddaughter, Katya, below left, studies Aramaic in the village, said a govern-

ment policy of "Arabization" discouraged the language there during his childhood. At the Convent of St. Takla in Malula, most of the instruction is in Arabic except the Lord's Prayer.

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In Syrian Villages, the Language of Jesus Lives

By ROBERT F. WORTH

MALULA, Syria — Elias Khoury can still remember the days when old people in this cliffside village spoke only Aramaic, the language of Jesus. Back then the village, linked to the capital, Damascus, only by a long and bumpy bus ride over the mountains, was almost entirely Christian, a vestige of an older and more diverse Middle East that existed before the arrival of Islam.

Now Mr. Khoury, 65, gray-haired and bedridden, admits ruefully that he has largely forgotten the language he spoke with his own mother.

"It's disappearing," he said in Arabic, sitting with his wife on a bed in the mud-and-straw house where he grew up. "A lot of the Aramaic vocabulary I don't use any more, and I've lost it."

Malula, along with two smaller neighboring villages where Aramaic is also spoken, is still celebrated in Syria as a unique linguistic island. In the Convent of St. Sergius and Bacchus, on a hill above town, young girls recite the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic to tourists, and booklets about the language are on sale at a gift shop in the town center.

But the island has grown smaller over the years, and some local people say they fear it will not last. Once a large population stretching across Syria, Turkey and Iraq, Aramaic-speaking Christians have slowly melted away, some fleeing westward, some converting to Islam.

In recent decades the process has accelerated, with large numbers of Iraqi Christians escaping the violence and chaos of their country.

Yona Sabar, a professor of Semitic languages at the University of California, Los Angeles, said that today, Malula and its neighboring villages, Jabadeen and Bakhaa, represent "the last Mo-

hicans" of Western Aramaic, which was the language Jesus presumably spoke in Palestine two millennia ago.

With its ancient houses clinging picturesquely to a dramatic cleft in the mountains, Malula was once remote from Damascus, the Syrian capital, and local people spent their lives here. But now there are few jobs, and young people tend to move to the city for work, Mr. Khoury said.

Even if they return, they are less likely to speak Aramaic. Buses to Damascus used to leave once or twice a day; now they leave every 15 minutes, and with better roads the journey takes about an hour. Constant exchange with the big city, not to mention television and the Internet, has eroded Malula's linguistic separateness.

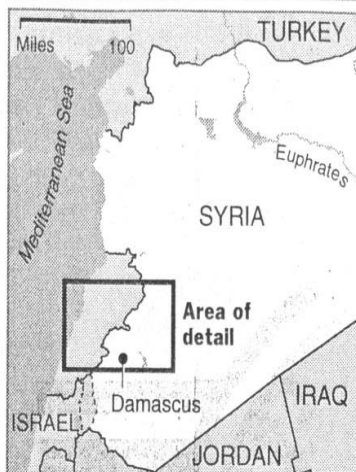
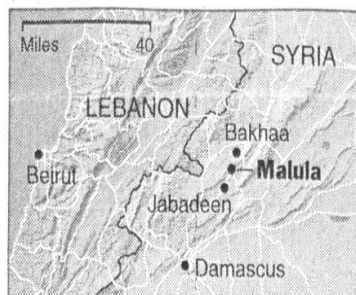
"The young generations have lost interest" in Aramaic, Mr. Khoury said sadly.

His granddaughter, a bright-eyed 17-year-old in blue jeans named Katya, offered a few samples of the language: "Awafih" for hello, "alloy a pelach a feethah" for God be with you. She learned Aramaic mostly at a new language school in Malula, established two years ago to keep the language alive. She knows some songs, too, and has started learning to write the language — something even her grandfather never did.

Mr. Khoury smiles at the words, but recalls how in his own childhood 60 years ago, schoolteachers slapped students who reverted to Aramaic in class, enforcing the government's "Arabization" policy.

"Now it's reversed," he says. Families speak Arabic at home and are more likely to learn Aramaic at the language center, where some foreigners also study.

In the town's central intersection, a group of young people outside a market seemed to confirm



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Malula, once entirely Christian, is almost half Muslim.

A once isolated village and traces of a more linguistically diverse Middle East.

Mr. Khoury's gloomy view.

"I speak some Aramaic, but I can barely understand it," said Fathi Mualem, 20.

John Francis, 20, said, "My father wrote a book about it, but I barely speak any." (Western-sounding names are common among Christians in Syria and Lebanon.)

Malula — Aramaic for "entrance" — derives its name from a legend that evokes the town's separate religious heritage. St. Takla, a beautiful young woman who had studied with St. Paul, is said to have fled from her home in what is now Turkey after her

pagan parents persecuted her for her newfound Christian faith. Arriving in Malula, she found her path blocked by a mountain. She prayed, and the rocks divided in two, a stream flowing out from under her feet.

Today, tourists walk up and down the narrow canyon where the saint is said to have fled, with rose-colored rocks rising 100 feet above a well-trod footpath. Nearby, two dozen nuns live at the Convent of St. Takla, presiding over a small orphanage. ("We teach the children the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic," said one black-clad nun, "but everything else is in Arabic.") There is a shrine in the mountainside where St. Takla is said to have lived, with a tree growing horizontally out of it.

But even the town's Christian identity is fading. Muslims have begun replacing the emigrating Christians, and now Malula — once entirely Christian — is almost half Muslim, residents say.

Malula's linguistic heritage stirred some interest after the release of Mel Gibson's 2004 film "The Passion of the Christ," with its mix of Aramaic, Latin and Hebrew dialogue. Virtually everyone in town seems to have seen the film, but few said they understood it. That was not their fault: it included different dialects of Aramaic, and the actors' pronunciation made it hard to understand anything, said Mr. Sabar, the Semitic languages professor.

Aramaic has also changed over the centuries, taking on features of Syrian Arabic, Mr. Sabar said.

But most residents of Malula believe that their town's ancestral language is still the same one Jesus spoke, and will speak again when he returns.

"Our parents and grandparents always spoke to us in this language," said Suhail Milani, a 50-year-old bus driver with a wizened face. "I hope it will not disappear."