

## Islamic traits and motifs in Jewish and Christian North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic languages and literatures

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The North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic dialects, historically spoken by Christian and Jewish minorities in the vast territory that includes southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq and northwestern Iran, belong to a region of linguistic convergence which includes varieties of Arabic, Kurdish and Turkish, spoken by the Muslim majority of the population, and in which prestigious literary—then national—Islamic languages (Arabic, Persian, Turkish) have exerted considerable influence. The results of these contacts have received much attention from scholars, and in some cases Islamic features have been isolated in the lexicon of Modern Aramaic varieties. An apparently paradoxical integration of terms with strong Islamic connotations into the religious language of Christians and Jews has also been observed. From a cultural and literary point of view, the minorities share with the Islamic majority much of the material culture, folklore, literary genres and, in some cases, stories and motifs, the ultimate origin of which may also have been Christian or Jewish.

**Keywords:** Islamic languages; Neo-Aramaic; Kurdistan; Islamicate.

### 1. Neo-Aramaic studies beyond dialectology<sup>1</sup>

During the Ottoman period, North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA) dialects were — and to a far lesser extent are still today — spoken today as minority languages by Christians and Jews in the vast territory that includes southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq and northwestern Iran.<sup>2</sup> They thus belong to an area

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Upon finishing the article, my first thought was to send it to Fabrizio Pennacchietti, who has always read and improved my publications with his incredibly vast knowledge, but especially with his enthusiastic approach and encouraging approval. This time he will find a little of my acknowledgment and deep gratitude in this and other footnotes. Most of what is found here and in my research interests was inspired by him and the network of masters, colleagues and students that he was able to gather around him thanks to his gentleness and the pleasantness of his conversation. *Basima raba, ya Fabrizio. Yarxi xayyox!*

<sup>2</sup> A handbook on Neo-Aramaic dialectology is currently under preparation by Simon Hopkins, Hezy Mutzafi, and Steven Fassberg. On Jewish and Christian North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic languages of the region under discussion, see Geoffrey Khan et

of cultural and linguistic convergence, a rich and diverse *Sprachbund* which includes varieties of Arabic, Kurdish and Turkish, spoken by the Muslim majority of the population, and in which prestigious literary Islamic languages – national languages in modern times (Arabic, Persian, Turkish) – have exercised a considerable influence.

The results of the cultural and linguistic interaction of Modern Aramaic communities with the Islamic majority have received relatively high attention from scholars. Suffice it to mention in this connection four ground-breaking contributions and the research lines to which they belong:

1. Irene Garbell. 1965. “The Impact of Kurdish and Turkish on the Jewish Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Persian Azerbaijan and the Adjoining Regions.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 85/2: 159-177.
2. Yona Sabar. 1982. *The Folk Literature of the Kurdistan Jews: An Anthology*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
3. Michel Chevalier. 1985. *Les Montagnards chrétiens du Hakkâri et du Kurdistan septentrional*. Publications du Département de géographie de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne.
4. Michael L. Chyet. 1995. “Neo-Aramaic and Kurdish: An Interdisciplinary Consideration of their Influence on Each Other.” *Israel Oriental Studies* 15: 219-49.

1. Irene Garbell published the first description of a Neo-Aramaic dialect with the instruments of modern structuralist linguistics (1965a) and an article on the impact of Kurdish and Turkish on Neo-Aramaic (1965b). In both publications, she showed the potential of a line of research on the Kurdistanian *Sprachbund*—of course, investigated from the point of view of the Aramaic speaking minorities—that, so far, has been the most productive.<sup>3</sup> Since then dialectologists have published

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al., “The North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic Database Project,” Faculty of Asian & Middle Eastern Studies, Cambridge University, <https://nena.ames.cam.ac.uk/>, with maps and bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> The contact between Aramaic and Iranian languages is a classical topic in Semitic (vs. Indo-Aryan?) philology and it was vigorously relaunched in contemporary Semitic linguistics when Kutscher (1969) applied to the Aramaic periphrastic perfect tense (*‘bid li* ‘(it is) done to me’ > ‘I have done’) Benveniste’s interpretation of the Old Persian *manā kartam* construction: see, e.g., Ciancaglini (2008: 29-37) and, for a more refined interpretation of the constructions at stake from the point of view of (Neo-)Aramaic and typological linguistics, Coghill (2016: 196-223). Pennacchietti (1988) published a comparison of the Neo-Aramaic, Farsi and Kurdish verbal systems and, with Orenge (1995), enlarged the comparative scope to Armenian – and Turkish, Azeri... – so as to strengthen the idea of the existence of areal features and therefore a regional *Sprachbund*. Following the interest for Neo-Semitic languages of Hans Polotsky’s Israeli school, Kapeliuk extensively published on contact phenomena between Aramaic or Afro-Semitic and coterritorial languages: on Neo-Aramaic, see her contribution, with bibliography, to Weninger’s handbook on the Semitic languages (Kapeliuk 2011); on Afro-Semitic, see, e.g., Kapeliuk (2002a, 2002b, 2004, and 2005), missing in Crass-Meyer’s (2011) bibliography on “Ethiosemitic-Cushitic language contact.” More recently, the areal perspective on western Asia is well represented in Geoffrey Khan’s Cambridge school of Neo-Aramaic

dozens of grammatical descriptions, usually including text collections and glossaries, articles and a few linguistic monographs on specific topics, in which the results of language contact and areal convergence are singled out or dealt with as explanatory hypotheses of language change, diachronic and diatopic variation. The urgency to describe languages that are dying or on the verge of extinction—coupled with the relatively high availability of Semitic scholars and dialectologists in today’s Academia — led to the somewhat paradoxical situation that Neo-Aramaic dialectology is in a much better position than Arabic and certainly Kurdish dialectological description of the region.

2. Yona Sabar, professor of Hebrew at UCLA, contributed to the field of Neo-Aramaic studies as a prolific editor and translator of texts and an excellent lexicographer. It is mainly thanks to him that we have at our disposal excellent editions of early and late homiletic, midrash- and targum-like literature in Jewish NENA varieties (17th-20th centuries), as well as a wealth of Jewish and Christian folk texts: stories, songs, lullabies, proverbs and sayings. As a native speaker of the Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialect of Zakho (northeastern Iraqi Kurdistan), he shows the tremendous importance of oral literature as the witness of a culture that is deeply rooted in its territory and social milieu and thus risks disappearing with the next generation and the limits of a purely dialectological approach to language.<sup>4</sup>
3. Professor of geography at the university of Paris-Sorbonne, Michel Chevalier (1985) describes the position of Christian (and Jewish) minorities among the Kurds in terms of cultural and social symbiosis. He contrasts the submission of the — mostly Catholic — Chaldean peasants of the plain

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linguistics, in the description of individual varieties as well as in more comprehensive comparative studies such as, e.g., Coghill (2016), Noorlander (2014), and Haig-Khan (2018).

<sup>4</sup> The best characterization of Yona Sabar as an Aramaic-speaking Jew of Zakho and Israeli scholar is the wonderful award-winning biography written by his son Ariel Sabar, *My Father’s Paradise: A Son’s Search for His Family’s Past*, Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 2008. Traditional — i.e., oral or oral-oriented — literature in the Neo-Aramaic vernaculars of the Christians (Sureth) started to attract scholarly attention in the last decades of the 19th century among German scholars such as Eugen Prym, Albert Socin and Eduard Sachau: see Mengozzi (forthcoming: 538-541), on their methods and achievements. Some hundred years later the Chaldean priest Joseph Habbi published a couple of articles on Sureth religious poetry (see Habbi 1978) and Pennacchietti (1976) a selection of erotic triplets, a popular genre that belongs to Kurdistani folklore, with a description of the way they are performed during a wedding feast. Bruno Poizat, Fabrizio A. Pennacchietti and the latter’s students published more studies and texts on Sureth literature in the last decade of the 20th and the first decade of the 21st centuries (see Mengozzi 2012 for bibliographic references). Interest for oral literature has grown considerably in the last few years in the Cambridge school of Neo-Aramaic studies, combining the goals of documenting endangered languages with living narrative texts and preserving the oral history and immaterial culture of minorities that faced or are facing persecution, insecurity, displacement and migration: see, e.g., Aloni’s (2014 and 2022) publication on the oral heritage of the Jewish community of Zakho and the “comparative [NENA and Kurdish] anthology with a sample of glossed texts” by Khan-Mihammadirad-Molin-Noorlander (2022).

of Mosul (*raya* “flock of subjects”) with the more or less independent, free position of the “Nestorian” tribes (*asiret*) on the (Hakkari) mountains, not dissimilar to the condition of their Kurdish neighbors. As far as I know this monograph remained isolated for quite a long time as an attempt to describe Christian minorities in Kurdistan with social and socio-economic criteria.<sup>5</sup> Later contributions on the history of the Christians of the region mainly focus on the genocide of 1915 and the diaspora.<sup>6</sup>

4. Michael Chyet is a Kurdologist and a cataloguer of Middle Eastern languages at the Library of Congress. His article of 1995 stands out among publications on Neo-Aramaic especially thanks to the attempt to widen the scope of the analysis from language(s) to culture and literature.<sup>7</sup> Only the third and last part of the article is devoted to linguistic data, whereas Chyet, in the first two sections, surveys hints and evidence from the available literature to deal with themes such as conversions — in both directions: Muslim Kurds becoming Christians and Aramaic or Armenian speaking Christians who converted to Islam and identified as Kurds, intermarriages and love affairs, shared lifestyle and Weltanschauung about hot gender and political issues.<sup>8</sup> Chyet shows that inter-ethnic and therefore linguistic contact and influence are further favored by commerce and the professional skills of Christians and Jews as peasants and specialized artisans. Special linguistic and literary skills were and are not uncommon among Christians and Jews. The tradition of Christian and Jewish bards and story-tellers, often illiterate, and quite normally capable of performing at the request of Christian, Jewish or Muslim audiences, in two or even three languages—Kurdish, Neo-Aramaic and Arabic—is well attested in the 19th century and has continued up to recent times.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> More recently, see Galletti (2010) and Donabed (2015).

<sup>6</sup> On the genocide, see Gaunt-Atto-Barthoma (2019), with extensive bibliography. On the Assyrian, Chaldean and Syriac Orthodox diaspora in general see Yacoub (1994); in the United States: Sengstock (1982), Hanoosh (2008), Ishaya (2010), Hughes (2017), Kiraz (2019); in Europe: Atto (2011), Merten (2013; 1st edition 1997), Lundgren (2019), Woźniak-Bobińska (2021), Tamcke (2022).

<sup>7</sup> “Linguistic phenomena do not, after all, exist in a vacuum: every language is spoken by a specific group of people with a distinctive culture” (Chyet 1995: 249).

<sup>8</sup> From his field-work experience among Kurds and Chaldeans in California, Chyet (1995: 226) concludes: ‘Both Kurds and Neo-Aramaic-speaking Christians have similar ways of thinking—about the type of modest behavior befitting a woman, for example—as well as comparable political aims (e.g., the establishment of an Assyrian state is the dream of many Assyrians.’

<sup>9</sup> See Chyet (1995, mainly based on Sabar 1982) on the Jewish story-teller Pinehas of Zakho, and Mengozzi (2002: 85-88 and 2019: 235-237) on David the Blind, the 19<sup>th</sup> century “Homer of the Chaldeans.”

## 2. Assimilation of Arabic (Islamic?) vocabulary

The self-evident result of dialectological research on the lexicon of Neo-Aramaic is the abundance of words borrowed directly from Arabic or via contact Islamic languages such as Kurdish, Turkish and Persian.<sup>10</sup> The phenomenon has been described as more or less pervasive, sometimes in rather impressionistic ways as a corruption of the original Aramaic stock, in all oral and written varieties of Neo-Aramaic, and for most semantic domains.<sup>11</sup> In the present context we will focus on religious terminology in early NENA written texts.

In the corpus of homiletic literature in the Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialect of Nerwa, preserved in 17th century manuscripts,<sup>12</sup> Sabar (1984: 208) observes that

The percentage of Arabic loanwords in NT [Nerwa texts] is quite high. Out of 1050 lexical entries of one typical text, 315 entries were borrowed, directly or via intermediary languages, from Arabic. In some prosodic instances almost the entire vocabulary is Arabic and only the declensions are Aramaic.

He then gives the following poetic example, which is indeed quite striking given the theological content: God speaks to Israel with (Iranian-influenced) Aramaic grammar, but Arabic vocabulary!

*yā yisrāʿēl, la qaṭlit nafs majān,*  
O Israel, thou shalt not kill a soul in vain,  
*uḥissox la fāsdeṭin ṣurtid ʿinsān,*  
and beware of harming the image of man,  
*ugimsabbibit lgyanox qitla bġēr hawān,*  
and (thus) cause thyself untimely death,  
*mud bṣurtid šarīf xliqle ʿilāha ʿinsān,*  
for God had created man in the image of the Eminent,

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<sup>10</sup> A puristic attitude towards orthography and vocabulary started with the 19th-century Bible translations in missionary milieu (Murre-van den Berg 1999), with a marked preference for classicizing historical spelling and inherited Classical Syriac words and roots, and increased during the 20th century: using Syriac vocabulary meant to get rid of words of Arabic origin and with possible Islamic connotations.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Tezel (2011) on Arabic borrowings in Şūrayt/Ṭūrōyo, the Christian Neo-Aramaic dialect cluster of Ṭur ʿAbdin (south-eastern Turkey) that can be considered part of the North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic continuum. See Häberl's contribution to the present issue of Kervan for a corpus-driven and statistically balanced evaluation of the degree of Arabic influence upon Western Neo-Aramaic vocabulary (dialect of Maʿlula).

<sup>12</sup> "Most of this literature probably came out of the school of Rabbi Samuel Barzāni (d. ca. 1630) who according to a local tradition was buried in ʿAmadiya" (Sabar 1984: 201 n. 5).

*umzōyinne bmanṭiq ublisān*

and had adorned him with (the faculty of) logic and tongue.

Sabar (1984: 201) hesitantly proposes a Judaeo-Arabic rather than Islamic origin for this technical theological terminology, but he concedes that it is not very likely that “the Neo-Aramaic texts may have been redacted directly from Judaeo-Arabic sources.” Moreover, he underlines that “it is somewhat surprising to see such emotionally loaded Islamic terms used for Jewish religious matters, instead of (or together with) H[ebrew] ones” (Sabar 1984: 208 n. 67), and gives the following examples:

- *šēx* “member of the Jewish burial society”
- *molla* [*< mawlā*] “Jewish or Muslim learned man”
- *ta‘āla* “Exalted be He! (God)”
- *sayyid al-faḏl* “Master of virtue (Moses)”
- *badr al-zamān* “Full moon of (her) time (Queen Esther)”

In the short introduction to the last edition of his Jewish Neo-Aramaic dictionary, Sabar (2020: x) remarks that many epithets and names of God used especially in Jewish Neo-Aramaic religious texts are “Judaic loanwords from Hebrew and Islamic from Arabic:” terms of Aramaic origin (OA) are used together with Hebrew- (H) and Arabic- (Ar) derived words.

- *‘ilāha* (OA) and *‘allāh* (Ar)
- *qayyām* “live, eternal” (H)
- *šēm* “Name” (H)
- *ta‘āla* “exalted” (Ar)
- *‘awādit ‘ajābe* “maker of wonders” (Ar)
- *raḥīm* “merciful” (Ar)
- *rāḥūm we-ḥannūn* “merciful and compassionate” (H)
- *xalāqa* “creator” (Ar) and *bōrē ‘ōlām* “creator of the world” (H)
- *‘istād ‘ōlām* “Master of the world” (Ar-H) and *ribbōn ha-‘ōlām* (H)
- *‘ilāha d’alamīn* “God of the universes” (OA-Ar)
- *parā’id hawuyāta* “benefactor” (OA-Ar)
- *rabb il-samāwāt* “Master of Heavens” (Ar)
- *rabb il-‘ālamīn* “Master of the Worlds” (Ar)
- *rabbi, mawlāyi* “my God, my Master” (Ar)
- *šēm šāmāyim* “for God’s sake” (H)
- *ma‘bud* “idol” (Ar); or *ṣanam* (OA), *‘avōḏa zāra* (H)

Besides the undoubtedly Arabic and probably Islamic origin of quite a number of God's epithets in Jewish Neo-Aramaic, we might further speculate about the influence of Islamic theology, spirituality and piety in the proliferation, use and role of God's names among Aramaic-speaking Jews. God's epithets and names are not exclusive to Islamic theology and piety, but the importance of *al-asmā' al-ḥusnā* 'the beautiful names (of God)' is evident in many forms of Islam (Gardet 1960).

A similar paradoxical integration of terms with strong Islamic connotations into the religious language has also been observed in early Christian Neo-Aramaic poetry. As an example, we can see two occurrences of Arabic-derived terms for "law" flanked with original Aramaic equivalents in the immediate context. In the first case the two lines belong to consecutive stanzas joined by anadiplosis, which is the typical technique—in complementary distribution with anaphora—to connect stanzas in Christian Neo-Aramaic religious poetry (Mengozi 2002: 75-79).

Israel of Alqosh, *On the Sin of Man* (early 17<sup>th</sup> cent.), 61c-62a

šari'at lālhin širyē

lālhin šrāy nāmosē

They have broken the laws.

Laws have been broken by them.

Yaswip of Telkepe, *On Revealed Truth* (1663), 71c-d

wdinā w-šar' b'īdēh msupillē [~ msuppēlē?]

bašrārā bḥaqq alāhā-ylē

Law and jurisdiction He delivered in His hands.

He is truly and really God.

In the second case, the two verse lines belong to the same quatrain and the bilingual hendiadys *dinā w-šar'* is paralleled in the following line by the bilingual hendiadys *bašrārā bḥaqq*, which is part of a recurrent formula in the poem. We will come back shortly to multilingual hendiadys in Neo-Aramaic—and Islamic!—literatures.

In the poem *On the life-giving Words* (1664?), Yaswip of Telkepe specifies that he is speaking of the šar' *kātā* "the new law," the New Testament that fulfills the commandments (*puqdānē*) of the Old Testament.

Yasip of Telkepe, *On the life-giving Words* (1664?), 4c

*kuḏ d-nāṭri ʿan puqḏānē wʿaḏ šarʿ kātā*

[He allowed to partake with Him through His body and blood in communion]  
all those who observe the Commandments and the New Law.

Arabic-derived terms with a strong Islamic connotation are assimilated into Jewish and Christian religious discourse, showing their correspondence with traditional terms of Aramaic, Hebrew or even Greek etymology, as is the case of Aramaic *nāmosā*. Early Neo-Aramaic authors and poets, who are learned rabbis and priests, use this terminology for pastoral and paraenetic purposes as well as so as to achieve sophisticated literary effects.

### 3. Polemical use of Islamic terminology

In the epilogue of the poem *On Revealed Truth* (1663), that I have commented upon on various occasions and that inspired the title of my PhD dissertation (Mengozzi 2002: 115-118 and 2005: 327-332), the priest Yawsip of Telkepe said:

Glory be to the Father, the Son and the Spirit  
who gave us an open mouth  
and a story in a truthful language (*wḥadīt bliššānā ṣaḥīḥā*)  
so that we praise and give glory to him.  
Come, let us glorify, oh Christians  
and let us keep on beseeching him,  
that he make for us peaceful times  
and save us from the Muslims!  
That he save us from the Ishmaelites,  
from the gentiles and the barbarians!  
Life has been made bitter to us.  
May Our Lord establish (back) the Greeks!  
That he establish the Greeks in our days  
so that we can (re-)build our churches!  
That he bring peace to our countries  
and protect our priests and pastors!

What has been translated as “a story in a truthful language” is in the original *ḥadīt bliššānā ṣaḥīḥā* (84c), where both terms *ḥadīt* and *ṣaḥīḥā* are borrowed from Arabic. In this context, *ḥadīt* must be understood as “story, narrative, message,” and in our text the *ḥadīt* is the history of salvation, the story of the Divine Economy, the message that God handed over to mankind in general, and to poets in particular, so that they might spread it and give glory to him. However, *ḥadīt* has a clear Islamic ring, that could not have escaped the attention of the poet and probably his audience.

The adjective “correct, truthful, reliable,” in combination with “language,” recalls the Christian-Islamic discussion about the superiority of one language or the other, Syriac or Arabic, as a reliable, truthful means used by God in his revelation. More provocatively, *ṣaḥīḥ* is used in the same context as *ḥadīt* as the Islamic technical term to certify as “sound, truthful, and reliable” a tradition relating to the Prophet.<sup>13</sup> Using Arabic words, the poet vigorously affirms the superiority of the Christian revelation and history of salvation and the reliability of his own language and verses as a way to re-write the Christian Scriptures in a poetic form.

The explicit polemic against Muslims that follows in the text demonstrates that the use of Arabisms and Islamisms such as *ḥadīt* and *ṣaḥīḥā* cannot be culturally neutral. The same God who gave the Christians an open mouth and a glorious story to tell, is explicitly invoked as a liberator against the Muslims. The real and reliable *ḥadīt*, the Christian *ḥadīt*, may also be seen as a foreshadowing of the liberation from the Muslims and the establishment of peace.

Arabic and Islamic technical terminology is used to reverse the Islamic position in the discussion about language and revelation. A loan may become a conscious polemic appropriation of the linguistic resources of the adversaries.

#### 4. *Ridondanza* as a(n Islamic?) stylistic feature

In two of the occurrences of *šarīʿat* and *šarʿ* for “law, judgment, jurisdiction,” we have seen that Arabic-derived terms are associated with Aramaic terms by chiasmus in *šarīʿat lālhin šryē ... lālhin šrāy nāmosē* and by double parallelism in *wdinā w-šarʿ ... bašrārā bḥaqq*. Hendiadys is not just one of the traditional stylistic devices which poets have at their disposal, but is clearly a constitutive element of the language of Christian Neo-Aramaic poetry.

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<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., the entry “Ṣaḥīḥ” by Alfred Guillaume in the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1913-1936) or Ahmed (2002).

Pairs usually involve terms ultimately derived from Arabic and Aramaic, as in the two examples mentioned above: e.g., *xabrē w-tanyātā* or (*peṭqāmē*) *w-xabrē w-millē* “words”, *māl w-qenyānā* “property,” (asyndetic) *sāfil dāwyā* “miserable,” *ṭayyārā w-pāriḥtā* “bird,” *staḏā ... malpānā* “master, teacher.” Aramaic words are also paired with words of Iranian origin widely used in the languages of the region, as in *raʿyē w-šefānē* (Persian *šabān*, Turkish *çoban*) “shepherds,” *gunahkār w-ḥaṭṭāyā* “sinner,” but pairs of synonyms or quasi synonyms belonging to the same language stock are also attested: *deḥlā w-surādā* “fear and terror” are both Aramaic; Christ is described as *kāmel tāmam bpaḡrā wnōšā* “perfect and complete in body and soul,” with terms of similar meaning asyndetically juxtaposed, both derived directly or indirectly from Arabic; in *ʿarjē w-sillē muqīmēlē* “he caused the lame and the crippled to stand up,” we have two terms belonging to the same semantic field of physical handicap and both derived, again, directly or indirectly, from Arabic.<sup>14</sup>

This kind of lexical virtuosity has also been observed in the Jewish homiletic literature written in Neo-Aramaic (Sabar 2002: 55-56) and can be seen as a stylistic reflex of the rich sociolinguistic profiles of Aramaic-speaking communities, who experience internal diglossia and live immersed in a multilingual—and multicultural—milieu. Neo-Aramaic authors love exploiting their own and their audiences’ vast and diverse linguistic competences to build pairs, sometimes triplets, of synonyms derived from different languages.

Sabar correctly speaks of hendiadys, since it is often very difficult to recognize the exact semantic relationship between the two terms used in such multilingual pairs. With a native speaker’s sensitivity, he remarks that it is a typical stylistic feature of the religious texts, where a large number of hendiadys are indeed found “usually each word being from a different language, and occasionally none of them being used in the colloquial dialect.” He observes that this kind of multilingual hendiadys is a trace of a long tradition of literary style and is therefore a learned feature in the literature in the modern tongue.

The multilingual vicinity of the speakers, with its cross-section of various ancient and new cultures—Kurdish, Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and Hebrew-Aramaic with its vast religious literature—has made an even stronger impact on the literary style than the colloquial jargons. (Sabar 1976: xxx-xxxi)

The stylistic use of synonymic, often multilingual, hendiadys poses interesting questions about their actual literary function: why should an author juxtapose almost equivalent terms in one verse or

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<sup>14</sup> Many examples in 17th-century religious poems are listed and discussed in Mengozzi (2002: 100-101).

distribute them in two consecutive lines? The abundance of multilingual pairs suggests a kind of cross-linguistic virtuosity of the poet. Crossing the boundaries between the linguistic codes that are either partly or well known to his audience, the author seems to display ostentatiously the lexical richness and the variety of languages at his command.

This rhetorical use of hendiadys is probably what Sabar has in mind, when he singles out the distance between the vocabulary used in such pairs and the colloquial language. The multilingual Christians and Jews of Iraqi Kurdistan certainly represent a perfect audience to appreciate this interruption of the linguistic continuity, realized by means of conscious borrowings and multilingual lexical choices. However, the frequency of synonymous pairs derived from different languages may also represent a stylization of the pedagogical purposes of poets who through these rhetorical features intended to enrich the vocabulary of their simpler listeners. This pedagogic intention would make sense especially when the multilingual hendiadys is construed with equivalent terms, one of them being Aramaic and the other a loan. The author seems to translate the traditional, learned term with a foreign word that may have been more familiar to the everyday vocabulary of his audience, or, alternatively, he indicates the correspondence between a familiar Aramaic term and a term known from the multilingual vicinity. The hendiadys could have the function of striking a balance between the learned classical tradition and the receptiveness of the vernacular, which was exposed and open to the influence of foreign languages.

An example of bilingual hendiadys (*p'êxamber... û enbîya* “prophet”) is also found in a Kurdish poem in Syriac script, composed by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Chaldean poet David Barzanê, whose *divân* is exceptionally preserved in an autograph manuscript and contains poems in Neo-Aramaic, Classical Syriac and Kurmanci Kurdish.<sup>15</sup>

Beyond Kurdistan, multilingual hendiadys is a common learned stylistic feature of Islamic literatures, where Arabic loans are flanked by their equivalents in languages such as Persian or Turkish. Alessandro Bausani (1981: 9) describes this phenomenon as *ridondanza* and as a side-effect of traditional translation techniques. Once developed “in translation,, *ridondanza* became a common stylistic type of Islamic literatures, generalized so as to include pairs of words belonging to the same language. Although not explicitly, Bausani presents it as a sign of learned contacts and the bookish, top-down influence (*influsso libresco* and *osmosi dall'alto*), which according to him characterizes the diffusion and

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<sup>15</sup> The *editio princeps* of this poem (Mengozi-Dehqan 2014) should be revised. The name of the author is wrongly given as Barazne and should be Barzanê or Barzan. In l. 17 *bi rusî û tazî* can be read as a hendiadys meaning “bare (adverb) and naked”, to strengthen the degree of nakedness as common in other languages of the region (personal communication of Ergin Opengin, University of Cambridge).

penetration of learned features among illiterates and low social classes in the Islamic cultures of Asia (Zappa 2008: 1192, esp. n. 3).

I do not know whether this intuition—as others—by Bausani<sup>16</sup> have led to systematic investigations on translation techniques and synonymic (multilingual) hendiadys in Islamic literatures. The phenomenon of “double translation,” also known as “hendiadys method” is well-known in several translation traditions.<sup>17</sup> Bausani correctly links the stylistic *ridondanza* to the translational character of texts and genres and frames it in his idea of a top-down influence from the highly prestigious cultural languages—especially Persian in Asia, with its load of Arabic vocabulary—and the receiving local languages. To what extent the progressive stylization of a translation technique is typical of Islamic languages is difficult to say: quite on the contrary, it is probably a rather common phenomenon in literatures and vernaculars that move their first steps in literacy with translations of normative, canonical, founding texts and models from originals written in prestigious or even sacred transnational languages.<sup>18</sup>

## 5. The Aḥiqar/Ḥayqar paradigm

From a cultural and literary point of view, the minorities unsurprisingly share with the Islamic majority much of the material culture, folklore, literary genres and, in some cases, stories and motifs, the ultimate origin of which may also have been Christian or Jewish.

In the realm of folklore, there is so much shared material that it is possible to speak of Kurdistanian folklore, rather than Kurdish or Neo-Aramaic folklore, although there is also specifically Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Yezidi folklore which is common to the whole (Chyet 1995: 233).

Among the shared narratives, circulating in various versions and in the various languages of the region, Chyet mentions the tragic love story of Mem û Zîn and the story of Joseph and Zulaikha.

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<sup>16</sup> On Bausani’s preference for provocative intuitions rather than systematic research projects, paired with his insatiable intellectual curiosity and search for intellectual fun, see Zappa (2021: 238).

<sup>17</sup> In translational literature to and from Greek, see, e.g., Talshir (1987) and Dhont (2016) on the Septuagint or Cooper (2016) on Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq’s Arabic translation of Galen.

<sup>18</sup> This is precisely the case of Neo-Aramaic literatures for both Jews (targum- and midrash-like texts for school, synagogue and common people) and Christians (poetic rewriting of Biblical and hagiographical texts with parenetic and educational purposes). On Neo-Aramaic in the broader scenario of “vernacularization in the Early Modern Middle East”, see Murre-van den Berg (2020: 10-14).

Various versions of these and other stories, as well as fragments or reference of local epic stories, surface in the texts collected by 19th century Orientalists or by contemporary dialectologists<sup>19</sup> as the tip of the iceberg of oral tradition. They result from processes of continuous adaptation and re-elaboration, often deriving from or molding together contents of learned literary sources, including canonical, sacred Scriptures, such as the Bible, Qurʾān and Ginza Rabba. The recontextualization according to different cultural systems and contamination, made possible or indeed favored by oral tradition, allow stories to travel across boundaries of genre, performance arena, language and faith: from highly formalized, written authorial prose or verses to anonymous popular stories told and/or sung by roaming storytellers or in an informal family gathering, from classical language to vernacular, from Arabic, Babylonian Aramaic or Syriac to Kurdish and Neo-Aramaic, from one religious community to the other.

The story of the devils' enmity toward Adam is told in the Neo-Aramaic poem *On Revealed Truth*, which we have mentioned before, according to a version known from non-canonical sources, such as the Latin *Life of Adam and Eve*, the Greek *Questions of Bartholomew* and *Revelation of Sedrach*, the Syriac *Cave of Treasures*, as well as from the Qurʾān. According to these various para-biblical accounts, when God established Adam as new king, viceroy (*ḥalifa*) in the Qurʾān, of the creation, the devils (the bad angels) refused to worship him, being a simple man made of clay, were punished and lost their position. Their refusal became the cause of enmity between the devil (the devils) and Adam. This account of Adam's fall or some adaptation thereof enjoyed great popularity among Jews, Christians, Mandaean, Yezidis, etc.<sup>20</sup> That the Neo-Aramaic poet did not have in mind that the story somehow linked the Qurʾān with Christian Syriac sources like the *Cave of Treasures* can hardly be maintained.

The Biblical and Qurʾānic stories on Joseph the Egyptian—with their countless variations in Christian exegetical literature, midrash, Islamic *isrāʾiliyyāt* 'Jewish stories' and *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* 'stories of the prophets', hence again in late Rabbinic literature—are certainly among the most popular and popularized among Jews, Christians and Muslims sharing territory and culture.<sup>21</sup>

All within the Jewish tradition and with important methodological remarks, Aloni (2014: 339-340) demonstrates that narrative details deriving from rabbinical sources are shared in three Zakho Neo-Aramaic oral versions of the story of Joseph and his brothers: an epic poem collected and transcribed

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<sup>19</sup> Modern linguists usually publish sample texts at the end of their grammatical description of the various dialects.

<sup>20</sup> See the bibliographic appendix on the angel's refusal to worship Adam in Mengozzi (2005: 332-333) and Minov (2015).

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., two late East-Syriac dialogue poems on Joseph and Potiphar's wife in Mengozzi (2020: 140-149), with bibliographic introduction and Italian translation.

in Israel by Yosef Rivlin in the 1950's, shortly after the migration of the Jews of Zakho to Israel, the epic poem as sung and recorded in the 1980's by Na'im Shalom, a cantor of the Jewish community of Zakho in Jerusalem, and a beautiful oral version, mixing recitation and singing, by the talented storyteller Samra Zaqen. A narrative addition in the oral versions appears to derive from the book *Toqpo šel Yosef* ('Joseph's strength'), by Yosef Shabbetai Farḥi, that was published in 1846 in Livorno and seems to have enjoyed great popularity among the learned Jews in Kurdistan.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Stephen Rayes of Alqosh translated into the modern language two Classical Syriac poems *On Joseph son of Jacob*, traditionally attributed to Narsai (5th cent.).<sup>22</sup> The NA versions are entitled *On Joseph son of Jacob* or, more commonly, *On Joseph the Egyptian* and are the most frequently copied Neo-Aramaic poems among Catholic Christians of the plain of Mosul in the late 19th and throughout the 20th century: in the database of the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (HMML)<sup>23</sup> there are at least thirteen copies of one or both of them in manuscripts belonging to Chaldean collections and two copies in West-Syriac script (Syriac Catholic collections). In 2016 two vocal performances of the first poem were posted on YouTube, the first, lasting more than two and a half hours, by George Mikho, a Chaldean resident in London, Canada. The second performance of the deacon 'Adel Helanto, according to a different melody, is divided in several videos. The audios are visually accompanied by pictures of the singers and illustrations on the life of Joseph taken from Western devotional books and today are easily available online.<sup>24</sup>

Written texts, possibly translated from Arabic at the request and perhaps according to the taste and interests of 19th century Semitists like Eduard Sachau, still await systematic scholarly investigation. As is the case for the Biblical, Qur'ānic, non-canonical and rabbinical stories of Joseph,<sup>25</sup> Christian Neo-Aramaic prose narratives and poems usually conform to what I would call the Aḥiqar/Ḥayqar paradigm: stories of ultimate Biblical or Christian hagiographic origins are re-proposed

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<sup>22</sup> Rayes' poems are dated 1893 in the ms. 121 of the Chaldean Archdiocese of Kirkuk, copied in 1954. In a ms. of the London Sachau collection, they are ascribed to the copyist and poet Joseph 'Azarya of Telkepe: (Mengozzi 1999: 482). They are poetic translations of the first and fourth Classical Syriac *mēmre* published by Paul Bedjan, *Homiliae Mar Narsetis in Joseph*, 521-558 and 609-629 (sometimes attributed to Efrem in the rubrics). On Joseph the Patriarch in the Classical Syriac tradition, see now Heal (2022).

<sup>23</sup> Digitized copies of Iraqi and Turkish Christian collections of Arabic, Neo-Aramaic and Syriac manuscripts can be consulted in the virtual reading room of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML, Collegeville, Minnesota, [www.hmml.org](http://www.hmml.org)).

<sup>24</sup> George Mikho: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OI-g\\_joXIAQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OI-g_joXIAQ); first part sung by 'Adel Helanto: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VObFCFeTupI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VObFCFeTupI).

<sup>25</sup> Aloni (2022: 183) proposes to compare oral and written Neo-Aramaic stories on Joseph circulating among Jews and Christians in Kurdistan.

or rewritten in the modern language, under the influence of the Islamic developments of the same stories and probably thanks to their popularity among Muslim readers or listeners. 19th-century German orientalism may also have played a role in the rediscovery of the traditional literary motifs and stories of Christians and Jews, now circulating in Islamic dress. It is as if learned Christian authors, by using Islamic versions of old stories or rewriting in the modern tongue Classical Syriac texts, implicitly claim the Christian origin of stories widely circulating among Christians and Muslims alike. In these cases, we do not have a direct Islamic influence, but the popularity of a story or its variants in Islamic milieu and/or the philological interest of European scholars may have acted as external catalysts for the preservation and revitalization of old Jewish and Christian lore.

Various versions of the story and proverbs of Aḥiqar the wise are known, in at least two NENA versions, in a Šūrayt/Ṭūrōyo version and in an oral version in the Neo-Aramaic dialect of Mlaḥso as well as in Christian Arabic and Garshuni, i.e., Arabic language in Syriac script. The Neo-Aramaic versions are sometimes contaminated with or are closer to Islamic versions, where the protagonist is usually known as Ḥayqar, than to the Classical Syriac Vorlage. The story and proverbs of Aḥiqar is probably the most important literary text preserved in Imperial Aramaic (5th century BC) and the protagonist is mentioned in the Catholic Bible (Tobit 1: 21-22).<sup>26</sup> Texts like Tobit, the Greek *Life of Aesop*, the five Syriac recensions and the multiple versions in Arabic and other languages show the vitality and fortune of the story over time, from late antiquity to modern times. In the 19th century, the interest of orientalist, and perhaps missionaries, for Aḥiqar may have reawakened the attention and pride of Neo-Aramaic authors for a story that they knew from the Ḥayqar's saga as circulating among Arabic-speaking Muslims and Christians.

Francesca Bellino and I published the Neo-Aramaic partial translation of a collection of 'ajā'ib more or less directly related to Alexander the Great. The Classical Syriac Vorlage, recently published by Sergey Minov (2021), largely depend on Arabic Islamic sources, but I suspect that it has been translated into Neo-Aramaic, possibly at the request of Eduard Sachau, and perhaps before from Arabic to Classical Syriac, because of the connection with two important and influential texts of Syriac literature: the *Alexander Romance* and the *Christian legend on Alexander the Great*, reflected in the Qur'ānic Al-Qarnayn and spread in countless variations throughout the Islamic world (Bellino-Mengozzi 2016,

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<sup>26</sup> Pennacchietti (1981) translated one of the Classical Syriac recensions into Italian, as his contribution to Paolo Sacchi's research and editorial projects on the so-called "apocrypha of the Old Testament," lately better described as Jewish literature of the Second Temple, the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The translation has been republished (2005a), with a bibliographic introduction by Riccardo Contini. See also Talay (2002) for the Mlaḥso version and Mengozzi (forthcoming: 544-545), for other bibliographic references on the Arabic and (Neo-)Aramaic Aḥiqars.

with references). Echo of the legend is to be found, via the Syriac *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, in the Neo-Aramaic polemical verses against the Muslims of the epilogue of *On Revealed Truth* (see, above: “May Our Lord establish (back) the Greeks!”).

The Christian legend of St Arsanis king of Egypt, whom Jesus resurrected to interview him about the afterlife, known in most Christian Oriental languages, including Syriac and Arabic, inspired the Islamic story of the skull Jumjuma restored to life and, via a Persian poem attributed to Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d. 1221), at least two Jewish versions, in Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Persian. One of the Neo-Aramaic poems on *Jimjimma*, published and studied by Pennacchietti (1991, 1993, 1994), is presented by the author as the translation of an anonymous Kurdish poem, and thus gives rise to interesting reflections on the re-incorporation into Christian hagiography of Islamic lore material in its turn inspired by a Christian legend.<sup>27</sup> The popularity of the story among their Muslim neighbors may have stimulated the composition of Neo-Aramaic poems on a subject that may have been preserved for centuries in the collective memory of the Christians:

The Christian versions in Syriac, Neo-Aramaic and Arabic may therefore have retained the memory of a Christian archetype from the pre-Islamic era...

The legend of Jesus and the Skull is the product of a cultural osmosis and a popular religious interaction that has continued over the centuries. Of probable Christian origin, it spread throughout the Muslim world, from Yemen to Andalusia, from Central Asia to India and the Sunda Islands.

Especially dear to the Sufi brotherhoods, who translated it into the most diverse languages, often putting it in verse, the legend was also adopted by Christians and Jews, who adapted it to their own cultures and religious sensibilities.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The eschatological content itself—a description of deaths and judgements of the righteous and the wicked, reward and punishment in paradise and hell—is of Christian origin and is clearly related to the *Apocalypse of Paul*, a text that widely circulated among East-Syriac Christians in the Ottoman period and was put in verse by the celebrated Neo-Aramaic poet Israel of Alqosh at the beginning of the 17th century (Mengozzi 2002: 107-110 and forthcoming: 551).

<sup>28</sup> Pennacchietti (2005b: 296 and 299, my transl.). I think that these conclusions on the Islamic legend of the skull restored to life are an implicit homage to two scholars whom Pennacchietti has always considered among his masters and whose teachings have deeply resonated with his interest in languages and religious sensibility. The use of the term cultural osmosis, an open gaze on linguistic diversity and the unitary cultural traits of the Muslim world are the legacy of Alessandro Bausani. The attention to popular religious traditions, I believe, derives from Enrico Cerulli’s works on the circulation of Christian stories between Africa and Europe and the unitary character of pre-Reformation (and pre-Counter-Reformation) popular Christianity.

Geoffrey Khan and his team in northern Iraq collected and published four oral versions of the story of Zambil(i)rosh (Kurdish for ‘basket-seller,’ used in the story as the proper name of the protagonist).<sup>29</sup> Zambilfrosh is a noble young man or a prince who, shocked by the experience of death and mourning, decides to live the simple life of a basket-weaver, as a monk in the Christian versions. A noble lady or princess attempts in vain to seduce him and distract him from his ascetic life.

In the first text, in the Neo-Aramaic dialect of Shaqlawa (northeastern Iraqi Kurdistan), Angel Sher inserts the spoken story between the first sung prologue quatrain and other twenty sung quatrains. The third text, in the Neo-Aramaic dialect of Enishke (north-western Iraqi Kurdistan, near Amadiya), is in fact an oral version of the Biblical and Qur’ānic story of Joseph and Potiphar’s (here the king’s) wife. The seduction scene triggers the insertion of the theme of the humble basket-seller who refuses to become a king: Joseph becomes (a) Zambilfrosh. When the king’s wife offers the king’s crown, the protagonist, who is never called by name as Joseph in this text, answers: “I am a basket-seller (or I am Zambilfrosh?) ... I will not become a king” (Khan-Mihammaddirad-Molin-Noorlander 2022, vol. 2: 38-39).

Ahmad Abubakir Suleiman, the narrator of the fourth text in the Northern Kurdish dialect of Khizava (northwestern Iraqi Kurdistan, near Zakho), knows and to some extent compares different traditions on Zambilfrosh and refers to the existence of at least two tombs, one in the Diyarbakir province and the other on the road between Batifa and Zakho<sup>30</sup> He gives precise historical identifications of the protagonist of the story and tries to rationalize narrative details. In a way, his story appears as a learned and informed text in which verse lines are occasionally quoted to embellish the narration and strengthen specific points. Among other things, the narrator is aware that the story of the basket-seller was written down by the Kurdish poet Feqiyê Teyran (end of the 16th-first half of the 17th centuries) and quotes the quatrain of his poem in which the girl discloses to her maid: “The boy broke my heart / I cannot sleep because of his love” (Khan-Mihammaddirad-Molin-Noorlander 2022, vol. 2: 57).

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<sup>29</sup> Transcriptions and translations are published in Khan-Mihammaddirad-Molin-Noorlander (2022, vol. 2: 3-59), with links to the mp3 audio files that can be listened to on and downloaded from the website of the “The North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic Database Project” (University of Cambridge).

<sup>30</sup> See the entry “Zembîlfiroş” of English Wikipedia for a picture of Zambilfrosh’ tomb near Batifa (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zembîlfiroş>).

Kurmanci Kurdish Wikipedia is synthetic ([https://ku.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zembîlfiroş\\_\(destan\)](https://ku.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zembîlfiroş_(destan))), whereas Sorani Kurdish Wikipedia is more generous in details and quotation of verse lines (<https://ckb.wikipedia.org/wiki/زەمبیلفروش>).

According to fieldwork information from northern Iraq, Molin refers that there exist Yezidi version(s) of Zambilfrosh' story and, on the basis of the ascetic values conveyed by the tale, she considers it not unlikely that it originated in Sufi-influenced Yezidi circles (Khan-Mihammadirad-Molin-Noorlander 2022, vol. 1: 48). She concludes:

The story of Zambilfrosh illustrates the shared nature of the folk literature of northern Iraq as well as the preservation of a distinct cultural-religious imprint on the stories. It also bears witness to the complex and doubtless long-standing interaction with sacred, written and folkloristic traditions (Khan-Mihammadirad-Molin-Noorlander 2022, vol. 1: 53).

A written authorial version of the story of the basket-seller has been published with the title *On the Hermit Barmalka* by Braida (2011), from the Neo-Aramaic manuscript Habbi 3,<sup>31</sup> where it is entitled *Story of the solitary monk*, attributed to Yawsep 'Abbaya<sup>32</sup> and dated 1912. Braida describes it as a hagiographical tale, where Barmalka (Aramaic for "prince") and Xatun (Kurdish or Persian for "lady") are used as proper names. The characters are deprived of any historical and personal identity and are almost pure narrative functions in the text that is explicitly described by the author in the concluding verses as a kind of fable for children, a pedagogical story to teach asceticism and chastity as moral values.

Four other manuscript copies of the Story of the Solitary Monk have become available since 2011, thank to the HMML's project of digitization: ms. 799 (20th cent.) of the Dominican Friars of Mosul, 21v-27r (where it is entitled Zambilfrosh) and three copies made and signed by Elias Stephan Madalu, mss. 298 (1989) and 299 (1988) of the Chaldean Patriarch of Baghdad, and 610 (1989) of the Dominican Friars of Mosul. Two performances are available on YouTube: the first, entitled Qeşsettā d-Rabban Zambil (lit. "Story of the monk Basket"), is sung by the Chaldean priest Yoḥannan Cholagh, who worked as a pastor in Alqosh and Mosul, whereas the other is sung by another voice (George Yaldā?) and was published by

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<sup>31</sup> The ms. Habbi 3, copied in Alqosh in 1933, is one of the most important and complete collections of Christian Neo-Aramaic poetry. Its content is described in Ḥabbi (1978). A photographic reproduction of the ms. is listed as no. 584 of the collection of the Dominican Friars of Mosul in the database of HMML. The ms. was printed in facsimile in San Diego, CA, in 1977. A couple of weeks before my departure for Leiden, Fabrizio Pennacchietti visited me at my parents' house and offered me as travel companions the two volumes by Lidzbarski (1896) on the Neo-Aramaic manuscripts of the Berlin Sachau collection, a copy of the ms. Habbi 3 and his own unpublished description of its content.

<sup>32</sup> Besides the *Story of the Solitary Monk*, Yawsep 'Abbaya authored three hymns on Mar Qardagh and at least three other liturgical texts: a *Hymn for the feast of the Holy Cross* (1912; ms. 76, 159v-162r of the Chaldean Archdiocese of Mosul), an *Invocation of the Virgin* (1926; same ms., 162r-169r), and a *Hymn on St George* (1925-26, ms. 323 of the Dominican Friars of Mosul).

George Mikho in 2015.<sup>33</sup> The melody is the same used by Angel Sher in the sung parts of the story in the dialect of Shaqlawa. Further research and comparison of the oral and written versions, in Kurdish as well as in Neo-Aramaic, will shed light on the history of this tale. Its compliance to the Ahiqar paradigm, i.e. the existence of models for the prince who became a monk in Christian hagiography, cannot be excluded a priori.

#### 6. A process of linguistic-literary Islamization or acculturation into an Islamic(ate) culture?

As a matter of fact, all the linguistic and literary phenomena surveyed so far—abundance of Arabic-derived vocabulary in oral and written varieties, assimilation or polemical treatment of Islamic technical terms and multilingual hendiadys as stylistic device in written varieties, claim of the Christian origin or appropriation of Islamic versions of motifs and stories as attested in oral and written traditions — show that Neo-Aramaic takes part with the coterritorial Islamic languages in the process of linguistic-literary Islamization that Francesco Zappa proposes to postulate as an appropriate alternative to the Islamic vs non-Islamic dichotomy as applied to languages and literatures.

Rather than postulating a rigid divide between Islamic and non-Islamic languages as a matter of fact, it is more appropriate to speak of more or less advanced processes of linguistic-literary Islamization that coexist and interact in various ways and with different outcomes with other processes, triggered in turn by the influence of non-Islamic superstrates (Zappa 2008: 1196; my translation, author's *Italics*).

Neo-Aramaic varieties are not Islamic languages and their literatures are not Islamic, since they do not satisfy at least three of the basic criteria listed in the various available—and tentative—definitions. They are not spoken or written by Muslims, as required in Wexler's (2000) definition of Islamic languages, or by Muslim authors on Islamic themes, as in Knappert's (1996) definition of Islamic literatures.<sup>34</sup> They are not written in Arabic script, as suggested by the adverb “graphically” in Bausani's (1975 and 1981) definition of Islamic languages: both Jews and Christians usually write their

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<sup>33</sup> Sung by Yohannan Cholagh: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OiO\\_joR5-6k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OiO_joR5-6k);

by George Yaldā?: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibspjuiXsSU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibspjuiXsSU), with Arabic translation in the video.

<sup>34</sup> Contini and Nicosia (2020) try to evaluate the Islamic character of Western Neo-Aramaic varieties spoken by Aramaic-speaking Christians who converted to Islam a couple of centuries ago in the Syrian Anti-Lebanon, but did not abandon their Aramaic dialect. The authors clearly explain the limits of their corpus and investigation, which is based on a purely linguistic or sociolinguistic—as opposed to literary and cultural—understanding of Bausani's concept of Islamic languages.

vernaculars and cultural languages using and adapting traditional scripts, Hebrew for Jews and Classical Syriac for Christians.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, if we exclude the reference to script and add to the powerful Arabic and Persian superstrates the oral parastrates of contact vernaculars such as Kurdish, Turkish or Azeri dialects, it is tempting to describe Neo-Aramaic languages, especially early written varieties, with Bausani's famous definition of an Islamic language:

[A “Muslim language is] a language that, at a certain moment of its history, presents itself deeply influenced, lexically, graphically and to some extent also morphologically and even phonetically by the great cultural languages of Islam, Arabic and Persian (Bausani 1975: 113, repeated in Italian in Bausani 1981: 5).

In accordance with his idea of the Islamic world as a cultural rather than religious entity, something close to what Hodgson (1977) calls “Islamicate,” Bausani did not mention in the definition of Islamic languages the religious identity of the speakers and the Islamic contents of the literatures.

I thus restrict the term ‘Islam’ to the religion of the Muslims, not using that term for the far more general phenomena, the society of Islamdom and its Islamicate cultural traditions. ... ‘Islamicate’ would refer not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims (Hodgson 1977: 58-59).

On the margins (Zappa 2021)—perhaps off the margins of the Islamic—Islamicate, if you want—world, Neo-Aramaic languages show linguistic, stylistic and literary features that Bausani presented as characteristic of Islamic languages and literatures. They probably do not help to solve the conundrum of what an Islamic language is or if a language can be Islamic (Versteegh 2020). However, they clearly show that the spoken or literary languages of the religious non-Muslim minorities share, at the

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<sup>35</sup> See Zappa (2008), Versteegh (2020) and Dayeh (2022) for the living critical debate around the term “Islamic languages.” There are examples of Christian Neo-Aramaic short texts written in Arabic script on paper and online, but these are marginal exceptions, probably caused by technical reasons. On the contrary, among Jews and Christians there are historically well-established and living traditions of writing more or less standard varieties of Arabic in Hebrew (Judeo-Arabic) and Syriac script (Garshuni). Writing in Hebrew script, together with the occurrence of Hebrew and Aramaic words, is a—perhaps the most?—salient feature of Jewish languages. Non-Arabic and non-Islamic superstrates are strong enough to influence vocabulary, scribal and literary traditions and therefore compensate for the enormous prestige of Arabic and, to a lesser extent, Persian as the languages of the Muslim majority and the dominant Islamic culture.

regional, local level, the same linguistic-literary processes of Islamization as the languages of the Muslim majority.

This process may perhaps be best explained and described with the sociological concept of acculturation, which Bausani does not use in his contributions on the Islamic languages, but clearly appears in the title of his article of 1981. Linguistic and literary convergence may be an areal, even macroareal, phenomenon that can be easily explained, sociologically, in terms of acculturation. In other words, the question to what extent these processes are characteristic of the Islamic(ate) world or are generally typical of human societies and cultures (languages, literatures, folklore, religions, but also material culture) remains open and clearly surpasses the scope of the present article. In the Islamic world the acculturation processes are marked by the diffusion and prestige of linguistic (the Arabo-Persian vocabulary, morphology, syntax) and literary features (multilingual hendiadys as a stylistic device, genres, idioms, motifs, myths and stories) that characterize the learned and popular literary traditions of the Muslim majority. In this perspective, Bausani's concept of Islamic languages (and literatures) remains valid as a model for research and investigation, even on the languages and literatures of non-Muslim minorities that conform with or react against the majority's culture(s).

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