

# Neo-Aramaic and Kurdish Folklore from Northern Iraq

A Comparative Anthology with a Sample of Glossed Texts

VOLUME 1



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## 2. THE FOLKLORISTIC HERITAGE OF KURDS, JEWS AND SYRIAC CHRISTIANS OF NORTHERN IRAQ: SHARED MOTIFS, INDEPENDENT DEVELOPMENTS<sup>1</sup>

*Dorota Molin*

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The folklore presented in Volume II is a testament to the intimate and long-standing relations between three ethno-religious communities from northern Iraq: the Kurds, Jews and Syriac Christians.<sup>2</sup> The folklore of these three communities is closely intertwined—not just through folkloristic motifs, which are often uni-

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Dr Michael Chyet for his valuable comments on this chapter, and especially on cross-cultural parallels of folkloristic motifs. My sincere thanks also to Lourd Hanna, our Iraqi fieldworker, for insights and information about the communities and their folklore.

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Yezidi folklore is not included in this publication. This seems a great shame, since a comparative study with Yezidi folklore would doubtless illuminate the larger extent of northern Iraq's shared cultural history. See, for instance, the discussion on 'Zanbilfirosh'. The overlap of this story's values with those praised in the Yezidi community is striking, and could suggest a Yezidi origin of this tale.

versal, but also with regard to specific narrative units ('motifemes') and even entire shared stories. In several cases, very similar stories are told by several different communities, with a greater or smaller degree of overlap in details. This chapter traces both folkloristic parallels as well as independent strands in the present corpus, focusing especially on themes, character types and cultural–religious frameworks in which the stories are set.

In general, the oral literature of northern Iraq demonstrates that social and geographic proximity can produce a degree of cultural convergence perhaps as strong as a shared national or ethnic identity and/or religious affiliation.<sup>3</sup> For instance, the *Bridge of Dalale* legend (Theme II) is highly popular throughout the whole region. There are also several animal stories (Theme III; §3.1) told by Muslims, Christians and Jews whose striking similarities suggest a common source. The folktale *As Precious as Salt* (§4) has an even wider trans-communal connection, as this theme occurs also in European folklore.

At the same time, some stories are apparently unique to particular ethno–religious communities.<sup>4</sup> Naturally, therefore, the religious stories in Theme VII introduce figures and/or sets of values that are specific to particular sacred traditions. Moreover,

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<sup>3</sup> A similar conclusion is reached by Chyet (1995, 233) who—as in the present chapter—uses the term 'Kurdistani folklore' to refer to this trans-communal tradition of oral literature of the region of northern Iraq in which there is a Kurdish majority

<sup>4</sup> That is, our Iraqi fieldworker Lourd Hanna and myself are not aware of another version. In this corpus, see, for instance, the Christian *Mar Yohanan* and the Kurdish–Muslim *The Prophet Muhammad and his horse Dildil* (both §5).

stories such as *Zanbilfirosh* (Theme I) are shared, but nevertheless differ in ways that hint at distinct cultural values. For instance, the Chaldean-Catholic variants praise ascetic piety (a celibate, hermit lifestyle), while the Kurdish-Muslim version has the protagonist married and with a family, focusing instead on the restoration of justice. These points of divergence highlight the limits of cultural convergence among the Christians, Muslims and Jews of northern Iraq, and reflect the persistence of some degree of cultural-religious independence.

Sometimes, however, a story is 'borrowed' along with its culture-specific realia; see for instance, the anecdote *Two Mullahs* told by the Christians of Shaqlawa and, conversely, *The Foul-Mouthed Priest* told by the Muslims of the same town (Theme VII). On other occasions, communities adopt not only each other's folklore, but also religious traditions. In the case of *Zanbilfirosh* (Theme I), both Jews and Christians apparently draw from the story of Joseph and Zulaykha in the Quran (e.g. *Joseph or Zambilfrosh*, ChA. Enishke), despite having their own Biblical variant of this narrative (Joseph and Potiphar's wife). Nevertheless, the moral virtues and behaviour patterns extolled in these stories are not in conflict with the norms of the community telling the story (save the reference to religion-specific devotional practices etc.). The existence of such conflicts in a narrative would be likely to discourage a community from borrowing it, at least without adaptations.

The existence of such distinct cultural tendencies, however, should not be equated with complete cultural homogeneity, even in the oral literature of a single community. Thus, for instance,

several stories concerning social status (Theme IV) praise resilient, independent women who challenge official, male authority. At other times, the same character in a parallel story (e.g. the builder in *The Bridge of Dalale*, Theme II) receives a drastically different portrayal that makes the character once a villain, then a victim. This variety of behaviour patterns doubtless reflects the unique aesthetics or personalities of the narrators, as well as the fact that folklore is performed with a whole series of different functions and for diverse audiences (see below).

Given the broad approach of this chapter, a brief excursus on folklore theory will suffice. The basic structural units invoked here are themes and motifs, as well as the more specific motifemes. ‘Motifeme’ is understood here as a motif with a specific function. It is thus used to refer to scenes, narrative units, scene or character types that are shared across a group of closely-related folktales (often of shared origin, at least in part). For instance, while a talking, human-like animal is a universal folkloristic motif, the present corpus includes a specific application of this motif: a wise animal who meets a human on its territory and teaches the human a moral lesson (see Theme III).<sup>5</sup> A list of international folkloristic motifs which are attested in the stories is given in Table 9 below.

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<sup>5</sup> For the theory of folklore structure and function, and for the distinction between a culture-internal (‘emic’) and scientific (‘etic’) analysis, see especially Dundes (1962). See also the useful overview of Elstein & Lipsker’s analytical model in Aloni (2022, 187–97). When possible, the motifs discussed here are given indexes according to Stith Thompson’s

Table 9. Folkloristic motifs occurring in the stories (categorised with Aarne-Thomson-Uther's and Thompson's indexes)

Motif group	Motif name (number)	Story
<b>Aarne-Thompson-Uther Classification of Folk Tales</b>		
ATU 1–299: <b>Animal tales</b>	1–69: The clever fox (other animals)	12–13: <i>A 'Pious' Fox</i>
	154: The Jackal and the Farmer	18: <i>A Wolf, a Dog and a Ewe</i> 19: <i>A Ewe and a Wolf</i>
	160: Grateful animals; ungrateful man	17: <i>A Woman and a Leopard</i> 14: <i>A Man and a Lion</i> 16: <i>A Man and a Wolf</i> 15: <i>A Man and a Snake</i> 21: <i>A Man and His Dog</i>
ATU 300–749: <b>Tales of magic</b>	301: The three kid- napped princesses	32: <i>Mirza Muhammad and the Forty Mon- sters</i> 33: <i>Mirza Muhammad and the Three Prin- cesses</i>

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*Motif Index* (1922–1936) and/or Aarne-Thompson-Uther's *Tale Type Index* (2004). Thompson's motifs are referred to with a letter and a number (e.g. S200). A *Tale Type Index* reference has a number preceded by the abbreviation 'ATU'.

Table 9. Folkloristic motifs occurring in the stories (categorised with Aarne-Thomson-Uther's and Thompson's indexes; cont.)

	300: Slaying the dragon	24: <i>A Woman Builds her Home</i> 32: <i>Mirza Muhammad and the Forty Monsters</i> 36: <i>Mar Giwargis (St George)</i>
	510: Cinderella and Cap o' Rushes	16: <i>The Girl Pomegranate Grain</i>
	514: The shift of sex	23: <i>The Poor Girl and Her Horse</i>
	532: The speaking horsehead	23: <i>The Poor Girl and Her Horse</i>
	301: The three stolen princesses	32: <i>Mirza Muhammad and the Forty Monsters</i> 33: <i>Mirza Muhammad and the Three Princesses</i>
	400: The man on a quest for his lost wife	34: <i>Mirza Muhammad's Adventures</i>
ATU 750–849: <b>Religious tales</b>	831: The dishonest priest	38: <i>The Foul-Mouthed Priest</i>
ATU 850–999: <b>Realistic tales</b>	923: Loving the salt	25: <i>As Precious as Salt</i>
	850–869: The man marries the princess	25: <i>As Precious as Salt</i> 24: <i>A Woman Builds her Home</i>
ATU 1200–1999: <b>Anecdotes and jokes</b>	1725-1849: Jokes about clergymen and religious figures	38: <i>The Foul-Mouthed Priest</i>



Table 9. Folkloristic motifs occurring in the stories (categorised with Aarne-Thomson-Uther's and Thompson's indexes; cont.)

Thompson's index		
<b>B. Animals</b>	B 530: Animals nourish men	17: <i>A Woman and a Leopard</i>
		14: <i>A Man and a Lion</i>
		16: <i>A Man and a Wolf</i>
		15: <i>A Man and a Snake</i>
<b>D. Magic</b>	D 150: Transformation: man to bird	30: <i>The Girl, Her Evil Stepmother and the Old Witch</i>
	D 1540: Magic object controls the elements	32: <i>Mirza Muhammad and the Forty Monsters</i>
<b>F. Marvels</b>	F 628: Strong man slays monster	32: <i>Mirza Muhammad and the Forty Monsters</i>
		36: <i>Mar Giwargis (St George)</i>
<b>G. Ogres</b>	G 100: Giant ogre	32: <i>Mirza Muhammad and the Forty Monsters</i>
	G 610: Theft from ogre	
<b>K. Deceptions</b>	K 1300–K1399: Seduction or deceptive marriage	4–7: <i>Zambilfrosh (The Basket-Seller)</i>
<b>L. Reversal of Fortune</b>	L 10: Victorious youngest son	32: <i>Mirza Muhammad and the Forty Monsters</i>
		33: <i>Mirza Muhammad and the Three Princesses</i>
	L 50: Victorious youngest daughter & L61: Clever youngest daughter	25: <i>As Precious as Salt</i>
		24: <i>A Woman Builds her Home</i>

Table 9. Folkloristic motifs occurring in the stories (categorised with Aarne-Thomson-Uther's and Thompson's indexes; cont.)

<b>N. Chance and Fate</b>	N 343: Lover kills self believing his mistress dead	31: <i>Firyat and Khajija</i>
<b>R. Captives and Fugitives</b>	R 10: Abduction	34: <i>Mirza Muhammad's Adventures</i>
<b>S. Unnatural Cruelty</b>	S 31: Cruel stepmother	16: <i>The Girl Pomegranate Grain</i> 30: <i>The Girl, her Evil Stepmother and the Old Witch</i>
	S 261: Foundations sacrifice	8–11: <i>The Bridge of Dalale</i>
<b>T. Sex</b>	T 80: Tragic love T 338: Virtuous man seduced by woman T 481: Wife seduces husband's servant	31: <i>Firyat and Khajija</i> 4–7: <i>Zambilfrosh</i> 6: <i>Joseph or Zambilfrosh</i>
<b>V. Religion</b>	V462. Kingship renounced to become an ascetic	35: <i>Mar Yohanan (St John)</i> 4–7: <i>Zambilfrosh</i>

Several folkloristic genres feature in this corpus, including folktales, legends and anecdotes. Legends—narratives presented as history—are represented by stories of saints and religious figures (Theme VII), the *Bridge of Dalale* (Theme II) and *Zambilfrosh* (the basket seller; Theme I), at least in its Kurdish variant. Stories of humans and animals (Theme III) are for the most part folktales (creations presented as fiction), including the sub-genre of fables (Theme III.C)—stories with a moral, in which human characteristics are taken on by animal protagonists. However, some animal

stories (e.g. *A Talking Goat* and *A Family Horse*, Theme III.B) are most likely anecdotes—short (amusing) stories often considered true by the narrator. The boundary between these folkloristic genres is highly fluid, as has long been recognised by folklorists (Shuman & Hasan-Rokem 2012).<sup>6</sup> Statements about genre categorisation, therefore, are simply shortcuts for referring to the characteristic features of the story in question (e.g. presentation as history for legends, sung/poetic elements for ballads, shortness for anecdotes etc.).

The question of genre interacts closely also with the issue of *audience* (cf. Allison 2010, 132; Shuman & Hasan-Rokem 2012). In the culture of northern Iraq, folklore was performed in a variety of contexts for a wide range of audiences. Stories and poetry entertained people during manual labour, which would typically be gender-segregated. This meant that work folklore would be produced, for instance, by and for women. Social and religious occasions such as weddings, too, had their specific genres, such as *epithalamia* (songs in praise of marriage). In village guest houses (*dīwānxāna*), folklore was performed for and by men. The stories that filled the long winter evenings spent with family and neighbours were intended for a mixed audience, though generally performed by men.<sup>7</sup> Folk poetry and prose were also performed in urban tea houses and even at the courts of

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, a single creation can have features characteristic of several different genres, and can pass from one genre to another in the course of its transmission.

<sup>7</sup> My Jewish informants from Duhok who left Iraq in the 1950s report that they knew no female storytellers performing for a mixed audience.

emirs—typically by professionally-trained men for other men (Allison 2010). Sung performance especially was the domain of men. Folk singing required specialist training, which was less easily accessible to women. Additionally, female sung performance was considered immodest in many communities (cf. Allison 2010, 143 and the references there).<sup>8</sup>

It is useful to bear in mind the specifics of audience and performance in our discussion, though needless to say, it is not always possible to determine unequivocally the original audience of a given folk creation.

When a story or a part of it exists in both a Kurdish and a Christian Aramaic version, it is most likely to have been taken over by one community from the other, and then re-told. Such sharing and re-telling of stories, in turn, would have been most likely in a context in which the two communities lived near each other. Members of at least one of the communities must have understood or spoken the other's language. Furthermore, the two communities would typically have spent extensive amounts of time together in amicable interaction.<sup>9</sup> Such relations doubtless continued for centuries, surviving even in the living memory of the folktale narrators themselves. The elderly among them de-

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<sup>8</sup> For women and folklore performance among the Kurds, see Marlene Schäfers, e.g. 2018.

<sup>9</sup> As shown above, folklore was performed in a variety of rural and urban contexts. The region's different ethno-religious communities would interact with each other in a variety of these situations, perhaps especially during manual labour and winter evenings spent with the neighbours.

scribed, for instance, how during the long winter evenings without modern media and electricity, the Muslims, Jews and Christians of a given town or village would visit each other and listen to stories. My Jewish informants report that they were especially close to their Muslim Kurdish neighbours.

Today, folklore performance among communities of northern Iraq—as in many places around the world—is endangered, and indeed on the brink of extinction. For instance, the vast majority of the Jews of northern Iraq now live in Israel, where their traditions and language are no longer transmitted.

There has been some previous scholarly work on the folklore of the region, which includes documentation and analytic research. A collection and classification of Kurdish folktales may be found in the doctoral dissertation of Amani (2021).<sup>10</sup> Several volumes of Kurdish folklore have also been published by Celîl and Celîl (2014–2018). An anthology of Jewish Neo-Aramaic folklore has been published by Sabar (1982), and many grammars of (Jewish and Christian) Neo-Aramaic include text corpora with folkloristic material.<sup>11</sup> A folkloristic analysis focusing on the Jewish community of Zakho has been published by Aloni (2022).

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<sup>10</sup> See, however, the research by Robins (née Allison), e.g. 2001, 2010 and 2016. See also Chyet (1991) for the romance of Mem and Zin, which he collected in a series of Kurdish and Neo-Aramaic varieties. Existing collections of Kurdish folklore include *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, vol. 13 (Thackston 1999).

<sup>11</sup> The largest corpora are found in Khan's work on ChA. Urmi (north-western Iran; 2016, vol. 4) and ChA. Barwar (north-western Iraq, 2008, vol. 3). See also Mutzafi (2008a) for a corpus of JA. Betanure (north-western Iraq).

More work, however, is urgently needed, especially documentation, given the endangered state of these folklore traditions.

## 1.0. Zambilfrosh (Zambilfrosh) and Joseph the Egyptian

Text 4: *Zambilfrosh*, narrated by A. Sher (ChA. Shaqlawa)

Text 5: *Zambilfrosh*, narrated by W. Toma (ChA. Shaqlawa)

Text 7: *Zambilfrosh* (NK. Khizava)

Text 6: *Joseph or Zambilfrosh* (ChA. Enishke)

*Zambilfrosh* tells the story of a pious basket-seller who gives up his royal status (V462)<sup>12</sup> after he has witnessed death and his values are shaken to the core. The story climaxes when the basket-seller successfully resists the seduction of a wealthy married woman.<sup>13</sup> This tale is also the example *par excellence* in our anthology of the fluid boundary between oral and written literature in northern Iraq, as is shown below. The variants included here further subdivide into ‘Zambilfrosh proper’—which includes the

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Kingship renounced to become an ascetic’.

<sup>13</sup> *zambilfrosh* in Kurdish means simply ‘basket-seller’. This Kurdish title of the protagonist, adapted to ‘Zambilfrosh’, also occurs in the Neo-Aramaic versions of the tale (i.e. is left untranslated). In other words, it is apparently functioning as the protagonist’s name. In this chapter, ‘Zambilfrosh’ is used when speaking of the character in folklore in general, or of the Kurdish variants of the story, while ‘Zambilfrosh’ is used for the Neo-Aramaic stories. For further examples of the interaction of oral and literary written traditions in Kurdish culture, see Allison (2010, 131).

two *Zambilfrosh* stories in ChA. Shaqlawa Aramaic<sup>14</sup> and *Zambilfrosh* (NK. Khizava)—and the tale of *Joseph or Zambilfrosh*. The latter stands apart because it draws chiefly from the Qur'anic story of Joseph the Righteous, yet its protagonist also self-identifies as *zambilfrosh* (i.e. 'basket-seller').<sup>15</sup> Moreover, in contrast to his Qur'anic counterpart and in parallel with the folkloristic *Zambilfrosh*, the protagonist is of royal descent (ChA. Enishke, *Zambilfrosh*, §1). Presumably, therefore, *Joseph or Zambilfrosh* in ChA. Enishke is informed by both stories. It is a new oral tale formed by the fusion of a sacred (written) tradition, on the one hand, and a popular oral tradition, on the other.

The story of *Zambilfrosh* has long inhabited the imagination and formed the collective identity of the various ethno-religious communities of northern Iraq, with many communities considering it a legend. In the present corpus, this certainly applies to the Kurdish version. It is set in Mosul and names the place where the basket-seller was buried; on the road between Zakhō

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<sup>14</sup> The ChA. Shaqlawa tale by A. Sher also contains a sung version (§44–63). It bears a strong resemblance to the spoken one, while also being more concise and open-ended (it is unclear whether the protagonist manages to escape unharmed). For comparative purposes, it is the spoken version which is referred to in this section.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, when offered the king's crown by the woman who tries to seduce him, he responds that he is 'a mere basket-seller' (ChA. Enishke, *Zambilfrosh*, §7), implying that he does not desire any greater honour.

and Batifa in north-western Iraq (NK. Khizava, *Zanbilfirosh*, §3).<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, none of the Christian Aramaic versions give proper names of places or even people, making it unclear whether the story is treated as a legend. In the case of ChA. Enishke, the categorisation as a legend is further problematised by the clear Qur'anic inspirations.

Several written versions of the story also exist, perhaps most famously by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Kurdish Faqīyē Tayrān.<sup>17</sup> The Yezidis have also claimed the story as their own. This project's Iraqi fieldworker Lourd Hanna has informed me that the five domes of the famed Yezidi Lalish temple are named after the five sons of Zanbilfirosh—that is, the names that they carry in the Yezidi version(s) of this tale. The Yezidi origin of 'Zanbilfirosh' is in fact not unlikely, considering also the obvious overlap in values praised in the two. The life of the pious, ascetic (though not necessarily celibate) folkloristic basket seller resembles the Sufi-influenced lifestyle of the celebrated Yezidi *faqirs*.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, the story overlaps with the Qur'anic Joseph story in a way so striking as to suggest a shared history (see below). And indeed, the story of Joseph and Zulaykha in the Qur'an is itself based on an even older story of Joseph in the Hebrew Bible, doubtless familiar to the Jews and Christians of northern Iraq. Among the Kurds and their Jewish (and other?) neighbours,

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<sup>16</sup> The communities of Turkey have their own place that is claimed to be the tomb of Zanbilfirosh, near Farqin in Diyarbakir (NK. Khizava, *Zanbilfirosh*, §2).

<sup>17</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zemb%C3%AElfiro%C5%9F>.

<sup>18</sup> See Arekalova (2021) and the references therein.



the story of Joseph and Zulaykha (see below) enjoys a great popularity (Chyet 1995, 233–34), transmitted in prose and poetry in both written and oral media. The poem ‘Yusuf and Zulaykha’ by the Persian poet Jami (d. 1414) is perhaps the most famous variant.

Considering the origin of Zambilfirosh, therefore, it seems likely that at some point, one of the creative re-tellings of the Joseph and Zulaykha narrative merged with or morphed into the story of the Kurdish basket-seller, Zambilfirosh. The Jews of northern Iraq too had their own, rhymed (para-)religious stories about Joseph (Sabar 1976, 171, footnote 61). Interestingly, these were based on the ‘Moslem Kurdish traditions’ of Joseph (*ibid.*), rather than on their Biblical counterpart.

### Zambilfirosh: basket-seller, prince, monk, father and Joseph the Egyptian?

The Kurdish version in the present corpus diverges somewhat from the two Christian ‘Zambilfrosh proper’ variants (see below). This distinction is likely indicative of a wider typological split between the Christian and Muslim(/Yezidi) versions of this legend. On the other hand, the three ‘Zambilfirosh proper’ tales agree that the protagonist grows up as a prince oblivious to suffering and death, until the day when he witnesses death and this turns his life upside down. Shaken to the core because of a sense of vanity of this world, he gives up his wealth and makes a living as a humble basket-seller.

This general similarity notwithstanding, the three ‘Zambilfirosh proper’ tales differ on what exactly the prince turns *from*

and *towards*. In the ChA. Shaqlawa version by W. Toma, the protagonist simply wants to live a simple life. Since all human successes and pleasures are fleeting and fragile, they are not worth pursuing (§5). In the ChA. Shaqlawa version by A. Sher, Zambilfrosh goes a step further. He desires to replace the vain with something more enduring. He seeks to enter the kingdom of God and worship the Creator (e.g. §23). Still, both stories are explicitly Christian. Zambilfrosh lives with hermit monks and the tales assume a culture in which strict ascetic piety is celebrated. In other words, the response to corruption in society is a life in seclusion from society—which also includes celibacy—and the worship of God.

In the Kurdish-Muslim version, the celebrated value is not strict ascetic piety or a hermit lifestyle, but rather the restoration of justice. Zambilfrosh leaves his father's house when a mullah tells him that if he remains, he is complicit in his father's unjust policies (§12–13). He then decides to make a living independently, by weaving baskets. This does not mean, however, that he leaves everything behind. On the contrary, he already has a family (§15), and his motivation is to provide for them. The Yezidi versions of Zambilfrosh likely resemble the Muslim ones in this regard. As mentioned above, the names found at the Lalish temple suggest that the Yezidi Zambilfrosh had children. This difference highlights the fact that ascetic piety as manifested in hermit lifestyle and celibacy is not valued or institutionalised among the Muslim (and Yezidi?) communities to the extent it is among the (Chaldean-Catholic) Christians (see further the discussion on religious stories (Theme VII) below).

When he has established his new lifestyle, Zambilfrosh faces a temptation that will prove his moral virtue. One day, a ruler's wife (or daughter) locks the basket-seller inside her palace and tries to seduce him, but he resists. In all the versions of this corpus, this episode closely parallels the Qur'anic story of Joseph and Zulaykha and the Biblical account of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. In the sacred stories and the tales of 'Zambilfrosh proper', for instance, the woman accuses the young man of assault after her pursuits turn out to be unsuccessful. The motif of attempted seduction by a powerful woman is well established,<sup>19</sup> known from the Bible and the Quran, but also in Kurdish folklore. In King Ahmad (Thackston 1991, 91–92), the prince is tempted by his step-mother, who rips his clothes from his back in pursuit of him, as does Zulaykha in the Qur'an.

The protagonist's temptation becomes the ultimate test of his new-found piety. Thus, in the Christian versions, Zambilfrosh must resist a woman's charms as well as the promise of life of luxury and indeed royal status (e.g. ChA. Shaqlawa, *Zambilfrosh* narrated by A. Sher, §36–7 and *Zambilfrosh* narrated by W. Toma, §21). By now, he has experienced both privilege and poverty, life as a royal son and celibacy, and must confirm his dedication to one of these. If he were to yield, he would convey an implicit regret over his conversion. This double temptation (with pleasure in a woman's arms and royal status) occurs also in the ChA. Enishke version. This feature doubtless originates in the folkloristic (or written-poetic) tradition, since there is no mention of the

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<sup>19</sup> See K1300–K1399 ('Seduction or deceptive marriage') and T481 ('Wife seduces husband's servant') in Thompson's index.

promise of wealth in Joseph and Zulaykha, and Zulaykha is not the queen.

In the end, the Khizava Northern Kurdish version is the most naturalistic one. In the Christian Shaqlawa versions, Zambil-firosh is miraculously saved from the queen's palace by an angel (the version by A. Sher: §43; by W. Toma: §31). In the Kurdish version, by contrast, he prefers to throw himself down from a tower than succumb to the seduction, and dies as a result of his injuries (§25, 30). Here, the message is, therefore, that virtue is worth pursuing no matter what the cost.

As mentioned above, the 'Zambilfirosh proper' tales in this corpus are culturally adapted. Most importantly, in the Christian Shaqlawa versions, the protagonist lives with a hermit monk, while in the Kurdish Khizava one, he learns about religion from a mullah. This indicates that the transfer of the story from one community to another most likely took place centuries ago, after which it underwent cultural adaptations.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, the Christian Enishke *Joseph or Zambilfirosh* story draws from a similar religious Joseph narrative, but apparently from the Qur'anic rather than the Biblical one. For instance, the protagonist is reluctant to share his prophetic dream about his future glory and his brothers' subjugation to him: 'I won't tell, I am not comfortable telling' (ChA. Enishke, *Zambilfirosh*, §3). This parallels the Qur'anic version where Joseph's father cautions him not to relate his dream to his brothers (12:5) fearing ridicule, and contrasts with the Biblical account, in which Joseph boasts about his dreams to his

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<sup>20</sup> Contrast this with the unadapted—and therefore likely the more recently 'borrowed'—anecdote *The Two Mullahs*, §4 below.

brothers—all the while knowing that they already despise him (Gen. 37.4–11).

The three stories of Zambilfirosh proper go to great lengths to emphasise the protagonist's piety, making him an example of modesty, steadfastness and justice or asceticism for all those who tell and hear his story. In the Christian Enishke story, the exemplary pietistic role of the protagonist is arguably less central. For instance, he leaves his house simply because of an argument with his family (ChA. Enishke, *Joseph or Zambilfrosh*, §1).

In general, the story of Zambilfirosh 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. Though the present corpus only includes Christian and Kurdish tales of the pious and humble basket-seller, Yezidi and Jewish versions also exist, as mentioned earlier. Likely, many—if not all—of these communities have claimed Zambilfirosh as their own.

At the same time, this tale suggests that the communities adapted not only each other's folklore, but sometimes also religious traditions. In this case, both Jews and Christians apparently retold the Qur'anic version of Joseph, or at least used some of its elements.

Finally, the story of a pious (and poor) man resisting the seduction of a powerful woman has likely passed back and forth

through oral and written media.<sup>21</sup> Thus, in the Christian Enishke *Joseph or Zambilfrosh* story, for instance, an oral and a written source have been merged together to give rise to a new oral tradition.

## 2.0. The Bridge of Dalale Legend (and Ballad)

Text 8: *The Bridge of Dalale* (ChA. Dure)

Text 9: *The Bridge of Dalale* (ChA. Duhok)

Text 10: *The Bridge of Dalale* (ChA. Zakho)

Text 11: *The Bridge of Dalale* (NK. Zakho)

*The Bridge of Dalale/Dalal* (also ‘The Bridge of Zakho’) narrates the story of a builder who sacrifices his female relative (called Dalale) to ensure that the bridge is completed. This legend occupies a unique position in the folklore of northern Iraq. It is bound inextricably to the landscape of region—through one of the local architectural icons, the Bridge of Zakho. It serves as an etiology for this unique construction, which is several centuries old. This, in turn, serves those who tell the story to claim the physical landscape as the habitat of their own cultural life.

Though grafted onto the landscape of northern Iraq, however, *The Bridge of Dalale* bears similarities with stories grouped under ‘The Bridge of Atra’ (ballad), describing a foundation sacrifice (S261). Versions of ‘The Bridge of Atra’ are attested from the Balkans all the way to India. This has led scholars such as Shai (1976) to propose that the JA. Zakho ballad ‘The Bridge of

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<sup>21</sup> See further Jakobson and Bogatyrev (1980, 13–14) for the interaction between oral and written literature.

Dalale' which she published is in fact a variant of 'The Bridge of Atra'.<sup>22</sup> This shared origin is possible, but the differences between 'The Bridge of Atra and 'The Bridge of Dalale' also license a hypothesis about independent developments.

In this volume, Christian and Muslim versions of *The Bridge of Dalale* are documented,<sup>23</sup> but as mentioned above, Jewish Neo-Aramaic versions also exist (cf. Shai 1976). A feature that is apparently unique to the Jewish variants is the incorporation of the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter from the Hebrew Bible (Shai 1976, 307–8). Another Northern Kurdish version in the Zakho dialect is found in MacKenzie (1962, 356–359). Many of the Aramaic versions of 'The Bridge of Dalale'<sup>24</sup> end with a short ballad.

The origin of the Dalale legend is not entirely clear. On the one hand, the ballad that features in some Aramaic versions<sup>25</sup> contains Kurdish expressions, suggesting a Kurdish origin, at least as far as the ballad is concerned. On the other hand, during this project, it has proved impossible to find Kurdish versions of the

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<sup>22</sup> See Dundes (1989) and the references there. I thank Michael Chyet for drawing my attention to this publication.

<sup>23</sup> Several other Aramaic versions of the ballad have been documented. See, for instance, Talay (2008; a community living today in the Khabur region) and the arrangement by *Mesopotamian Fusion*, sung in the dialect of Bohtan (south-eastern Turkey) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6Ue4YyH2D4>.

<sup>24</sup> See e.g. the ChA. Duhok and ChA. Dure versions in this corpus and the JA. Zakho version in Shai (1976).

<sup>25</sup> For instance, ChhA. Duhok, *The Bridge of Dalale*, 16 and the ChA. Bohtan version at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6Ue4YyH2D4> with the Kurdish phrase *Dalale brindare*, 'Oh Dalal, you wounded!'

ballad. In fact, the Aramaic (Christian and Jewish) versions of the legend are generally more extensive and poetically developed, which at least suggests that the legend (and the ballad) have been better preserved among the Christians and the Jews, even if they do not originate among them. The Zakho narrator who tells the Kurdish version of the story presented here claims that the Kurds took this story over from the Jews (NK. Zakho, *The Bridge of Dalal*, 24).<sup>26</sup> In any case, there are clear sub-types of the legend (see below), which shows at least that the story has developed in a few separate traditions.

Outside northern Iraq, this legend also possesses a close Mandaean parallel from Khorramshahr (south-western Iran; cf. Häberl 2009, 280–89). On the other hand, ‘The Bridge of Dalale’ is reportedly not known among the Jews of north-eastern Iraq and western Iran (east of the Great Zab), which suggests their relative isolation from the communities in the region west of the Great Zab.<sup>27</sup>

The exact origin of the actual bridge standing Zakho is also somewhat uncertain. There was a bridge in this town likely already in Roman times, but this original construction has since been rebuilt several times. The extent to which the Roman bridge is preserved is uncertain. Some Iraqi archaeologists maintain that most of the modern bridge was erected by one of the Bahdinan princes who ruled the region from the 13th to the 19th centuries (cf. Pavelka 2009).

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<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, I was unable to get access to the full legend mentioned in Shai (1976) in order to judge their closeness.

<sup>27</sup> Hezy Mutzafi, personal communication.



### A villain, a martyr or a victim? The portrayal of the characters

The versions included in this volume constitute three sub-types that differ in striking ways with regard to the character of the protagonists—Dalale and the builder, and, in one case, also the local *agha*. These points of divergence have implications for the identity of the true hero(s).

Both of the stories from Zakho, the Christian Aramaic one and the Kurdish one, belong to the same category, and they clearly draw from the same source. Here, the builder himself is a victim: his hand had been cut off after he had built another bridge, and now has to work impaired on the Zakho bridge. In the Christian variant, he is also under the threat that his whole family will be killed if he fails. When he sacrifices Dalale, therefore, he does so not to save his reputation as a successful builder, but rather to save his and his family's life. The sacrifice is accompanied by considerable remorse and anguish:

‘Oh, my God, may it not be my daughter-in-law, because I’ll have to put her inside the bridge.’ (ChA. Zakho, Text 10: *The Bridge of Dalale*, §34).

The builder, therefore, is a tragic hero forced to murder because it is a lesser evil. Dalale, on the other hand, is a martyr whose death proves redemptive. Her sacrifice is in fact an independent decision taken to save the lives of others, or for the sake of the city:

‘No, I must be in your stead.’ (ChA. Zakho, Text 10: *The Bridge of Dalale*, §35)

The Kurdish version from Zakho differs from its Christian counterpart in the absence of a threat for the builder, but the voluntary and redemptive nature of Dalal's sacrifice remains. In a move of sheer heroism, she refuses to be saved from the bridge by her husband (23), content to be a sacrifice for the sake of the city (18).

In the ChA. Duhok story, by contrast, Dalale undoubtedly holds the moral high ground, while the builder does not shy away from cold calculations. He considers which of his daughters-in-law he should kill for the bridge, so that his reputation in Zakho would suffer the least damage. Dalale is chosen as the least 'harmful' in this regard:

'If I put my daughter-in-law Hane,  
her father's family belongs to this community  
and I will be ashamed to sit in their midst.  
If I put my daughter-in-law Hane,  
her family are village chiefs,  
I will be ashamed to sit in the diwan.  
I'll put my daughter-in-law Dalale. Her family come from  
afar so I'll not be ashamed.' (ChA. Duhok, Text 9: *The  
Bridge of Dalale*, §3–9).

Dalale, therefore, is unmistakably the victim, being discriminated against in both actions and language. The other daughters-in-law are introduced through rhymed verse—Dalale is mentioned in simple prose (cf. above—ChA. Duhok, Text 9: *The Bridge of Dalale*, §3–9). The sacrifice of the other daughters-in-law is introduced as a possibility—through a conditional clause. The sacrifice of Dalale is stated plainly using the future tense (ibid.)—her fate is sealed the moment she appears on stage.

When Dalale approaches the bridge unsuspecting, she is seized and killed by her father-in-law. Her life is cut off suddenly, so that she leaves behind a crying baby and bread dough rising (ChA. Duhok, Text 9: *The Bridge of Dalale*, §19). She becomes both the tragic hero and the martyr.

It is also difficult to miss the ironic mismatch between the builder's name and his moral character, which in fact applies to all Neo-Aramaic versions in the corpus. He is referred to as *xamy-ana*. This word means 'father-in-law', but its lexical root *x-m-y* has the general meaning of protection, reflecting the legal-social protective role of the family patriarch in traditional Middle Eastern societies.

The lexically related verb 'to protect' features in fact in the version of this story as told by the Gargarnaye Christians (southeastern Turkey). There, the builder himself tells Dalale that if she agrees to become a sacrifice for the bridge, he will become the guardian for her son: *'ana b-xamanne* 'I will protect him.'<sup>28</sup> In a twist of cruel irony, therefore, Dalale is betrayed by the one who should have protected her, and the builder is *de facto* condemned by his own name.

The brief ChA. Dure version in this corpus is more neutral in its portrayal of the builder. Here, it is the local ruler who is asked to make a sacrifice, which he does—we may assume—out of a commitment towards his community. As well as sacrificing one of his seven daughters-in-law, he also has to give up a part of his wealth (one of his seven horses and mills).

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<sup>28</sup> Source: <https://nena.ames.cam.ac.uk/audio/147/> (audio only).

The versions known from other sources such as the NK. Zakho story in MacKenzie (1962) are also less psychologically developed, and do not narrate any inner turmoil of the protagonists. The builders decide to sacrifice the first person whom they see and the girl does not appear to have a choice, just like in the ChA. Duhok version but in contrast to the ChA. Zakho tale. The Zakho Kurdish legend in MacKenzie (1962), however, diverges from the versions in this corpus in that the builders take a considerable risk: the girl whom they choose to sacrifice is the local chieftain's daughter. This is precisely the opposite to the ChA. Duhok version where the girl is chosen because her sacrifice would not pose a risk for the perpetrator. It is likely that all of these points of divergence in the portrayal of the characters reflect different implicit attitudes to particular social groups.

Finally, the motif of a dog—which features in all of the versions included here—arguably also contributes to the moral evaluation of the protagonists. In the ChA. Duhok version, the dog is noble and ‘clever’, apparently attempting to save Dalale from the builder's trap by getting ahead of her, despite the fact that dogs are generally considered impure or even evil in many traditional Middle Eastern (Muslim) societies. In this way, he would arrive at the bridge first and thus become the sacrifice instead of the girl (ChA. Duhok, *Bridge of Dalale*, 13). The builder, by contrast, lives up to the stereotype of a dog as a curse-worthy being:

‘My father-in-law is a black dog,  
May the sun never again shine upon him.’ (ChA. Duhok,  
*Bridge of Dalale*, 21–22)

### 3.0. Animal Stories (Animal-Human Relations and Fables)

#### 3.1. 'Man is Wolf to Wolf': Moral Role Reversal of Beasts and Humans

Text 14: *A Man and a Lion* (ChA. Duhok)

Text 15: *A Man and a Snake* (ChA. Duhok)

Text 16: *A Man and a Wolf* (JA. Duhok)

Text 17: *A Woman and a Leopard* (NK. Duhok)

Among the stories with animal protagonists, one distinctive group consists of tales in which the stereotypical attributes of humans and wild animals are reversed. A human behaves in a beastly way, while the beast is noble, caring for the human<sup>29</sup> and in the end imparting to them a moral lesson. The story's message is thus opposite to that conveyed by the European folktales with the ATU 154 motif,<sup>30</sup> where the animal is ungrateful towards a human that shows it kindness.

All four stories in this collection are close and doubtless come ultimately from the same source. Especially close are the Christian and Jewish Aramaic stories *A Man and a Lion* and *A Man and a Wolf*, both of which come from Duhok. It seems, therefore, that the Jews adapted the story from their Christian neighbours or vice versa, rather than from the Kurds. The Christian

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<sup>29</sup> Like in B530 ('animals nourish men'). The motif of 'man is wolf to wolf' is also akin to—though not identical with—ATU 160, 'Grateful animals; ungrateful men'.

<sup>30</sup> 'The jackal and the farmer'; for instance, 'Man, Snake and fox'.

Duhok story *A Man and a Snake* is also close. All three narratives tell of a poor man who finds an animal that helps him earn a living.

The NK. Duhok story *A Woman and a Leopard* differs from these Neo-Aramaic stories in the identity of its protagonist (a woman) and in the favour performed by the wild animal. In this tale, the favour is not to make a living, but to protect the human from the dangers lurking in a forest. In all four stories, the human hurts the animal, either by haughty words (*A Man and a Lion*, *A Man and a Wolf* and *A Woman and a Leopard*), or by trying to kill the animal for profit (*A Man and a Snake*).

The extent of the overlap between the two Duhok Neo-Aramaic stories, *A Man and a Lion* and *A Man and a Wolf*, is striking (cf. the story summaries). Aside from the animal's identity (lion vs wolf, Christian and Jewish versions respectively), the only significant divergence between them concerns the character of the animal. The lion in the Christian version is philanthropic, but ultimately driven by enlightened self-interest. In the Jewish version, the animal is highly altruistic and forgiving. In the Christian version, the beast agrees to help the human on the condition that the man brings back some food for it (ChA. Duhok, *A Man and a Lion*, 8). By contrast, the wolf in the Jewish variant simply volunteers to give the man a golden coin—on top of the wood which the man cuts to earn his living (JA. Duhok, *A Man and a Wolf*, §4). Similarly, at the end of the Christian folktale, the lion devours the man in revenge (ChA. Duhok, *A Man and a Lion*, §18). The wolf in the Jewish version, on the other hand, forgives the

harmful words, but warns the man that he should not come back to the wolf's forest (JA. Duhok, *A Man and a Wolf*, §27).

The three stories *A Man and a Lion*, *A Man and a Wolf* and *A Woman and a Leopard* end with the moral that words can scar more deeply than 'sticks and stones'. In all three tales, the human is commanded to hit the beast with his/her axe/dagger in order to learn a lesson: after some time, the animal heals from the blow, but the disrespect it has suffered still causes pain:

šawpa, šawp-ət saypa g-nâyax-Ø.<sup>1</sup>  
 impact impact-of sword IND-heal-3SG.M

šawp-ət xabra là-g-nayax-Ø.<sup>1</sup>  
 impact-of word NEG-IND-heal-3SG.M

'The impact, the impact of a sword heals. But the impact of words does not heal.' (ChA. Duhok, Text 14: *A Man and a Lion*, §19)

šwir-ət dərba<sup>1</sup> naša g-naš-è-le.<sup>1</sup> šwir-ət  
 wound-of blow man IND-forget-3SG.M-O.3SG.M wound-of

xàbra<sup>1</sup> hál mòθa<sup>1</sup> naša là-g-naš-e-le.<sup>1</sup>  
 word until death man NEG-IND-forget-3SG.M-O.3SG.M

'A wound [caused by] a blow [a] man forgets.' [But] a wound [caused by a] word until death [a] man does not forget. (JA. Duhok, Text 16: *A Man and a Wolf*, §25–26)

žē ət-čət nīš-ā šīn-ā xanjar-ā<sup>1</sup>  
 removed IND-go.PRS.3SG sting-EZ.FS trace-EZ.FS dagger-OBL.PL

bas žē nā-č-ītən šīn-ā xabar-ā<sup>31</sup>  
 but removed NEG-go.PRS-3SG trace-EZ.SG.F word-OBL.PL

<sup>31</sup> I thank Masoud Mohammadirad for providing the Kurdish gloss for this saying.

‘The trace of grief caused by daggers will go away, but the grief caused by words will not go away.’ (NK. Duhok, Text 17: *A Woman and a Leopard*, §37)

As Michael Chyet has pointed out to me, there is also a Turkish version of this proverb.<sup>32</sup> This suggests that this is a well-known saying throughout the region, as is probably the folktale which it appears in.<sup>33</sup>

The characters in the Jewish version—in contrast to the Christian story of *A Man and Lion*—speak partly in Northern (Bahdini) Kurdish:

<i>g-emər-ø,</i>	<sup>NK</sup> <i>xer-a</i>	<i>xudê</i> <sup>NK</sup>	= <i>la,</i> <sup>1</sup>
IND-say-3SG.M	<sup>NK</sup> goodness-EZ.SG.F	God.OBL <sup>NK</sup>	= COP.PRS.3SG.F

‘He said, ‘It is God’s favour.’ (JA. Duhok, Text 16: *A Man and a Wolf*, §4)

This phrase could be an innovation to the story, serving to locate it in a Kurdish milieu.

### 3.2. Anecdotes about Animal-Human Relations

Text 20: *A Family Horse* (NK. Dure)

Text 21: *A Man and his Dog* (CK. Shaqlawa)

Text 22: *A Talking Goat* (CK. Shaqlawa)

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<sup>32</sup> *Kılıç yarası geçer, dil yarası geçmez.* ‘A sword wound heals, a tongue wound does not.’

<sup>33</sup> Masoud Mohammadirad has recorded a story that closely resembles the NK. Duhok tale *A Woman and a Leopard* in Davani (a south-western Iranian language used in the Zagros Mountains area).



These three Kurdish stories also address animal-human relations, but in a more anecdotal way. No directly parallel Aramaic stories were found, but the themes are nevertheless universal.

*A Talking Goat*, for instance, is an anecdote about a goat that started talking and this drove the man carrying it out of his wits.<sup>34</sup> *A Man and His Dog* resembles in one key aspect the stories of moral 'role reversal' of animals and humans. Here, a dog proves loyal to his master despite the severe and apparently undeserved beating that it receives from him. *A Family Horse* is concerned with family honour. A majestic horse of apparently special strength that is the pride of the family is stolen. The father uses his normal riding horse to pursue the thief, who is fleeing on the special horse. When he is about to reach out for the thief riding the special horse, however, he realises that if the horse is not caught, this will better support the idea of the horse's special strength. This would indicate that it was faster than any other horse and could not be caught. He, therefore, decides to let the horse go to reinforce the myth of the mighty horse. In this way, even though the horse was stolen, its reputation was strengthened, and continued to be a source of pride for the family.

### 3.3. Fables

Text 19: *A Ewe and a Wolf* (CK. Shaqlawa)

Text 18: *A Wolf, a Dog and a Ewe* (ChA. Duhok)

Text 12: *A 'Pious' Fox* (ChA. Shaqlawa)

Text 13: *A 'Pious' Fox* (CK. Shaqlawa)

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<sup>34</sup> This motif bears a distant similarity to ATU 212 ('The lying goat').

The folktales *A Ewe and a Wolf* and *A wolf, a Dog and a Ewe* are two very close versions of the same story, despite the fact that they come from different areas of northern Iraq; the former comes from Shaqlawa within the Central Kurdish area, the latter from Duhok of the Northern Kurdish region.<sup>35</sup> This story also shows similarities with the Arab folktale documented in Algeria ‘How the Ewe Outwitted the Jackal’ (ATU 154).

Both stories in the present corpus tell of a ewe defended by a dog from a wicked wolf. The wolf wants to devour the sheep (or its lamb), and so brings a fox to swear falsely that the pasture belongs to the wolf and the sheep has no right to graze there, which would legitimise punishing the ewe and killing it (or its young). In the Christian Duhok tale, the relationship between the ewe and the dog is very familial: the two have been living together and the dog looks after the sheep ‘like a brother’ (ChA. Duhok, *A wolf, a Dog and a Ewe*, §2). In the Kurdish Shaqlawa version, the sheep has lost its flock and is now living alone with its lamb. The dog appears as a helper when the ewe is threatened by the wolf (CK. Shaqlawa, *A wolf, a Dog and a Ewe*, §15–16).

This difference notwithstanding, the two versions exhibit striking overlaps. In both, for instance, the ewe is vindicated when the dog attacks the wolf (ChA. Duhok, *A Wolf, a Dog and a Ewe*, §12; CK. Shaqlawa, *A Wolf, a Dog and a Ewe*, §22).

These two fables as well as several other animal stories in this volume share the theme of trespass on land claimed by a wild

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<sup>35</sup> Contrast this with the Bridge of Dalale story, which apparently did not spread widely in the Central Kurdish area, or at least did not reach the Jewish communities in this area (cf. §1 above).

animal as their territory. This theme seems to be popular in folktales of northern Iraq, which features here in *A Wolf, a Dog and a Ewe* (ChA. Duhok, §12), *A Wolf, a Dog and a Ewe* (CK. Shaqlawa, §11), *A Woman and a Leopard* (NK. Duhok, §10) and *A Man and a Lion* (ChA. Duhok, §2). Interestingly, in both *A Man and a Lion* (ChA. Duhok, §4) and *A Woman and a Leopard* (NK. Duhok, §11), the human trespasses knowingly, reasoning that even a violent death ‘at the incisors of’ the beast is better than their current life in misery.

The story of a *‘Pious’ Fox* from Shaqlawa also exists in a Kurdish and a Neo-Aramaic version and both variants are set in Muslim realia. This lack of adaptation to a Christian context along with the strong similarities of the two variants suggest that the Christian version has been adapted from Kurdish relatively recently. The Christian Shaqlawa version even contains a short Kurdish poem calling for repentance (ChA. Shaqlawa, *A ‘Pious’ Fox*, §8). The main protagonist is a starving fox who assumes the appearance of a religious person—a Sunni cleric—to convince other animals that it is now religious and is, therefore, harmless. The fox convinces two birds of its conversion to Islam and lures them into a trap to eat them. In the Kurdish version, it manages to eat one of the birds while in the Christian tale, the bird escapes.

#### **4.0. Social Status (Marriage, Class, Independence etc.)**

Text 23: *The Poor Girl and Her Horse* (ChA. Shaqlawa)

Text 24: *A Woman Builds Her Home* (ChA. Duhok)

Text 25: *As Precious as Salt* (JA. Zakho)

Text 26: *Dindik Hinar—A Girl Called Pomegranate Grain* (NK. Duhok)

Text 27: *The Indecent Neighbour* (CK. Shaqlawa)

The folktales in this category deal with different responses to hardships and interact in several ways with social class and gender. Issues such as social status, poverty, marriage and gender roles are universal to human culture; the differences concern the ways these issues are dealt with. Thus, the question that arises for this analysis is what the folktales discussed here reveal about the values of the community that tell the story.

No direct Aramaic-Kurdish parallels occur in this collection, but they likely exist. In fact, the Zakho Jewish Aramaic tale *As Precious as Salt* is based on the international motif of ‘love as strong as salt’ (ATU 923). The fact that this motif is especially popular in Central and Western Europe (though attested also in Berber languages and in India)<sup>36</sup> suggests that we are dealing with an ancient Indo-European motif. It is likely, therefore, that the Jews adapted this story from their own Indo-European neighbours, the Kurds.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> <http://www.maerchenlexikon.de/at-lexikon/at923.htm>, accessed 14/12/2021 and

<http://www.mftd.org/index.php?action=atu&src=atu&id=923>, accessed 21/09/2021.

<sup>37</sup> For other original Indo-European themes preserved among the Iranian peoples, see Thackston (1993, i). For a phylogenetic study tracing back a series of Indo-European folktales, see da Silva and Tehrani (2016). They argue that some stories originated as far as 2500–6000 years ago.

The Jewish Aramaic tale *As Precious as Salt* relates—in parallel to, for instance, the German story of ‘Princess Mouse Skin’—the story of a princess who tells his father that she loves him as much as salt. The king takes this as an insult and expels her, but she manages to make a living alone. In the end, she becomes wealthy and is vindicated in front of her father, who confesses that it is indeed impossible to eat saltless food (served to him by his daughter herself).

There are three Aramaic stories in this collection that are particularly close: *A woman Builds Her Home*, *As Precious as Salt* and *The Poor Girl and her Horse*. All three tell of girls who in one way or another lose their family, but manage to take their fate into their own hands to turn their situation around. In the first two, moreover, it is the youngest daughter who proves to be more resourceful and wiser than her older sisters (L50 and L61),<sup>38</sup> and marries a poor man whom he eventually lifts to her station (cf. ATU 850–862).<sup>39</sup>

In *A Woman Builds Her Home*, a princess marries a pauper and together with him sets off to prove his father wrong. She shows him that a woman is also capable of providing for her family and for herself. The protagonist in *The Poor Girl and her Horse*

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<sup>38</sup> Respectively, ‘Victorious youngest daughter’ and ‘Clever youngest daughter’.

<sup>39</sup> ‘The man marries the princess’.

disguises as a boy in order to be able to get work as a royal servant.<sup>40</sup> This story features the motif of gender disguise<sup>41</sup> and aid from a magical, talking animal horse (B401). Finally, in the Jewish story *As Precious as Salt*, the princess teams up with a lazy youth to gain wealth and outshine the king in grandeur.

This last tale, *As Precious as Salt*, includes two motifs— one akin to *A Woman Builds Her Home*, the other parallel to ‘love as strong as salt’ (see above). More specifically, the princess in *As Precious as Gold* has two missions, which correspond respectively to the other two aforementioned tales. First, the protagonist has to provide for herself, which she does with the help of a ‘servant’ boy and of extraordinary luck or magic (cf. *A Woman Builds Her Home*, §36–38 and *As Precious as Salt*, §35). In both stories, in the course of this change the heroine also raises her ‘servant’ boy from poverty. Her second mission is then to prove to her father that salt is indeed priceless, and therefore that she does love him (*As Precious as Salt*, §55–56).

*Dindik Hinar...* is a variant of the ‘Cinderella’ story—an orphaned girl oppressed by her evil step-mother, but eventually vindicated and married to a prince. In this story and in a (partial) contradistinction to the previous three, magic replaces human determination and creativity to help the heroes in overcoming

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<sup>40</sup> See e.g. the story of a poor boy driven away by an evil stepmother and helped by a talking horse(head) attested in Hungarian (ATU 532).

<sup>41</sup> Compare this also with the theme of sex transformation (D10 and ATU 514), apparently relatively rare cross-culturally, but attested in (at least one) story told by the Jews of Zakho (Aloni 2022, 284–96).

difficulty. When in peril, the orphan Pomegranate Grain is delivered by magical bones that belonged to the girl's beloved cow, previously killed by the evil stepmother.

The 'Cinderella' motif appears in variant forms from Europe all the way to South-East Asia (ATU 510A; cf. Dundes 1988).<sup>42</sup> For instance, the enchanted bones of Pomegranate Grain's dead cow correspond to the magical bones of a beloved fish in the South-East Asian versions.

The final story of this collection, *The Indecent Neighbour* in CK. Shaqlawa, also touches on the issue of social status, but in a much lighter, anecdotal way.<sup>43</sup> In addition, the parameters here are reversed in comparison with the stories in the sense that the protagonist is an ordinary man, not a girl of noble birth (CK. Shaqlawa, 5–7). In this case, moreover, the problem here is not with destitution, but rather its appearances. The protagonist meets a woman bringing his family a gift of fruit. However, the man takes offence, presuming that the woman thinks him poor and in need of her charity. He refuses the gift and drives the woman away.

Yet the story's subtle irony lies in the fact that the man seemed more than happy to receive in another sense (CK. Shaqlawa, §5–7). When he first meets the woman, he is dazzled by her beauty and is apparently expecting an erotic encounter. Soon, it transpires, however, that the woman simply came with

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<sup>42</sup> A Neo-Aramaic version is also known among the Christians of Urmi (north-western Iran); cf. Khan (2016, 215–18).

<sup>43</sup> Compare this with ATU 1459 ('Keeping up appearances') and W165 ('False pride').

a little gift, but he rejects it, worried that this would make his family appear poor. In its light-hearted way, therefore, this anecdote critiques a culture in which public reputation is valued over actual moral integrity. The man had no problem with the prospect of being unfaithful to his wife, likely as long as this remained a secret, but felt greatly ashamed when thinking that others think him a pauper.<sup>44</sup>

### Independent Women in a Patriarchal Culture

In the context of the patriarchal cultures of northern Iraq, the ‘emancipation’ stories discussed above are noteworthy, at the very least. In the three stories *A Woman Builds Her Home*, *As Precious as Salt*, *The Poor Girl and her Horse* and *The Indecent Neighbour*, the woman is the resourceful and clever one. The male characters, on the other hand, are biased about women (e.g. the king in *A Woman Builds Her Home*), arrogant (*The Indecent Neighbour*) or downright lazy, like the boy who waits for figs to fall into his mouth from the tree (JA. Zakho, *As Precious as Salt*, §11).

The stereotypical gender roles are, therefore, reversed: the woman takes the initiative in providing for herself and for others, even taking on male appearance to legitimise her ‘male-like’ behaviour (e.g. ChA. Duhok, *A Woman Builds Her Home*, §52–53; ChA. Shaqlawa, *The Poor Girl and her Horse*).

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<sup>44</sup> For other anecdotes of northern Iraq, often with implicit social critique, see Mutzafi (2008a). For instance, ‘A Foolish Pauper’ (ibid, 282–285; with audio at <https://nena.ames.cam.ac.uk/audio/214/>) tells of a thick-headed poor man who drives his wife to insanity.



Interestingly, in *As Precious as Salt*, the princess even takes advantage of her social class to achieve her goals. Initially, she treats the boy whom she finds in her father's vineyard very much as a servant, even punishing him as a servant would be punished (JA. Zakho, *As Precious as Salt*, §12). On her way to what we could call emancipation, therefore, she is still content to rely on a male of a low social class to do the bulk of the hard manual labour.

All in all, such stories remain striking. On the one hand, female resourcefulness, physical strength and entrepreneurship are certainly valued among the patriarchal communities of northern Iraq. Still, their authority and degree of independence has traditionally remained subject to male guidance and benevolence, and their educational and economic opportunities have often been limited.<sup>45</sup>

In their seminal article on the nature of folk literature, Jakobson and Bogatyrev (1980) argue that any folk creation must earn a degree of approval by their community to be passed on because—in contrast to written literature—it relies on the community for its transmission.<sup>46</sup> As a result, folklore production is, according to Jakobson and Bogatyrev, driven by communal values, rather than by a desire to change the *status quo*. As they put it, 'the folk poet (...) does not create a new environment' (ibid, 11).

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<sup>45</sup> See, for instance, Brauer (1993, 149) for the treatment of women in the Jewish communities, about a century ago.

<sup>46</sup> This is known as 'the preventive censure of the community'.

Still, stories such as those discussed here caution us before oversimplifying the mechanism of folklore transmission. In the vast majority of human societies, the cultural *status quo* is not homogeneous, even though some attitudes might predominate or be considered normative (at least by those with social or political authority). The very existence of folktales such as these means that there must have been space for the diverse attitudes that they represent.

It is possible, for instance, that folktales like those discussed above were created in response to overly rigid gender roles, perhaps by female narrators. They could have been intended for a mixed audience, since female narrators did at times perform for a mixed audience, but this was relatively rare (Allison 2010, 143).<sup>47</sup> Alternatively, the stories of independent women discussed here could have been performed as work stories (see the introductory section) by women for other women.

## 5.0. Family Relations (Conflict, Intrigue)

Text 28: *Two Mullahs* (ChA. Shaqlawa)

Text 29: *Two Mullahs* (CK. Shaqlawa)

Text 30: *The Girl, Her Evil Stepmother and the Old Witch* (NK. Duhok)

Text 31: *Firyat and Khajija* (NK. Khizava)

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<sup>47</sup> See Allison (2001) for how the portrayal of women in Kurdish folklore interacts with real-life gender roles etc. See also Ashliman (2004, 148–145) for ‘emancipated’ women in European folklore. In a minority of cases, which are nevertheless far from exceptions, a female protagonist rebels against a decision imposed on her and perceived to be unjust, and is vindicated (ibid).

Like the previous group of folktales, these stories address social issues—here, in particular, conflict and intrigue within the family.

The anecdote of *Two Mullahs* appears in this corpus in a Christian and a Kurdish Shaqlawa version,<sup>48</sup> once again showing the readiness of the Christian community to adopt a story along with its Muslim setting. This tale warns men against taking a second wife—it causes much strife and tension in the house. While this anecdote is written from the male perspective, narratives with the female viewpoint also exist. For instance, the Jews of Duhok told an anecdote describing the emotional suffering that the second wife experiences.<sup>49</sup>

The story of *The Girl, Her Evil Stepmother and the Old Witch* is similar to *The Girl Pomegranate Grain* (cf. Theme IV above) in that it includes the well-known theme of a girl mistreated by her stepmother (S31).<sup>50</sup> There is also an evil old witch-woman Pirhavar (NK. Duhok, *The Girl, Her Evil Stepmother and the Old Witch*, §28), who conspires with the stepmother to kill Fatma and her brothers.

*Firyat and Khajija* is a tragic story of love that could not be (T80), because the community of one of the lovers conspires to keep them apart. Khajija's family does not allow her to marry the prince Firyat, because they are from different religions. At first, the girl's community gives Firyat a hope of marriage to Khajija.

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<sup>48</sup> As demonstrated by Lourd Hanna, this story is also known among the Kurds of Duhok.

<sup>49</sup> My own fieldwork.

<sup>50</sup> It also features motif D150, 'Transformation: man to bird'.

However, this is simply a pretext, used to get him to build a canal for them and thus take advantage of Firyat's wealth (§11–12).<sup>51</sup> In the end, Firyat is made to believe that his beloved Khajija is dead, and dies of despair as a consequence.<sup>52</sup>

Some elements in the story resemble other Iranian tragic love tales of the wider region. Perhaps the most important parallel is 'Khosrow and Shirin', a tragic romance written by the 12<sup>th</sup>-century poet Nezami Ganjavi. Khosrow and Shirin is a legend, based on the historical romance between the Armenian (Christian) princess Shirin and the Sassanian (Zoroastrian) king Khosrow II (Orsatti 2006). As in *Firyat and Khajija*, the lovers are divided by communal-religious lines. Another obvious parallel is the tragic love-story epic 'Mem u Zin' told by the Kurds of the greater Kurdistan region and their neighbours (Chyet 1991).

## 6.0. *Mirza Muhammad*

Text 32: *Mirza Muhammad and the Forty Monsters* (ChA. Duhok)

Text 33: *Mirza Muhammad and the Three Princesses* (ChA. Harmashe)

Text 34: *Mirza Muhammad's Adventures* (NK. Duhok)

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<sup>51</sup> I thank Masoud Mohammadirad for drawing my attention to 'Khosrow and Shirin'.

<sup>52</sup> This can be seen as a variant of motif N343 ('lover kills himself believing his mistress dead'), though in this case, the death is not actively caused, but rather the result of despair.

Mirza Muhammad is the youngest, but most heroic of three princes who experiences fantastic and heroic adventures.<sup>53</sup> The protagonist Mirza Muhammad is a hero of the ‘Hercules’ type—an adventurer who goes around slaying monsters and outwitting foes. The number of the adventurous episodes and their character, differ radically across the versions, showing that narrators have often invented new episodes, or perhaps borrowed from other stories.

Despite these differences in the adventures, however, the Mirza Muhammad story is apparently a variant of the widely-attested tale of the three princes-brothers and their quest for the three stolen princesses, occurring also in Europe.<sup>54</sup> This story type is typically categorised under ATU 301 ‘The three stolen princesses’. This exact description is not entirely fitting for the northern-Iraqi variants of the tale, despite the existence of the parallels. For example, in the NK. Duhok version in this corpus, only one woman—who at the time is already married to the protagonist Mirza Muhammad—is stolen (cf. ATU 400), and this deed is done by a king, rather than by magical creatures. Nevertheless, the *Mirza Muhammad* tales have other points of overlap with the stories of the three stolen princesses. For instance, the ChA. Duhok version features the motif of defeating monsters (ogres; ATU

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<sup>53</sup> I thank Paul Noorlander for sharing with me his knowledge of the various forms of the Mirza Muhammad tale, which I drew from in writing this section.

<sup>54</sup> Known as, for instance, ‘The Golden Apples’ in European folklore.

300),<sup>55</sup> often included within the story of the three stolen princesses.<sup>56</sup> The connection of these stories to the ATU 301 type is corroborated by the existence of tales in which the presence of elements from both tale variants (Iraqi and European) is very explicit. For instance, the ChA. version published by Lazarev (1974)<sup>57</sup> includes the motif of the king's prized apple being stolen (as in European variants), while also sharing the name of the youngest prince ('Mirza Mamed') with the northern-Iraqi variants in the present corpus.

The more specific variant of this international motif is very popular among the communities of the region, including in Armenia.<sup>58</sup> As our Iraqi fieldworker Lourd Hanna has confirmed, however, the protagonist does not always carry the name Mirza. A version in Central Neo-Aramaic<sup>59</sup> has also been published, where the three brothers remain nameless (Jastrow and Talay 2019, 273–281). In this Central Aramaic version, the story of the three princes precedes the story of *Gūlo Zīlo Bando*. The hero's

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<sup>55</sup> For the ogre motif elsewhere in Kurdistan folklore; see, for instance, Mutzafi's corpus of JA. (2008a, 274–277).

<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, the three stories presented in this publication do not include the motif of the golden apples, attested in the European (e.g. Romanian, Bulgarian, French) variants of the related tale.

<sup>57</sup> I could only access the online edition of the publication at [https://archive.org/stream/B-001-014-246/B-001-014-246\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/B-001-014-246/B-001-014-246_djvu.txt).

<sup>58</sup> For the Armenian version, see Mouse (2018; page numbers missing in the online PDF).

<sup>59</sup> Turoyo; south-eastern Turkey, Tūr 'Abdin, the provinces of Mardin and Şırnak.

(i.e. the wife of the prince otherwise known as Mirza Muhammad) asks for this story before she allows him to marry her. Another Central Neo-Aramaic version recorded in Ritter's collection (1969, Text 61) also closely parallels the ChA. Duhok version (Text 32) with slight differences, for instance the younger hero fights fourteen instead of forty monsters and also collects the ears of lions and foxes in his pocket. A Northern Kurdish version (from Gulli) has been published by MacKenzie (1962, 348–357). A similar story to that of Mirza Muhammad is available in Mohamadirad (2021, text A), a corpus of Central Kurdish of the Sanandaj region.

A key motifeme in most of the stories about an adventurous young prince is the death of the king—the father of the brothers—and/or the issue of his royal succession. This death, moreover, (almost) always coincides with the adventures of his three sons, in all of which Mirza Muhammad clearly excels. Still, the details of this royal succession motif and the role of the king-father differ significantly across the versions.

In the ChA. Duhok version, the last will of the father is for him to be buried in the place where a mare would bring them to (§7–13).<sup>60</sup> The journey to bury their father marks the beginning of their adventures. In the ChA. Harmashe tale, the king's death is only mentioned in passing at the end (§33), and coincides with the marriage of his sons to the three princesses. In a symbolic way, where one life (and apparently one reign) ends, another begins. The princes meet the princesses in the palace of the late

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<sup>60</sup> This is also the case in the above-mentioned Turoyo version, except that it is a camel that carries the king's body.

king (where Mirza Muhammad had brought them). In the NK. Duhok tale, the father warns his sons to guard his throne after he dies, because the king's brother envies it. Indeed, when the king dies, his brother seizes the opportunity of the time of mourning to usurp his throne. The Armenian version resembles the Kurdish one in this regard; the brother of the late king usurps the throne and expels his nephews (Mouse 2018).

A striking feature of the *Mirza Muhammad* tales is that the hero is the youngest of the brothers, and, therefore, not the rightful heir of his father's throne.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, the adventures of the story demonstrate that Mirza Muhammad is the most resourceful one and the bravest of them, and thus the most 'throne-worthy', as per Thompson's 'Victorious youngest son' motif (L10). In other words, the story deals with the reversal of the law of succession, or at least suggests that it is not always the eldest who excels in his leadership skills and justice.<sup>62</sup> In the ChA. Duhok story, for instance, Mirza Muhammad faces forty monsters and they promise him that if he wins the challenge presented to him, they will consider him 'their older brother' (90–100). In the Armenian variant (Mouse 2018), the brothers themselves present a challenge to Mirza and recognise him as their eldest brother when he succeeds. In the NK. Duhok narrative, Mirza Muhammad is the one who acts like a responsible and just leader, protecting his own brothers as well as victims of war (e.g. 11–20; 38–40).

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. the Armenian version (Mouse 2018), where—as expected—the oldest brother inherits the throne at first.

<sup>62</sup> Compare this also with the motif of primogeniture reversal, e.g. in the Biblical book of Genesis (Borysov 2020).



As regards the details of the adventures, the ChA. Duhok version contains (at least) one episode with a direct parallel in the Armenian story (Mouse 2018). In both, Mirza Muhammad meets an old person (a woman in the Aramaic and a man in the Armenian variant) who represents the deity Time. This figure causes it to be either day or night by unrolling respectively a white and a black clew (ChA. Duhok, *Mirza Muhammad and the Forty Monsters*, §64–1). In both variants, Mirza Muhammad binds this person in order to lengthen the night, so that he can complete his tasks (ChA. Duhok, *Mirza Muhammad and the Three Princesses*, §72–74). The motif of an encounter with Time is reportedly very popular in Armenian folklore (Abeghyan 1899). This raises the possibility that the tale of *Mirza Muhammad*, or at least part of it, is of Armenian origin. The abduction of Mirza Muhammad's wife by the ruler and the motif of bathing is also reminiscent of ATU 465 ('Man persecuted for his beautiful wife'), attested, for instance, in Armenian.

The protagonist Mirza Muhammad carries the name of a historical figure: a 15th-century Timurid ruler, governor of Samarkand (Woods 1990, 35). This historical Mirza Muhammad married a daughter of the Hakkari Kurd's chief, who had formerly been his adversary. In this way, Mirza Muhammad formed a political alliance with the Hakkari Kurds. Other protagonists of Kurdistanian oral literature (of northern Iraq and south-eastern Turkey) were also named after prominent (non-local) political-military leaders.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Another example is the Ghaznavid Sultan Mahmud (Thackson 1999), responsible for the wide islamisation of central-western Asia.

The lives of the historical and folkloristic Mirza Muhammad, however, likely have little in common, except that both have the status of a chieftain/prince who goes on to marry the daughter of another ruler. It is noteworthy that the protagonist of *Mirza Muhammad* is named after the Kurds' former enemy. The motivation for this naming cannot be recovered, but it may have to do with legends that Mirza was a great warrior.

## 7.0. Religious Legends (and other religious stories)

Text 35: *Mar Yohanan (St John)* (ChA. Shaqlawa)

Text 36: *Mar Giwargis (St George)* (ChA. Enishke)

Text 37: *The Prophet's Horse* (NK. Dure)

Text 38: *The Foul-Mouthed Priest* (CK. Shaqlawa)

Like all religious societies, the Muslims, Jews and Christians of northern Iraq too have stories about pious individuals who set a moral example<sup>64</sup> and stories of miracles. A few of these are represented in this corpus.

*Mar Giwargis* (ChA. Enishke) tells the legend of Saint George slaying the dragon (F628) and rescuing the princess (see Ogden 2013). The tale of *Mar Yohanan (St John)* celebrates ascetic piety (V462)—one in which life in poverty comes at the expense of everything else. The prince Yohanan is ready to be cut off from his parents despite the grief that it causes them, and to disappoint them over giving up his heirship (ChA. Shaqlawa, *Mar Yohanan*, §8). He leaves them behind and becomes a monk.

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<sup>64</sup> Though see *The Foul-Mouthed Priest* below for an anti-hero.

Yohanan clings to his vows of poverty even after he becomes ill and is taken back to his parents' palace, refusing to be recognised by them and receive care. He believes that his perseverance until the very end will guarantee him a reward from God (ChA. Shaqlawa, *Mar Yohanan*, §28).

Mar Yohanan's asceticism arguably highlights the difference between Christian (Chaldean Catholic) and Kurdish Muslim saint types. For instance, in the (Chaldean) Catholic church, celibacy is institutionalised (obligatory for priests) and held in high esteem, so the faithfulness of Mar Yohanan to his monastic vows does not surprise us. It is different in the Kurdish Muslim communities, where even among the mystic movements such as the Sufi *derwishes*, celibacy is by no means the norm.<sup>65</sup>

Arguably, this divergence in the ideal of piety is also apparent in the previously discussed story of Zambilfrosh—the humble basket-seller (which is in fact very popular among Sufi *derwishes*; cf. Sabar 1976, 171, footnote 61). As shown above, the Christian-Aramaic Shaqlawa versions (Texts 4–5) have Zambilfrosh become a monk—in a way that suspiciously resembles the life of Mar Yohanan. In the Kurdish variant (Text 7), there is no mention that Zambilfrosh lived as a hermit or a monk.

The story of *The Prophet's Horse* (NK. Dure) is a Kurdish variation on the Muslim story of Muhammad and his flying horse Buraq. Here, the Prophet's miraculous journeys are deliberately placed in the realia of northern Iraq. The narrator also says that

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<sup>65</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/celibacy/Islam-Judaism-and-Christianity>.

the horse Dildil left a hoofprint near the village of Sararo (north-western Iraq).

In the anecdote *The Foul-Mouthed Priest* (CK. Shaqlawa), the religious figure—the priest—is an anti-hero; an impatient, unkind and rude religious leader.<sup>66</sup> In the end, his malice is exposed—perhaps deliberately—by a simple woman. She offers him hospitality, but he is too impatient to receive it. The tale is told by Muslim Kurds, but set in a Christian environment.

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<sup>66</sup> See ATU 1725–1849 ('Jokes about Clergymen and Religious Figures') and ATU 831 ('The Dishonest Priest').