

Neo-Aramaic and Kurdish Folklore from Northern Iraq

A Comparative Anthology with a Sample of Glossed Texts

VOLUME 1



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PREFACE

Kurdish and Neo-Aramaic speaking communities have been neighbours in northern Iraq for centuries long before modern ethnic nationalist politics became dominant. The documentation and analysis of Neo-Aramaic and Kurdish folktales has long been a desideratum in the field of Middle Eastern literature. Like most oral literature today, it is highly endangered and likely to disappear within the next few decades. Recent violent conflicts in northern Iraq, fuelled by religious and ethnic ideologies, have had devastating effects on minority communities, resulting in their mass displacement and the endangerment of their language and oral culture. In northern Iraq the diverse ethnic and religious communities share many folktales, which they tell, often with local variations, in their various different languages. How similar are the shared folktales in their motifs and how have the shared tales been adapted to the particular ethno-religious identity of the community in question?

This book is a comparative collection of folklore as narrated by members of three ethno-religious communities from northern Iraq: Kurdish Muslims, Syriac Christians and—to a lesser degree—Aramaic-speaking Jews. Each story is transcribed to reflect as authentically as possible the language and dialect of the speaker. Several varieties of Northern and Central Kurdish, as well as Christian and Jewish Neo-Aramaic are included. All of these communities are understood here as belonging to a shared, though not homogeneous, cultural space, described here as ‘northern Iraq’, and elsewhere referred to as ‘Iraqi Kurdistan’ and

‘Kurdistan’. The latter terms refer to the ethnically diverse region of northern Iraq, nowadays politically recognised as the ‘Kurdistan Regional Government’. Though now Kurdish-speaking and Muslim in its majority, this region has historically hosted a wide range of ethno-religious communities, including Kurdish-speaking Yezidis, Arabic- and Aramaic-speaking Jews and Christians, as well as Gorani-speaking Shia Shabaks and Yarsanis.

The shared political and social history as well as geography of the region’s communities has led to a significant degree of cultural convergence, along with the preservation of firm boundaries of religion and—to a lesser degree—language. This reality justifies considering the various communities of Iraqi Kurdistan as part of a larger cultural space. For the lack of a better term, this multi-cultural space is referred to as ‘northern Iraq’ in this publication.

With its comparative approach, this volume serves as a case-study of the intimate and long-standing relations between the three aforementioned ethno-religious communities: the Kurds, Jews and Syriac Christians. Many Christians of Iraq who speak Neo-Aramaic, i.e. *surəθ* or *surət* ‘Syriac’, identify themselves as *suraye* ‘Syrian Christians’. The vast majority of them belong to the Chaldean Catholic Church and Assyrian Church of the East. Most speakers, therefore, identify themselves as Chaldeans and Assyrians, respectively.

This volume is the outcome of a collaboration between linguists based at the University of Cambridge and members of the Syriac Christian and Kurdish Muslim communities in northern

Iraq. It has been funded by a grant awarded by the Heritage, Dignity and Violence programme (HDV190229) of the British Academy in 2019 and directed by Geoffrey Khan and Paul M. Noorlander. The main aim has been to produce parallel corpora of Kurdish and Neo-Aramaic folktales and to investigate the exchanges between the two neighbouring communities in order to foster an understanding of shared cultural heritage, and so contribute to the resolution and prevention of conflict.

Our main collaborator in Iraq, Lourd Hanna, was responsible for conducting the fieldwork and collecting the majority of the stories in northern Iraq. Lourd has experience in working with peace-building NGOs in northern Iraq. It was she who had the idea of using the shared cultural heritage of folktales as a means of fostering understanding between the different religious communities of the region. The funding of the project by the British Academy has allowed Lourd and the Cambridge team to make this vision a reality. This open-access publication will be used by Lourd as the basis for peace-building workshops between Christians and Muslims in northern Iraq.

We would like to thank Aziz Al-Zebari and Salim Abraham, both native speakers of Neo-Aramaic, for their assistance with transcription and translation. We are also grateful to Oz Aloni for giving us access to the story *The Princess and the Lazy Boy*, which he had collected in his own fieldwork,¹ and for sharing his own transcription, which served as the basis for the text of the tale in the present volume.

¹ <https://nena.ames.cam.ac.uk/audio/173/>.

The audio recordings of the corpus of parallel Neo-Aramaic and Kurdish folktales can be accessed at nena.ames.cam.ac.uk, and kurdic.ames.cam.ac.uk, which are databases maintained by the University of Cambridge.

The fieldwork and documentation work for this volume was made possible, as remarked, by a grant from the British Academy. Financial support for some of the groundwork of the project came from a grant by the University of Cambridge from the university's Global Challenges Research Fund. The research and preparations for this volume were partly funded by the European Research Council. Some of the native speaker assistants were supported by donations from the Assyrian community in the USA. We would like to thank in particular Francis Sarguis and Rebecca Simon for their generous support.

It is our hope that the stories about universal human experiences passed down over generations and communities will help build bridges across cultural divides.

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