This comparative anthology showcases the rich and mutually intertwined folklore of three ethno-religious communities from northern Iraq: Aramaic-speaking (‘Syriac’) Christians, Kurdish Muslims and—to a lesser extent—Aramaic-speaking Jews. The first volume contains several introductory chapters on language, folklore motifs and narrative style, followed by samples of glossed texts in each language variety. The second volume is the anthology proper, presenting folklore narratives in several distinct varieties of North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic and Northern and Central Kurdish. The stories are accompanied by English translations. The material includes different genres such as folktales, legends, fables and anecdotes, and is organised into seven thematic units. The folkloristic material of these three communities is shared to a large extent. The anthology is, therefore, a testament to the intimate and long-standing relations between these three ethno-religious communities—relations that existed in a multilingual environment centuries before the modern era of nationalism.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher’s website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found here: www.openbookpublishers.com

Cover image: The village of Harbole, south-eastern Turkey (photograph taken by Bruno Poizat in 1978 before the village’s destruction). Cover design: Anna Gaë.
7. ZANBILFIROSH—THE BASKET-SELLER¹

Masoud Mohammadirad

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Recording: Lourd Hanna

Audio: https://kurdic.ames.cam.ac.uk/audio/247/

Summary

The son of the prince of Mosul lived a lavish lifestyle and was oblivious of death and afterlife. When he experienced the loss of one of his relatives, he was transformed and chose to become pious. To avoid living off his cruel father, he started to make a living by selling baskets and was, therefore, called Zanbilfirosh, i.e. basket-seller. Once, while strolling streets to sell his baskets, the daughter of the ruler of the city caught sight of him and tried to charm him. However, the pious basket-seller did not consent. The daughter accused him of assault. The guards kept chasing the basket-seller. The basket-seller threw himself down from one of the towers of the citadel and was later buried on a public road.

The narrator elaborates on different versions of Zanbilfirosh across Kurdistan.

¹ I am grateful to Slava Sheikmous and Rewan Hussein, native speakers of Kurmanji, for their help with interpreting language in a few passages.
(1) nāvē mān | ʾAhmad ʾAbūbakər Sələmān | az xalkē gundē Xizavâ-ma | ʾašīr-ā Guliā. | ū az žə dāyəkbug | həzār-ū nəhsad-ū šeṣt-ū həštē-ma | ʾamā dərəstəhiyā mən dā tərlx-əm | xəlaq-ən. | šeṣt-ū dū-ma. |  

(2) zanbılfaɾoš | du goɾət zanbılfaɾoʃ yət həyən əl dəvərä kurdā dā, | ək lə Kurdəstānā Bāktor, | ək lə Kurdəstānā Bāšor. | yə Bāktor, | yə lə Vəɾqinē lə Qazā Səlivā, lə vələyatə Dıyərbəkər. |  

(3) ʾamā yə avē | haçko lə Kurdəstānā Bāšor | ava ṭə-kət sar jāʿdā nəvbaynā Bātifē ū Zāxo dā. | əl sər jədē-ya | bə-ɾax gundē Sərkətkiyē də. | ṭəqriban rošəvāyē | nəhīyā Bātifā ʹənji kəlovət. |  

(4) əv zanbılfaɾoʃə wak həkəyətə wī hətī gətənē | yət xalkē mə-ū bəv-ū bəpiɾeṭ ma ək bo ək yə göti. | əl sar və kalhə šəbəniyē ʾt-ənən, | av kalhə šəbəniyē. |  

(5) ava yə ʿko lə daf ma nəvē wī | ... məhsən kuṛē mər Avdulazizē mərē Müsəl-a, | yə vē kəlhā Müsəl. | mər ... Məhsən kuṛē mər Avdulazizē mərē Müsəl-a. | tabʿan wak ava wak həkəyətə wī ət-bəžən | zanbılfaɾoʃ kuṛē mərī bi. |  

(6) ʾənsənaḵi ləwəkə jahēl yə barkətī bi. | gəɾhā nəv jahēlə dā-ū pərə lə bar dəst-î zəhəf bīn-ū. | ət-bəžən wəxtəkə kəsək ʃə məlā mərī mər.
My name is Ahmad Abubakir Sileman. I come from the village of Khizava, from the Guli tribe. I was born in 1968, but in reality ... my date of birth is wrong. I was born in 1962.

The basket-seller—there are two tombs of the basket-seller in Kurdish regions: one in northern Kurdistan, one in southern Kurdistan. The one in northern Kurdistan is located in Farqin in the Siliva county, Diyarbakir province.

But, as for the one in southern Kurdistan, the tomb is located on the road between Batifa and Zakho. It is on the road next to the Sirkotki village. It is located approximately less than five kilometres west of the Batifa region.

As for the basket-seller,—the way his adventure has been told and from what our ancestors have passed on to each other—his story comes from the citadel of Shabani, this citadel of Shabani.

He (the basket-seller) was called Mir Muhsin in our region. He is the son of Mir Avdulaziz, the prince of Mosul, at this citadel of Mosul. Mir Muhsin (the basket-seller) was the son of Avdulaziz, the prince of Mosul. Evidently, his story was like this: the basket-seller was the prince’s son.

He was a handsome young man. He would wander around with other youths. He had a lot of money at his disposal. It is said that a member of the prince’s family once passed away.
(7) waxtē mērī tabʿān xalkē ... davarē lē kôm bin-ū| bərənā-v ziyāratē-ū| aw goř ḵolā-ū| ḵər ŏeda-ū| va-šàrt-ū.| awi ži got-ē, ’mā dē ava hamā lō vêdē bē?!| got-ē, ‘ava dē lō vē bē hatā qiyyamatē.’ |

(8) ’qiyyamat ḵangī-ya?’, goti-ū.| ’ço qiyyamate-va ṭā ėo hē diyānatē nə-zāna,| čo diyānatā’!| ŋərsē xwa lə dəl dā| goti, ‘ava dē ŏ-nāv vē ṭəxē ṭā-bət?‘| got-ē, ’āl bi šəvē-ū bə rožē go məstamər lə vē-dē bē ava xəlās.’ |

(9) ťā-bi ... wak awdīaḵē bə sāri kat.| malāyāḵ hāt| bo āxāft ŋəzāḵ du sē ġār.| har ŋo dā bēzē, ’malē wara bo mən bə-āxava.’| hatā bahsē diyānatē bo i ḱər.| 

(10) ’diyānat hūsā-na-ū.| diyānatā masīhi yā hayl| diyānatā øslāmatā yā hay.| har diyānataḵā ha-bōt’ ... tabʿān ʿerf-ū ’ādāt-ū ’awādiyēḵ manhajē diyānatē.’| aw lə sar øslāmatiyē bi.| øslāmati ništā dā.| 

(11) māl bi čand hayvakā mā.| goti, ’pā az ḵə bə-kəm?‘ az-e žə vē ’awādī xalās| žə wi qablī ŏtank-ū tūrīyā vi qablī xalās b-əm.’ |
‘When he died, the people of the region obviously gathered around him, took [him] to the cemetery, dug a grave, put [him] in it, and buried [him].’ He (Muhsin) said, ‘Is he going to rest in this grave forever?’ They (the people at the funeral) said, ‘Yes, he will stay here until the resurrection.’

‘When is the resurrection?’, he said. [They said to him], ‘No religion knows for sure about [when] the resurrection [happens], no religion!’ Fear took hold of him (Muhsin). He said, ‘Is he going to get out from under the soil [at the resurrection]?’ ‘Yes, day and night,’ they said. ‘He will stay here day and night continually. It is finished [for the dead].’

[Upon seeing this scene] something came to his mind. A mullah came to talk to him for one, two, three, four days. Every day, he would say, ‘Mullah! Come [and] talk to me [about religion].’ He (Muhsin) had Islamic faith. [The Mullah] showed him the principles of Islam.

‘Religion is like this. There is the Christian religion. There is the Islamic religion. Each religion has a set of liturgies and customs.’ The Mullah showed him the principles of Islam.

Things remained [like this] for a couple of months. He (Muhsin) said, ‘What shall I do to be relieved of this thing, [to be relieved] of this dark narrow grave?’

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2 Lit. A thing fell on his head.
got-e, ḳəvêt tû êh tû nêvêzêt xwa bê-kê! tû tâ'at-û ʾobâdâtêt xwa bê-kê! tû hârikîr bê legal xalkakê-û tû ye bê râhm bê-û tû zulm o zordari lê xalkakê nê-kê. hagår tû zolmê bê-kê tê'at-û ʾibâdate tê qabûl nê-bêt.\(1\)

bêsh-a pêne bâvê menê tê-kê lê wê xwênê dê-xom.\(2\) got-e, ʾwêla ã bâvê tê zolmê bê-kê tê ʾibâdate tê qabûl nê-bêt.\(3\) ʾpê az kû bê-kêm azê-zê ẑê vê zulmû zordariyê bâvê xwa?\(4\)

hendi go bâvê xwà. bâvê wi rêzî nê-bî vi ʾtêştî bê-hêlêt. got, ʾagar tû kadakê bê dastê xwa bê-kê u tû xwa xwadân bê-kê-û ʾayârâ xwa xwadan kê dê hôngê tê'at-û ʾibâdate tê qabûl dê-bêt.\(5\)

rê-bê dâr-kat, dâr-kat ẑê mal dâr-kat bê ẑê ẑênkâk habû-û du bêcêk. got ẑênkà xwà, ʾazê-ê čêm bo mà sêl ẑêm.\(6\)

rê-bê hät, dâst ʾêp zanbilaw čëkarêvê kû. zanbilêt kurdawariyê bo feqî bê kar țîna xalkê ma. ʾêš šêfkât hät čêkarêvê. lê hät ba ŏubîrâ-û zanbil čê kûrên. ma gotî wi sardanî ẑiyân ʾêt kalhâ dê bî. û hät-û hät-û mantaqa hatê hâtî kalhî šâbêniyê.\(7\)
(12) He (the Mullah) said, ‘You, eh, you should recite your prayers! You should perform your worship! You should help people. You should be merciful. You should not do any injustice nor cruelty to people. If you are unjust [to people], your obedience and prayer will not be accepted [by God].’

(13) [Muhsin said], ‘Isn’t it so that my father does [injustice]! I’m living off him.’ He (the Mullah) said, ‘By God, if your father does injustice [and you live off him], your prayers will not be accepted.’ [Muhsin said], ‘What shall I do to be relieved of the injustice caused by my father?’

(14) He talked so much to his father. [But] his father did not agree to abandon this thing. The Mullah said, ‘If you do a job with your own hands, take care of yourself and manage to live by your own means, then your prayers will be accepted.’

(15) He rose [and] left [the house]. He had a wife and two babies. He said to his wife, ‘I will go and make a living for us.’

(16) He rose, came [and] started making baskets. Our people use the Kurdish baskets for fruit. They are made of sticks. He came to the river and made baskets. We said that back then people would live in citadels. He (i.e. Muhsin) kept coming until he arrived at the gate of the Shabani citadel.

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3 Lit. he.
4 Lit. Take care of your own standard.
5 Lit. work.
6 Lit. he came and he came.
(17) hät.1 wuxtē lō darokē dargahā hawā kati-ūl zēravānā go, ‘tē kō čē?1 got-e tab’an zanbīlē māl-i-vā bi1 go, ‘az-ē čom zanbīlā fərošm.1 ol kūlānēt bāzērē hät-o čo.1

(18) əxt-bēżōn awādi ... hačko kəčā mīrī1 əxt qasrē əxt panjarē dā aw kuṛā làwē barkati dī-ū zanbīlā for[ošt].1 kuṛē mīr-a-w làwakī barkati-yā.1

(19) jōhē dā viyānā kuṛē kat dolē kəčkē.1 got jārīyā xwa,1 ‘haṛa bēža wi zanbīlərošī bəlā bēt vēdē.1 čū got-e, ‘wara ām-e zanbīlā žə ṭa kərin.1

(20) hät žor-vā.1 tab’an ... avādi mānē yā pē häti gotonē-ū,1 viyā ma’rūf-āl kā čāwā ləgal ēk āhaftən-ūl hozānvānā yā ūrī hozən-ū:

(21) zanbīləroš mīrkē řawā1 ... zanbīləroš làwē darwēšə-w1 karam ka ṭu wara pēšə-w,1 qimatē salkā ṭu bēžə-w1 yā bəčkē lō bar zērā bə-kēšə-w1 yā mà[zən buhā bəbəža].1
(17) He arrived.7 When the [lock of the] gate of the citadel flew open, the guards asked, ‘Where are you going?’ He (the basket-seller) said—well, he had baskets on his shoulders—, ‘I’m going to sell baskets.’ He strolled from street to street in the city.

(18) It is said that the prince’s daughter saw the handsome man, i.e. the basket-seller, who was selling baskets, through the windows of the palace. He was selling baskets. He was the prince’s son. He was a handsome young man.

(19) Immediately, she (the prince’s daughter) was filled with love for the boy.8 She said to her maidservant, ‘Go and ask the basket-seller to come here.’ She (the maidservant) went and said to him (the basket-seller), ‘Come here. We would like to buy baskets from you.’

(20) He went upstairs. Of course, things were said [at their meeting]. It is known how they would talk to each other. The poets turned it [their conversation] into poetry:

(21) Oh Basket-seller, son of …

Oh Basket-seller, son of Dervish

Please come forward!

Tell (me) how much the price of the baskets is?

Ask for pieces of gold for small baskets, and set a[n expensive price] for the big ones.

7 Lit. He came.
8 Lit. The longing for the boy fell into the girl’s heart.
(22) muhǝm ava awådî-ya! balê hǝndî hât zanbîlfǝrošî ko qāna' bə-ɔ̄l ṯ ū b-ê ù viyânâ xwa bô-y diyâr kat. zanbîlfǝrošî yĕ še ṯ̄r̄sē xodê ta'alâ na-hâtî.

(23) zanbîlfǝroš barê xwa dâ rax saratê-û 'xalatê. zanbîlfǝroš ži lɔ darajatâ čü-va xwârê. gâzi ... ƙɔ̌čkê gâzi ... zêravânà kǝr. got-e, 'zêravân! go, 'hâ' got-e, 'wi zanbîlfǝrošî bø-gørə gre.'

(24) awän ži řahlà dâl âw řavi. čûn mälê dargahê lê gørê. go, 'møli ki-vâ čot?' aw bø xwa kalhâ šabání 'āsì büya. mälê dargahê lê gørt ū lɔ div čûn lɔ div čûn hatâ čû sar gøvân dâ kavrê.

(25) hâr got-e, 'na-û [mø] xodê dê xwa tê da âvêzêm.' aw ži har čûn bânê [......] muhǝm xwa tê da âvêt. xwa tê da âvêt sî hønî kat. dø vê awådiyê dâ ... dø vê āriše dâ waxtê av řûdâna paydâ bi, bâbê ƙɔ̌čkê hât.

Anyway, it was like that. She (the prince’s daughter) wanted to lure the basket-seller with her charm and show him her love. The basket-seller, who was overwhelmed by the fear of God, did not accept that.

The basket-seller turned around and left the palace, [saying to himself], ‘These [actions] are wrong.’ The basket-seller went down from the stairs [and ran away]. The girl called the guards, [and] said ‘Guards!’ ‘Yes,’ they replied. She said, ‘Grab the basket-seller.’

They chased him. He fled. They went [and] closed the gates of the citadel to him and said, ‘Where is he heading to?’ The citadel of Shabani was in principle impregnable. They closed the gates of the citadel to him and kept chasing him until he arrived at the top of one of the towers of the citadel.

He said to the guards, ‘By God, I will throw myself down into it [i.e. into the pointed rocks at the bottom of the castle].’ They (the guards) kept going further up […]. Anyway, he threw himself into it [i.e. into the pointed rocks]. He fell down. In this situation, during the time when this accident happened, the girl’s father came [to the scene].

[The father said], ‘What is this?’ Out of fear, she (the daughter) turned the story to her favour. She said, ‘It was the prince’s son (the basket-seller) who lusted after me!’ The prince said to the head of guards, ‘Go and bring him.’ He (the head of the guards) came down from the citadel and saw that he (the basket-seller) was shouting in pain and was wounded.

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9 Lit. arch of the rock.
awādi mirē kalhā šabānī barē xwa dâ-yē lâwâk bârkatî-ya\| dolē wi na-d-ĉû wi bê-kûţē.\| go, ‘hârēn bê-bôn bônē kalhē bê-kûţēn.’\| sarokē zêravānā zânī bêbaxtī lō vi awādi hât kârênē.\|

waxtē inây xwârē, go, ‘az-ē ūta bê-vēm dav hakimakī balki az ūta ‘ilâj bê-kôm.’\| qadarakī inâ xwârē šê kalhē,\| gotē, ‘mē daynēn,\| az-ē mərêm az\| tu mën xēlās nê-êkē.’\|

‘bâs\| az-i hursiyatake ūta kôm\| haka ūta bê-šē\| mē bê sar ŭêkâkā ‘ûm va-šēra,\| waxtē xalkâk b-êt dâ bo mën dē-âd bê-kêt-û.\| ū az mēt’âj ūzē b-ôm.\| gotē, ‘bêlâ!’\|

vējâ hât hōngē aw ŭêk ŭêkâkâ ‘ûm bî ūzē vê mantaqē hatâ Āmedî-û hata Bârzan-û [...],\| ū ūzē vi gundi ūzî čo bo jêzîrâ Boţâ husâ,\| ŭêkâkâ ‘ûm bî.\| sar we ŭêkê va-šârt.\|

ava ūbêĵên hêkâyatat zanbilfûroşi yā lô Bâsor â bê vi ŭangî-ya.\| ū həndak xalkê ma ūzî têbêĵên nâvē wi Mêhamad ʿAmûn bî.\| ʿamâ\| ʿamâ potar ūbêţên nâvē wi mîr Mêhsûn kuřê mîr Avdulazizê mirê Mûsûl bî.\|
Well, the prince of the Shabani citadel looked at him (the basket-seller) and saw that he was a handsome man. He (the prince) was not willing\(^\text{10}\) to kill him (the basket-seller) [himself]. He said [to the guards], ‘Go and kill him on the slope of the citadel.’ The head of the guards knew that he (the basket-seller) had been bullied.

While he (the guard) was taking him (the basket-seller) to the slope, he said to him, ‘I will take you to a physician. I will cure you.’ After a few moments, when they were on their way to the slope of the citadel, he (the basket-seller) said, ‘Put me down here, I’m dying. You cannot save me’.

[The basket-seller continued], ‘But I have to testify to you: if it’s possible for you, please bury me next to a public road, so that people who pass by pray for me. I will need that.’ ‘All right,’ he (the head of the guards) said.

He (the guard) came. The road was a public road. It went from this region to Amadiya, Barzan [Choli] and from this village up to Cizre Bohtan. He (the guard) buried him (the basket-seller) next to that road.

The tale of the basket-seller in southern Kurdistan is like this. Some of our people say the real name of the basket-seller was Muhammad Amin. But most would say his name was Mir Muhsin, son of Mir Avdulaziz, the prince of Mosul.

\(^{10}\) Lit. His heart would not go.
(32) ʾamā yā ... yā Bākor, ʿaw t-bēžōn nāvē wi ʿmir Saʿīd ʿurē ʿmir Hasan, pāšāyē Dīyārbakʿor bi. nafsē ʿvi čirokā mā bo wā gotī nafsē wi čirokē lā sar ʿet-hēt gotūnē. ʿayn lā sar wi ... yē Bākor avē Vārqinē bē vē čirokē nafsē.

(33) bas aw tabʿan kalhā Vārqinē kalhakā dasčēkār-a tāvoko dasčēkār-a. ūt hazīrēt xwa bē-kē masan kā bēzē āv-a ān na awa-a. ava masla ūt guhē xwa bē-dē hozānē. dē ḫo bēžēt, ṭē-bēžēt

(34) kalhā mīrē ṭawāl-a
bōlēndāhiyē haf ŭemh hēzār-a
bānē wē qoč ū hēsār-a
xwa ṭō kalhē dā b-avēm xwār-a
ū go, bēlā ū xođē ... na-bēm šarmazārā
bēlā ū xoṭīnē bē-bēm xusārā.

(35) yaʿnī haftōm hēzār-a yaʿnī hēzār-ū haf ŭemhā bōlēndāhi-ya, hasab ... ūzē darā mà diyār kēri bānē wē qoč-ū hēsār-a, kāvṛ-ū fōlān-a. aw hamā awādī bi qāṣr bi xwa dē paŋjērayē da āvēt.
(32) But in northern Kurdistan it is said that the basket-seller was called Mir Saʿid, son of Mir Hasan, the prince of Diyarbakir. The story of the basket-seller is told the same way in the north, the same as I told you. The story of the basket-seller in Varqin in northern Kurdistan is the same.

(33) However, [note that] the citadel of Farqin is man-made. It is totally man-made. You should really ponder whether it is [the same castle as in the basket-seller story]. Let’s listen to the verse, which goes as follows:

(34) The castle of the emir is modern.
   Its height is the size of one thousand and seven spears.
   At the bottom of it there are pointed rocks and a blockade.
   I shall throw myself down from the castle,
   He (the basket-seller) said,
   Lest I become humiliated in front of God, [but]
   let me mortify the lady.

(35) $\textit{hafəm hizār-a}$ means that the citadel was the length of 1007 spears placed on top of each other. As we pointed out [in the verse], the bottom of the castle was full of pointed rocks, as a blockade, and so forth. It was a thing, a palace. [However, in that version from northern Kurdistan it is said that the basket-seller] threw himself down from a window.

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11 Lit. made by hands.

(37) bas lâ wak dalîl ūqêcâ mirî-ya.  čokû ā̱kamûn kas, avâ hà nahşad-û nūt-û čârê zâyini av ūdâna paydâ bo-bi.  ū ū wî sardami hatâ wê sardamê Faqiyyê ūyârê Faqiyyê ūyârê ûxâr-û pênsad-û ū čwû nahê yâ hâtî dênyaye.  hâxâr-û šâşsad-û sēh-û ëkê çû bar dêlovâniyê xodê.  dê vi mâwi šiyê xwa dâya nêvisî.

(38) ūqariban mâway pênsad sâlê avâ yâ mâyî bo dastê cîrokbêz-û baytbêz-û ū hunarmandâva.  ū ū nûkâ Faqiyyê ūyârê yâ nêvisî-û yê bi aršîn-û.  hatâ nûkâ xêst û ūştâmê mîrovâ av baytâ hâ yâ nêvisîn.

(39) balê miro awâdi bo xwa ko ṭa-bêzêm.  masalan vê gâvê ... Faqiyyê ūyârê.  ṭa-bêzê:

`muhabtê ūqêc mubtalâ kûr.

sêr lâ járiyê aškûrê kûr,

“lêwêkê qalb-êm jadâ kûr.

mûn žê ʿašqûn xaw na-tê”
They (in northern Kurdistan) say he (the basket-seller) jumped down from a window. In addition, according to them (in northern Kurdistan) it was the prince’s wife [that lusted after the basket-seller]. If you read their books, it is written that it was the prince’s wife who fell in love with the basket-seller. However, in our region it is said that it was the prince’s daughter [who fell in love with the basket-seller].

We can infer that the woman in question was the prince’s daughter. Because the first person .... this event (the story of the basket-seller) happened in AD 994. From that time onward until the time of Faqi Tayran [the Kurdish poet, the first who wrote down the story of the basket-seller]—he was born in 1549. He passed away in 1631. During his lifetime he devoted himself to writing.

Approximately for a period of 500 years, the story was narrated by storytellers, minstrels, and artists. Faqi Tayran turned the tale into prose, and it was [accordingly] put into the archive. Until now, there have been some sixty people who have written down the story of the basket-seller.

But let me tell you this. Back then, Faqi Tayran said,

‘Love overtook the girl.

She disclosed her story to her maid:

“The boy broke\textsuperscript{12} my heart

I cannot sleep because of [his] love.’”

\textsuperscript{12} Lit. made apart.
(40)  hako ṭu masalan guhē xwa bǝ-di aw bǝ xwa ṭǝ-bēžǝt  kêčā miri lē āšeq bī.\(^{1}\) muhēm bas àw lǝ wē rē wa ṭ-bēžǝn.\(^{1}\) ava wak nā-
bežǝn wak kurṭiyāḵ lǝ sar ... žiyanā yā zanbilfroši-û sar gorē wi.\(^{1}\) ü\nav har du gorē yēṭ hayn lǝ Kurdistanē.\(^{1}\)
If you listen to these couplets, he (Faqi Teyran) himself says that it was the prince’s daughter who fell in love with him (the basket-seller). Anyway, they (in northern Kurdistan) tell it (the tale) like that. This was, as they say, a short account of the basket-seller’s life and the two graves [associated with him]. And there are two tombs associated with him in Kurdistan.