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ARCHAIC FEATURES IN THE IRAQI ARABIC DIALECT

In an earlier, related article, we attempted to demonstrate that in several of the Arabic dialects there exists a repository of "archaic" phraseology and lexica often omitted from the dictionaries of the classical, literary language, considered vulgar, but nonetheless traceable to varied ancient "Near-Eastern" sources.

The Quran states concerning the crime of slander¹ (Quran 49,12) *'a yu-ħibbu 'ahadukum' an y'akulu laħma 'ahihu maytan* (lit. would any one of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother). In order to gain a deeper understanding of the verse, we quote the remarks made by A. Yusuf Ali in his commentary on the Quran. "No one would like to think of such an abomination as eating the flesh of his brother. But when the brother is dead, and the flesh is carrion, abomination is added to abomination. In the same way we are to refrain from hurting people's feelings when they are present; how much worse it is when we say things, true or false, when they are absent".²

The attitude towards slander reflected in the aforementioned Quranic verse is related, at least by implication, to the phrase in Daniel 6,25, *wa'amar malka' wehaytiw gābrayyā 'illek di 'akalū qaršōhi di daniel*, "and at the king's command those men who slandered Daniel were brought . . ." We recognize that the source for both the Biblical and Quranic passages is the Assyrian phrase *ākīl karši* "denouncer, maligner", as in: *ša a-kil kar-ši qābū limutti . . . uqa'ū rēssu* "he who utters (and) spreads evil (rumours) will be called to account".³

Classical Arabic possesses several phrases meaning to slander or libel someone such as *iftarā 'la*, *ṭa'ana kaḍiban* and *qaḍafa bi*.⁴ In addition, the Western Arabic dialects (Egypt, Syria) possess the related phraseology *ṭa'an fyh*, "he libelled him" and *maṭ'un* "libelled"⁵, along with *'eqzef fi*⁶ "to

¹ See the author's related article in *JNSL XI*, "Random notes on the Hebrew-Arabic Lexicon".

² A. Yusuf Ali *The Holy Quran Text, Translation and Commentary*, 1946, 1406.

³ *CAD A* pt. 1 col. I p. 266 (ongoing). Further instances of the phrase *ākīl karšu* in a different context are: *bēlimi ana sarrūti ša i-ga-lu-ū-nim kar-ši-ia ana pan šarri bētiia la te-šemna* "my lord (I say) do not listen to the liars who denounce me in the presence of the king my Lord *EA* 161:8; and *šābu ša ultu elamti ana pan šarri ilikūni ana šabāt abbūti ša ramanisūnu kar-ši-ia ina ekalli i-tal-lu* "the contingent which came from Elam to the king have denounced me at the palace (in order) to further their own cause". *ABL* 283:8.

⁴ Ma'an Z. Madina, *Arabic-English Dictionary*, 1973 502, 399, 525.

⁵ Socrates Spiro, *An Arabic-English Dictionary of the Colloquial Arabic of Egypt*, 1980, 367.

⁶ Edward Elias, *Elias Practical Dictionary of the Colloquial Arabic of the Middle East*, n.d. 198.

slander"; what we have here, essentially, is the use of the standard literary idiom of Classical Arabic modified and adapted to a "modern" dialect.

In the spoken language of Iraq, in particular the dialect of Baghdad, we come across an interesting phrase *in-nas 'ilsaw illahamne* "The people spoke against us" (lit. chewed our flesh-*iles bi*)⁷. The standard Arabic dictionaries, Lane, Hava, etc., sub *'alasin* mention "a certain kind of wheat, having two grains in one husk . . . it is found in the region of el-Yemen . . . and is the wheat of Ṣanaá"⁸. The true meaning of the aforementioned passage in the Iraqi dialect is clarified by calling attention to the primary meaning of the verb *'ilas* "to chew", as in the phrase *'ilis il-ḥubza zēen gabul-ma tiblā'ha* "chew the bread well before you swallow it"⁹. In our opinion, the Iraqi Arabic verb *'ilas* "to chew, libel" is an instance of the metathesis of the Middle Hebrew verb *la'as* "to chew". The Mishnaic tractate *Shabbāt XI, 2* reads *'im lo' sāhaq me'ereb šabbat lo'es bešimnew wenōten* "if this had not been pounded up on the Sabbath a man may chew it with his teeth and then apply it"¹⁰. A further illuminating passage is recorded in the Mishnaic tractate *Pesāhim II, 7 lo'yil'os 'adam ḥittin weyānīah 'al mak-kātō bappessah mippeney šehen maḥmišōt* "at Passover a man may not chew grains of wheat to put on his wound, since they will ferment."¹¹ The correspondence between the Middle Hebrew verb *la'as* and the Iraqi dialect verb *'ilas* "to chew, to slander", may be further illustrated in comparison with the semantic development that the common Semitic verb *'akal* has undergone in its wide range of shades of meaning from eat, consume (as with fire), bite and libel.¹²

The Iraqi dialect of Arabic possesses an auxiliary verb *'aku* "there is, there are" as in the phrase *'aku ḥamsiin diinaar ib-jebbi* "there's fifty dinars in my pocket" or *'aku 'aḥhad bilbeet* "is there anyone at home?"¹³ In our opinion the source of the aforementioned *'aku* is to be found in the Aramaic *'iyka* "there is, there are" as in the phrase in the Babylonian Talmudic tractate *Hullin 3b 'iyka lememar* "what is there to say"¹⁴. Note also that the

⁷ R. J. McCarthy and Faraj Raffouli, *Spoken Arabic of Baghdad*, I 1964, 100.

⁸ Edward Lane, *Lane Arabic-English Lexicon*, part 5, 1968, 2130 col. 1.

⁹ D. R. Woodhead and Wayne Beene, *A Dictionary of Iraqi Arabic: Arabic-English*, 1967, 319 col. 2.

¹⁰ See standard versions of the Mishnah in Hebrew. For translation into English see *The Mishnah*, Herbert Danby, 1933 116, 138.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Note especially the following, *Kīma NINDA MEŠ a-kal tiṭṭa* (in the underworld) "I eat clay instead of food", CT 15 45:33; *bīta ki umaššir išati ta-ta-kal-šu* "after I left the house fire burned it (consumed) it" YOS 3 95:12; *km' š'klt zqn* "as fire consumed a beard" KAI/1 4, ins. 24, 6-7.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, Woodhead and Beene, 12.

¹⁴ See standard versions of the Vilna edition of the Babylonian Talmud, reprinted many times.

Iraqi Arabic dialect possesses a negative form of *'aku*, *ma-'aku* "is'nt, there is no, as in the phrase *sta'jil ma-'aku wakit* "hurry, there is no time".¹⁵ Corresponding to this development we find that the Eastern Aramaic dialect as spoken by the Jews of Babylonia, present day Iraq, also possessed a negative form of *'iyka*, *likā* < **layīka* as in the phrase found in Sanhedrin 97a *mereš hewey 'amina likā qūštā be'alma* "formerly I thought there is no truth in the world".

As for the peculiar, far reaching developments within the lexicon of Iraqi Arabic, one may observe the geographic proximity of the Arabic speaking people of Iraq today to the area inhabited by both the Eastern Aramaic speaking Jews and Christians in the centuries prior to the Islamic conquest of Mesopotamia. Perhaps with further research additional "archaisms" within the Arabic dialects of Mesopotamia will be uncovered and satisfactorily explained.

¹⁵ Op. cit. Woodhead and Beene, 12.