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‘THAT I MIGHT SPEAK AND THE EAR LISTEN TO ME!’: ON GENRES IN TRADITIONAL MODERN ARAMAIC LITERATURE

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Abstract[1]

The literary space of Modern Aramaic-speaking communities was and, to a large extent, is characterized by diglossia and, in certain cases, multilingualism. As far as Christians are concerned, before print and modern schools were introduced in Urmia and Mosul, literacy was confined to a small portion of the population and mainly found expression in the Classical Syriac language and literature. On the other hand, Jewish and Christian varieties of vernacular Aramaic were the linguistic medium for a very rich oral tradition, organized according to specific genres. A survey of the commonest literary genres of Modern Aramaic literature will be given, focusing on the better-known and documented: proverbs, songs, folktales, heroic epos, and the religious genres of the Christian *durekṯa* and the Jewish *targum*. Although in different ways, both religious genres functioned as a bridge from written to oral tradition, from classical to vernacular language.

Rudolf Macuch opened up new horizons in the knowledge of late Syriac culture and literature to western scholars. His *Geschichte* (1976) is still the most comprehensive introduction to the history of Late and Modern Syriac literature, from the Mongolian period onwards, that we have at our disposal. In reviewing his book, Sebastian Brock (1978: 136) pointed out that the author is generally well-informed about the literary production of the Assyrians of Iran, whereas he has no first-hand, up-dated information on Chaldean literature from Iraq, especially for the late nineteenth and the twentieth

centuries. In my PhD dissertation (Mengozzi 2002: 4-5), I tried to argue that another major lacuna in Macuch's book is that he seldom makes reference to Assyro-Chaldean oral literature, which was and is rarely recorded in written form, but is very rich and living. More precisely, I discussed Macuch's criticism of Iraqi Chaldean literature in the modern language, where he observes that literary texts circulated in the Mosul plain exclusively in manuscript form and the illiteracy and poor education of the Chaldeans hindered their diffusion. Furthermore, Macuch describes Chaldean literature as exclusively religious, not concerned with secular matters, being almost entirely cultivated by the clergy, and therefore unable to develop and sustain a national identity and consciousness,[2] whereas these were developed among the Assyrians of Iran, especially thanks to the stimulus of the Presbyterian mission (Macuch 1976: 91, 99, and 111).

I do not intend to describe how the consciousness of a national identity emerged and developed among Assyrians and Chaldeans, in present-day Iran and Iraq, under the influence of European Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Russian Orthodox or American reformed missionaries, since this involves a complicated net of anthropological and sociological issues which goes far beyond the scope of this paper and my competence as a philologist. It is true that the history of Modern Aramaic literatures seems to confirm Marshall McLuhan's paradigm – *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (London 1962) –, that links the introduction of the printing press with the development of linguistic standards and the emergence of nationalism (Mengozzi 2003b: 453-4). What in my opinion Macuch failed to notice is that a literature in vernacular Aramaic existed long before the establishment of competing foreign missions in the region and it was largely shared as a common inherited lore or circulated in oral form, creatively varied, among all East Syrians – and,

as we shall see, to some extent among co-territorial Jews as well –, living in the Mosul plain, on the Hakkari mountains or in Persian Azerbaijan. It produced an immense, rich repertoire of orally transmitted texts, characterized by the internal stylistic and linguistic variation typical of folk literature the world over. Specimens were written down only from the second half of the nineteenth century on, mostly at the explicit request of European, especially German, scholars.

Even before, however, certainly since the eighteenth century, the more learned varieties of oral texts, the religious poems, had been copied in manuscripts, as a marginal phenomenon in the amazingly intensive literary and scribal activities in the classical language that have flourished in northern Iraq since the sixteenth century and, as far as East Syrians are concerned, have been connected with the so-called 'School of Alqosh', with its famous authors and families of professional scribes.[3] In the manuscripts, some of the religious poems written in the vernacular are dated as late sixteenth century or attributed to the most prominent seventeenth-century authors of the School. What we now know about this specific kind of poetic production convinces me even more strongly than when I wrote my dissertation some ten years ago, that Macuch's lack of interest in oral literature prevented him from appreciating the common roots of what it has become customary to call 'Assyrian' and 'Chaldean' literatures only since the nineteenth, but especially in the twentieth century.[4]

The need to look at orality as a heuristic and explanatory category is confirmed by a broader socio-linguistic and socio-literary approach to Modern or 'Neo-' Aramaic, as dialectologists usually call the continuum of Aramaic varieties still spoken today.[5] The literary space of Modern Aramaic-speaking communities was and, to a large extent, is characterized by diglossia and, in certain cases, multilingualism. Before print and

modern schools were introduced in Urmia and Mosul, literacy was confined to a small portion of the Christian population and mainly found expression in the Classical Syriac language and literature (Murre-van den Berg 2008b and 2009). On the other hand, Jewish and Christian vernaculars were the linguistic medium for a very rich oral tradition, organized according to specific genres. In the present paper, I intend to survey and briefly exemplify the commonest literary genres of Modern Aramaic literatures, focusing on the better-known and documented proverbs, popular songs, folktales, heroic epos, and the religious genres of the Christian *durekṯa* and the Jewish *targum*. Albeit in different ways, both the religious poems and the Aramaic Bible translations served as a bridge from written to oral tradition, from classical to vernacular language.

This overview does not claim to be exhaustive. I shall refer to recent publications on the various genres, most of them containing further bibliographic references, and point out open questions and research directions that deserve to be further explored in the near future.[6]

Proverbs

Heleen Younansardaroud (2009) gives a critical overview of the state of research on Modern Assyrian proverbs. The main collections of proverbs published so far are used as well as two studies on the Modern Aramaic proverbs of the Jews of Zakho.[7] Among the Assyrian proverbs, she singles out four main classes:

1. Biblical quotations such as *ilana men ṭʿuntēh bed yadʿetlēh* 'You will recognize the tree from its fruit' (Matthew 12:33; English proverb: 'A tree is known by its fruit');
2. biblical allusions, such as *raba-yna qerye, ina xačča-yna gubye* 'many are invited, but few are chosen' based on Matthew 22:14;

3. proverbs of ancient origin, i.e. proverbs that acquired a remarkable pedigree and whose origin can be traced back to ancient Mesopotamian civilizations. Younansardaroud links e.g. the following Modern Assyrian proverbs to the Sumerian sub-genre of animal proverbs: *kalba marēh yadeʿlēh* 'the dog recognizes his master' and *ax kalba be-xraba-ylēh* 'he is angry as a dog';
4. a number of proverbs of ancient origin belong to the wider group of multilingual proverbs, i.e. proverbs that are attested with slight variation in a number of languages and cultures: e.g. *miya d-xot tevna-ylēh* 'The water which is under the straw' refers to someone sneaky, dishonest and cunning and appears to be the Modern Aramaic version of Akkadian *ša-pa-al tibnim mu-ú.* It occurs in several other languages of the region, such as Persian, Kurdish (*ava bin kaê*), Turkish (*saman altından su yürütür*), and Arabic (*miṯl ḥayya taḥt al-tibn*, lit. 'like a snake under the straw').

Precisely because they are so widespread and – in the case of animal proverbs – so close to everyday experience, it is in fact extremely difficult to reconstruct the genealogy of the proverbs of classes 3 and 4, despite the fact that they are astonishingly persistent throughout the millennia in the Near East. We shall face this problem again in dealing with other genres of Modern Aramaic literature.

Popular Songs

Much less well documented and studied than proverbs, are Modern Aramaic popular songs, with the partial exception of the genres based on rhyming triplets of seven syllable lines (*rawe* and *leliyana*), to which we shall come back in the following section. In the categories of songs a number of different genres are included, such as warrior songs (Socin 1882: 140-1), love songs, nursery rhymes and lullabies. All of them are

characterized by a variety of metrical forms answering to different musical patterns that, as far as I know, desperately need systematic recording and accurate ethno-musical study, before the last generation of competent singers disappears and the mainstream oriental pop rock completely obliterates taste and musical traditions from Bollywood to Morocco.

Lyrics of Modern Aramaic popular songs are to be found in the manuscript collections and pioneering publications of the late nineteenth century[8] and in the textual corpora accompanying many grammatical descriptions of Neo-Aramaic dialects. Yona Sabar, author of a very nice anthology of the literature of Kurdistani Jews (1982),[9] has published a number of texts in Jewish and Christian dialects (Sabar 1974, 1993 and 1996). Three simple Jewish rhymes are reproduced here below, drawn from Sabar (1974: 330): (1) a blessing before breakfast, (2) a blessing before taking a bath and (3) a lullaby evoking the dear ones of the family who went far away to make a living.

(1)	*ṣabāḥox brixe*	May your mornings be blessed
	xāyox brixe	May your life be long
	dıžmınox mkurxe dmixe	May your enemies be shrouded, dead
	ġdāyox muqılbe pixe	May your breakfasts be poured, cooled!
(2)	*ṣaḥḥat hāwēlox*	May the bath bring health to you
	šo'a bnōne hāwēlox	May you have seven sons
	zōrıd kullu māxēlox	May the smallest of them all hit you
	(zōrıd kullu nāšıq b'izox)	(May the smallest of them all kiss your hand)
(3)	*hāye hāye hāye*	Go to sleep, go to sleep, go to sleep !
	ṭalbannox šınsıt šēna urāba xāye	I wish you peaceful sleep and long life

bxudrēš ġaribnāye	Upon the life of those-far-from-home,
dilu lmawṭāne nuxrāye	those who are in strange lands.

Sabar (forthcoming) presented 'a song of flirtations' (*xa zımmorta dbāfūšīyat*), that he found in a Jewish collection of love songs, though it clearly has a Christian background (4). It gives a glimpse of the circulation of this kind of text among Jews and Christians alike, and on the impact of Kurdish on the linguistic and literary stock of Modern Aramaic speakers. The refrain, part of which is repeated at the end of each verse is in Kurdish and it is probably the title of a Kurdish song.

(4)	*hay šēni ušēni ušēni.*	Oh blooming (Flower)!
	gul šenyāmın mālāmın	[Refrain:] Blooming flower of mine!
	tırte bizāla lgılla, gul…	Two (girls) are going to the meadow, blooming flower of mine!
	xumartıd lıbba mpılla, gul…	The beat of her heart dropped (she swooned?), blooming ...
	zurtıd kullu wal šqılla, gul…	The smallest of them, all she has taken, blooming ...
	xa lēle, lēl 'irōta, gul…	One night, Friday night, blooming ...
	darga psıxlibṣabō'ta, gul …	Her door I opened with my finger, blooming ...
	nšiqāli utūta sōta, gul…	I kissed her, while her grandma was sitting nearby, blooming ...
	xızyāli š-gārıt 'ēta, gul…	I saw her on the roof of the church, blooming ...
	ṣadra xwāra mux be'ta, gul…	Her breast as white as an egg, blooming ...
	nšiqāli umırra xēta, gul…	I kissed her and she said: another one, blooming ...
	xa lēle, lēl xušāba, gul…	One night, Sunday night, blooming …
	darga psıxli bkullāba, gul…	I opened her door with a hook, blooming ...
	nšiqāli utīwa bāba, gul …	I kissed her, while her father was sitting nearby, blooming …

xızyāli qam xa zūra, gul …	I saw her before a hill, blooming ...
(k)ma gmasımqa gmaxūra, gul…	How she turns red, then turns white, blooming ...
nšiqāli utīwe xūra, gul…	I kissed her, while her friends were sitting nearby, blooming ...

The blooming flower, or rose, of the Kurdish refrain sets the sensual tone of the whole composition, in which there is a kind of climax of transgression as the young man steals kisses from a beautiful Christian girl while her relatives and friends are so close that they may discover the couple at any moment.

Rawe and Leliyana

Rhyming triplets of seven-syllable lines represent a very popular metre for songs among Modern Assyrians. According to the occasions on which they are performed they are called *rawe* – performed during evening gatherings in the villages or wedding feasts – or *leliyana* – wedding songs, mostly sung by women (Donabed 2007: 350).[10] Fabrizio Pennacchietti (1985-6: 42) attended a wedding feast celebrated in 1972 in the East-Syrian village of Bebáde, a few kilometres from ʻAmadiya, in which two choirs of singers took turns in singing *rawe* triplets in a kind of amoeboean song-contest. Each choir sang a triplet formally or thematically linked to the previous one and waited for the approving applause of the audience. The genre survives among the Ṭiyari, Txuma and Barwari communities (Benyamin 1998), but it was also known among other Assyrian tribes of the Hakkari region (Jillu and Bāz), and possibly also in the Mosul plain (Lamassu, forthcoming b).

Various collections of *rawe* have appeared since the first publications by Socin (1882) and Lidzbarski (1896). It is perhaps worth remembering the circumstances under

which Albert Socin came across these songs in 1870 at the Dominican Monastery of Mar Yaqo near Dehok. At his request the French Dominicans summoned a blind singer, almost certainly David Kora, who dictated to the German scholar a poem *On Repentance* by another famous nineteenth-century poet, Thomas Tektek Sindjari of Telkepe. The 'Chaldean Homer' knew the 111 quatrains of decasyllables by heart. Since the meeting took place in the monastery, David Kora thought the visitor was a clergyman and accordingly addressed him with the ecclesiastic title of *abuna* 'Father'. So he was surprised to hear that Socin was interested in the erotic triplets which two Chaldean boys sang for him. It was not exactly the genre one would expect a visiting prelate to be looking for.[11]

Rawe verses usually deal with love and passion and are, indeed, rather explicit from time to time (5). The rev. Emanuel Youkhana (1998) collected and published in *Zmiraṯa d-rawe* the less embarrassing verses and arranged them in alphabetical order. Daniel D. Bet Benyamin (1998) published 215 verses with ample commentary in *Zmiraṯa d-rawaṯa*[12] and a collection of *leliyana* in *Men yartuṯan* '*ammayta: Zmiraṯa d-lelyana* (2009). Furthermore, texts of *leliyana*, *rawe* and other genres are recorded in the manuscripts of the London Sachau collection and await study and publication (Mengozzi 1999: 483-4).

(5)	*Mammekkāh xware xloṣe*	Her firm, white breasts
	Gaw ṣadrāh berye troṣe	Modelled her chest perfectly
	muxervila bmammuṣe	Now she has had them ruined through suckling
	Mammekkāh xware xzayli	I saw her white breasts
	Grišli ziqāh w-muksayli	I pulled up her shirt and covered them

La nhēla li d-mgulyayli I couldn't bear to have them exposed

Recently, Nineb Lamassu dedicated a couple of papers to the study of *rawe* as an Assyrian poetic genre (2009 and forthcoming b). His article on *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* (2009) deals with the contents of *rawe* from a gender-sensitive and feminist point of view. Although they were and are sung mostly by men and for men – occasionally also by clergy-men –, we do have evidence of female singers and a feminine 'poetic I' does occur in the texts (6), clearly recognizable thanks to Neo-Aramaic morphology that distinguishes between a masculine (*-en*) and a feminine (*-an*) first-singular verbal ending. Lamassu (2009: 48) argues that 'female voices' can be read in the *rawe* as 'subversive voices against existing patriarchal social norms'.

(6) *rēxānta d-ʿeqqar nate* The basil sprig that's lodged behind his ear
aza w-ātya b-šamʿate Flapping around his auditory area
k-mā d-kāmša rēxa ate The more it dries the more fragrant it gets

Zmurri d-šamʿanne qalux Sing for me so I hear your voice
Dxurri xuš atyan l-balux Remember me, let me come to your thoughts
l-haw yawma dwanwa yarux For the sake of the old times when I was your lover[13]

Lamassu (2009) correctly presents *rawe* as a precious literary witness of the Modern Assyrian attitudes towards love and sexuality and tries to trace their 'ancient roots'. He evokes the Hebrew poetry of the *Song of Songs* – as Theodor Nöldeke did in his 1882 review of Socin's collection of *rawe*[14] – and its possible Mesopotamian origin. According to Lamassu (2009: 42), the modern genre might also be related to the love songs about which we have scanty evidence from tablets of the Neo-Assyrian period (thus, first millennium BCE). 'Hopefully, further excavations will yield similar tablets and enhance our understanding of this genre', he adds.

Folktales

Exactly like songs, stories and folktales are attested as representative of very popular genres in the early collections of texts[15] as well as in recent linguistic descriptions of Neo-Aramaic dialects. Especially the latter, recorded from the living voice of native speakers, bear witness to the fact that there is an excellent tradition of exceptionally fine narrators among Assyrians, Chaldeans and Kurdistani Jews. Topics vary from humorous to pedagogic content, from historical to fabulous settings. Modern Aramaic stories are usually studied by dialectologists from the point of view of text or discourse grammar, with a few remarks on the obvious relationship with narrative technique.[16]

Every narrator is an independent author and the texts produced display the customary variation in oral tradition. Form and content are combined in an inextricable kaleidoscope of original traits, traditional topoi – which may be of ancient origin –, culture-specific features or themes borrowed from foreign cultures and adapted.

Roving story-tellers (*rawi*) are part of traditional Kurdistani folklore. Pinehas, a Jew of Zakho fluent in Neo-Aramaic as well as in Kurdish, was popular among the Kurdish tribes of Bohtan and Hakkari and helped Albert Socin in his attempt to collect and read Kurdish texts. The tradition of Jewish story-tellers, often illiterate, and quite normally capable of performing at the request of Jews or Muslims, in two or even three languages – Kurdish, Neo-Aramaic and Arabic – has continued up to recent times (Chyet 1995). The same might be true of Christian professional story-tellers, but I have not found information on this subject in the literature. We know that Chaldean poets were able to compose and perform in both Aramaic and Kurdish (Mengozzi 2002: 85), but I do not know to what extent their art was appreciated by Kurdish Muslims.

Similarly, I have found no notice of Kurds who performed as story-tellers and singers in the Christian villages. Multilingualism, which has characterized the region since time immemorial as the linguistic manifestation of a melting pot of cultures and civilizations, suggests a rather complicated picture of intertwined traditions, multilingual transmissions and mutual influences.

Heroic Epos

Scholarly interest in Modern Assyrian epic has only developed in relatively recent times, especially among Assyrians of the North-American diaspora. In 1961, the celebrated Assyrian poet and musician William Daniel published in three volumes more than 6000 lines of an epic poem (*humasa* in Modern Assyrian, from Arabic *ḥamāsa*)[17] on the national hero Qaṯina Gabbara. William Daniel collected and inserted in this single poem a chain of folktales and songs that were and are very popular among the East-Syrians living in the Hakkari mountains, especially among the Ṭiyari and Txuma tribes, but were also known among the Christians of the Mosul plain.

In Daniel's poem, a description of the hero is given in a song that announces his arrival at the castle of his uncle Tuma (7):

(7)

xa xzemon l'atoraya,	– Behold the Assyrian,
men ṭurane beṣlaya.	Coming down from the highland
kul xa refše xa draʿa,	He is tall his shoulders broad
arʿa xuṯe beṯbaʿa.	The earth sinks beneath his stride
qaṯina qāṯeʿ ṭura,	Qaṯine the mountain-leaper
ṣadre šuša dʿāwina,	His chest is strong as stone
sate le xamra blʿina,	He drinks wine by the barrel

it xa bgawa dʿašina,	Is there one among the brave
dpaleš ʿamma dqaṭina?	Who will fight with Qaṭine?
qaṭina qāṭeʿ ṭura.	Qaṭine the mountain-leaper. –
en iṯ gavra zarbana,	If there is a mighty man
dʾaseq lṭura ṣawana,	Who can ascend the frightful peak
maxe lzarʿa dsaṭana,	Defeat the devilish creature
aha-yle haw maṣyana,	This is the only one,
qaṭina qāṭeʿ ṭura.	Qaṭine the mountain-leaper.
whaw qaṭina beʿvara,	As Qaṭine enters
wʿalma qawwuxe.	The crowd gasps
wqam dhaw qawma gabbara,	Before his mighty body
tarʹe gambuxe.	The doors collapse.
bšlama ʿavren yan bplaša	[Qaṭine:] – Should I come to fight or in peace,
ya xali tʾoma?	My uncle Tuma?
baʹen dpārqax lduraša,	I want this quarrel to cease
har edyum yawma.	On this very day. –
bšayna telux xwārzayi,	[Malik Tuma:] – Welcome my nephew
bšayna wbašlama,	In peace and tranquility
bṭavta haw babi dayi	Come forward
ta lux laqama.	With blessing my beloved. –

Qaṭeʿ ṭura ‘The mountain-leaper’ (lit. ‘the mountain cutter’) is the alliterating formulaic epithet that introduces Qaṭina at the beginning of a children’s song (8), part of the folklore of the Mosul plain, in the villages of Aloqsh, Telkepe, Barṭella, Qaraqosh, Karamlesh, etc.

(8)	*qaṭina qaṭeʿ ṭura*	Qaṭine the mountain-leaper
	petwane yurxa dxure	His width the length of poplar
	qaṭina qaṭeʿ guma	Qaṭine the stables crasher
	bexdara blayla wbyawma	Day and night he is on the move
	ayma-yle gavra dgavre	He is the greatest of the great
	dšawer le gare gare	Leaping from roof to roof
	fayet men feṭḥa lfeṭḥa	Strides from one plain to the next
	šate le demma wqadxa	And drinks the blood and the vine
	aseq lkarma dleli̲ta	Goes up to Lilith's vineyard
	leli̲ta mazdʿani̲ta	The most frightful Lilith
	ʿaved baqa drexane	Picks an armful of the scented plant
	dare b'i̲da dpatyane	Holding it in his large hands
	ʿayne guhre patexlay	Its smell restores sight to the blind eye
	mi̲te dqavra mnaxemlay	Resurrects from grave those who died[18]

Danabed (2007) clearly distinguishes the literarily elaborate poem by William Daniel as a 'secondary' epic with respect to his sources and the models that inspired him − a collection of oral folktales sung by anonymous bards in the Christian villages of northern Iraq, that represents the 'primary' or 'original' epics by Modern Assyrians.[19] He demonstrates that Qaṭina Gabbara perfectly satisfies the requirements of a hero, as defined by contemporary studies on oral tradition and epic poetry. He is a 'super-hero' who stakes his life on the protection of his people from three different waves of invading forces and is therefore engaged in the following struggles: the ethical conflict with Awanis the Armenian; the battle against Qorezmanko, the Muslim invader who conquered Assyrian land and possessions; resistance against the religious invasion, i.e. 'Islam's entrance into a Christian world'. To these three narrative and thematic threads, variously dispersed in the oral folktales, Daniel added in his written version more

contemporary concerns, such as political Assyrianism, explicit reference to the biblical messianic promise of redemption, and a number of individual attributes of the hero, such as his sense of responsibility, readiness to sacrifice himself, struggle for union, etc. 'These ideals are entirely connected to the oral versions and are mere extensions of the basic fundamental ideas in the folk epic' (Donabed 2007: 346-8).

Daniel's work illustrates admirably the vitality of the epic genre as a storehouse of Assyrian traditional culture and language and its versatility in absorbing contemporary themes such as nationalism and the people's hope for unity and national renaissance. For Assyrian scholars it is natural to link the heroic deeds of the modern Qaṭina with the ancient Sumero-Akkadian epic of Gilgamesh.[20] The mention of the Lilith demon is possibly a borrowing from ancient Mesopotamian literatures, perhaps via the Bible (Isaiah 34:14) and traditional stories on Qaṭina are connected with local aetiological legends, associated with local customs or certain place-names, like Qaṭina's Ring in northern Iraq.

Donabed (2007: 349) inserts Modern Assyrian poetry in 'the evolutionary scheme beginning with Sumerian and Akkadian literature and poetry'. I am not sure that 'evolutionary scheme' is an appropriate term to describe the history of Mesopotamian literatures. The term 'evolution' is particularly problematic. But it is not only a question of terminology. Donabed's historical sketch (ancient Sumero-Akkadian epic, Ephrem's Classical Syriac poetry, modern oral tradition) is in fact rather rigid and schematic and the links between the various phases are far from being self-evident. In particular, as far as I know, we do not have direct nor indirect evidence of the existence of an epic tradition in Classical Syriac literature.[21]

Oral traditions can be rather conservative and effective in preserving very old forms and content, but they usually transform the inherited lore, which becomes barely recognizable in the various processes of adaptation, innovation, creative reworking, and contamination with other oral and written traditions. Moreover, 'all cultures inherently share the major aspects of the *mythos* that governs the ideas behind such [epic] tales' (Donabed 2007: 343). After all, Qaṭina Gabbara does not need to have very old ancestors to be appreciated as a hero who embodies both the universal attributes of heroism and the specific virtues of the Christian Assyrian culture, even in its more recent nationalistic version.

Other directions could be further explored in dealing with Assyrian epos. It should be compared with neighbouring epic traditions, such as the Armenian folktales mentioned by Hozaya (1996) and Donabed (2007), the Jewish folktales on supernatural beings such as *Sarkərinke* 'the head-eater' and the cyclopean ogre *Ḥambašaya*, interestingly killed by a *tyaraya*, a Christian from Ṭiyari (Mutzafi 2008: 270-7), and definitely also with Kurdish epics or epic-related poetry.[22] More oral performances should be recorded, preferably in audio-visual form, than the few examples transcribed by Hozaya (1996) or in the anthology of oral texts in the Neo-Aramaic dialect of Barwar (Khan 2008: 1867-79). Performance techniques of folk bards, if they are still to be found among elderly Assyrians, should be carefully studied: memorization, improvisation, creative variation, use of formulae and topoi, metres, music, gesture, interaction with the audience, etc.

Durekyaṯa

The literary genres surveyed so far – proverbs, popular songs, folktales and epics – all have their roots in what students of medieval Europe call 'mixed' orality, i.e. the oral traditions and literary production of a community in which script and writing exist, but have either a marginal or no literary function. Although in recent times some of the oral genres eventually acquired a stabilized and rather sophisticated written form, as in the case of William Daniel's poetry, they consist of texts traditionally composed, preserved and transmitted in oral form, by a singing or reciting voice. On the other hand, the last two genres that I intend to present here, the Christian *durekṯa* and the Jewish *targum*, reflect a situation between 'mixed' and 'secondary' orality, which is typical of societies in which oral literature exists, but almost any cultural expression is dominated and marked by the presence of script.[23] More precisely, *durekyaṯa* and targums are conceived by their authors and more or less explicitly presented as bridge-genres from written to oral tradition.

A *durekṯa*[24] is a stanzaic poem, with verses of two to six rhyming lines and lines of six to twelve syllables. A poem usually numbers more than one hundred verses. The longest I know of is the *durekṯa On Divine Economy* by Joseph of Telkepe, that has more than seven hundred quatrains.

In the opening verses of his *durekṯa On Shmuni and her Seven Sons*, the seventeenth-century poet Israel of Alqosh, the founder or in any case a prominent figure of the so-called 'School of Alqosh', stages himself as the narrator of the biblical story of the Maccabean martyrs before an audience of Syrians (9): 'That I may speak and the ear listen to me!'. The process of vocal, oral/aural transmission could not have been expressed more graphically.

(9) *bašma daṯliṯayuṯa* In the name of the Trinity,
kwān qanena mliluṯa oh that I had eloquence
wqāyṯa bi ʿašoquṯa and passion might strike me!

ʿašoquṯa bi qāyṯā Oh that passion might strike me
en bbarraye w'en bbayṯa both without and within
dqāwlen wnhaṯa li ṣayṯa that I may speak and the ear listen to me!

ṣuṯun galleg suraye Listen, oh Syrians,
lqāwla dqaša esraye to the story of the priest Israel
mira bsāhde maqvaye which he told of the Maccabean martyrs.
(Mengozzi 2002: 163)

The tripartite structure of early *durekyaṯa* reproduces the structure of a manuscript. The prologue is the rubric that announces title and content of the poem and the epilogue is a stylized colophon, in which the author, and sometimes the scribe, asks for prayers for himself or prays for the community, signs his work, and indicates the date and occasion of the poem. Precisely as in the colophons, they may also refer to the historical context in which they live, often complaining of Muslim oppression. The work of Joseph of Telkepe, in particular – probably the most prolific and important Modern Aramaic poet of the seventeenth century – can be described as a grandiose project of poetic rewriting of the Scriptures, an attempt to give voice to and sing the written words of the Bible, sometimes integrated with apocryphal narratives (Mengozzi 2010: IX).

Since the first dated poem (1590), the genre of the *durekyaṯa* has continued to be cultivated by East Syrians throughout the centuries until the present day, covering a range of topics that more or less overlaps with that of the late classical genre of the

ʿ*oniṯa*: penitential hymns, rewriting and paraenetic commentary of biblical and apocryphal texts, praise of saints and martyrs, and commemoration of dramatic historical events such as wars, famines, droughts and epidemics – hence the French translation of the term *durekṯa* as *complainte* 'lament'.[25]

Two special kinds of *durekyaṯa* – the 'lament' ('*oniṯa* with historical content) and the dialogue poem (*sugiṯa*) – ensure a continuation in the modern tongue of Classical Syriac genres whose origins may be traced back to pre-Christian Mesopotamia. The Modern Aramaic poems on catastrophic events imitate the late East-Syriac hymns attributed to Giwargis Warda and deal with warfare and natural disasters (flooding, drought, epidemics) which are dramatically recurrent in the region (Mengozzi 2010: XVII-XIX, forthcoming). Lamentation on historical events has indeed characterized Mesopotamian literatures and liturgies, since the very beginnings, as attested by Sumerian and Akkadian laments over the destruction of cities or the dying god in the cults of fertility (Krecher 1983). The dialogue poems in Modern Aramaic are often poetic adaptations or translations of East-Syriac *sugiyaṯa*, late witnesses of a genre well-established in the Classical Syriac tradition that may be at least ideally connected with the Mesopotamian disputes of the two millennia BCE.[26] Rather than with a continuous textual transmission, we are dealing here with genres that formally and thematically vary throughout the millennia, but share basic formal and thematic components capable of finding favour with various, though similar, audiences, and function as textual support for public rites of lamentation and/or commemoration. Rather than the texts themselves, it is their social, liturgical function and their literary appeal that are almost uninterruptedly attested in Mesopotamia.

Like late East-Syriac *ʿoniyaṯa*, which are preserved in dedicated manuscript collections – the most famous ones being the Book of Warda and the Book of Khamis bar Qardaḥe – and unlike the oral compositions that we have surveyed so far, *durekyaṯa* are not anonymous and are usually dated and attributed to specific authors in the manuscripts. These earliest authors seem to be learned pastors who discovered the potential of the vernacular language and of the aesthetic of oral poetry for providing a bridge from their scriptoria and libraries to the everyday speech and the taste of the community (Mengozzi 2002: 102).

In the nineteenth century the clever, attentive missionary Father Jacques Rhéthoré realized that the traditional oral poetry of the *durekyaṯa* could become an effective pastoral tool and promoted the production of new texts, combining traditional moods with Roman Catholic content. He himself wrote *durekyaṯa*, a grammar of Sureth and a handbook of Sureth poetry, protected poets such as David Kora and Thomas Tektek Sindjari, and appreciated the translation of Jesuit baroque literature into Modern Aramaic verses by the learned monk Damyanos of Alqosh. His *La versification en Soureth* – which will soon be published by Bruno Poizat (Rhéthoré 1913-) – is extremely interesting as a source of first-hand information on the authors and as an example of the missionary attitude towards East Syrians and Eastern Christianity in general.

The French Dominican's criticism of Modern Aramaic traditional poetry contains the typical western prejudices: it is the expression of uneducated people, who rarely master higher registers of the language, too often indulge in poetic license, are pathologically prolix and inclined to despise themselves; it is sometimes vitiated by bad taste.[27] The poets receive different treatment according to their Catholic sympathies or

well-tried faith: a poet like Damyanos is literally exalted, while only a few lines are dedicated to the 'Nestorian' authors. The poetess Anne of Telkepe is described as a poor illiterate woman, with a passable religious instruction, probably only because she did not speak of Mary as 'mother of God', but as 'daughter of priests', echoing the apocryphal stories on the Blessed Virgin Mary (Mengozzi 2010: XXI-II, 79).

We know the performance arena of the *durekyaṯa* from late indirect witnesses, dating from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They suggest spontaneous gatherings on the roofs of the villages or under the lodge of a cucumber garden, after the labours of harvest (Mengozzi 2002: 87-89).

We are told by Protestant missionaries that singers and musicians were the most dissolute and lascivious among the Assyrians:

> There is no class of persons, among the Nestorians, more depraved and dissolute than professional musicians. They are called upon to take parts at weddings, and on festival occasions, among their own people, where drunkenness, revelry, and every form of iniquity, are practiced. Their services are also in demand among the Mussulmâns, on similar occasions, and in assemblies of the loose and dissipated. Here, dancing boys, whose manners are indecent, are made to perform, and musicians are called upon to sing obscene songs. Nestorian musicians are thus trained in the very school of Satan himself (Wright 1857: 77, quoted in Lamassu 2009: 11).

The 'obscene songs' mentioned in the text probably belonged to the *rawe* genre, but we know that *durekyaṯa* too were performed during wedding feasts. The Reverend Justin Perkins, Presbyterian missionary, was literally scandalized by the performance of what most probably was a *durekṯa* on the life of Jesus in a profane degraded context:

> I attended a wedding, Jan. 9, at the house of Mar Gabriel, at Ardisháí. During the noise and confusion of eating and drinking, a minstrel sat playing on a rude violin and singing sacred songs, composed on the most solemn and impressive subjects revealed in the Scriptures, as the coming of Christ, the judgment and the rich man in torment. The giddy company appeared to have no idea,

> that there was any incongruity between the subjects of these songs and the convivial scenes, in which they were so eagerly and thoughtlessly engaged. And this is not strange, considering their lack of religious instruction (Perkins 1843: 330).

This practice, abhorred and stigmatized by the American missionary, is probably confirmed by the last verse of the *durekṯa* on the Maccabean martyrs (10) whose first verses have been quoted above (9):

(10)	*bšatta d'aṣkab lyāwnaye*	In the year 1922 of the Greeks
	wedle bāh durek wmnaye	he made this poem and the verses
	wymere bāh ṭa wasṭaye	and he recited it to the foremen
	imān dwaywa rawaye	when they were drunk.

I suspected that it was a corrupted text (Mengozzi 2002: 113), but in the light of Perkins' account it might be read as a realistic notation by the poet or a scribe.

Targum

One of the stylistic devices that reveals the learned and to some extent pedagogical character of the *durekyaṯa* is the frequent use of multilingual hendiadys. Authors exploit the vast and diverse linguistic competences of their audience and often uses pairs, sometimes triplets, of synonyms derived from different languages: e.g. *bašrara bḥaqq* 'really', *dina w-šarʿ* 'law', *gunahkar w-ḥaṭṭaya* 'sinner', *kahne w-qaše* 'priests', *xabre w-tanyaṯa* 'words', *māl w-qenyana* 'property', *safel dawya* 'miserable' (Mengozzi 2002: 100-101). This kind of lexical virtuosism has also been observed in the Jewish homiletic literature written in Neo-Aramaic (Sabar 2002: 55-6) and can be seen as a stylistic reflex of the rich sociolinguistic profiles of Aramaic-speaking communities, who experience internal diglossia and live immersed in a multilingual milieu.

Jewish Neo-Aramaic literature emerged in northern Iraq in the same period to which the earliest *durekyaṯa* are attributed, i.e. around the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries. Moreover, the two literary traditions share at first content – paraenetic religious discourses –, oral features and the social status of the authors, who were rather poor, but learned rabbis and priests concerned with the pastoral care of their flocks (Sabar 2005).

Jewish Neo-Aramaic oral traditions have been more extensively documented and studied than Christian ones. Especially after the emigration to Israel of Kurdistani Jews, Israeli scholars have asked Neo-Aramaic speakers to record and write in manuscript folk texts of various genres. The traditional genre of biblical translation (*targum*) is particularly well documented and has been the object of text edition and research.

In one of his recent publications, Yona Sabar (2006) collects 'almost all available manuscripts and recordings' of NA targums to the *K^{e}ṯuvim*, including the works by translators from Amedia, Dihok, Urmia, Zakho, and Nerwa.[28] Sabar's remarks on translation technique are a precious contribution to biblical and targumic studies. In his words:

> The Jewish Neo-Aramaic translations of the Five Scrolls are usually literal translations of the Masoretic Text [...] When the Hebrew text presented unusual difficulties, the translators would resort directly or indirectly to traditional commentaries and the old Targums, according to the degree of the learning of the translator. This may be compared to the way Christian translations derived help from the Septuagint or the Vulgate (Sabar 2008: 194).

In 2008 Margo Rees published a monograph on the Jewish Neo-Aramaic targum transmitted by the *metargem* Sason Barzani from Rewanduz. It is not only a study on translation technique, but also on the social functioning of this kind of text, which is orally transmitted and eventually committed to writing for the sake of preservation.

They are composed in a language rather different from the colloquial, in that it combines features of various dialects, occasionally recurs to an archaic literary register,[29] and is strongly influenced by the source language, i.e. Biblical Hebrew. Oral targums are pedagogical tools used to teach the biblical text and its original language to school-boys. They prototypically represent an oral genre that tries to bridge the gap between every-day spoken language and the sacred text, sometimes via transitional and traditional languages: archaic forms of Neo-Aramaic and the old classical targums.

Translations of the Peshiṭta, which remains their authoritative Bible, into the various Aramaic vernaculars are a rather common practice among Christians as well. As for the Jews, the history of Christian Bible translations antedates the introduction of the printing press. Experimental partial translations are attested at least since the eighteenth century in northern Iraq around the School of Alqosh (Murre-van den Berg 2006 and 2008a), but translations and editorial activities received a tremendous impulse from the Protestant missions in Iran and significantly contributed to the creation of a standard literary language (Murre-van den Berg 1998 and 1999). Similarly, in the American Mission in Mardin (Ṭur ʿAbdin, south-eastern Turkey), a young deacon named Isaiah translated the Gospel of St. John in Ṭuroyo, the local Neo-Aramaic language of Orthodox Syrians (1877; Heinrichs 1990).[30]

Among West and East Syrians alike, it is not uncommon for ministering priests to provide an oral translation into Modern Aramaic of the Scriptures, especially the Gospels, when they read them in the church with a Peshiṭta text before them. The 'targums' thus produced are not however recorded in written form.[31] This practice appears to be rather common among Neo-Aramaic speaking Christians even in the diaspora, and should be accurately described, documented and investigated.

Conclusions

As stated at the beginning, this overview of genres in Modern Aramaic oral literature does not claim to be exhaustive. However, I hope that it will suffice to illustrate the following concluding remarks.

Despite what Macuch maintained, the literary space of both Assyrians and Iraqi Chaldeans is much broader than appears in their written literature, and encompasses themes which go beyond the traditional religious inspiration of Classical Syriac literature. Written records of Assyro-Chaldean oral traditions are rather few and the development of a written literary tradition and of written literary genres – such as narrative, historiography, journalism, essay-writing – in the vernacular is a late phenomenon, following the introduction of the printing press in nineteenth-century Urmia and Mosul.

We owe the little we know of Assyro-Chaldean oral traditions to the cooperation of western orientalists and Assyrian scholars. European scholars and western missionaries have engaged since the nineteenth century in the study of Neo-Aramaic first with the methodological instruments of Semitic philology and then modern dialectology, with all their advantages and limitations. We may mention Albert Socin, Theodor Nöldeke, Mark Lidzbarski, Eduard Sachau, David Stoddard, Arthur Maclean, among the pioneers, and, among contemporary figures, Bruno Poizat, Fabrizio Pennacchietti, Geoffrey Khan, Otto Jastrow and their numerous followers or pupils; whereas the literary study of oral traditions and their cultural functions is cultivated especially among Assyrians of the diaspora such as Yunan Hozaya and Daniel d-Bet Benyamin. There are also young Assyrian scholars who represent the surest hope for the

preservation and enhancement of the Assyro-Chaldean heritage. A number of their contributions to the field have been profitably used in preparing this overview of oral genres.

The recording and description of oral traditions, texts, music and performance techniques is a most urgent task, since many of them are probably bound to disappear in the next few generations. Linguists have realized this urgency as far as dialects are concerned. They may be wrong in combining 'odd' terms such as 'Neo-'and 'Aramaic', as claimed by Donabed (2007: 349), but it is certainly thanks to their zeal that Modern Aramaic is one of the best known sub-groups of Semitic languages and, more generally, dialectal clusters – e.g. in comparison with the situation of Arabic and, outside Semitics, Kurdish dialectology (Jastrow 2002).

Oral traditions should be studied according to their specific characteristics and functions, avoiding modern prejudices concerning orality and popular culture. In this connection I cannot but subscribe to Donabed's conclusions:

> It is regrettable that the oral traditions of the Assyrians, such as the song genres *rāwē*, *lilyānā*, *dorekta* (or *dorekyāta*) and the heroic epic genre, *hūmasa*, are lacunas in scholarly studies of Middle Eastern literature. Much more extensive research must be undertaken. … It is my hope, therefore, that the balance may be redressed by future research to shed further light on the epic poetry of the Assyrian oral tradition, involving both the comparative study of other bardic traditions and the detailed analysis of the processes of oral transmission of history, philosophy, music and other forms of cultural expression (Donabed 2007: 352-3).

Besides the search for ancient Mesopotamian roots of Assyro-Chaldean oral traditions and their relationship with Classical Syriac literature, scholarly investigations should indeed address 'other bardic traditions', starting with co-territorial cultures such as Jewish Aramaic, Muslim or Yazidi Kurdish, Arabic, dialectal Turkish, etc.

Proverbs, *durekyaṯa* and Bible translations are oral genres that clearly elaborate themes and textual material from the Holy Scriptures and may be regarded as bridge genres between written literature and the oral transmission of texts. Written literature and oral tradition nourish and strengthen each other constantly in societies characterized by 'mixed' or 'secondary' orality, as used to be and is the case for many Aramaic-speaking communities. A literary analysis and a history of literature that exclude one of the two types of cultural expression will necessarily result in a partial and incomplete picture of the Modern Aramaic literary space.

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NOTES

[1] A previous version of this text was presented as a guest lecture at the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations of the University of Toronto (11th November 2010). I wish to express my gratitude to prof. Amir Harrak for inviting me and for the warm reception and stimulating feed-back of the audience.

[2] It is Macuch's euro-centric prejudice that a literary tradition should be judged according to its ability to support or stimulate national feelings or overt nationalism, and some kind of Protestant bias might have influenced his arguments.

[3] On various definitions of the 'School of Alqosh', see Murre-van den Berg (1998).

[4] For the use of the term 'Assyrian' and 'Chaldean' for modern East Syrians and other Eastern Christians, see Heinrichs (1993) and Mengozzi (2003a: 45-53).

[5] Khan (2007) and Kim (2008) give further bibliographical references.

[6] The presentation will focus on (North-)Eastern varieties of Modern Aramaic, with a few remarks on Ṭuroyo. For the state of the art in research on Modern Mandaic, see Häberl (2009: 13-39). Texts are transliterated according to the sources from which they are drawn: I reproduce faithfully the original transliteration, when it is available in the quoted source, whereas I use a phonologically oriented system, widely employed in publications on Neo-Aramaic, when the sources are in Syriac script. Macrons on long vowels are generally omitted, with the assumption that vowels are long in open and short in closed syllables. When this general rule of syllabic structure is contradicted by the Syriac-based orthography or in the expected pronunciation, long vowels are marked as *ā* and *ē*. Consonants are preserved in transliteration as in the Syriac-based historical spelling: e.g. <*ev*> for [u], silent <'>, final <*h*> in 3rd singular suffix pronouns, etc. As is common in Neo-Aramaic linguistics, the unvoiced velar fricative (Arabic *ḫ*) is transliterated *x*.

[7] Segal (1955) and Sabar (1978). At the 10th Symposium of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies (Toronto, 13th November 2010), Shawqi Talia presented a paper on Neo-Aramaic proverbs from the plain of Mosul and northern Iraq, quoting both Christian and Jewish sources, and announced the publication of a rich collection thereof. Among other considerations on the social function of this genre as

a discourse-constructing device, he pointed out the old and pervasive character of the root **mṯl*, attested in all branches of the Semitic family and often yielding the technical term for 'proverbial saying' in the various languages.

[8] Publications by Guidi, Lidzbarski, Sachau, Socin and Vandenhoff (see Mengozzi 1999 for precise references).

[9] To the best of my knowledge there is no up-dated equivalent for the literature of Assyrians and Chaldeans of the same region, Lidzbarski (1896) being the most comprehensive edition of Christian texts.

[10] Contra Lamassu (2009: 41 and others quoted there), who links the term *rawe* with the Arabic verbal root **rwy* meaning 'to drink one's fill, quench one's thirst', thus referring to the symposial context of their performance, I think the etymology proposed by Pennacchietti (1985-6: 43-4) is still more tenable; according to him *banda* (Kurdish *band*?) *d-rawe* (Arabic *rāwī* 'the last letter in which all the verses of a poem terminate') originally indicates 'a monorhyme verse'. A popular etymological interpretation has been proposed for *leliyana* as possibly meaning 'it is not I (fem.)' (Donabed 2007: 350). The term is probably connected with Kurdish *leylan* 'tune, melody, song', compound verb *lêlandin* or *lîlandin* 'to sing, shout' (Chyet 2003: 351).

[11] Socin (1882: VIII-IX). On this episode, see also Pennacchietti (1985-6: 41), Mengozzi (2002: 85-86) and Donabed (2007: 350). On David Kora and Thomas Tektek Sindjari, see Mengozzi (2010: XIV-V).

[12] In the same year a collection of *rawe* was published in Iraq (Ashitha and Qasrayta 1998). Khan (2008: 2110-57) collects *lelyane*, *rawe* (including those published by Pennacchietti, 1985-6), dirges, lullabies, churn songs, dance tunes and other songs, in the Barwari dialect.

[13] Texts (5) and (6) are drawn from Lamassu (2009: 44-5; translation slightly revised).

[14] Nöldeke (1882: 679-80).

[15] E.g. the eleven stories published by Sachau (1895: 66-77) and Lidzbarski (1896), who published stories of various lengths and subjects, in a number of different dialects.

[16] E.g. Khan (2009). Coghill (2009) is a wonderful edition and study of the children's story of the sparrow with a thorn in its foot in four versions: dialects of Alqosh, Telkepe, Hamziye and Tazakand.

[17] Origin and meaning of the Arabic term are explained in the entry *ḥamasa* of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Pellat 1986): *ḥamasa* 'bravery, valour' originally designated part or the whole of thematic anthologies of Arabic poetry, structured according to the prestigious model of Abū Tammām (ninth cent. CE); it was then used for epics and finally replaced in this meaning by the current term *malḥama*. Generally speaking, the epic is a relatively late genre in Arabic literature, where epic contents are found especially in post-classical narratives, mainly in prose: *siyar* (sg. *sīra*), *ḥikāyāt*, etc. On the variegated picture of Arabic epics see the miscellaneous Canova (2003) and, on extensive fieldwork among bards and story-tellers, especially in Upper Egypt, Canova (2010). Epic poetry and prose are well known in other Islamic literatures, overviewed in *EI* by H. Massé (the old, influential Persian tradition), I. Mélikoff (Turkish), A.T. Hatto (Central Asia), and A. Ahmad (Urdu; vol. 3, 112-9).

[18] Texts (7) and (8) are drawn from Warda and Odisho (2000: 14 and 20; my transliteration, their translation, slightly revised).

[19] Sargon Danabed builds on earlier studies published in *JAAS* by Younan Hozaya (1996) in Modern Assyrian and by Warda and Odisho (2000) in English, in a very interesting paper which appeared in the international journal *Folklore* (2007). On the literary level, the distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' epics may reflect the distinction between cultures characterized by 'primary' or 'mixed' on the one hand and 'secondary' orality on the other (Zumthor 1985: 834 and 1987: 18-9). Similarly, Foley (1990: 5) distinguishes between 'unambiguously oral texts' and 'oral-derived texts'. We shall come back shortly to the distinction between 'primary, mixed' and 'secondary' orality, arguing for a third type of texts, i.e. 'oral-oriented texts': derived from the written tradition but intended for oral transmission (e.g. Modern Aramaic *durekyaṯa* and targums).

[20] E.g. the title of Lamassu's paper (forthcoming a).

[21] This is not surprising in a Christian culture, in which the cosmogony and the general framework of universal history are defined by biblical and para-biblical accounts and chivalric romance is virtually absent. Baumstark (1922: 40, 323) suggested one might see a germinal form of Syriac epos in the late East-Syriac hymns (*'oniyaṯa*) with historical content (see the section on *durekyaṯā*). These late hymns (on the history of a monastery, the laying waste of Jerusalem, the siege of Tiflis, the attack of the Mongols at

Karamlesh, etc.) may indeed be regarded as 'epic' in their attempt to insert events in the broader Bible-derived context, to honour Christian victims, praise their heroes and scorn their Muslim enemies (Mengozzi forthcoming).

[22] A bibliography on Kurdish oral and written literature can be found in Meho and Maglaughlin (2001: 197-214). On Yazidi oral traditions, see Kreyenbroek (1995) and Allison (2001), with a methodological discussion on the concept of orality as applied to Kurmanji Kurdish literary space and a survey of studies on Kurmanji oral tradition (ibi, 7-16). On Armenian epics, see Gulbekian (1984) and, on the relationship of Armenian with Kurdish epics and the connection of the latter with the old and prestigious Persian tradition, see Haroutyunian (1997).

[23] Above, n. 19.

[24] In the manuscripts *durekṯa* is used as an equivalent of the Classical Syriac *mêmra* 'metrical homily', *sugiṯa* 'dialogue poem' or '*oniṯa* '(late East-Syriac) hymn'. The term *durekṯa* or *durek* (pl. *durekyaṯa*) probably derives from the Semitic root **drk* 'to tread, step on' and seems to be related to the Mesopotamian Aramaic word '*drkt*' 'song, hymn', attested in Theodore bar Koni's *Book of Scholia* (Kruisheer 1995: 162). The spelling *dureg* (from Classical Syriac **drg* 'to step forward') is common in Urmi literary Aramaic (Assyrian). Less convincing Kurdish etymologies have also been proposed: *du-* 'two' *rêk* 'in good order > 'couplet'?; Arabic **dwr* 'be circular' + Kurdish *-ek* (the equivalent *durek* in the Jewish Neo-Aramaic of Dehok means 'round bread, khallah') > 'cyclic poem'? (Mengozzi 2002: 67-9).

[25] E.g. Rhéthoré (1913-). Poems of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries deal with more secular topics such as the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-8 (Mengozzi 2010: XVIII-XIX), the Russian-Turkish battle of Urmia in 1914 or the praise of a soccer player (manuscripts presented by Emmanuel Joseph Mar-Emmanuel at the 10th Symposium of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies: Toronto, 13th November 2010). Talia (2009: 180) suggests the *durekyaṯa* with narrative content should more properly be defined as *qeṣṣetyaṯa* (lit. 'stories', from Arabic *qiṣṣa*).

[26] See the miscellaneous Reinink and Vanstinphout (1991) and, more recently and specifically on the Syriac tradition, Brock (2001). On Modern Aramaic original dialogue poems or *durekya̲ta* that translate classical *sugiya̲ta*, see Mengozzi (1999: 481-2 and 2010: XIX-XX).

[27] Critical remarks on the illiteracy of the East Syrians and the prolixity of their poetic style characterizes the western reception of Modern Aramaic literature since Nöldeke's time and bear witness to western difficulties and bias in dealing with traditional societies and oral cultures and understanding the function and aesthetics of oral genres (Mengozzi 1999: 460-1).

[28] Sabar had previously published Neo-Aramaic targums of the Pentateuch and other biblical books. See Sabar (2000 and 2002) for bibliographical information.

[29] See also the morphological and lexical peculiarities of the language of the Jewish community of Betanure used for oral translations of the Bible (Mutzafi 2008: 8-9).

[30] A Ṭuroyo translation of the Gospel of St. John by Isaiah of Qillith can also be found in the ms. Or. 9327 of the British Museum (1889-90, in *serṭo* script and Roman transliteration; Mengozzi 1999: 485). Various methods of writing and teaching Ṭuroyo have been adopted in Sweden since the 1970s (Ishaq 1990). More generally, Ṭuroyo has been used in the diaspora, again since the 1970s, to translate religious texts form Classical Syriac and, rarely, to write original works (Talay 2008). Orthodox Syrians from Ṭur ʿAbdin, however, generally prefer Classical Syriac (*kṯovonoyo*) as their *Kultursprache* (Brock 1978: 130; Talay 2008).

[31] Geoffrey Khan managed to obtain recordings of such oral Gospel translations and published a selection of them (2002: 698-707).