

## **Perpetuated in Tradition: The Role of Wheat Products in the Narratives of the Contemporary Assyrians**

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Besides rich and vivid gesticulation, in their conversations the peoples of the Middle East tend to use also a wealth of metaphors, aphorisms and proverbs. They frequently refer to the words of the elders and long dead men of authority, and quote passages from the holy books. Sadly, this form of the traditional culture is gradually falling into oblivion. A slow process of cultural atrophy starts when a person permanently moves to a different environment.

The material presented in this work has been collected in recent years during the author's meetings with his compatriots. The research was carried out among the emigrants from Syria and Turkey, including the author's relatives, currently permanent residents of Western Europe. Some of the expressions are cited after publications, which tackle the issue of the Assyrian folklore in a rather perfunctory manner. These publications are usually issued in small editions of a few hundred copies.

Processing the material collected, the author attempted to record the Assyrian or Arabic words in transcription. Where it was possible, the literal meaning was preserved in translation, in other cases it was as close as possible to the original. It may turn out that certain expressions will be unclear to the reader, especially the complex maxims. Also the scope of the application of a given saying may be problematic as they have been coined and have developed in the specific environment and cultural reality of the Orient. The comments attached to particular sentences should clarify these issues.

The expressions under study are used in a variety of circumstances and life situations. They are part of the colloquial speech. Some of them sound like some coded messages. An example of this may be a common form of a question: 'Wheat or barley?' Reply 'wheat' means that the matter in question has had a happy ending, while the answer 'barley' informs of a less happy or altogether negative finale of the matter. When the question refers to a newly born child, 'wheat' denotes a boy, while 'barley', a girl.

The material presented in this work encompasses proverbs, aphorisms, folk maxims, metaphors and sayings used mainly by the West Assyrians represented in the greatest number by the natives of Tūr 'Abdīn (southeast Turkey), called *Ṭurōye*, i.e., the Mountaineers, speaking *ṭurōyo* - the mountaineer's dialect. Part of the production in the Arabic language comes from the former Assyrian inhabitants of the town of Āzah (Bēt Zabdāy, Idil) called the *Azḥeniyye* (*Hazḥōye*). The rest was obtained from the Assyrians formerly inhabiting the

town of Mārdīn, referred to as the *Mərdalliyye*.<sup>1</sup> Due to the recurring massacres, with their culmination in the years of World War I, these people have been dispersed in the Arab countries of the Middle East, mainly in Syria and Lebanon and in a distant diaspora. They speak a simple Arabic sub-dialect. In northeast Syria the surname Mārdīnī is fairly common. It is born both by Christians and Muslims.

The author's modest collection of expressions by no means exhausts the resources of the verbal literature of this type. The groups of Assyrians that for centuries have, against their will, lived in isolation from one another have developed a rich art of narration. Territorial and language isolation is noticeable even today, also in the diaspora. Sadly, the Assyrian emigrants still do not appreciate this aspect of their culture. The concise, enigmatic, frequently ambiguous content of the expressions used by the elderly is often incomprehensible and unclear for the young Assyrians born in Europe.

So far the author has managed to collect and verify 50 expressions referring to bread and to the process of its preparation, including 23 expressions in the Assyrian dialect of Ṭūr 'Abdīn, 17 in the Arabic dialect of Mārdīn, 9 in the Arabic dialect of Āzaḥ and 1 expression in the Arabic dialect of Mosul. A relatively high number of expressions in the language containing the word 'bread' indicates the significance of this product in the nutrition and folk culture of various Assyrian populations. Isolated different living conditions have resulted in the development of a variety of versions of existing sayings and in the coining of new ones.

### 1. Expressions in the Ṭūr 'Abdīn dialect of the Assyrian language<sup>2</sup>

- (1) *Ū laḥmo daḥḥēṭe kōba'le gāwo mē fūlad*  
(Wheat bread requires stomach made of steel)

In the Assyrian dialects *gāwo* denotes both stomach and abdomen. Wheat bread is in this case a symbol of improved material or social status. Regardless of how wealthy a person is, he can be considered a noble man only if feelings towards his relatives and friends remain stable and if he shows continuous commitment to social matters. Replacing barley bread, which is commonly considered to symbolize poverty, with wheat bread should not change man's personality and his attitude towards other people. Additionally, this byword

<sup>1</sup> Both towns are situated in southeast Turkey. Each has a population of approximately 60,000. In the summer of 1999 there were only 8 Assyrians in Āzaḥ, and 65 Assyrian families lived in Mārdīn.

<sup>2</sup> The initial 14 expressions are quoted from the author's memory and have been recorded during his research, while the next 9 ones are quoted after J. Asmar, *Ḥikam az-zamān fī amṭāl as-Syriān al-'āmiyye* (*All-time wise sayings in the Assyrian popular proverbs*), (Damascus, Syria: 1991), 15, 32-8, 53-9, 71, 85, 91.

expresses disillusionment with the people whose mental inclination depends on their material status or position.

**(2) *Ū laḥmaydī māyīrōyo***  
(My bread is bitter)

This sentence is uttered by a person feeling sorry for himself, worried that his noble actions have not been appreciated and have in fact been wasted. He wants to say: “No matter how much good I am doing, my efforts go unnoticed.” He wants to make it clear that the persons he has treated with loyalty, fidelity and hospitality fail to treat him in the same manner. How much distress and pain he has suffered from these ungrateful people! He also suggests that there are people who, even though their effort fails to match his effort and who are neither sincere nor friendly or loyal, still have a following. They are always successful.

**(3) *Māḫī ū fāko lū fēmo***  
(The bread bite has reached the mouth)

This expression refers to critical situations when a man is forced to make a choice. Some job is about to be finished, but will it be possible to complete it? Effort put into raising a child or cultivation of a crop will soon produce an expected effect, but will I be allowed to enjoy it? This is, unfortunately, an ever-present worry in the lives of the oppressed people who are frequently forced by poor living conditions to leave their birth place and to leave behind not only the effects of the work of generations of their ancestors but even provisions.

**(4) *Hāwī fāko d-laḥmo***  
(Like a bread bite)

The expression implies a state of helplessness, lack of success in an attempt to find someone or something, despite thorough search. The expected person who is to bring an important message is not coming. He or she has disappeared.<sup>3</sup>

**(5) *Ḫīlan ‘am ḫdōde laḥmo w-mālḥo***  
(Together we have eaten bread and salt)

The above saying makes us aware of, reminds us of and stresses a bond, intimacy and friendship between concrete persons as well as a resulting obligation to come to each other’s assistance if need arises. This expression is at

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<sup>3</sup> Sometimes people tried to explain the fact that a thing was missing with interference from “jinns” (invisible beings). They believed that soon the thing would be returned. Many boys were convinced they had had personal encounters and adventures with these ‘ghosts’.

the same time a warning or admonition addressed to a person who neglects his or her duties with regard to somebody who has the right to expect help, support, loyalty and honesty from him. Thus, the saying is set in a context different to that of the popular Polish version: “I have eaten a barrel of salt with him”. The latter means simply that the speaker has got to know someone very well, but it does not imply that this fact imposes an obligation of responsibility on that person.

**(6) *Ī barto ħdī ʔlamṭōyo. Bas gawṛo, k-məšlōho mū tānūro***

(A girl is like a loaf of bread. When she gets married she is taken out of the oven)

An interesting comparison of a girl to bread. Fresh bread is the tastiest. When it is taken out of the oven it starts to gradually lose its flavor and eventually goes stale. The same applies to a girl who has just got married. Her assets are not only her youth and freshness but also the manner in which she is coping with numerous duties. Leaving her family home a daughter leaves behind direct, authentic care of her parents and the warmth they have given her. Now she has to adapt to new conditions and get used to taking important decisions.

**(7) *Ū laḥmaydī samyōyo***

(My bread is blind)

This expression is pervaded with bitterness, self-pity and self-compassion, but also with self-criticism. People do not notice my efforts, they turn their backs on me and do not reciprocate my good deeds. My efforts are wasted.

**(8) *Kīto laḥmo ‘al fōte***

(His face brings bread)

This saying refers to a person whose sudden appearance or the very physical presence brings good luck in a given situation or project. Most often it is used to describe a newborn baby whose birth has coincided with an improvement of the family’s living conditions or with an achievement of professional, scientific or general success by one of the family members. A person referred to in this manner is considered to be exceptionally beautiful, regardless of the sex. The sentence is also heard in reference to the fiancée, fiancé, the bridegroom or the bride, when one or both of the families are better off during the betrothal period or after the wedding.

**(9) *Hāwī sawke ka’ko***

(His hair has become like *ka’ko*)

*Ka’ko* is white, hard, crescent-shaped bread with up to 10 cm diameter designed for feeding ill children. *Ka’kos* are sold stringed. The saying refers to

old age or to moments of horror or times of hardship, it also reflects bad atmosphere within a family or living conditions full of failures and trouble.

- (10) *Qellūro lō k-fōyəš ‘al tānūro*  
(*Qellūro* will not stay in the oven)

*Qellūro* is a small loaf of bread with a hole in the center, made from dough leftovers. It is served to children. The above expression is used to convince someone to be patient, calm and hopeful. Most often it refers to a situation when parents are concerned that their plain daughter might fail to find a husband.

- (11) *Qay ū laḥmaydī kōyōqəḏ bū-tānūro?*  
(Is my bread burning in the oven?)

This saying can be heard when a person is urged to make an important resolution or decision. The person urged, however, is either unwilling to haste or has no heart to openly reject the request. He or she prefers to think the matter over, to seek advice and to consult with other persons. The expression is used for instance in reference to giving one's daughter away in marriage. Another version of the saying with identical meaning is: *Qay ū layšaydī fāṭīrōyo?* (Is my dough unleavened?). Unleavened dough does not ferment, so it bakes quickly.

- (12) *Ū laḥmo dī gəddiyye lək-maswə‘*  
(Bread obtained by begging does not appease hunger)

The message in this proverb is stressing the value of food obtained through hard and honest work of one's hands. One should incessantly strive for dignified life and mobilize his efforts to make himself and his family self-sufficient. Bar Ebraya (13th century) appealed to his countrymen not to attend the parties at which the host serves food obtained by theft or acquired by some other dishonest practices.

- (13) *Ū laḥmatte ‘al barkōṭayyēyo*  
(They carry their bread on their knees)

This expression communicates disappointment with concrete persons, who when in need made an impression of pleasant, grateful people appreciating one's kind acts and ready to reciprocate them. However, having obtained what they had been after they suddenly turned their backs on their benefactor. Now they are pretending nothing has happened, but one must not trust them anymore. They are like *dēwe b-gadle də -‘wōne* (wolves in sheep's clothing). Another version of this saying says: *Īmalḥatte ‘al barkōṭayyēyo* (They carry their salt on their knees)

The meaning conveyed by this saying can be explained in the following way. It is clear that bread and salt are symbols of manhood, nobleness and friendship. However, the effect of these articles of food on people devoid of such qualities is negligible. They do not appreciate the profound meaning carried by bread and salt. They unscrupulously take whatever they come across, they desire everything, but when even a small trouble appears they drop the bread to the ground, they spill the salt. They cannot be trusted. Bread and salt on the ground means a profanation.

**(14) *Ū fākō d-fēme laṭyo dīde***

(The piece of bread in his mouth is not his)

A person referred to in this manner must be exceptionally hospitable and so generous that he or she is ready to give away everything he has to the needy and hungry ones, even the only bite of bread he has already got in his mouth.

**(15) *Aṭyo ī ṭlamṭo dū dayno***

(A bread loaf of debts has arrived)

This expression refers to trespassers on someone's hospitality, egoists, bums wasting other people's time and refusing to understand that everybody is right to use their time in whatever manner they wish. With this complaint the narrator gently warns people of the approaching visitor; the day before yesterday he visited our home, with no reason. The same happened yesterday and the same may happen today, too. He comes uninvited every day and bothers us. How long is it going to last? Doesn't he understand a popular saying: *Dhōwe ḥawruḥ dawšo, luḥlatle kūle* (Even if your friend is made of honey, do not lick him off). This expression is known also among the Arabs.

**(16) *Ālōho d-šōqel mū ḥmōro, g-dōḥel ū laḥmo dū dāwōro***

(If a donkey goes insane, it devours ploughman's bread)

This sadly sounding saying refers to destiny, since human fate is in the hands of God. People whose life is not particularly successful try to blame supernatural powers for their failures. They believe that God has turned away from them, that he has blurred their mind, has made them lose everything they achieved, that he has ruined them. Up to a certain moment they had been doing well but suddenly they became poor. Attempts to regain balance will be unsuccessful, since man is incapable of opposing divine plans. What happened was God's will, but it is not clear why it happened. Perhaps the wretched man lived an evil life, but nobody knew about it?

**(17) *Laḥmo ḥəd faḡro***

(Bread like the Host [Eucharistic bread])

This expression can be heard in two different situations:

When some product is so scarce that there is not sufficient quantity of it for everyone. In reference to food the sentence implies that no one has satisfied hunger. When the saying refers to some other thing, the speaker means that the thing is so small that it is impossible to divide it in such a way that everybody could receive at least a microscopic part of it. It is a complaint about life in poverty.

When a dish is delicious, and when it associates with something extraordinary and beneficial.

**(18) *Kōsōyām ū laḥmāyde d-ḥēte***

(He makes his bread into wheat bread)

This expression is fringing upon the psychology of personality. It refers to people who tend to boast; groundlessly they try to convince others that their abilities are greater than they appear. Expressing his opinion about someone in this manner, the narrator wants to gently warn the listeners so that they do not believe in the merits claimed by the person referred to.

**(19) *Laḥmo fātīro haw fāyəš lī***

(Even my unleavened bread has run out)

This sentence indicates the loss of almost all possessions or bankruptcy. The Assyrians bake unleavened bread only out of absolute necessity. It symbolizes lack of stability and stormy days in people's lives.

**(20) *Fōte ḥəd ṭlamto d-laḥmōyo***

(His face is like a loaf of bread)

This sentence describes the appearance of a plump, affluent person, enjoying success and good health. He is chubby-cheeked and his face resembles a fine-looking loaf of country bread.

**(21) *Ḥdū ātōyo mī rəḥyo***

(Like someone coming back from a flour-mill)

The above expression means that someone has traveled a long way. His clothes are covered with dust and dirt, just like the clothes of a flourmill worker which are covered with flour.

**(22) Hāwī mzīdo**

(He looks like a goatskin)

*Mzīdo* is a leather sack used for the storage of loose food products, most often *bərgəl* (bulgur). A similar sack in which yogurt is shaken in order to obtain butter is called *gawdo*, and another one used for storage of potable water is called *qarbo*.

The above expression is a metaphor. It denotes a hopeless state of a person suffering from a disease. Bloated body resembling a filled up sack is a symptom of an illness. Originally, the sentence probably referred to the appearance of an unburied dead body. It used to happen in the history of the Middle East Christians that people were either too weak to bury the deceased or lagged behind with the burials due to their great number.

**(23) Azza ī rəḥyo, w-fāyōš ū zāgo**

(The flourmill is lost, the bell remains)

The saying says that a person has lost almost everything. He is left with only a small part of his possessions.

**2. Expressions in the Mārdīn dialect of the Arabic language<sup>4</sup>****(24) əllī yākəl ḥəbz əḍ-ḍāləm - yğərr sēfo**

(He who eats the bread of a cruel man, takes out his sword against himself)

A situation that has given origin to this saying teaches us to avoid despots and to refuse to accept any offering, even bread from them, since they can be revengeful and ruthless.

**(25) əḥtī ḡāl'ī ḥəbəkī mən taḥt rəkbətī! Sanət əl-ḡalā\* tənqədī  
w-təbqa nadāmətī**

(Take out the bread from under your knee, sister! The year of hunger will pass, and you will be left with sorrow)

<sup>4</sup> I. Armala, *Salwa, ar-rā'idī fī amṡāl Mārdīn (For the sake of consolation, with the Mārdīn proverbs)*, (Beirut: 1927), 7, 13-4, 16-20, 24, 36-9, 44-8, 64-6, 81-9, 92-97. Born in Mārdīn, Armala was a Syrian Catholic bishop of Beirut. He wrote many books, including books on the tragedy of the Ṭūr 'Abdīn Christians in the years 1895-1918 he witnessed with his own eyes. The expressions he recorded (presented in alphabetic order, without numbering) are clear to a Middle Eastern reader, for this reason he does not explain the circumstances they are used in. They rhyme more often than the quoted Ṭūr 'Abdīn expressions.

\**Ġala*, meaning literally high prices, often appears in dialects with the meaning: scarcity or hunger.

In this byword bread symbolizes food in general. A conventionally dressed woman when seating can hide a thin cake under her knee.

Stingy people, even though they have enough food, never eat till full. Sometimes they would rather waste the food than share it with the poor and hungry. One feels like reminding such a person that *ad-dənye dūlāb* (fortune is fickle) and that when also the poor will have their food, then he will be ashamed of his behavior and he himself may be in need.

**(26) *Ḥəbəz əl-lərgāl ‘al əll-rġāl dēn***

(Men’s bread is a debt to men)

We have to do with human virtues such as nobleness, honor, sense of dignity and obligation to redress injustice or harm done. One must not be a debtor to people who gave him a helping hand in the past. To be a man means to have these virtues. This is not about physical features but about the attitude and the state of mind.

Another Assyrian saying in an even stricter manner appeals for settling accounts with other people: *Ūḥa d-ḥozēli b-‘ayno, k-ḥozenōle b-tartē ‘ayne* (He who sees me with one eye will be seen by me with both my eyes). The saying teaches one should express one’s gratitude in excess, with a double measure.<sup>5</sup>

**(27) *Aḥūy arāk amīr, w-’əḥtī bēn ət-tanānīr***

(I can see you are an emir my brother, and my sister is still working at the bread ovens)

<sup>5</sup> Up to the not too distant times man’s moustache was the outward symbol of his honor, dignity and his sense of self-confidence, while the same was true of the hair in case of women. Once a venerable man experienced poverty, his family was in danger of death from hunger. He harnessed the horse to the cart and set out to search for some venerable and affluent person. He found him. With a heavy heart he described his plight and asked the host for help. The host agreed but on the condition that he would leave collateral in the form of a single hair plucked from his moustache. The guest agreed and asked for a mirror. Then carefully and in a dignified manner he plucked just a single hair. Having done that he took out his dagger and addressed the host with a serious warning: “If after repayment I will not recover my hair for a long time, with this dagger I will take vengeance for the dishonor.” This behavior was to the host’s liking. The needy man was given as much food as he asked for, not to be repaid. On his way home the donee met a fellow peasant who was also suffering poverty. Having found out about the source of the gift he also went to the wealthy man’s house. When he heard that in return for a single hair from his moustache he could receive the food he needed, he immediately plucked a whole handful. Unfortunately, the host definitely refused to help him.

A man that after a long absence returns to his homeland notices the social rise and improved prestige of his brother, but he sees also that his sister is still dealing with making of bread. Feeling sympathy for his sister, the visitor makes it clear that the division of labor is discriminating against the woman. This saying has a deeper social meaning; it shows that the road to promotion is more difficult for women, especially in the Muslim world.

**(28) *əllī yətləb laḥəm t̄rudūhū, w-’ əllī yətləb ḥəbəz r̄ḥamūhū!***

(Chase away the man, who asks for meat, be merciful to the man who asks for bread!)

The sense of the saying is clear. Bread is a necessity, while meat is considered to be a luxurious addition to bread. A poor man should be happy to have bread to eat, and he should not ask for meat. If one turns to someone else for help, he should not be greedy. Similarly, one should be modest when accepting gifts and refrain from taking the whole quantity of the offering.<sup>6</sup>

**(29) *‘Tī əl-ḥəbəz laḥabbāzo walaw ’akal kəllo***

(Have the baker make your bread, even if he eats it all)

The byword teaches that people should entrust performance of services to experts. This is beneficial even if they ask a high price for it. The use of the baker’s example proves the significance of this occupation and an important role of bread in nutrition. In an Arabic dialect of Egypt a similar, though more realistic, saying is known: *əddī əl-’ēš li-ḥabbāzīnu walaw yāklu nəššo* (Have the bakers take care of making bread, even if they were to eat half of it).<sup>7</sup> In Egypt the word ‘ēš denotes both bread and life.

**(30) *əllī ‘əndu ḥənṭa - ydaynūhū daqīq, w-’ əllī ‘əndu daqīq - ydaynūhū ḥəbəz***

(People lend flour to those who have wheat, and they lend bread to those who have flour)

<sup>6</sup> The deep meaning of the intention behind this expression is well illustrated with a post-wedding element of an Assyrian folk custom. On the lapse of the first week of the bride’s stay in her husband’s house, her elder brother arrives there to take her back to her family for a few days’ time. The brother-in-law expecting his baḥmo (father’s-in-law son) prepares him a present, usually a sum of money. Regardless of the material status of both of the families the recipient accepts only part of the money offered. As evident the principle “If you are given something, take it” is not common among the Assyrians.

<sup>7</sup> A. Taymour, *al- amṭāl al-’āmmiyya (Folk aphorisms)*, (Cairo: al-Ahram, 1986), 16.

People often do not know the concrete needs of the poor and do not know what they lack most. Offering someone something that he does not need is purposeless, it is not an act of kindness; on the contrary, it proves the donor's ill will. This sentence's deep meaning is an appeal to people to make an effort and find out what the actual needs of other people are.

**(31) *Zawğ mən faḥme, tayğīb ḥəbəz w-laḥme***

(A husband made of coal will bring home both bread and meat)

Only a man who does not shy away from any work can ensure good living conditions for his family.

**(32) *Ḥəbəz əl-ğamīl ma'a walad əl-ḥarām - dāyə'***

(With an evil man even the thanksgiving bread is wasted)

The phrase 'thanksgiving bread' is understood as an act of kindness associated with faithfulness and loyalty towards another man. However, there are people with regard to whom one can regret a kind gesture. This warning, having counterparts in many other cultures is rooted in ancient times. The sentence pronounced by Aḥiqar: "My son, do not eat even bread with shameless people!"<sup>8</sup> carries a similar message.

**(33) *Bāṭōye mā təbqa 'ala tannūr. Aw yākəla kalb, aw yakəla sannūr***

(*Bāṭōye* will not be left in the oven. It will be eaten by a dog or by a cat)

*Bāṭōye* - undercooked bread, which in the process of baking drops on the ashes. The above expression is applied to a variety of life and work situations. It is used to calm someone down or to make him slow down. It makes us think of destiny. And finally it teaches us about the necessity of self-control, of taking care of one's family and guarding one's possessions.

**(34) *Ida Allā ḡadab 'al ḡanamē, tatākəl ḥəbz əḡ-rā 'ī***

(If God turns away from a sheep, it will eat the shepherd's bread)

A maxim with a sense almost identical to the sense expressed by the saying no. 16, only we have a sheep instead of a donkey here.

**(35) *Madaḥna əl-qəṭṭ - zabbal fəl-ləṭḥīn***

(We have been praising the cat, and now it has made a mess in the flour)

<sup>8</sup> Y. Dolabani (metropolitan), *Maṭle, awkīṭ teš 'īto d-Aḥīqar ḥākīmo w-sefro d-Sanḥarib malko d-Oṭur wad-Ninwe (Aphorisms, or the life of Ahiqar, the sage and the scribe to Sanherib, the king of Assyria and Nineveh)*, (Mārdīn, Turkey: 1962), 27.

A person who has so far managed to cope with various tasks without major problems, this time is unable to perform a simple task. His or her abilities have been overestimated. The hopes set on this person have not come true, they were not realistic, which comes as a surprise even to the closest relatives.

**(36) *əllī yākəl həbzək - yədrəb b-sayfək***

(He who eats your bread will fight with your sword)

Sharing bread makes people friends, it strengthens bonds between them. They will not be indifferent in the face of events that will affect one of them. One should share his bread with other people, and a person who will eat your bread will not betray you. He will come to your assistance, and will defend you if need be. This however does not apply to people referred to in the saying, 24.

**(37) *Dawwaqna ḥamīre***

(All we are left with (after he's gone) is leaven)

The above expression is usually pronounced by a host in reference to a person he has received in his house. The guest has just bid farewell to the members of the household and the food has run out. Leaven is not fit to eat, it symbolizes poverty and bitterness. The host has used up all his flour to make bread. Everything fit to eat in the household has been eaten.

**(38) *əd-dahab yə 'tāz nḥāle***

(Gold needs bran)

There is no absolutely pure thing, like there is no man without a flaw. Good and evil, beauty and ugliness coexist, and complement each other. The saying offers a consolation for successful people whose children have not followed their steps.

**(39) *Māt bāba wən-tamm əd-daḡīq***

(The father has died and the flour has run out)

Late compliments to a hard-working father, supporter of the family. He took care to it that the household was never short of bread. The word 'flour' should not be understood literally here, it refers to the home larder as a whole, which after the father's death started to shrink.

**(40) *'Ala wəčču nākəl ḥəbək***

(Owing to his face we are eating bread)

Compare with saying number 8.

### 3. Expressions in the Āzaḥ dialect of the Arabic language<sup>9</sup>

(41) *Ḥbēzo ‘ala rəkbəto, kama əl-Oṣmallī*

(He is holding bread on his knees like an Ottoman)

The saying number 13 above has a less specific meaning in the Assyrian dialect. The Āzaḥ version stresses the fact that the behavior referred to in the maxim was typical of the Ottoman Turks. An almost identical saying is used in Egypt, a country also once under the Turkish rule: *Āḥər ḥidmət əl-guzz - sakter* (The payment for the service to an Oguz is like saying: go away!).<sup>10</sup>

(42) *Ḥbēz w-baṣāl, kama əl-‘asal*

(Bread and onions are like honey)

The expression reveals admiration for the people who are happy in spite of the fact that they live on a very modest diet. In their eyes the simplest dishes are as tasty as honey which only the rich can afford. Interestingly, in this version, unlike in the version popular among the Arabs, there is no mention of poverty or hunger: *Ḥubz w-baṣāl ləḡ-ḡū ‘ān, aṭyab mən əl-‘asal* (For a hungry man bread and onions are tastier than honey).

(43) *‘Ṭī ḥbēzək šal-ḥabbāz, taykūn rḡīf zyāde*

(Give your bread to the baker, you will get an extra loaf back)

Another advice to trust the experts. Compared to the proverb, 29, the Āzaḥ version contains a greater dose of realism and moderation.

(44) *əl yākəl ḥbēz əṣ-ṣultān, lāzəm yəḍrəb b-sayfo*

(He who eats the sultan’s bread, should fight with the sultan’s sword)

The sense of this expression is different than the sense conveyed by the earlier quoted sayings, 24 and 36. Here, there is no reference to friendship, but the sentence makes the subjects aware that their status imposes on them the obligation of loyalty towards the authority and the superiors, no matter what the consequences of such obedience might be. The saying has its Egyptian counterpart: *əllī baddak tihdimō - ṭī ‘ō* (Be obedient to the man you are to serve).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> L. Iṣḥāq, *Amṭāl min Bāzeḇde (The Proverbs from Bāzeḇde)*, (Damascus: 1994), 88-9, 90-3. The author is a native Āzaḥ, today living in Qāmēšli. The texts on the last pages of the book are of high value for linguists, including the letters written in the dialect.

<sup>10</sup> Taymour, *al- amṭāl al- ‘āmmiyya*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

- (45) **Ḥbēzo yəntəkəl**  
(His bread is fit to eat)

This byword tells us that the man referred to is hospitable and has a sense of personal value and dignity. Spending time in his company is beneficial and illuminating; it is an honor, not a disgrace.

- (46) **Ṣār bēni w-bēno ḥbēz w-mələḥ**  
(There is bread and salt between him and me)

The meaning of the saying is identical with the meaning of maxim no. 5.

- (47) **Flān ḥbēzo a'ma**  
(His bread is blind)

The meaning conveyed by this saying is identical to the meaning of expression number 7 quoted earlier.

- (48) **Ḥbēz əl-ḥənta ləl-faqīr mawwe ḥarām**  
(A poor man is not forbidden to eat wheat bread)

This expression is used when some poor person suddenly becomes rich. Other possible interpretations assume that also a poor man has the right to eat wheat bread, i.e., to improve his material status. Wheat bread is a symbol of rising for those who eat bread made from other types of grain.

- (49) **Allā mā yḥammər b-'idēno**  
(God does not cause fermentation in his hands)

In other words: "he is unlucky," he is unsuccessful in everything, he is ill-starred.

#### 4. An expression in Arabic from the area of Mosul (North Iraq)<sup>12</sup>

- (50) **Yəqša' əl-qamar, yəḥsəbu rgīf ḥəbəz**  
(When he sees the moon, he thinks it is a loaf of bread)<sup>13</sup>

This saying refers to two situations:

<sup>12</sup> B. Haddad, "al-Amṭāl al-Ārāmiyya fī al-mōṣalliyya al-āmmiyya," (Aramaean proverbs in the Mosul dialect), *Qala Suryaya*, no. 6-7 (Baghdad: 1975): 164.

<sup>13</sup> Comparison of bread to the shape of the moon is worthy of notice.

- it expresses a poor man's desire to have bread,
- it conveys a far-fetched naiveté or belief in something that is impossible to come true.

## 5. Folk narratives. Events and situations

The author preserved in his memory many tales and legends that he heard in his childhood spent among the fellow Assyrians, alternately in the country and in the city. The old people were eager to tell stories, while the young were attentive listeners. The stories were usually told on the occasion of traditional night meetings organized in people's homes. The representatives of the elderly generation could impressively narrate the vicissitudes of the current or the previous generations, and storytellers for hours entertained the household members and guests putting to work their narrating skills. Some of the stories were based on facts. Moralizing plots captured the minds and imagination of the children and youth. Later, in play, they were frequently impersonating their favorite characters and re-creating the earlier narrated events. Some stories referred to the struggle with evil spirits (*tēba*), while other praised the deeds of angel-knights. The latter materialized on white horses in the tragic moments of the Assyrian people's history in order to give assistance to the persecuted and to the oppressed.

The author owes a lot to these folk storytellers. His father was actually one of them. He inherited the skill from his father. Feeling indebted to these people, in the late 1970s the author felt a need to record and preserve if not all then at least fragments of these narratives. The idea was slowly turning ripe for the execution, but in the meantime the passage of time managed to blur many a detail in his memory, leaving only general outlines of the narratives in place. The author's father did not refuse the request to tape-record the stories he used to narrate during convivial gatherings and which he had himself heard from elderly people.

### I

#### 'NOODLE SEEDS'

From 1952 till 1958 I lived in the village of Təl 'Alo in northeast Syria. The village belonged to Dhām al-Hādi, the greatest local Arab landowner, but Assyrians were its only inhabitants.<sup>14</sup> At that time my father maintained wide contacts with several chieftains of the local settled Bedouin tribes. He often entertained them at feasts given in our house. Many a time the chieftains invited

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<sup>14</sup> The village of Təl 'Alo can still be found on the maps, but the Assyrians who have founded it do not live there anymore. In 1987 there were two Assyrian families left there, in 1996 only one remained. The Kurds and Bedouins moved into their abandoned houses.

us to their feasts to have a dish called *ḥamīs (tirīd)*<sup>15</sup> with them and to participate in an elaborate ceremonial of coffee making. Sometimes such stays at our Bedouin hosts lasted several days or even weeks.

Then came the early spring of 1957. During the preparations for a family trip to the nearby Bedouin village of aṣ-Ṣufa my grandfather seated me on a horseback covered with thick and stiff woolen mattress.<sup>16</sup> When the horse I was riding reached the top of the hill at the edges of Təl ‘Alo, a gust of wind threw the mattress with me on top off the horse.

In this hospitable village we were accommodated in a freestanding hut with no windows. There was not a single clay oven in the village. Bedouin women baked unleavened bread on the metal plate over the bonfire. Somewhat shy because she wore dress different than the local women my mother preferred to bake identical cakes in the hut. The smoke from the bonfire chased us away from it.

The time we spent in aṣ-Ṣufa coincided with a Muslim holiday. In order to wish the locals all the best on that occasion I climbed a donkey (the Assyrians did not keep donkeys!) and went to the house of Ṣāleḥ Meḍgāl, an Arab nobleman.

He was a son-in-law of the earlier mentioned Dhām. Unfortunately; I did not know how to stop the donkey before his house. As a result I rode it inside. My unusual entrance reduced the household members to tears with laughter. They gave me a handful of candies and I left their house in the same fashion. Because of the adventure with the stubborn donkey I gave up paying visits to other villagers.

When I returned to the hut my mother wanted to know where I had got the candies from.

“A *qaračiyye* (a Gipsy woman), maid in the sheik’s house have given them to me,” I answered, “because the woman’s thick hair had been uncombed.”

It turned out that the woman was the sheik’s sister.

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<sup>15</sup> *Tirīd (ḥamīs)* fresh mutton with bone chopped into large pieces, cooked with onions and spices. The stew is put on thin cakes of unleavened bread placed on the bottom of deep and broad dishes (*manṣaf*). The cakes absorb the sauce and acquire its aroma. The guests squat around the dish and eat the food with the use of the five fingers of their hand (*bəl-ḥamsa*). Some dishes are so big that as many as four men are needed to move them. Smacking of the tongs and licking of the fingers adds charm to the feast. Tents and camels, the absence of tables and chairs, barking of dogs and the endless desert around make it even more exotic. A proper Bedouin feast cannot take place without *tirīd*.

<sup>16</sup> Each member of the family had its own mattress to sleep on. It was made of 15 to 20 layers of sheep wool and weighed some 15 kg. Before the trip parts of mattresses were mounted on the backs of the horses but since there were fewer horses than mattresses the rest were transported in the cart.

This must have happened before my father invited this very sheik to dinner in our house in Təl ‘Alo. Before that visit I had had no idea that there were people in the area of our village who spoke languages other than Assyrian.<sup>17</sup> Probably for this reason I was surprised to hear our guest call bread meat during a dinner.<sup>18</sup> In Assyrian *lahmo* means bread, while *lahm* means meat in Arabic.

For that dinner, apart from other dishes, my mother served *bərgəl* with *š’irāye* (thin home made noodles). The guest delighted with the taste of the dish, decided to sow his land with ‘noodle seeds’. He was convinced that noodles are a plant, which naturally had seeds. He asked my father to accompany him to the town of Qāməšli on the following day to buy the seeds.

Later on I was told that it had not been easy to convince the sheik that noodles are made at home from ordinary wheat dough.

*Source:* From the author’s personal experience and the tape-recorded account of the author’s father.

## II

### KASHA INSTEAD OF DYNAMITE

A French archaeologist visiting the village was served cooked *bərgəl* for dinner. The dish pleased the guest’s palate, so he ate to the full. After the meal he said good-bye to the hosts and set out on his way. Only after some time the kasha started to bulge in the European’s delicate stomach. His abdomen swelled painfully. After some time he met on his way a group of quarryman. They were putting dynamite into a pre-drilled recess to cause an explosion to crush the rock. While passing by, the Frenchman shouted in their direction: “Save your dynamite. Cooked *bərgəl* is a much better explosive!”

*Source:* A.G. Mirza, *Maḥkay ḥdō ḥrēto* (*Collection of stories*), (Södertälje, Sweden: Bet-Froso Nsibin, 1997), 6.

## III

### DINNER OF BREAD AND TEA

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<sup>17</sup> As far as I know nobody in the village had a radio at that time, not to mention the television, which was unknown even in Qāməšli. In 1958 my father bought the first battery-powered record player in the village. The record attached to it contained a song in Arabic. Its lyrics praised Hitler. Even today I still remember the words and the monotonous tune resembling a military march.

<sup>18</sup> It is rare for children to participate in parties. Even if they are allowed to stay in the room where the feast is taking place they are served a separate dish. Most often, however, they eat with their mothers and sisters in a separate room. Sometimes an exception is made for the first-born son.

Probably up to the mid 1950s tea was not known to the villagers of Təl ‘Alo. At least that is how it was in our household. Having heard that in the shops in Qāməšli some exotic herb called *čāye* had appeared, my mother asked my father to buy us a little of this specialty.

The dinner prepared that evening was made up of tea and bread. Each bite of bread we washed down with a sip of tea. Seeing that the drink was quickly disappearing my mother asked us to bite larger pieces of bread and to take smaller sips of the tea. She suggested that because the bread was made at home, while the tea had to be bought.

Such a ‘tea meal’ was frequently the only breakfast or dinner for many Assyrian families who had to cope with urban poverty. In order to be able to reuse tealeaves some people sun-dried them.

*Source:* The author’s personal experience.

#### IV

#### A TREE THAT HAS SPROUTED FROM A POKER

There was an Assyrian peasant who did not live a Christian life, yet he never repudiated his nationality. He was unique in the sense he preached the principle of active resistance against evil and administered justice with his own hands.

In the last ten years of his life the record of villains he killed reached ninety-nine people. He refused to repent despite the efforts of the parish priest trying to persuade him to do so. In order to show him that his deeds are inexcusable, the priest grabbed a poker<sup>19</sup> and stuck it in the ground. When doing this the priest said: “Like it is impossible for this poker to grow into a live tree, like it is impossible for your sins to be forgiven!”

Deprived of the hope for a promising after-life, that night the sinner could not fall asleep with worry. The house was situated close to the cemetery, and since it was summer time his bed was on the rooftop terrace. In the dead of the night he heard a noise coming from the cemetery. He gripped his rifle from under the pillow and set off towards the graveyard. There he found a man digging out the corpse of a young woman buried there a few hours ago. When he heard the offender bluster out threats against the dead woman and saw him getting ready to abuse her sexually he shot his rifle killing the villain on the spot. Ninety-nine plus one makes a hundred. Now hell awaits him beyond any doubt.

Next morning the sinner spotted a crowd of people near the church. They were surrounding the place where the priest had stuck the poker into the ground the day before. To everybody’s astonishment the iron rod sprouted shoots!

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<sup>19</sup> Poker – a rod-like implement made from iron (*bəst*) or wood (*šāfūdo*) used to rake ash from the bread oven.

*Source: A tale tape-recorded by the author's father, printed in: M. Abdalla, "Z kregu folkloru chrześcijańskich Asyryjczyków" (From the Folklore of the Assyrian Christians), Literatura lu-dowa (Folk Literature), no. 4-6 (1986): 63-76.*

V

**AN ADVISOR TURNED MILLER**

In the times when Christianity had not yet taken deep roots in Mesopotamia there lived a king by the name of Narsai. He had a brilliant advisor able to resolve conflicts and pacify revolts. He relieved his king of almost all his tasks, of both minor and great importance. Also rulers of faraway kingdoms came to him for advice. All this has earned him the name of another Aḥiqar.<sup>20</sup>

Noblemen, planning to overthrow the king, concluded that when deprived of his advisor the king would not stay long on the throne. Due to their intrigues and plotting the advisor soon fell in disgrace. While condemning him to life in exile the king said: "I used to have a loyal and wise servant in you. I will spare your life, but I do order you to go away to such a distant land where you will not hear my name." On his departure, the wretched man warned his master: "Soon you will painfully feel my absence". Dressed as a pauper he left the royal palace.

He went on and on and finally stopped in a village on the confines of the kingdom. Pretending he was a homeless laborer in search for a job, he found work in a flourmill.

Meanwhile, in the highest circles of the palace, the king's adversaries started to get into power. The kingdom was in danger of collapse. Unable to trust his closest collaborators the king sought advice from an old man famed for his wisdom. In harsh words the sage criticized the king for his thoughtless decision to expel the advisor. The ruler was to find the advisor without delay, bring him back in flavor and reinstate him to his former position. Only the advisor could bring back peace and order to the country and save the throne.

The old man suggested that a meeting of all the chiefs and village administrators be convened. Each of them was given a lamb, weighted and properly branded, and told to take care of the animal in such a way that in three months' time it had exactly the same weight. With the prospects of promotion the low-level administrators looked for advice from local sages. One of them was likely to come across the ex-advisor.

This task appeared impracticable to the chiefs and administrators who turned up at the king's call. Puzzled, they returned to their settlements, each of them burdened with a lamb.

The news about the riddle conceived by the king started to spread. Finally it also reached the ears of the 'miller'. Together with other peasants he came to the village gathering. The villagers were told the riddle associated with the lamb.

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<sup>20</sup> Aḥiqar, Assyrian sage living at the turn of the 7th and 6th centuries BC.

Proposals started to crop up. Someone suggested the lamb should be fed every other day, someone else, just once a day. Then the 'miller' was asked to express his opinion. He saw through the king's scheme, and realized he was in serious danger. Remembering good times in the king's service he came up with a solution: tie a young wolf in the lamb's fold. Living under constant fear the lamb would not put on weight no matter how much feed it eats.

The idea gained approval of the gathering. And so they did.

When the time of the trial elapsed the village administrators, each with his lamb, gathered again in the king's palace. Only one lamb did not change its weight. The king cheered up and asked about the man who had invented the method. "It must have been my former advisor and nobody else," said the king joyfully.

"It is a simple miller who not so long ago wandered into my village. I felt sorry for him and gave him a job," said the administrator.

A procession set forth from the palace. When the 'miller' saw the noblemen he knew it was the lamb that brought them to his village. The advisor, back in the king's grace, restored order in the kingdom. The king's throne regained its splendor.

*Source:* Tales tape recorded by the author's father.

## VI

### THE 'CHALCEDONIAN' HOST AND CAMEL MEAT

The Gassanides were an Arab tribe of Christians. Having left Arabia they settled in the area southwest of Damascus. Their king, al-Ḥārīt Ibn Ġabla, like the majority of the inhabitants of Syria refused to accept the resolutions of the 6th General Council of Chalcedon (451). He is also given credit for the revival of the Syrian-Orthodox Church persecuted by the Byzantines. His mediation suited the purpose of the Empress Theodora so well that with her efforts monk Jacob Baradeus was raised to the position of a bishop. The consecration is said to have taken place in a prison cell in Constantinople by the Copt patriarch Theodosius.

Emperor Justinian II did not give up efforts to make his lieges accept the resolutions of the Chalcedon Council. He sent Efrem, patriarch of Antioch with the mission to convince al-Ḥārīt to accept the new dogma. He did it having heard that the Arabian king refused even to share bread with the 'Chalcedonians'. Sticking to the teachings of the three preceding Councils, the Gassanides considered the new dogma an attempt to divide Christ into two separate beings.

"What are the grounds of your objections against the Council," the Emperor's emissary asked al-Ḥārīt.

"This and nothing else that from the Holy Trinity we worship you have made a 'Quadrity' which you also call 'holy'," answered al-Ḥārīt.

“Are you saying, my Lord, that 630 patriarchs were corrupt and only a handful of those present at the Council were right?” asked the hierarch trying to convince the king.

“I am a simple man and a soldier, wise books are not my domain. Yet, when I give orders to prepare a meal for soldiers the servants take vats, fill them up with mutton or beef and get the food cooked. Sometimes a foul mouse gets into one of the vats. Isn’t the whole meat contaminated for its presence?” explained al-Ḥārīt̄ at the same time asking the guest a captious question.

“Certainly, the meat cannot be eaten,” confirmed the patriarch.

“Therefore, as a small mouse is able to contaminate a huge quantity of meat, in the same manner a single man, who has announced his ‘Quadrity’ has been able to corrupt the whole Council. This man’s name is Leon.<sup>21</sup> By subscribing to his false teaching the participants of the Council have contaminated entire Christianity,” explained the host.

To demonstrate his unyielding stance with regard to his faith and to show he would not accept the Host (eucharistic bread) from his guest’s hands, al-Ḥārīt̄ ordered his servants to prepare him a dish from camel meat.

The very thought of camel meat has made the hierarch feel sick. When the dish was served, he got confused, not knowing what he should do. He was unable to swallow a single bite of the food. This was what the Gassanide king expected would happen.

“Do not push me to accept your Host he said to Efrem, I cannot accept it just like your stomach will not accept camel meat.”

*Source:* Michael the Syrian (patriarch, †1199), *Tārīḫ az-Zamān (Popular History)*, vol. 2 (Aleppo, Syria: Dār ar-Raha, 1996), 129-130; and I. Armala, *Tārīḫ al-Kanīsa as-Syrianiyya (The History of the Assyrian Church)*, (Beirut: Bet Zabday-Azah, 1996), 94.

## VII

### A MEAL FOR THE ARMY

Preparing to wage the war against ‘Aḡam<sup>22</sup> Turkey called to the colors a great number of troops. With scarce means of transport the soldiers had to cover large distances on foot. They marched in the day and rested in the night. One night soldiers reached the vicinity of an Assyrian village belonging to Ḥrīmo. There they decided to rest.

Ḥrīmo was a rich and generous farmer. He had a huge kneading trough made from oak wood able to contain two bags (some 250 kg) of flour at a time. Freshly baked bread was distributed among the servants and people in need. Every Saturday fresh bread was made.

<sup>21</sup> The contemporary Bishop of Rome.

<sup>22</sup> The name of Persia used by the Turks, Assyrians and Arabs.

With his usual generosity Ḥrīmo decided to treat the soldiers as his guests and serve them a copious breakfast. He explained to their commander that it would be impolite not to notice so many young men camping on his land. They have parents who must worry about their sons. Who knows how many of them will come back home? As a host he obliged himself to supply food in sufficient quantity saying that if even a single soldier left his place hungry he would be ready to accept any punishment. "Bread will be served with a delicacy made without the use of flames," he promised. With such an approach he quickly convinced the commander.

Stocks of flour were opened. All the women were employed in baking of bread that lasted till the dawn. On the edges of the village rows of pots were arranged right on the ground. Then they were filled with honey poured straight from barrels.

After the morning assembly the hungry soldiers rushed towards the food. Ḥrīmo told them to take the rest of food, which they could not eat on the spot as rations for the journey. When asked by the commander about the source of such enormous quantity of food the host answered: "Save today's bread for tomorrow, but never put off today's work till tomorrow."

The troops reached the frontier. The Persians came up with peace talks proposal, declaring readiness to make some concessions. The negotiations on the conditions of peace went on and on. Meanwhile the Turkish commander was informed about Persian attempts to gather a huge army. When inspecting the troops he noticed that the soldiers' morale was beginning to go down. The only exercise they had had for a long time was catching lice. Then the commander recalled the words he had heard from Ḥrīmo: "Never postpone to-day's work till tomorrow". He gave the troops the order to attack and won.

*Source:* The story was tape-recorded by the author's father.

## VIII

### HOW TO MARK OFF BORDERS

Mīden and Bsoṛīno are two ancient yet still inhabited Assyrian settlements located in Ṭūr 'Abdīn. At some point in old times the inhabitants gathered to determine the boundaries between the two settlements. The parties agreed that each of them would cook a dish of their choice and starting from the farthest inhabited household would walk in the direction of the neighboring village. The boundary will be set at the point where the dish will have completely cooled off. The inhabitants of Mīden cooked *garso* (polished wheat grain) while the people of Bsoṛīno prepared scrambled eggs.

Since thick *garso* retains heat for a long time, the procession of Mīdenians reached as far as the outer buildings of Bsoṛīno, while it did not take even 20 meters before the scrambled eggs went completely cold.

*Source:* Noted by the author during his stay in Ṭūr ‘Abdīn (August 1999). Mīden extends westwards up to the first buildings of Bsorīno. The settlements of ‘Ayn Wardo and Midyat are said to have applied a similar method of demarcation with the result in favor of ‘Ayn Wardo, corresponding to the present extent of their territory.

## IX

### ADVENTURES OF A MISCHIEVOUS BIRD

In the village of Dilmun in the Kish district of Mesopotamia there lived a pious woman, advanced in years. It was a spring day. The meadows were green and the air was filled with the smell of flowers, dew and sunshine. In the woman’s courtyard there was a mulberry tree, occupied by a flock of singing birds. A wonderful day to bake bread!

The woman worked the dough. In the oven she put an ember and some dry twigs and wood. She started to blow, yet the fire would not start.

Her futile efforts drew attention of a bird flying by. It was colorful and sang beautifully. The bird landed next to the old woman and bade her a greeting: Peace to you, granny! In her distress the old woman was happy to hear that.

“Where do you come from and what do you do?” she asked.

“I come from a distant country where there is nothing to eat. The people living there are poor,” answered the bird.

“Here you will get as much food as you like. Wait till I get the stove going and soon we will have bread. I will give you a big *qellūro*,” she said soothingly.

The hostess started to blow again. Yet the fire still would not burn. Seeing that the piece of ember stopped glowing and turned dim the bird offered help “A dry thorn has stuck in my leg. Take it out and try to set fire with it.” The old woman plucked the thorn and put it on the ember. A *gubb*<sup>23</sup> was heard and the fire blazed in the oven.

The old woman joyfully took to sticking the pieces of dough onto the hot walls of her stove. The last loaf, a *qellūro*, she gave to the bird.

“It is not enough for me,” objected the bird. “Give me seven loaves and a *qellūro* on top!”

The woman was unable to convince the bird that a single bird could not eat that much bread and that the *qellūro* alone would suffice him for a long time

The stubborn bird gave her a choice: either she give him what he demanded or she should return the thorn to its owner.

Thus the old woman had to satisfy his whim.

The bird spread his wings. On each wing he put three loaves of bread and the remaining two loaves he took loaded on his back. Then he flew away satisfied.

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<sup>23</sup> Gubb, a word describing the sound generated by an outburst of fire.

During the flight the bird spotted a flock of sheep guarded by shepherds. Here the fate offers me another opportunity to cheat a man, thought the rogue. He flew closer to the shepherds, and upon greeting them asked if they were not hungry by any chance.

“We are very hungry and weak. We are just looking for some food we could eat with milk. Bread would be the best. But it is not available here,” answered the shepherds.

The bird offered them the bread he had carried on his wings and back. Having satisfied their appetites the delighted shepherds thanked him kindly. In return for the gift they offered him some locusts, a tasty bite for any bird.

Yet the bird refused to accept it. For each loaf he demanded one ewe and for *qellūro*, a lamb.

All the shepherds’ pleading did not change his mind. Finally he was given what he wanted. With the sheep on his wings the bird flew away.

Flying over the land he noticed a group of peasants. They were dancing and singing to the sound of drums and pipes. It was a wedding party. On closer examination the bird discovered that there was no food around. When he asked about the cause of that he heard that the bridegroom was a poor man and he could not afford to buy a meal for the guests.

The bird found the bridegroom and whispered into his ear: call a butcher and a cook. Have them prepare delicious dishes from these sheep. All the guests were overjoyed. Everybody ate to the full.

When the party was drawing to an end and the guests started to leave wishing the newly wed couple good fortune, the bird gave the bridegroom an ultimatum. He demanded his seven sheep back together with the lamb or he was going to abduct the bride. Nobody was able to persuade him to change his mind: neither the butcher, who killed the sheep, nor the cook who prepared the meal, and not even any of the guests and the bride for whom that was a long awaited day. With his uncompromising approach the bird won again.

He made the bride sit on his wings and flew away. Finally, tired with the journey the bird landed on a big stone. He took out his pipe and started to sing a song. “In exchange for a thorn I got bread. In no time I had seven sheep instead. An hour has passed, for the sheep I got a lovely bride at last. What a shrewd, wise, unbeatable bird I am!”

In the vicinity of the stone a boy by the name of Ninós was playing. He was hunting birds with a sling. As soon as he spotted a colorful songbird singing a nice tune he put a stone in his sling. The shot went home. The bird fell to the ground.

Ninós captured the bird and set the bride free. As a punishment for the harm the bird had done to people the boy decided to keep him in captivity in his home. Each day he taught the bird a new word and in exchange listened to his singing till they became friends.

*Source: A. Arsalan, Tarte taš ’yōto ’āmmoyōto (Two folk tales), (Södertälje, Sweden:*

Assyriska Föreningen, 1989), 38-70. The text has been recorded in the Ṭūr ‘Abdīn dialect, and illustrated by Hanna al-Haek.

## X

### I AM A SON OF WHEAT AND BARLEY

Suffering brings back the memories of great deeds and their heroes. The following is an authentic story. It happened at the end of the 19th century and similarly to only few other stories has been passed orally up to our times. At that time Mesopotamia had been going through an over 300-year spell of continuous anarchy under the Ottoman rule. The scared peasants harvested the wheat under the cover of the night and then concealed the corn in masked holes dug in their houses. Their livestock was also in danger from the Kurds and to a lesser extent from Bedouins.

Abrohōm ‘Abo was the owner of two villages: Gər Šērān and Təl Barham. They extended over the area of over 5000 hectares. He grew cereals and kept livestock. Famed for his courage ‘Abo was called ‘the Samson of the Assyrians’, since being his father’s only son he never trimmed his hair. He wore his hair plaited into two long braids.

One day Gər Šērān was attacked by armed Bedouins from the Šammar tribe under the command of Ləbbad. Despite the villagers’ resistance the plunderers managed to lead away thousands of sheep. Abrohōm returning to the village from some trip saw the clouds of dust hovering over the sandy road. Knowing he was unable to recover the loot by force, he decided to do otherwise: he climbed up to the top of a nearby hillock close to the village of Qarašiyye. He threw his horse’s reins over a big stone, stuck his spear into the ground and hung his robe on it. Lying in a shade he patiently waited for the caravan. His eyes were fixed on the road. His position indicated firmness and determination as if to warn everybody that he would not let the sheep to pass that way.

On his approach, Ləbbad noticed the man and his challenging position. Not knowing who he might be, he sensed the intentions of the stranger. He sent two of his men to propose a share in the loot in return for letting them pass by without trouble. Abrohōm flatly refused.

“All the sheep are mine!” he said firmly. “I would rather die than see your chief steal my and my peasants’ sheep. The only way he can keep them is to beat me in fair combat.

Ləbbad had no choice but to accept the challenge. Refusal of a challenge thrown by a Christian would spoil his reputation. The sheikh’s companions have sworn by Allah that they would humbly respect the result of the duel.

The chiefs engaged in a desperate fight. The struggle continued for several rounds, yet both fighters remained saddle-fast. Then, when the horses met rushing from opposite directions, Abrohōm managed with a quick and swift lash of the whip to knock the turban off the Arab’s head. This resulted in Arab’s defeat. Ləbbad’s people were dismayed. However, the Arab refused to surrender

until he was thrown to the ground before Abrohōm's horse. The sheep thieves understood that the winner's aim was not to kill his opponent but to humiliate him, which was even worse.

With the defeated culprit marching in front of his horse and with the flock of sheep intact, Abrohōm triumphantly returned to the village amidst singing and cheers of the villagers. He did not allow anybody to even touch the loser. He decided to treat him as his private guest. The village was set on alert, but no attempt to rescue the captive was made.

After a month in captivity the host decided to set the Arab free. He dressed him in new clothes and loaded the horses with clothing, wheat and barley. On his way home the chief was accompanied by several Assyrian peasants.

Back in his village the Arab met with the hostility of his people. In vain did he try to explain to them that even among Christians one can find masters of spear and horse riding.

Days and months passed. Ləbbad was still unable to regain the confidence of his tribesmen and his former position. To put an end to this humiliation he decided to pay Abrohōm a visit. He asked his conqueror to help him prove to his people he was a wise and courageous man. Abrohōm agreed to help his guest and told him to go back to his village and wait for his visit.

A few days later accompanied by five chosen warriors Abrohōm approached Ləbbad's village. The leader with dignity rode some 200 meters before his retinue. As soon as Ləbbad saw them he shouted eagerly: Here comes Abrohōm! Stand up to him he who has enough strength! Many tried to unseat Abrohōm from the saddle, yet none of them could even reach him. The attackers were falling off their horses one by one. Abrohōm continued his walk until he stopped before Ləbbad's tent. He stuck his spear in the ground and called loudly: "Ləbbad a guest has come to see you!"

The show of Abrohōm's warrior skills and his words filled Ləbbad's heart with joy. They shook hands and the people gathered around to see them. Only then did they understand their chief's position.

Ləbbad's mother enjoyed high esteem among the Bedouins. People asked her for advice in important matters. Therefore, it was she who suffered most because of her son's defeat. On Abrohōm's entrance to the tent she was sitting in the part of the tent reserved for women (harem).<sup>24</sup> Seeing a strange looking man with plaited hair she said respectfully: ... "You are a wise, strong and noble man. Yet I feel pity for you because you have been misguided by the Christian faith." Such an attitude, which is unfortunately rather widespread, is not conducive to friendship.

In the same year Abrohōm came to pay a visit to the chieftain of the Ṭay another local Bedouin tribe to express his good wishes on the occasion of a

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<sup>24</sup> Harem, a part of a Muslim household reserved for women. No strangers are allowed there.

Moslem holiday. The guest was ushered to the tent occupied by the leader. Seeing a stranger the host was prepared to stand up to greet him. However, his advisor whispered to his ear that the stranger was a Christian famed for his victory over Ləbbad. But the chieftain did not believe that the visitor was Abrohōm, the legendary warrior. Remaining seated he asked:

“Whose son are you?”

Seeing through the host’s intention Abrohōm answered, “I am a son of wheat and barley!”

This is a wise answer. If you had spoken boastfully of your lineage in my presence, you would not leave this tent alive “commented the sheikh.

*Source:* Tape-recording made by the author’s father.