

THE MUSIC OF KURDISTAN JEWS

A SYNOPSIS OF THEIR MUSICAL STYLES

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Cultural-geographical conditions

Kurdistan never was a region that developed an independent statehood, defined by physical frontiers and political or educational institutions, and guaranteeing an historical continuity of national schools of thought in sciences or arts. Its more recent political history has demonstrated the inevitable results of decentralization under the sovereignties of several foreign neighbouring countries, including a strong tendency towards linguistic as well as musical dialect formation. It is only natural that the musical traditions of Kurdistan Jews should also have been conditioned by this long historical process, by the multi-national and multi-linguistic character of their host country. On the other hand, this insecure political condition undoubtedly helped to stabilize and even to heighten the differentiation of variants of musical styles, forms, and melodic intonations.

On the whole, Kurdistan is known as a territory of cultural regression where residues of archaic languages and, parallel to them, of archaic singing and playing have survived the vicissitudes of history. It is certain that many aspects of their expression in speaking as in song preserve some remnants of an early pre-Christian style; in other words, here we seem to have some samples of a living antiquity, doubly interesting in that it is to a considerable extent connected with Jewish history of the biblical period.

In Kurdistan, as in other ancient civilizations where music has remained an unwritten folk tradition, the human voice is still the main constituent in the formation of melodic style, which is closely bound to the specific articulation of speech and intonation of sound. As far as song is bound to holy texts — as is the case in these ancient theocratic communities — the musical sound remains a close function of speech. In our case the ancient Aramaic language has remained to this day the living home-language of the Kurdistan Jews as well as of the Christian Nestorian sect in the same regions.

Thus, the outstanding characteristic of Jewish music in Kurdistan — and it is unique — is the Aramaic song, which must be distinguished from the Hebrew, which is performed in the generally-known oriental sephardic style.

The stylistic features of this Aramaic liturgical speech-melody include a pure monophony of melodic lines displaying a tendency to stretch over long tracts in a litany or parlando style, especially if the text is of a narrative nature (as in the chanting of the biblical books, or the Zohar in *targum*, i.e. the Aramaic language). If the contents are of a poetical or meditative-cabalistic nature, the words may be interrupted by long and drawn-out melodic tropes (melismata) produced in a slow and deep vibrato, often connected with a curious change of voice timbre.

In addition to these basic qualities of song, the Kurdistan styles of music vary according to the geographical situation of the territories inhabited by Jewish communities, clearly divided into four: Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria. The meeting place of their mutual boundaries, that particular corner between the Euphrate and Tigris where the south-eastern corner of Turkey meets the north-eastern part of Syria, the north of Iraq and the north-west of Persia, equals the centre of Kurdish Jewish colonization, and presents a four-fold symbiosis of styles with their correspondent variants of musical dialects. Jewish tribes have lived in all these four territories since the time of the Babylonian exile (seventh century B.C.E.) in an uninterrupted continuity. The special phenomenon of Kurdish Jewish music is the preservation of the Aramaic language in the face of the growing influence of Islam and the Arabic idiom. Generally, Aramaic was obliterated as a spoken language in nearly all the territories conquered by Islam. Therefore, its continued use in Kurdistan may serve as an indication that Arabic culture had not (or only to a minor degree) succeeded in penetrating the impassable clefts and ravines of the mountain zones of Kurdistan with their small and isolated hamlets.

Like the language and the human type, the music is part of an archaic structure which is doubly precious to us as it has been preserved for nearly 2700 years, not in archeological vestiges, but in the full flowering of a musical folk-culture.

Kurdistan Jews are among the few Jewish tribes that settled as free peasants among the general Moslem population (though there are some entirely Jewish places, like Sindur, Agra, Bet-Nürf).

This means that they lived as free men and we may take it for granted that in the sphere of secular folk life they accepted the folk usages of their surroundings to a considerable degree. As an agrarian country, Kurdistan became the classical setting of a scriptless peasant culture: every public or historical event turned into a lyric, a song, an epic or a dance, and each of these transformations developed its musical categories. In particular, the Kurds, and with them the Kurdish Jews, have to this day remained the last stronghold of the great bards, the true chroniclers of their own people.

A serious study of Jewish song in Kurdistan should comprise (a) a separate

description of the specific composition of the local traditions of music in each of the four national provinces and (b) the analysis of single musical forms (like cantillation motifs, prayer tunes, dance songs, etc.) across the four national boundaries. A further factor in the formation of Jewish song in that meeting-place of four countries is (c) the multi-lingual disposition of the communities concerned. No less than four languages are used (by the men) in each of the sectors. While three of them, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Gurmanġi, may be considered as the common stock, the fourth language — being one of the national idioms of Iraq, Persia, Turkey and Syria — lends a determinative accent which helps to differentiate the musical dialects. (Smaller communities of Kurdistan Jews have also been known in Soviet Armenia.)

The bulk of the Jewish population, however, stems from North-Eastern Iraq, with the vernacular Arabic as an additional idiom. General acquaintance with it and with Arabic culture and its musical tradition may be considered as a further factor in the formation of Jewish song in Kurdistan. It makes itself felt mainly in the sphere of artistic town music with small bands of instrumentalists — a relatively recent acquisition surviving from medieval Islamic culture. To a lesser degree, and much simplified, this Iraqi music with *'ud* and *kamanġa* (lute and violin) can be heard in the dispersed townlets of the Kurdish mountains wherever some Jewish families had settled down.

However, the main contribution of Kurdistan Jewry to Eastern music consists in its song of liturgical character. Here the formative elements were the traditional bonds with Hebrew music, as used in Bible-cantillation and *hazzanūt*, which had been taught to the unskilled rural communities by emissaries from the spiritual centers of Judaism (Baghdad, Jerusalem). But these teachings reached them in the official "oriental-sephardic" style which soon began to supplant their indigenous and ancient "mountain"- (or *ġebelī*-) style. This ancient Mesopotamian melody still lingers in the memories of the older people. Hence the dual disposition of the more educated Kurdish cantors who can, on request, produce the same liturgical text with a *ġebelī* or with a sephardic melody. But time is working against the survival of the genuine style, and the task of collecting and analysing the peculiarities of this "mountain" melos is most urgent, so that the last remnants of Aramaic chant, possibly one of the rare extant sounds connecting us with Jewish antiquity, may be salvaged.

An additional source of music contributing to the symbiosis of Jewish styles in the Kurdish regions is the Kurdistan folk song proper, in the (non-semitic) *gurmanġi* language of the Moslem Kurds, with its rich unwritten literature of folk-epics, ballads and dance tunes, which has been widely accepted by the Jews and integrated into the rest of their singing styles. In many cases, the Jewish bards and ballad singers may even be considered the true representatives of this type of musician. The fact that Kurdistan Jews used to live as

free peasants side by side with their Moslem neighbours — a rare instance in the history of the diaspora — undoubtedly contributed to their identification with that country's folk ways, and to their full acceptance of its lore and song.

Summarizing the distribution of languages and musical structures, even within the one (and main) Iraqi sector of Kurdistan, we get the following classification:

1. The Hebrew idiom for the liturgical music of the Synagogue.
2. The Aramaic (or *targūm*) idiom for the spiritual and paraliturgical music of the *hêder*, *yešivah*, and home services. It is used in the study, vulgarization and paraphrasing of the holy texts.
3. The Arabic idiom for the social style of secular songs, of popular and artistic town music.
4. The Kurdish (*gurmangî*) idiom for the genuine Kurdistan folklore of heroic epics, ballads, or dance songs and tunes representing peasant and village folk life and customs.

This division reflects the two main categories of community life: Nos. 1 and 2, the Hebrew and Aramaic tradition of music, constitute the cycle of the Liturgical Year, while Nos. 3 and 4, the Arabic and Kurdistan folklore, constitute the cycle of ceremonial folk life, from birth to death.

Only by studying this double cycle of forms and events of the structural and the social history of musical traditions, of monotheistic and animistic beliefs, can we hope to arrive at a better understanding of the archaic melos of Kurdish Jews.

Within these two liturgical and ceremonial orders of music, there are some leading classes which may be briefly described here.

One of them, and the central one, is the *reading of the biblical books*. Reading here means chanting, and chanting implies the melodization of the verbal text into a kind of dialectical speech-melody. Its dialectic character is evident in the close connexion between melos and syntax, i.e. between the small melodic motifs and the syntactical construction of the textual sentence. Each one of the melodic fragments symbolizes a definite portion of a full sentence, and is therefore not interchangeable. The closely knitted groups of motifs follow the grammatical punctuation and the phrasing of the sentences. There is much room for ornamentation, extension or contraction of the individual motifs, but not for interchange. Every little motif has to be recurrent in order to facilitate the recognition of the same melodic feature at the same literary and syntactical point. This chanting may also be termed analytical melody, as it analyses the parts of which the sentence is composed, and thus emphasizes the meaning of the text. To outline, isolate, separate and group what logically belongs to one unit of thought (= sentence), are the main functions of this enhanced speech-melody. The idea of narrating long stories with a melodic

intonation and, in particular, of immersing religious texts in an incessant stream of melody, as an esoteric medium of communication, was a common trend in most old Asiatic cultures. This is above all a distinctive constituent of oral folk literatures, as of the heroic epics of the East where a single proto-melody line served thousand verses.

The melodic intonation applied to a written literature such as the biblical books may once have been much the same as in the oral tradition. Especially in the poetical Book of Psalms, with its many regular structures of parallelistic half-verses, the simple early melody scheme may have been enough to carry over hundreds of verses. But the situation was very different when this proto-melody-line was adopted for the prose books of the Bible. Here it had to undergo a fundamental transformation which eventually led to the written symbols (reading accents, in Hebrew *ta'amey-miqra*) and their final codification by the Tiberian school of Masoretes (tenth century).

Yet, this new system was not accepted everywhere, or, if accepted, not fully and not in the creative spirit in which it had finally crystallized. In the remote and mountainous territories of northern Mesopotamia, the foreign Tiberian reading system probably never became firmly rooted, and the readers continued to chant in the older familiar Babylonian system, or even in a scheme in common use for story-telling and folk epics.

We must therefore distinguish between the Masoretic tradition of chanting the Bible, and a pre- or extra-Masoretic one. While we are acquainted with many communal variants of chanting the masoretic accents, we know very little of Jewish traditions that remained outside this rabbinical doctrine — whether by mere accident of history, as with the Indian Jews of Cochin, or because of adverse geo-political conditions, as with the Kurdish Jews, or through a conscious act of refusal, as with the Jewish sects of the Samaritans, or Karaites.

We shall now give a short survey of musical structures from both the liturgical and the secular cycles of Kurdish Jews, as developed within their tradition.

I. *From the Cycle of the Liturgical Year.*

(a) *The Psalms.* As we have already remarked, the chanting style of the psalms is representative for all forms in a poetical mode. As is well known, the poetic language of the Bible does not know rhyme or metre, but is constructed on the basis of a verse composed of two parallel-half-verses, containing the same concept or image in two variant wordings. Following the structure of these dychothomic verses, the music, too, is split into two halves with a common tonal axis along which the greater part of the verbal text is chanted in a kind of parlando recitative. Small melodic tropes are added only at the

punctuation points at the beginning, middle and end, in order to mark the division of verses. In the following example the chanting of Psalm XCII, 13–14, is given in a Kurdish and a Baghdadian version, for comparison.

Example 1: Ps. XCII a) Kurdish

b) Baghdadian

The image shows two musical examples, each with a Kurdish and a Baghdadian version. Each version is represented by a staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notes are represented by black squares on the staff, with stems and beams indicating pitch and rhythm. The lyrics are written below the staffs.

Versus 13:
 Kurd.: *Şad-diğ kat-tâ-mâr yif - râh / ke-'e - rez bal-vâ-nôn yis-ge.*
 Baghd.: *Şad-diğ kat-tâ-mâr yif - râh / ke-'e - rez bal-vâ-nôn yis-ge.*

Versus 14:
 Kurd.: *Şe - tû-lim be-vêt 'â-dô-nây / be-ħaş - rôt 'E-lô-hê-nû yaf-rî-ħû.*
 Baghd.: *Şe - tû-lim be-vêt 'â-dô-nây / be-ħaş - rôt 'E-lô-hê-nû yaf-rî-ħû.*

In both examples the recitation axis is not as clearly defined as we would expect. It is more a swinging around an imaginary declamation tone than its steady pulsation. The ambitus of each example is tetrachordal and the tone movement diatonical. Yet, in spite of the sparseness and paucity of the means, every tone has its definite function in this little edifice. In the Kurdish version, the declamation line is *d* (*re*), the medial motive *e-d* (*mi-re*) and the final one *c-d* (*do-re*), the ambitus being *c-f* (*do-fa*). In the case of the Baghdadian psalm chanting, the ambitus is between *d-g* (*re-sol*), the declamation line on the *e* (*mi*), the medial trope *f-e* and the final one *f-d*. It is interesting to note how little the official reading accents as laid down by the Masoretic text are used. The actual performance proceeds along a scheme of its own with a clear structure for one verse, but with all the parts extremely elastic and open to many variants necessitated by the change of texts, the number of syllables and the distribution of the tonal accents. Obviously, we have here an example of an archaic form of chanting that the masoretic redaction has passed over, leaving it in a state that may have existed long before the standardization.

(b) *The Prose Books*. An ancient form of cantillation, not conforming to the Tiberian system and not even to the earlier more indigenous Babylonian one, can be observed in the reading of the prose books (Pentateuch, Prophets, and the Hagiographs).

At least two historical phases can be discerned: the earlier representing (according to the explanations of the Kurdish cantor) the indigenous mountain

Ex. 3a (2)

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 160$



Verse 4: ♩ Wayyê- šê 'iš hab-bé-na - yîm mim ma-ħa-nôṭ Pliš - tîm,
 Gol- yâṭ še-mô mig-Gaṭ ; gov- hō šēs 'a - mōṭ wâ-zâ - - - reṭ .

Verse 5: ♩ We-ħô- va' ne-ħô - šeṭ 'al rô - šô , we-šîr -yôn
 qaš- qaš-sîm hú lâ- vûš : û- miš -qal haš šîr-yôn ħa-mê-šeṭ
 'a-lâ - fîm še -qâ-lîm ne - ħô - - - šeṭ .

hexachord *mi-do*, with tonic-mese *sol* in its midith also serves as the recitation note. The reading is nearly isometric and bare of ornaments.

Ex. 3b



Mi - peq - le go - ra min na - be - ne, min or - det Pa - les - tai - e,
 Go - liath ve - le shi - me min Gath, ro - ma - nu - sa de - de ish - ta
 dra - e u - kha se - ta.

(c) This is a reading of the David and Goliath chapter transmuted into a freely told folk narrative, or epic. The melodic structure has again changed and reveals a broad ambitus of more than two disjunctive tetrachords — it is the same epic verse unit structure which we were able to establish in another Kurdish Jewish Bible story, the legend of Joseph.

The direction of the melody is downwards, starting on the high note (*do*), the fall being arrested on three levels (which correspond more or less to the

Ex. 3c



Verse 1: De-shmu-un ku-lu mu-hi-be di - di _____



8 de ma-zi-tzun ku-lu 'a-zi-ze di-di _____



9 (ay) na-tzu-tzit Da-vid ha-me-lekh vë-Goliath Pa-lesh-traia



6 did në-ze-lu'l dash - tet. (ya) Ma-gid- - - - do (ho), yai-ya



(Refr.) Heif ue-tzad më-kha - ben u- mëga-bi - ne _____



8 el Da - - - - vid Shul - ta - na .



Verse 2: Jë'ma' lu kul- lu Pa-lesh-tai _____



8 se-le i-mo-hun Go-li-ath min Git-taie _____



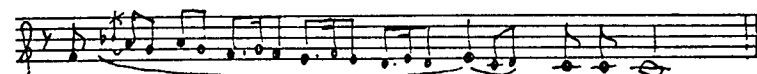
8 mi-re i-dio më-kal-tzi-nu Yis-ra-el



8 min shar - 'e (ya) u-da' - va - - - - ye (he), yë - i ye, ye - ye



Ah _____, (Refr.) Heif u- tzad më- khaa-ben u- mëgha-bi - ne _____, yah



8 el Da - - - - vid Shul - ta - na

corner notes of the two tetrachords: *do-sol, sol-fa, fa-do*), thus organizing each verse on a threefold plane. The terraced descent of the melodic recitation is further slowed up by an extensive ornamentation of the declamation lines in microtones and micrometrics. In addition, the three levels of recitation are knitted together by the repetition of the preceding final clause before starting the next level, as in the following model verses (Example 3c):

To sum up, we see here an extremely refined organism of melody scrupulously adhering to the rules of the poetical verse unit.

A more recent historical phase of biblical text recitation is given in the following example, which may demonstrate the Babylonian style of cantillation.

Ex. 4a/b

Kurd.: 
 1- Be-ré-šít bá-rá 'E-ló-hím 'et haš-šá-ma-yim we'et há-'á- res.

Babl.: 
 1-Be-ré-šít bá-rá 'E-ló-hím 'et haš-šá-ma-yim we'et há-'á- res.

Kurd.: 
 2-We há-'á- res há-ye-tá tó - hú wá - vó - hú we-hó-šek 'al pēnē te-hóm

Babl.: 
 2-We há-'á- res há-ye-tá tó - hú wá - vó - hú we-hó-šek 'al pēnē te-hóm

Kurd.: 
 we-rú-ah 'E-ló-hím me-ra-he-fet 'al pēnē hamma-yim

Babl.: 
 we-rú-ah 'E-ló-hím me-ra-he-fet 'al pēnē ham-ma-yim.

Kurd.: 
 3-Way-yô-mer 'E-ló-hím ye-hí 'ôr way -hi 'ôr.

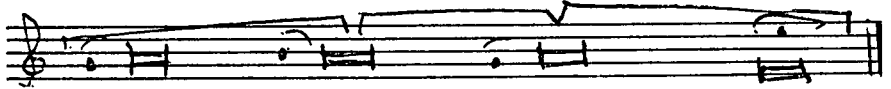
Babl.: 
 3-Way-yô-mer 'E-ló-hím ye-hí 'ôr way -hi 'ôr.

often, the unwritten annals of Jewish history were also preserved in these song archives.

The discovery of this class of musical poetry is recent and our knowledge of both the melodical as well as the textual practices and procedures is still in its infancy. What makes their exploration more difficult is the fact that all the true folk epics of secular content are told in the tribal language, i.e. in the non-Semitic *gurmanği* (and not, as for the Iraqi, in Arabic). This Kurdish tongue is not a written and literary language, and its syntax and vocabulary are only now being studied.

Analysis of the musical renderings of the epics is no less difficult. In the versified stories there is no spoken word; everything is melodized in the style of an intensely dramatic recitative, a kind of expressive speech melody. Like the text, the melody was conceived without any consideration for written musical symbols. It firmly defies any conventional notation and is best described in words or, if at all, written as a scheme of fundamental sound pitches, as in the following example (No. 6):

Ex. 6



We see here a very authentic and probably most archaic form of speech melody built on a one-tone declamation line (*la*). Around it, some related tonal units are grouped, remarkable in their economy: There are (1) besides this declamation or high tone an initial tone preparing its attack; (2) the lateral or affiliated tones above or below the high tone (*sol* and *si*) working as repercussion or vibration tones; and (3) the cadential fall to the fundamental note (*mi*).

The musical performance of such a dry scheme is most striking: the opening note is a loud, vibrating call uttered in one long breath that slowly peters out as it loses pitch. The recitation of the text then starts in a quick *parlando* style on the same high tone, which is now shaken and enlivened by small micro-ornamental tone-figures above and below which also accompany the descent to the tonic (*mi*) circumscribing it with a small *clausula*. In the above scheme, the total ambitus does not exceed a Fourth, though the auditive impression is that of a multitude of whirling microtones. While each verse is freely variegated as regards its melodic outline, the grouping of the diminutive tone-figures, the length and the rhythm, there is an underlying formal structure binding all the melody-verses into the same frame. The model-verse is tripartite as in the biblical epics, and reveals a fine balance in the organization of its fixed and variative particles within the scheme.

There is no doubt that the Kurdish epics may be incorporated into the great line of heroic epics of the Middle East, from India and Persia to Arabia,

the Caucasus, Georgia, and Turkey. Those of Kurdistan, spread over four of these territories, may perhaps have been the bridge leading to the great epic tradition of Greece and the Balkan countries. Not only the music impresses us as belonging to an ancient style, but also the personality of the Bardic singer: today, as in Pharaonic times, he sits, left hand covering the ear, right hand on his lap, moving in count, body swaying forwards and backwards, eyes half-closed, and face shining as if he were carried away by the force of his creative thought.

(b) *Dance Songs and Dance Tunes.* The Kurds, and with them the Jews of Kurdistan, are dancers by vocation, among the most fanatical dancers of the East. They dance day and night, weekdays and Sundays, without cause or instigation, but for the sheer joy of living. Their dance types are not very far from the Arab and Turkish male dances of the *debka* and *horrah*. Each type of dance has its special song whose name it bears, like the *šešani*, *lo suano*, *dalleleli*, *berissa*, *arabka*, and others. This is the place for the *muturbaya*, the professional musicians, usually a pair of them, playing the *zurna* (shawm) and the *tabla dohola* (Persian-Kurdish-Turkish Gran Cassa). These are practically the only music instruments found among the Kurdistan Jews, who seem to have preserved to the smallest detail the manner of dancing and playing of their ancient guest-country. The *zurna* is of conically carved wood, and the short but broad double-reed is mounted on a staple around which a metal disc is fastened. It serves as a support for the player's lips which have to be closed tightly around the reed in order to let it swing freely in the cavity of the mouth. This latter serves as a kind of "bag" to be filled with air, thus producing air pressure on the reed by the ancient nose breathing method. The *tabla dohola* drum consists of two skins stretched on a huge wooden cylinder with a diameter of 0.65 cm. The upper skin is beaten with a bent stick while the lower is lightly rubbed with an elastic whip. The double rhythms and double timbres of sound thus produced are quite exciting and combine well with the shrill and unchanging fortissimo piping of the *zurna*. Both instruments, in construction as well as in method of performance and sound production, are still of a medieval level of development — as are probably the choreographic forms of their dances.

The following example re-produces one of the characteristic *zurna* motives:

Ex. 7

The musical notation for Ex. 7 consists of two staves. The top staff is labeled 'Zurna' and contains a melody in 4/4 time. The melody begins with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G4, an eighth note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5. This is followed by a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, including several triplet markings. The bottom staff is labeled 'Drum' and shows a complex rhythmic accompaniment with various note values and rests, including some triplet markings.

In conclusion, here is the model-melody, and refrain of a dance song in the tradition of the Jews of Kurdistan:

Ex. 8

A - man, a - man a - man, a - man, a - man, a - man, a -
 -man, a - man a - man, a - man a - man a - man, a - man, a -
 -man, a - man a - man, g' - di g' - di a - ni.

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