

CHAPTER 1

1. BACKGROUND TO THE SPEECH COMMUNITY AND THE TEXTS

1.1 The village of Gawraǰū

The village of Gawraǰū (Persian گوراجوب; the final is generally not pronounced) is located in the western part of Kermanshah province. This province lies in the westernmost part of Iran, bordering Iraq. The province has a population of about 1.9 million people, almost half of whom inhabit the province's capital, the city of Kermanshah. The province is well known as the site of numerous archaeological sites, some of which date back to the Paleolithic Era. The most famous archaeological highlights are the magnificent monuments of the Achaemenid and Sasanian eras, including the Old Persian inscriptions of Darius the Great (521 BC at Bisotun), and the mixed Sasanian-Achaemenid edifices at Kangāvar.

The province is divided into fourteen counties (Shahrestans). Gawraǰū belongs to the county of Dālāhu (دالاهو), in the west of the province, in a region commonly called the Goran area. The name Gawraǰū is used collectively to refer to a cluster of four hamlets in the Zimkān river valley: Gawr. Morādbeyg (also called Gawr. Gawrā, and which includes the sub-hamlet Gawr. Qeshlāq), Gawr. Bābākaram, Gawr. Zeyd Ali, and Gawr. Safar Shah. Colloquially, the name Gawraǰū is also generally used to refer to the largest of these hamlets (Gawr. Morādbeyg), and this is what we will refer to as Gawraǰū in the rest of this book. Gawraǰū itself consists of about 250-300 houses, but as of 2012, only about thirty of those houses remained inhabited, for reasons outlined in the following paragraph. The nearest town is Īslāmābād (formerly Šāhābād). Gawraǰū can be reached by unsealed roads; the village has electricity and a post office.

Traditionally, the populace lives from small-scale agriculture and animal husbandry. The inhabitants of the village belong overwhelmingly to the Ahl-e Haqq, or Yaresan, religious group. They speak a peculiar dialect, close to the Gorani language used for the sacred texts of this religion. However, they also use a variety of Southern Kurdish as a lingua franca, and are taught exclusively in Persian at school, so these two languages are increasingly dominant (see next section). The village language, Gawraǰūyī, will almost certainly die out within one or two generations, not only because of the increasing dominance of other languages, but also because the village itself is under imminent physical threat through the construction of a dam on the Zimkān river, which will completely flood the valley. Construction work is well under way, and many of the village's inhabitants have already left the village.

1.2 The language situation

The language situation in Kermanshah province and adjacent regions is quite complex and has never been systematically investigated. There are three main languages, or language clusters, prevalent in the region. The first is Persian (Fārsī), the official language of the state of Iran, used as the sole medium of education in state schools and for all official purposes. As a consequence of compulsory schooling and exposure to mass media, competence in Persian is on the increase among the younger people, who probably all can now speak Persian. Genetically, Persian is classified as a Southwest Iranian language.

The second important group of languages are those that are commonly referred to as ‘Kurdish’ (*Kurdî*), more specifically, Central and Southern Kurdish dialects. Although the term Kurdish is fraught with difficulties (see MacKenzie 1961a), the fact remains that many people of Kermanshah province consider themselves ethnically and linguistically ‘Kurdish’, and refer to their language(s) as *Kurdî*. Indeed, the speakers of Gawraǰū sometimes refer to their language as *Kurdî*. In particular, *Kurdî Kermānšāhî* (Kermanshah Kurdish), in its various sub-varieties, is an important lingua franca throughout the region, and it is steadily advancing at the cost of local languages such as Gawraǰūyî (see next section). The varieties of Kurdish spoken in western Kermanshah province mostly belong to the Southern group of Kurdish.

Within the Iranian languages themselves, Kurdish has been traditionally classified as “Northwest Iranian”. But in fact, despite the widespread use of the term “Kurdish”, it has yet to be convincingly demonstrated that the languages concerned really do constitute a viable (i.e., reconstructible) group within Northwest Iranian. More recently, the categorical distinction between Northwest and Southwest Iranian has been called into question (Paul 1998, Korn 2003). According to this view, the Northern and Central groups of Kurdish are transitional dialects between Northwest and Southwest Iranian, while Southern Kurdish (e.g., of Kermanshah) is closer to Southwest Iranian. Resolving these issues go beyond the scope of this book, but we hope that the data contained in this documentation may contribute to a better understanding of the complex genetic and areal relationships among the languages of the region.

Another language spoken in the region, and considered by some to be Kurdish, is Laki, though its relationship to Kurdish remains controversial in the literature (see Fattah 2000 and Anonby 2004/2005 for recent discussion). Finally, the third major influence in the region is Gorani (see next section), generally considered to be a Northwest Iranian language. The most important dialect of Gorani is Hawrami, with its main geographical centre as Paveh, in Iran. It is also spoken in the area around Halabja in Iraq. We consider Gawraǰūyî to be a dialect of Gorani.

All three of the linguistic influences in the region have more or less developed written forms, literary traditions, and conventionalized standards. Persian is the most robustly standardized language, with a rich literary tradition and high prestige throughout the country. For Kurdish, the Central Kurdish dialect of Sorani has acquired some prestige as a written language and a language used in the mass media (satellite television), and indeed, it now serves as a language of administration in the neighboring Kurdish autonomous region of Iraq. Hawrami has a written tradition and there are local initiatives towards fostering the standardized, written form. This, then, is the broad linguistic triad within which local vernaculars such as Gawraǰūyî are situated. The villagers are generally trilingual, speaking Gawraǰūyî, Persian, and a local form of Kurdish for informal interactions with local people from outside the immediate village.

1.3 The term “Gorani”

There is considerable confusion surrounding the name Gorani. In the earlier European tradition of Iranian linguistics, the term Goranî (*Guranî*) was used to refer to the language of the “Guran”, a people considered distinct from both the Kurds and the Persians, and inhabiting an area on the northwest fringe of the Zagros mountains close to the present-day border of Iran and Iraq. A number of other groups were also included in the Guran, for example, the Bajalan, who live as far west as Mosul in today’s Iraq.¹ In part, this view of the matter is historically

¹ See the summary of earlier European scholarship in Hadank (1930).

motivated and is based on the use of “Gorani” as the written language in the principality of Ardalan, which was dominant in the region from approximately the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries. Gorani is also the name for the language of the sacred texts of the Ahl-e Haqq (or Yaresan) religion, with which the Ardalan were closely linked and which was considerably more widespread in the region than it is today. According to this account, the language Hawrami (Hawramani), spoken in the Awraman district of Iran and around Halabja in Iraq, is considered a “Gōrānī dialect” (MacKenzie 1966: 4). According to Hadank (1930: 76), Hawrami and the Gorani of the enclave of Kandula constitute the “core” of the Gorani language.

However, present-day usage among the inhabitants of the area is quite different. The term Gorani, if used at all as a language name, is only used to refer to the language of poetry and of the sacred texts of the Ahl-e Haqq. Otherwise, people refer rather generally to “Kurdī” for most varieties of Central and Southern Kurdish used as lingua francas throughout the region, and may even extend the term to other languages. The main distinction drawn by the people of the region is thus between Kurdī and Hawrami for the variety of Paveh. The term Gorani is therefore not part of common usage among laypeople. Recent fieldwork in Iraq (2010) by Mahmoudveysi confirmed the existence of pockets of what we would refer to as Gorani in locations even as far as the north-west areas of the Mosul region in northern Iraq.² But the speakers of these varieties refer to them with such names as Bājalānī, Kākāyī, Šexānī, Šabakī, and Zangana. The name Māčo (lit., ‘he says’) is also commonly used by the speakers concerned, usually as a collective term for these Iraqi varieties.

Linguistically, there is little doubt that these now isolated pockets are quite closely related to the Gorani dialects of Iran, such as Gawraǰūyī, and in particular, to the dialect of the village of Zarde, which we are also investigating in the framework of our project, but not yet including in the present publication. We take this as indicative of an earlier, much larger area in which various forms of Gorani were once spoken, but which progressively eroded through the encroachment of Kurdish. Outside of the core regions of Hawraman, the varieties of contemporary Iraq, as well as those of Gawraǰūyī and Zardeyī, constitute more or less remnant pockets of this earlier Gorani area. Such a view was already expounded by MacKenzie (1961a). Thus our usage of the term “Gorani” evokes a historical unity of which speakers of the scattered remnant dialects today are largely unaware. It is, of course, a matter of dispute whether scientific terminology should depart from laypeople’s perceptions, but in the present case, there seems to be good reason to maintain the term “Gorani”, in particular because no other term is available. Thus, our standpoint is that languages and dialects such as Gawraǰūyī, Zardeyī, and others, which exhibit deep similarities to the comparatively well-documented “Hawrami” of Paveh and surroundings (see MacKenzie 1966), can be included in an overarching “Gorani” language (or language group), of which Hawrami is but one representative, albeit the most robust and, in terms of morphology, complex and archaic.

The genetic relationships between the individual Gorani languages remain poorly understood. However, Hawrami and the variety of Gorani spoken in the village of Kandula (north of Kermanshah) appear to be closest to each other (see Paul 2007: 291 and Hadank 1930), while that of Gawraǰū differs from these in a number of important respects (e.g., lack of gender, several differences in the paradigms of verbal agreement). Broadly speaking, Gawraǰūyī

² Mahmoudveysi’s observation confirms the account provided by Hadank (1930: 43), who discusses a narrow stretch of Gorani-speaking enclaves running some 500 kilometers along a southeast-northwest axis from the border region towards Mosul. Hadank, however, refers to these “westernmost outliers of the Gūrān” as “Bājalān”.

appears to have undergone stronger influence from Southern Kurdish, although it may be premature to attribute the differences to contact influence. The dialect of Zarde, on the other hand, is closer to the Hawrami (Paveh) and Kandulai end of the spectrum. Mahmoudveysi's fieldwork in Iraq suggests that the dialects in Iraq are likewise remarkably similar to the Zarde variety, despite distances of hundreds of kilometers and a national border that separates them.

Traditionally, the small town of Gahvāre has been a cultural and administrative centre of the Gorani-speaking Ahl-e Haqq communities in the region. It lies approximately twenty kilometers northeast of Kerend, and Gahvāre is also a mere ten kilometers from Gawraǰū, but the road between the two is extremely poor. When Oskar Mann visited the town in 1902, a variety of Gorani was still widely spoken there, and Mann was able to gather extensive language material, reproduced in Hadank (1930: 436-455). However, when Ludwig Paul visited the township in 2004, only three speakers remained, all over seventy years old, and having only restricted competence in the language (Paul 2007). The language has thus been almost totally abandoned in favor of the local variety of Southern Kurdish, and more recently, Persian. In fact, it appears that Gorani is still spoken in only two villages in the entire area, Gawraǰū and Zarde.

In sum, the language of Gawraǰūyī represents a remnant pocket of the Gorani that was once spoken across a wide area. An overview of the traditional Gorani speech zone, showing the most important villages and towns with the names of the tribes, is provided in Map 1 on page 6. Over the past century, most Gorani speakers have shifted to Kurdish and Persian. It is only a matter of time before Gawraǰūyī likewise becomes extinct.

1.4 Fieldwork procedure

The texts were recorded in situ in the village during two periods of fieldwork in October 2007 and in October 2008. The interviewer was Parvin Mahmoudveysi, who spoke as little as possible during the interviews. She herself speaks a variety of Kurdish very close to the Kurdish vernacular widely used as a lingua franca in the region. Most of the time, she intentionally did not speak her own variety of Hawrami in order to avoid influencing the speakers in their own use of the language. On several occasions the speakers lapsed into Kurdish, at which point Parvin would politely request that they continue speaking in Gawraǰūyī. Nevertheless, there was a fair amount of spontaneous and mostly unintentional or unconscious code-switching in the texts. These stretches of speech have also been transcribed but indicated as Kurdish and enclosed by curly brackets, {...}.

The recordings were made with a Zoom H2 recorder using built-in microphones to enable recordings to be made spontaneously, and to make the recording situation as unintrusive as possible. The sound was recorded using a linear WAV-format at 44 KHz frequency. Some of the recordings were subsequently processed using Adobe Audition to increase the volume, which was too low due to the less-than-ideal recording conditions and the use of the internal microphones.

A number of people of the village were recorded at the initial stage, but it soon became evident that these people differed widely in the extent to which they had active command of Gawraǰūyī (or at least in the extent to which they were willing to use the language consistently). After some experimentation, two main speakers were found who were both willing and able to provide connected, spoken narratives. Our two main speakers were Arus and Alidust. Arus is a married woman of approximately thirty years of age, who had spent her entire life in the village. On the whole, out of all our informants, she speaks the most

consistent and pure form of Gawraǰūyī. Alidust (AD) is a man of approximately seventy-five years of age, who is also a native of the village. In the texts, he tends to use more Kurdish elements, and he speaks a little less clearly, making some stretches difficult to analyze. Both speakers have basic school education (four to five years), and also speak Kurdish and Persian. In addition, recordings were also made with three unmarried women. As they prefer to remain anonymous, they are referred to by the abbreviations YFH, YFF, and YFN (Young Female H etc.). These texts include dialogue passages and contain fascinating insights into daily life in the village.

In the first stage following the recordings, a rough transcription and translation were produced using the software package ELAN.³ The details of transcription were successively modified as further texts were transcribed, and the translations were likewise modified. Due to visa restrictions and political unrest in the region in 2009, it was not possible to spend an extensive period of time in the village, so most of the work on the texts was done in Germany. A number of questions of interpretation were clarified by consulting Fereidoon Hosseini, originally of Gahvāre, who has a good active command of Gawraǰūyī (though not that of a native speaker); nonetheless, some questions remain unsolved. Of the approximately twenty-five texts recorded, nine were selected for complete analysis and they appear in this book. Seven of them are also provided on the CD accompanying the book (cf. p. 79 for details of the texts). In total they amount to approximately ninety-four minutes of recordings. The texts were chosen to provide a reasonably representative cross section of speaker and topics, but criteria such as recording quality and coherency were also considered.

Once a reasonably consistent orthography had been developed, the texts were entered into the software program FLEx⁴ to facilitate analysis and glossing, and to enable production of the lexicon. This work was undertaken by Denise Bailey in collaboration with Parvin Mahmoudveysi.

³ ELAN Linguistic Annotator, developed by Han Sloetjes at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen.

⁴ FLEx refers to SIL FieldWorks Language Explorer, developed by SIL International.