

Autochthonous Texts in the Arabic Dialect of the Jews in Tiberias

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in the Arabic Dialect
of the Jews of Tiberias

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 General features

On October 16, 1998, I began to conduct interviews with Arabic-speaking Jews in Tiberias [yahūdi Tabarāni fem. Tabraniyye¹ Pl. yahūd Tabārne~wlād Tabariyye].² From then until the time of writing, I have been occupied here in the topographically lowest town under the Galilee skies. My research was actually a continuation study of Arabic dialects in northern Israel, which has already resulted in the publication of a book on the urban dialects of Haifa in the first half of the twentieth century.³ During my fieldwork in Haifa, I discovered a disappearing world and the vanishing voices of the Arabic dialects among the Jews in Galilee: in Safed,⁴ Pqi'in,⁵ and Tiberias. The number of informants on those significant dialects has been decreasing day by day since that time, from more than two hundred people at the end of the twentieth century and less than a hundred in 2007 in all the above-mentioned settlements.

Jews have been living in Tiberias for centuries with only brief interruptions over the last two thousand years.⁶ They have spoken Arabic as their mother tongue in Galilee, especially in cities holy to the Jews such as Safed and Tiberias. In Safed, but not in Tiberias, Sephardi Jews used to speak Yiddish besides Arabic. The Jews of Pqi'in according to local tradition had never left the Holy Land and found shelter in caves in the high mountains of Upper Galilee. Arabic-speaking Jews were also found in Shfar'am until the 1920s, and then had to migrate to Haifa, where Arabic-speaking Jews had settled since the beginning of the nineteenth century, especially between the

1 See for example 40, 8.

2 48, 95. The informants call the city *Tabariyya*; the rural dialects thereabouts, Tiberias is pronounced *Tabariyye*, similar to the official Turkish pronunciation which is also used nowadays.

3 Aharon Geva-Kleinberger, *Die arabischen Stadtdialekte von Haifa in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004). [hereinafter ASH]

4 "Living amongst the Spirits: Death and Superstition as Reflected in the Arabic and Hebrew Vocabulary of the Jews of Safed". *Mediterranean Language Review* (MLR 2001), 12, 18-40.

5 "Last Informants of the Jewish-Arabic Dialect of the Ancient Community of Pqiqin" in *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* (WZKM 2005) 95, pp. 45-61.

6 In 18 AD Herod's son, Herod Antipas founded Tiberias, named in honor of Tiberius Caesar. He made the city his capital in order to promote Hellenistic culture and influence in the Galilee. Some Arab references deny this above mentioned etymology and suggest the obscure Arabic root *t-b-r* "to jump"; see Ibrāhīm Yahya Ash-Shihabi, *Tabariyya: Turāt wa-Dikrayāt* [Tiberias: Heritage and Memories]. (n.p.: Dār iš-Šāqara, 1999), p. 9. More historical data on the establishment of Tiberias can be found in Helga Dudman, and Elisheva Ballhorn, *Tiberias* (Jerusalem: Carta, 1988), pp. 13-27 and Yisrael and Phyllis Shalem, *The Complete Guide to Tiberias and the Sea of Galilee*. See also al-Hilou, *Topographische Namen des syro-palästinischen Raumes nach arabischen Geographen: historische und etymologische Untersuchung* (Dissertation der Freien Universität Berlin, 1985), p. 240-241. He writes: "Tabariyya ist durch aram. Vermittlung die Übernahme des röm. Namens Tiberias (nach dem Namen des röm. Kaisers Tiberius). Die ar. Geographen kannten schon die Herkunft des Namens, wobei sie den röm. Namen unterschiedlich überlieferten". Muṣṭafā Murād Ad-Dabbāgh, *Bilādunā Filastīn* (Kufr Qara; Dār al-Hudā, 1964, rep. 1991), I, p. 70. This book also refers to the establishment of Tiberias in the period of Herod Antipas. See also Yizhar Hirschfeld and Mordechay Naor, *Tvēryā: m-Isodá ve-ξád ha-Kibúš ha-Muslemí* (Tiberias: from its Beginning and until the Muslim Occupation, in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 1988), pp. 5-6.

years 1831-1840⁷ during the Egyptian occupation of the region. Some of the Tiberias Jews came from North Africa, especially Morocco. Gradually, those Arabic-speaking Jews of Galilee came to identify themselves by all-inclusive term "Arab Jews", an expression that gradually faded out by the time of the establishment of the State of Israel.⁸ As we see, the core group of Jews who spoke Arabic as a first language was urban, yet there were also some villages where Jews spoke Arabic for shorter times, such as Metulla on the Lebanese border, and Ja'uni farther south.⁹ However, informants in those rural places were few and did not bequeath Arabic to their children as a mother tongue since they spoke other languages, most of them of European origin, such as Yiddish, Rumanian and Russian.

The difference between the Jews of Tiberias and Safed is not limited to the dialectal field but arises from wide anthropological dissimilarity and antagonism. This difference also undoubtedly had a topographical cause. Tiberias is located some two hundred meters below sea level on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, while Safed lies on the slopes of Upper Galilee some eight hundred meters above sea level. The two settlements therefore have significantly different climates. Safed is characterized by its cold weather with snow and heavy rains in winter, which unfortunately, do not tend to stay long in the city but stream down to the Sea of Galilee. Tiberias is located on the lake and enjoys hot and humid weather with less rain but lots of water, some originating in the region of Safed and the rest drawn from the Sea of Galilee itself. The scarcity in Safed of available water, which descends to Tiberias, the less rainy city, caused much conflict between the cities. The inhabitants of Safed were said to be stingy, because they had to go to a communal well in the city whereas the Tiberians had water and vegetables all year round in their gardens that were watered directly and without any significant effort from the lake itself. So the people of Safed claimed that the Tiberians were exploitative, too lazy and too happy. In comparison, the Safedis were considered gloomy, besides being stingy and tightfisted. The Tiberians could wash their clothes right in the Sea of Galilee but the Safedis could wash theirs on Fridays alone, for the Sabbath. The Safedis had to be sparing in washing themselves, while the inhabitants of Tiberias could easily go to the Sea of Galilee to bathe. This also led to antagonistic proverbs: the Safedis said about Tiberias: "*Tabariyya hžārha sūd w sukkānha zrūd*" ["Tiberias has black stones and its dwellers are monkeys"] whereas the people of Tiberias used to say: "*Sáfadi- ráfadi!*" ["One has always to say *no* to a Safadi!"].¹⁰ No wonder then that there were also dialectal differences between the Jewish dwellers of the two cities. These dissimilarities are

7 On the population of *qaḍāz Tabariyya* at the time of the Ottoman census of 1884/6, see Mahmoud Yazbak, *Haifa in the late Period, 1864-1914: A Muslim Town in Transition* (Leiden; Boston; Köln: Brill, 1998), p. 97; one of the eminent Jews of Tiberias during the eighteenth century was Rabbi Haim Ḥabu l-Eṣṭafya. Details on this figure can be found in Aharon Bahbut, *Rabbénū Haim Abu-l-Eṣṭafya: Zimrát ha-Arets* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Ets-ha-Haim, 1987). On the population numbers in Tiberias, see Al-Marqashli A., Hashem A.H. and Sayegh, Anis, *al-Mawsū'a al-Filasṭīniyya* (Damascus: Hay'at al-Mawsū'a al-Filasṭīniyya, 1984), p. 99.

8 Photographs from the early twentieth century show that the dress and general appearance of those "Arab Jews" was very like their Arab Muslim neighbors. See Silver-Brody, *Documentors of the Dream*, p. 222. See also pictures of Jews in Iraq in Arabic dress in Reuven Snir, *Arabness, Jewishness, Zionism* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East, Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2005), pp. 17, 25, 51-52.

9 Rosh Pina – a Jewish settlement some thirty kilometers north of Tiberias, on the eastern slopes of Mount Canaan.

10 These sayings are known today only among Jewish informants. They might have been in use only among Jews in the past. The Arabic bibliography on Tiberias has no reference to this matter.

easily located especially in the lexicon. Since Tiberias is located on the Sea of Galilee and therefore nourished from it, we find in Tiberias names of various fishes and lake-life while these terms are not used and are even unknown in Safed.

This book is definitely not just a linguist or dialectological study.¹¹ The aim of the book is to preserve the Arabic dialect of the Jews of Tiberias since it is becoming obsolete. The book contains texts that can serve as basic material for a large spectrum of researchers in the fields of history, anthropology and sociology and even zoology and botany. These texts are indispensable for a better understanding of Jewish life in the period of the late Ottoman Empire and during the British Mandate in Palestine. Additionally, the texts are vital to the field of Arab-Jewish relations in this crucial time. Whoever reads the texts, gets the immediate impression that they reflect a normal way of speaking which includes stammering and hesitations. The texts, which belong to the stream of oral history,¹² are free of political alignment, although Jewish informants told all of them, since they contain valuable information on a whole range of subjects. Several texts describe life during the Ottoman period, particularly in Tiberias, and in Palestine as a whole. After the Turkish time we find texts on the British rule of the Holy land.

On one hand, in various texts, the Jews of the city are described somewhat negatively during Israel's War of Independence, but on the other hand, there are texts and paragraphs that tell of the brutality of Arab riots against the Jews of Tiberias. Yet other texts take a third way of representing relations between the Arabs and the Jews of the city. They portray a time before tension arose between these conflicting groups. This period can be named the "innocent time", especially towards the end of the Ottoman Empire and during the first years of British rule in Palestine.¹³ The texts of this research also include details on Arab neighbors. Those years witnessed good-neighborly relations between Jews and Arabs in Tiberias, flourishing commercial ties and a happy, innocent life along the picturesque shores of the Sea of Galilee. All the informants were unanimous in saying that the Sephardi Jews, who were closer to the way of life of the Arabs and spoke their language as a mother tongue, became extremely antagonistic towards the Arabs with the passage of time, especially during

11 This type of research is also reflected in the work of Schmidt and Kahle, *Volkserzählungen aus Palästina* and the colorful fieldwork of G. Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*. For a better understanding of the urban dialects of the Palestinian group, see L. Bauer, *Das Palästinische Arabisch: Die Dialekte des Städters und des Fellachen*. For the region of Tiberias which according to Bergsträßer somehow belongs to the Lower Galilee area, see H. Palva, *Lower Galilean Arabic*. A useful book on the Druze dialects of the region is H. Blanc, *Studies in North Palestinian Arabic*. The book by J. Sonnen, *Die Beduinen am See Genesareth*, helps to understand the influence of Bedouins on the urban dialect of the Jews of Tiberias. Books of secondary importance for this research are J. Blau, *Syntax des palästinensischen Bauerdialekts von Bir Zet* and E. N. Haddad, *Manual of Palestinian Arabic*. The book by W. Arnold, *Die arabischen Dialekte Antiochiens*, aids understanding the Arabic dialect of the Jews of Tiberias since it contains data on the dialect of the Jews of the Antakya region which in various respects resembles that of Tiberias, e.g., in verb conjugation. A book of great importance for me for this research for better understanding of the Jewish life in Palestine in the late Ottoman period and in the time of the British Mandate time is Moshe Piamenta, *Jewish Life in Arabic Language and Jerusalem Arabic in Communal Perspective* (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2000).

12 See for example S. A. Sowayan, *The Arabian Oral Historical Narrative* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrasowitz, 1992).

13 British forces conquered Tiberias on September 25, 1918, only two days after the fall of Haifa. The 4th Australian Brigade entered the city. See Kedar, B. Z. *Mabat ve-od Mabat gal Erets Israel* [Looking twice at the Land of Israel] (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense and Yad Ben-Zvi, 1991 rep. 1994), pp. 228-231. For more on the life of the Arabs in Tiberias in the first half of the twentieth century see Ibrāhīm Yahya Ash-Shihabi, pp. 139-151.

the 1940s - more than the Ashkenazi population who suffered similar historical events. This change undoubtedly led to a gradual abandonment of the Arabic language by the Sephardi group, since they felt betrayed by the Arabs. Extremist Jewish movements of the 1940s exploited this tendency and recruited the Arabic-speaking Jews of the city to their ranks because they knew the Arabic dialect of Tiberias and the mentality of the local Arab inhabitants, and because of their growing hatred of the Arabs, especially after recurrent brutal massacres against Jews in their own homes in Tiberias. All the informants emphasized that most of the instigation and provocation, as well as the murderers themselves, came from outside the city, particularly from Arab settlements such as Lübye¹⁴ from which the residents were expelled 1948 in revenge. Surprisingly, most of the Jewish informants regretted the historical fact that the Arabs left the city, and every now and then they told stories about the "innocent time" when harmony and peace had characterized the two neighboring sides for hundreds of years. It is no wonder that some of the informants blamed the British authorities for stirring up trouble between the two warring sides, applying, so they said, the policy of "divide and rule". Still, most of the informants viewed the British Mandate with favor, since economically Tiberias flourished during that time. There were also high expectations from the British Mandate, especially in the first years when Palestine had its first High Commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel, who was a Jew.¹⁵

The Jews of Tiberias, like the Jews of Haifa and Safed, and Jews in many other places in the Muslim world, preferred the Muslims to the Christian Arabs. This was the case for centuries in Tiberias, until the riots between the Jews and Arabs erupted in the late 1920s. The reason for the Muslim preference was religious affinity such as similar food restrictions of *kašér* and *halāl* and other comparable customs such as circumcision. Sometimes the informant even expresses an amazing attitude towards the Muslims. This can be seen in the expression "There is nothing better than the rule of the Ishmaelites", or in another, more nostalgic version, "Better is the rule of Ishmael and not the rule of Israel" [*hukum Yišma'él w lā hukum Yisra'él*]¹⁶.

It is noteworthy that there were a few examples of what was called in those years "Brothers through breast-feeding" [*ixwān bi-rrīdāqā*]. Jewish women would have their infants wet-nursed by Muslim women if they did not have enough milk themselves. Jewish and Muslim children, when they grew up, could not marry each other (although very rarely marriage between the sides did occur). In addition, the grown children had to protect their "other side" siblings as if they were natural siblings. Such a custom was not at all usual between Jews and Christian Arabs. However, this practice was rarer in Tiberias than among the Jews and Muslim Arabs in Haifa.¹⁷

In Tiberias, this preferential attitude was even more noticeable, since the Jews really rejected the Christians, particularly the Russian priests that lived in the city and had a foreign and strange appearance.¹⁸ The book also includes a historical description

14 See more on Lübye in Khalil Mahmoud isSa'd, *Tabariyyā-Tārīx wa-Ṯamal* [Tiberias- History and Hope] (Irbid: Dār al-Kitāb ath-thaqāfiyy, 2005), p. 104. On the Arab villages that used to be in the region of Tiberias see Walīd al-Khālidī, *Kay lā nansā* (All That Remains) [in Arabic] (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1991?), pp. 385-430.

15 4.

16 38, 33-34.

17 *ASH*, pp. 216-219.

18 14.

of other minorities in Tiberias such as the migration of Hauranis to the city in the early 1920s.¹⁹

As mentioned before, the texts in this book cover a vast spectrum of subjects and valuable details in oral history and thus provide extensive data on the life of the Jews of Galilee and other historical events and anthropological details; they thereby rescue this mass of data from oblivion. Note that such data could not be attained in other ways because this is not history that is based on written documents. Note too that many of the informants' stories have parallels in the New Testament stories about Jesus and his disciples who lived thereabouts, around the Sea of Galilee. The stories about the storms on the sea, the fishermen and the catching of fish, dramatic floods, earthquakes, and other natural phenomena, all seem to echo events that occurred more than two millennia ago.

We find many details on epidemics that befell Tiberias, such as the cholera of 1902, a disease called *Yellow Wind* [*irrīh ilʔaṣfar*] in the local dialects of the Jews. Numerous texts that mention the legendary character of the Scottish physician, *Dr. Torans*,²⁰ who saved the city from this illness and brought medical progress to its inhabitants. These texts yield anthropological details absent from any other historical documentation than this genre of oral history, for example, of the holding of Jewish wedding in the local cemetery to expel the frightful epidemic. We are told that a local Bedouin Emir in the region tried to help the Jews of Tiberias and gave them shelter on the mountain west of the city, far from the alleged origin of the epidemic, the contagious water of the Sea of Galilee. Other texts tell of the famine that prevailed in the region during the Ottoman period. As stated, such specific details can be found only in oral history.

Anthropologists and sociologists can also find valuable data on psychic and mental phenomena, such as a story about a lunatic whose life was saved and who did not fall from a balcony during an attack of his illness; such accounts exposed us to the atmosphere and mindset of the time. The man who saved the Jewish lunatic was an Arab who lived in front of his house – living evidence of the outstanding neighborly relations between Arabs and Jews in the so-called "innocent time". Weird- and crazy people in the city are told of, such as the well-known local fool *Abu Hasna*.²¹

In addition to Tiberias and its vicinity,²² details emerge about other places in the Holy Land of the time, such as a wonderful and unique description of the Old City of

19 10; 40, 9; 52, 16.

20 Dr. David Torans was born in Scotland on November 6, 1862. He first arrived in Tiberias in 1884 and was appointed head of the *Medical Scottish Expedition to Galilee*. On January 1, 1894, he opened a clinic in Tiberias. He was soon fluent in Arabic. At first only Arabs attended his clinic. During the cholera epidemic of 1902 his second wife Elinore died. After her death, he returned for a while to Scotland, but he soon went back to Tiberias. In 1908, he started giving English courses on behalf of the Scottish Mission. In 1912 he married his third wife, and they traveled abroad from Palestine for their honeymoon. On their return, a second cholera epidemic broke out in Tiberias. At the outbreak of WWI, Dr. Torans and all the English and American citizens had to leave Tiberias and his hospital was confiscated by the Turks and Germans. In 1919 he returned to Tiberias. In 1921 he was severely injured in an accident, but he recovered and resumed his work in his hospital in Tiberias. He died on August 26, 1923, and was buried on the shores of the Sea of Galilee which he so loved. Thousands of people attended his funeral, Muslims, Jews and Christians mostly from Tiberias. For more about Dr. Torans see Oded Avishar, *Séfer Tvérya (The Book of Tiberias)* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Keter, 1973), pp. 334-337; 432-433. See also p. 17, 1.2.5.1.4.1 in this book.

21 37, 1-12.

22 Pictures of Tiberias with its walls and the Sea-Mosque, painted by David Roberts, can be seen in Plates 65 and 66, *The Holyland*.

Jerusalem described by an informant from the point of view of a child, interchangeably with that of an old and experienced person.²³

Not all the texts are merely "valuable" from the point of view of a historical researcher. For example, a text on girls who enjoy bathing in the Sea of Galilee, tells us indirectly about the relations between them and a foreign Jewish girl from Paris, who for the first time in history introduced the notion of a bathing-costume to those so-called "provincial" girls. All this is accompanied by an amusing yet constructive text. In some texts, historical events appear that do not belong to the political oral documentation.

Several texts convey vivid details of the devastating flood in Tiberias in May 1934, which totally changed the topography of the city as is evident to this very day.²⁴ These texts are told by different informants from different points of view, or from different angles. The reader can compare the details given in each text. The atmosphere described is an extraordinary representation of history, not just a "dry" transmission of historical facts that can be found in a history book. We learn that that flood given the endemic word *tōfe*²⁵ in the local dialect of the Jews of Tiberias, was a tragedy in the history of the city but also a wound that changed the entire frame of mind of the local population. There are also some texts on the earthquake that struck the city in 1927.²⁶ Many texts give information about Jewish rituals in Tiberias, such as the visiting of tombs, especially those of *Maimonides* and *Rabbi Meir* and the celebration of the *Mimuná*, a feast at the end of Passover, which has Maghribi origins.²⁷

As dwellers of a city lying on the western shores of the Sea of Galilee, the Tiberians, Jews and Arabs alike, naturally lived a lacustrine life. During the late Ottoman period and the British Mandate, most of the fishermen and seamen of Tiberias were Arabs, only a minority being Jews. Various texts reflect this way of life, and provide a wide range of associated terms.²⁸

The Jews of Tiberias, like their Muslim neighbors, relied on the lake for their nourishment. Their acquaintance with the names of fish is remarkable, especially in compared with that of the Mediterranean coast-dwellers such as the inhabitants of Haifa and Acre.²⁹ Certain endemic types of fish can be found only in the Sea of Galilee; some of them might once have lived in Lake Huleh, which had existed north of Tiberias. Many Jewish men in the city, including some informants, who were not seamen by trade, took up angling as a hobby. The women who bought and cooked the fish also had a thorough knowledge of the names and kinds of fish in the lake. The book also contains some recipes for fish dishes.

Readers interested in autochthonous recipes can find them in the book. The uniquely local dish in Tiberias was the *gakkūb* [Tumble thistle: *Gundelia tournefortii*], a local wild vegetable cooked in a rather complicated way and regarded as the "King

23 6.

24 Helga Dudman and Elisheva Ballhorn, *Tiberias* (Jerusalem: Carta, 1988), p. 215.

25 This word does not appear in any dictionary in this morphological shape, nor in Barthélémy's dictionary or in Eliyah's new dictionary, *The Olive Tree Dictionary*. It is not found in any other dictionaries of the Palestinian dialect, or in Cl. Denizeau, *Dictionnaire des Parlers Arabes de Syrie, Liban et Palestine*.

26 9; 22.

27 18; 36. See also Avishar, pp. 229-236.

28 11; 45.

29 Aharon Geva Kleinberger and Roger Tavor, "A Text in the Fisherman Dialect of Acre (Akko)". *Estudios de Dialectología Norteafricana y Andalusi EDNA* (2003) 7, 125-134.

of all dishes".³⁰ In my fieldwork in Galilee, Tiberias was the sole place where I found that the Arabs cooked the very Jewish Sabbath dish of *chôlent*, called by Jews and Arabs *hammím* in the local dialect.³¹ Generally, the Tiberian cuisine is delicate and colorful, especially compared with the relatively meager cuisine of Safed. The Jewish women spent hours upon hours to prepare fairly elaborate dishes. Each was prepared for a specific day of the week; Sunday, for example, was pasta day. The recipes contain many Ladino names and the variety denotes a Maghribi influence on the local cuisine.

I was able to collect proverbs spoken only in Tiberias. Some have a semantic equivalent elsewhere in Galilee. Others are endemic to Tiberias particularly to its Jews. The texts also include some slang used by the Jews.

In many places all over Galilee, among old Arabic-speaking informants, Muslims, Christians, Druze and Jews, I found an explanation for the emergence of so many dialects in a relative small region. The informants were convinced that this variety is due to the water that the people drink: every village and town has its own water sources, – so the dialects even of two very close villages differ. In Tiberias, there is also a tendency to denote relations between people or groups, or even the character of certain people, by names of a semantic circle that concerns water. An example is *tɛakkarat ilmayy*³² [the water became turbid] to show the change of relations between Jews in Arabs in the late 1920s, the late 1930s and in the late 1940s. Overall, the Tiberians take a wry view of themselves. They tend to be good natured, and even admit that their town is a ridiculous mish-mash of many sorts of people of diverse origin, some of whom, unfortunately, are also bad mannered. This is expressed in the following sentence: *hōn Tabariyya, zayy-ma (zi)hn(a) nżūl: hiyye mahall wāti, nażam, w kull ši binzil la-żżürāt, zilla!* [Here in Tiberias, as we say: "It is a low place, indeed, and everything goes down to the sewage, sure!"].³³ Another expression that denotes the character of a humble and modest person also belongs to that same semantic circle, namely "water": *ilmayy ilwātye tišrab mayyitha w máyyit gērha* [low water drinks its own water and the water of other (places)].

30 12. On the Muslim cuisine of Tiberias, see Khalil Mahmoud isSa'd, pp. 79-84. The author refers to the *sakküb* on pp. 81-82.

31 Astonishingly this Hebrew terminology for the dish was also known to the Muslim neighbors in Tiberias. See Khalil Mahmoud isSa'd, p. 81. The normal Ashkenazi pronunciation is *xamín*.

32 See for example 48, 35.

33 34, 7.