

## Some Remarks on Language Use and Arabic Dialects in Eastern Turkey

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### 1. Introduction

Questions of language, minorities, and ethnicity are extremely complex. The essence of the terms themselves is open to discussion and, consequently, consideration of their relationships is fraught with difficulties.<sup>1</sup> The complexity of the mentioned issues increases when matters of religion and identity are involved. In this case study I will describe the problems connected with a small minority living side by side with a larger one, describe the consequences of this kind of interaction between groups on ethnicity, and account for its consequences on language.

In this study Arabs represent the small minority and Kurds the larger one. The State of Turkey represents the majority. It is needless to mention that all three groups belong to different ethnicities, whatever this may mean, and speak different languages. In Tillo, a village in South-eastern Turkey, both minorities live together, and the Turkish state is represented by officials and by all forms of mass media.

The main source of the data analyzed for this study is a corpus consisting of ca. 18 hours of tape-recorded material and interviews with people, mainly Arabs, from October 2000 and onwards. 20 informants are interviewed, three of whom are female: a 12-year-old schoolgirl, a 37-year-old unmarried woman living with her parents, and a 55-year-old housewife. The male informants are between 20 and 65 years old. Their levels of education show a great disparity. The 20-year-old informant works at a wholesale dealer's in Istanbul. A 21-year-old informant studied (in November 2000) to become a mullah in Tillo. A 33-year-old informant started training to become a pilot in the Turkish air force, but never finished. At the present time he owns a linen-draper's shop in the town of Siirt, some 9 km from Tillo. A 33-year-old informant works as a car-park attendant in Istanbul. A 39-year-old informant is an imam in Tillo. A 60-year-old informant is a mullah in Tillo. The rest have various professions, such as a circumciser, a hotel owner (in Istanbul), a wholesale dealer (in Istanbul) etc. The final interviews with Arabs in Tillo were made by telephone in April 2005.

### 2. Background

Before dealing with the question of these two minorities it may be of some importance to clarify the origin of these Arabs. When starting to carry out this task, I quickly learned that the Arabs of this region have been little investigated as far as

<sup>1</sup> Edwards 1985, 1.

their original homeland is concerned. Regardless of the fact that there are studies concerning the multiplicity of the different ethnic groups in today's Turkey, no one, as far as I know, has written about the origin of the Arabs of Siirt.<sup>2</sup> There are, however, studies on the group's confession of Islam, its size, areas of settlement etc.

During the expansion of Islam, Siirt was apparently not an important city strategically; the Arab sources say almost nothing about it.<sup>3</sup> In the 9<sup>th</sup> century al-Shabushti says that there was a monastery housing 400 monks.<sup>4</sup> Starting in the 11<sup>th</sup> century the city was under the rule of various local Muslim dynasties: Marwanids, Artukids, and Ayyubids – the last of which held it until 1462. Thereafter for a short time Siirt was under the sway of the Safawid Shah Ismail I. In 1513 it fell under Ottoman rule.<sup>5</sup>

In a situation like this, where written sources are completely absent, the Arabs' own perception of their origin might be of some significance. Among the Arabs, there is an undisputed conception concerning the early Arabs in the vicinity of Siirt. It is agreed that the Arabs of Tillo belong to two tribes, *ḫāḫila* Xālidiyya and *ḫāḫila* 'Abbāsiyya. The Xāliidi tribe claims that their ancestors came to Tillo from Ḥamṣ in Syria about 700 years ago, and the 'Abbāsi tribe says that their ancestors came to Tillo via Iraq from Saudi Arabia about 400 years ago. Both families are Sunni Muslims and belong to the Shāfi'i school. The 'Abbāsi proudly showed a family tree as documentation. The stem of the family tree is the first 'Abbās and the many branches document the lineage until the present generation. One informant, named Ahmat, says that there are forty fathers between him and 'Abbās. Ahmat's own words are presented in Example 1.

Before going into Example 1 it is essential to give the major reason for presenting the examples in the original language/dialect. I am of the opinion that no matter how good a translation is, it will never be able to render the exact nuances and feelings that are embedded in words and utterances. In this matter Mühlhäusler writes that:

Each language renders potentially a specific picture of reality apprehension or conception of the world and multiplicity constitutes "a source of alternative philosophies, scientific metaphors and manners of living."<sup>6</sup>

1. **f#l-arb>n app alúaq #l->Abbās raèiya llāhu >anhu. ya>ni mawò't uww qwn. #s-saú makt´b n #nne k#lla. Aúmad #b#n malla Naşrulla, malla Naşrulla #b#n malla >Abd#ll >Az z, malla >Abd#ll >Az z #b#n malla Aúmat, malla Aúmat #b#n malla Fah m trp h·ke hayyā l-arb>n app.**

"There are 40 fathers between me and Abbas, may God be pleased with him. This is documented. All this is documented. Ahmad son of mullah Nasrulla, mullah Nasrulla son of mullah Abdul Aziz, mullah Abdul Aziz son of mullah Ahmat, mullah Ahmat son of mullah Fahim and so on until 40 fathers."

<sup>2</sup> Andrews 1989, 148–151; Svanberg 1989a, 1989b and 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Seert in Fiey 1977, 244 and Witakowski 2000, 392-393, Si'ird in Bosworth 1997, 573.

<sup>4</sup> Bosworth 1997, 574.

<sup>5</sup> Fiey 1977, 244 and Bosworth 1997, 574.

<sup>6</sup> Mühlhäusler 1986, 52.

In order to acquire some idea of why these Arabs came to Tillo, the following questions were posed to some informants: Have you heard from your father or grandfather why their ancestors came to Tillo? The answer was as in 2a:

2a *m#’ xāṭar l-islāmiyye, m#’ xāṭar l-islāmiyye t#zdäät.*

“For the sake of Islam, for the spreading of Islam.”

And the attendant question was: Were they nomad tribes or soldiers? The answer was as in 2b:

2b *lā, lā k·nu faqah, mudarr#s n.*

“No, no, they were experts in Islamic law, teachers.”

Considering the assertion above and also the lack of written sources, we can assume that the first Arabs that came to Tillo were missionaries, and hence, were learned and acquainted with both the Arabic language and the Koran. This may have given the Arabs special status in the society, and as a result the society may have been divided into classes. Even today, it is still of great importance to show that you belong to a family or a tribe with a lineage. This is the reason why intermarriage between Arabs and Kurds was previously considered impossible when the female partner was Arab. This social division is obvious when one hears how the people of Tillo are described in the recordings. Three families are mentioned in the material, two that have ancestral lines and one that has none. The people of the third family are *kurmān* “Kurds”. The exact words used are presented in 3:

3 - ... *ya#ne b#la nasap >āyla wāhida. >āylat kurmān , nq’l kurmān , akrāt. mutafarriqa, k#ll wāh#d Òā m#n makān.*

“...without lineage there is one family, *kurmān* , we say *kurmān* , Kurds. They are scattered. Everyone has come from a different place.”

Example 4 is a passage from a text that describes how the Arabs viewed the first Kurds in the region:

4 *aw #l-kurmān lay k#Ò-Òaw m#n qab#l taút d Faq ru llāh w ’ayx MÒāh#d, y#xd#m’w#n awnak.*

“These Kurds who emigrated (to Tillo, came) for the sake of being servants of Faqiru llah and sheikh Muğahid, to serve them there.”

### 3. The situation today

The circumstances today are different. Kurds constitute the overwhelming majority in the region, and Kurdish is spoken more or less by all the Arabs of Tillo, also by small children before school age. However the reverse is not the case; not many Kurds speak Arabic. Since Turkish is the official language, and the only language taught in school, at least until recent times, everyone has to learn Turkish. Thus the Arabs of Tillo are multilingual.

Due to the geographical circumstances, the Arabs of Tillo and their language have been isolated from direct contact with other Arabs. They form a sort of ethnic and linguistic island. They are cut off, for instance, from the standard Arabic that flows through radio and television in all Arabic-speaking countries. The only proper language for these Arabs remains the language of the Koran. In February 1997 Koran schools were closed and teaching in the Koran was forbidden in the region.

Arnold describes the situation of Arabic in Turkey as follows:

Arabic has a hard time like all minority languages in Turkey. It is completely banished from public life and therefore the teaching of Arabic, singing of Arabic songs in public and use of Arabic personal names are forbidden by the government. Children in school are, for example, beaten by the teachers if they speak Arabic, even during breaks.<sup>7</sup>

Kurdish, on the other hand, has developed in another direction. A strong national feeling over decades has favored the growth and development of the language. That there is connection between ethnicity and nationalism is indisputable. Edwards declares that many of the criteria that are applied for ethnicity are also relevant for nationalism. He points out that nationalism can be seen as “intentional ethnicity”, or “organized ethnocultural solidarity” or that ethnic awareness can be a “pre-nationalistic state”.<sup>8</sup> Also indisputable is the connection between ethnicity and language. One general definition of ethnicity, according to Hyltenstam and Stroud is: “a feeling of group-belongingness that is based on common characteristics, such as language, race and religion”.<sup>9</sup>

This view is reinforced by Edwards who states:

Ethnic identity is allegiance to a group – large or small, socially dominant or subordinate – with which one has ancestral links. There is no necessity for a continuation, over generations, of the same socialization or cultural patterns, but some sense of a group boundary must persist. This can be sustained by shared objective characteristics (language, religion, etc.) or by more subjective contributions to a sense of ‘groupness’, or by some combination of both. Symbolic or subjective attachment must relate, at however distant a remove, to an observably real past.<sup>10</sup>

One of the characteristics mentioned above, namely religion, helped the Kurdish elite to gain non-Kurdish followers. It was almost shocking to hear a group of middle-aged men, in the region of Sasson, also in South-eastern Turkey, say that they were Kurds although they had Arabic origins. And how is that possible, one may ask. The answer was simple: our forefathers were Arabs but now we are Kurds. It is

<sup>7</sup> Arnold 2000, 357.

<sup>8</sup> Edwards 1985, 10f.

<sup>9</sup> Hyltenstam and Stroud 1990, 25.

<sup>10</sup> Edwards 1985, 10.

as simple as that. It is difficult to determine whether these men really meant what they said or if they were afraid for some reason. But if we assume that they did mean what they said, this will add another of the characteristics to the ones mentioned above, namely ‘subjective contribution to a sense of ‘groupness’. Now what may have encouraged this ‘subjective groupness’ could be dissatisfaction with and opposition to the state. This dissatisfaction was observable all over South-eastern Turkey, since the whole region is economically neglected and the living conditions are bad. People complained that the state shows up in different harvesting periods to buy the produce at absurd prices and takes it to be processed in the big cities in the West. No investments whatever are made or planned for the region. Hence the PKK<sup>11</sup> struggle for independence may have meant a kind of economic salvation promising inhabitants of the region better living standards.<sup>12</sup>

The Arabs of Tillo, on the other hand, are still proud of being Arabs. Two of the most famous saints in the region originate from Tillo, and as mentioned in 4, the first Kurds who came to Tillo were servants of Faqiru Ilah and sheikh Muğahid, a fact that makes it more difficult for these Arabs to unify themselves with the Kurds. For these Arabs the situation is different. The national feeling among the larger minority deliberately endeavours to create a homogenous group within the boundaries of its region. Assimilation of the smaller minority may be the consequence.<sup>13</sup> A concerned informant describes the situation as hopeless. Since he could not manage it any longer, he left Tillo in the mid-nineties and settled down in Istanbul. He describes the situation as in 5a and 5b:

5a #l-akrāt baqa ytabu úaqqa. ysaw rpuan mudāfa>a. n#úne mμ nt q. mμ t q a<l  
lā ... ama. #nne \ade ba>da d#-ysawawa, #nne \ade ba>., \ade d#-ysawawa.

“the Kurds have started to follow up their rights. They defend themselves. (But) we cannot. I cannot say ... but they, sooner or later, will do it, they, sooner or later, will do it.”

5b f äävi s-sun k#’-’ nřafa, ntammat T#llo, ntammat. d#-n#nsi rpuana. aš#lna  
d#-n#ns yu w d#-nrμ. d#-y#nq#t#ú ya>ne n-n#sal.

“These last years everything has become dark, Tillo is finished, finished. We shall forget ourselves. We shall forget our origin and we shall vanish. The lineage will come to an end.”

Because of fear of the larger minority, people were not willing to tape-record all their opinions. It was obvious that these people were afraid. When not recording one could hear utterances such as ‘the Kurds are expanding rapidly’, ‘there are no more jobs for us’ ‘we have nothing against the state so why should we fight’, etc. Note-

<sup>11</sup> Kurdistan Workers Party (Kurdish: Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan).

<sup>12</sup> Asserting this I rely only on the observations I made while traveling in the region and on the contents of my data, which reveal the feelings of the inhabitants of the region. Consequently no study was made to see whether these feelings are legitimate or not.

<sup>13</sup> Hyltenstam and Stroud 1990, 29.

worthy is that this phenomenon was also observed in north-western Syria. In 2002, during a field trip to Syria, we came across a village just on the border to Hatay, where we wanted to tape-record some samples of the Arabic dialect spoken there. After some time, and a couple of teas, the oldest son of the family was willing to give us an interview. But when his mother saw the tape-recorder, she almost fell on her knees begging, with fear in her eyes, not to make any tape-recordings. She excused herself by saying:

“We are not many left here, my son, and we have no one to protect us.”

In a bordering village another surprising feature puzzled us. In a house where the father accepted to give an interview, he suddenly started speaking Kurdish, even though he knew that our interest concerned his Arabic dialect. He said that it was all the same, and we were all brothers, and there was no difference between us, etc.

#### 4. Language and nationalism

According to Hyltenstam and Stroud, for a language to be a ‘real language’ it has to serve as ‘national language’ for a group of people though they do not necessarily have to be the governing majority. It is enough that it be spoken by a large part of the group, it be extensively used in daily communication and it be a symbol of ethnic and national identity. At the same time there must be a certain degree of standardization for the language to be understood as a ‘real language’ so that it can potentially serve as an official language in a state or other autonomous area.<sup>14</sup>

Concerning this phenomenon, attempts to standardize Northern Kurdish, **kurmanji**, started as early as in the 1930s. The attempts were doomed to fail, since the state did not allow any minority language to be used or taught in schools. It was not until 1987 that a sort of language committee was founded at the Kurdish Institute in Paris. This committee publishes a journal twice a year that is distributed in the Diaspora. Now that Turkey is applying for membership in the European Union, many of the strict national laws have been changed in a way that may favor Northern Kurdish.

The real language standardization, in this sense, was done by the majority, i.e. the state of Turkey. A planned policy aiming towards the homogenization of the people within the country’s boundaries was carried out supported by a language committee that continuously worked to purify Turkish from foreign words. This is being carried out despite the fact that the idea of keeping one’s language ‘pure’ and free from foreign taint reveals a profound misunderstanding of the dynamics of all natural languages.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, it seems that this concept has proved attractive, since the link between linguistic nationalism and language purity and preservation is, unsurprisingly, a strong one.<sup>16</sup> In this matter Kedourie writes:

<sup>14</sup> Hyltenstam and Stroud 1990, 46.

<sup>15</sup> Edwards 1985, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Edwards 1985, 27.

nationalism from its modern inception was inextricably bound up with language; language was seen as ‘an outward sign of a group’s peculiar identity and a significant means of ensuring its continuation’<sup>17</sup>

The deliberate plan of spreading Turkish to all parts of the country was about to be executed. It is well known that, historically, the connection between a group of people, a language and the State was the foundation of nationalism as an ideology - one people, one language, one nation.<sup>18</sup> In the late 1940s the young Turkish State started a process of building schools in South-eastern Turkey. Within 20 years schools came to almost every village, and access to education, once a privilege, now became a right. Children had the chance to learn how to read and write. Nevertheless, in states where nationalism is strong, schools can apparently serve as an instrument of ethnic and national policy. Kedourie declares:

On nationalist theory ... the purpose of education is not to transmit knowledge, traditional wisdom, and the ways devised by a society for attending to the common concerns; its purpose rather is wholly political, to bend the will of the young to the will of the nation. Schools are instruments of state policy, like the army, the police, and the exchequer.<sup>19</sup>

This took place at a time when Kurdish dominance, at least linguistically, was growing stronger in the region. It was a time when entire non-Kurdish villages shifted completely to Kurdish. As an example one can mention the Neo-Aramaic villages in the Tur Abdin area. **Kafro**, a village in the district of Midyat, was in the process of making a complete transition to Kurdish. In the early 1940s only people older than 40 years could understand and speak some Neo-Aramaic.<sup>20</sup> Another village is **karborān**, also in the district of Midyat. No one from this village speaks Neo-Aramaic at the present time. Today, there is a community of **karborān**-people living in Västerås in Sweden. The children in this community who are born in Sweden have Kurmanji as their mother tongue. The adults attend the Sunday mass that is held in Kurmanji, although they are ethnically not Kurds but members of the Syriac Orthodox Church. It is worth mentioning that there are no Christian Kurds, I myself have never met any.

Turkish subsequently became the official language. Television came to the region already in the 1970s, though only to the cities. Today, a television set is a part of the standard furnishing of a household in the villages. All television programs are either in Turkish or are dubbed into Turkish. Radio programs are broadcast in Turkish and all newspapers are written in Turkish. Turkish became the language of educated people and consequently gained higher status. Those who spoke good Turkish were considered to be educated and hence they had higher social status in the community.

<sup>17</sup> Kedourie 1961, 71.

<sup>18</sup> Hyltenstam and Stroud 1990, 29.

<sup>19</sup> Kedourie 1960, 83-84.

<sup>20</sup> My father was born in this village. When he was 16 years old, in the early 1940s, he left the village for Syria. At that time he did not speak Neo-Aramaic. Kurdish was the only language that he understood. His parents could speak and understand some Neo-Aramaic.

## 5. Language decline

Turning back to Tillo, we find that the situation is changing rapidly. The size of the Kurdish population is steadily increasing, while the number of Arabs is swiftly decreasing in the villages. To give an idea of this change, in November 2000 there were still about 3000 Arabs living in Tillo. In a telephone interview of 9 of April 2005 with an informant from Tillo, it was revealed that there are now less than 1000 left.<sup>21</sup> This means that in less than four and a half years more than two thirds of the Arabic population left the village. This same informant avowed in November 2000 that he would never leave Tillo, the home of Faqiru llah and Sheikh Muğahid; now he has moved to Siirt. Most of the Arabs remaining in the village are elderly. This migration is occurring so rapidly that the Arabs are worried that soon no Arabs will remain in their home village and that both the language and culture will vanish. The Arabs of Tillo are well aware that if the entire Arabic population moves to big cities like Istanbul, both their language and culture are doomed to die out. The anxiety they feel is often observed in the recorded material. To illustrate this anxiety some passages from an interview with an informant now living in Istanbul are presented in 6a and 6b:

6a **ana a>all#m b#nti >arabi · ba>d b#nti #' t#-ys r? #l-l#m b#nti t#qri f#l-maktab · k#m lay ma>a k#lla t#rk #nne.**

“I am teaching my daughter Arabic, but after her what will happen? Now my daughter goes to school where everyone else is Turkish.”

6b **#s-saú ana l faff ban· t. #l-faff ban· t #nn ka-\ade #nne am Şārlan k#l-me w#úde arbaú awlād āy fmaú'. k#l-wāú#d d#-yrµ mawqaú āk.#ž-ž· x. · ana d-anxalaŕ maú #t-t#riki. ana d-anx#laŕ maú #t-t#riki #' t#-ys r āk.#ž-ž· x?**

“Now I have three daughters. These three daughters, if they in the future have four children each, this will make them twelve. Everyone will then leave for a different place. In such a situation we will get mixed with the Turks. We will get mixed with Turks and then what will happen?”

Edwards states that the fortunes of language are bound up with those of its users, and if languages decline or ‘die’ it is simply because the circumstances of their speakers have changed. The most common scenario here is that involving language contact and conflict: one language supplants another.<sup>22</sup> Haugen asserts that a language is endangered when there are no monolinguals alive within the speech community.<sup>23</sup> This idea is opposed by Fishman who states that multilingualism does not necessarily lead to language shift, especially in those societies where there are clear limits between the domains of each language.<sup>24</sup> Denison, on the other hand notes

<sup>21</sup> These figures are provided by people still living in Tillo and they are confirmed by people now living in Istanbul.

<sup>22</sup> Edwards 1985, 49.

<sup>23</sup> Haugen 1953, 370.

<sup>24</sup> Fishman 1972, 115.

that the *direct* cause of language death is the lack of transmission of an original language from parents to children.<sup>25</sup>

In a language-contact situation a minority – often over some generations – may shift to using the language of the majority, especially if the majority’s language is the official language of the country, the language that is taught in schools, and the language with higher status. Eight years after moving from Tillo to Istanbul, informants between 20 and 55 years of age use plentiful Turkish borrowings in their everyday speech. In an interview where a male informant M is interviewing his mother H, he questions her frequent use of Turkish and asks as in 7a:

7a M- *āk.gari ‘ay’ k#l-\ayy#rt#nu ·ke, gari l-→arabī?*

“Why have you (c.pl.) changed the language (lit. speech), Arabic?”

The mother’s answer is:

7b H- #’’ *a>raf? awn f êʔanb´l lay ·ke y#graw n#úne #mm#n sayna<sup>26</sup> k#r-rāú ·ke. úalbuki<sup>27</sup> gar na l-→arabī uww akfar akw·s. uww aús·n. awn lay y#graw ·ke n#úne am s·na k#r-rā ·ke kam·hen.*

“How do I know? Because (everyone) here in Istanbul talks like this, we also do so (lit. our tongue got used). Whereas our Arabic language is better. It is nicer. But because everyone else here speaks in this way, we also do like them.”

During an interview with a middle-aged male informant, his 7-year-old daughter came in and asked him for some money. A short dialogue in Turkish took place between them. When the daughter had left, the father went on talking about the critical situation of the Arabic of Tillo. This shows how decisive the situation is: although he is aware of the looming death of his mother tongue he cannot stop a ‘natural’ course of events. In this respect Edwards writes:

Indeed, while we lament the decline of some contemporary minority language we often forget that if we took a long enough perspective we would see that virtually all groups have language shift somewhere in their past.<sup>28</sup>

Another important phenomenon is that the Arabs of Tillo not only avoid speaking Arabic in public, but they also try to speak the Istanbul dialect of Turkish and not the Turkish dialect that is spoken in South-eastern Turkey. The reason, according to two informants now living in Istanbul, is that if they are stopped on the street by the police it is important not to let the policemen know their original hometown. Otherwise the police will ask for identification papers and their first question after knowing that they are from the region of Siirt would be: *t#rrur mİsİn?* “are you a terrorist” which means ‘a member of the PKK’.

<sup>25</sup> Denison 1977, 21; quoted from Edwards 1985, 52.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *(İ)s·na* “our tongue”.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Turk. *halbuki* “whereas, however, nevertheless”.

<sup>28</sup> Edwards 1985, 96.

## 6. Conclusion

To sum up, the Arabs of Tillo feel that life in the home village seems to be unbearable. The larger minority is fighting for a sort of autonomy and hence is working hard to unify the whole region as Kurdish. One of the results of this kind of struggle is a rapid migration to the big cities. Since Arabic has already stagnated, its area of use shrinks even more in the big cities. For Tillo Arabic this fact may mean that it faces an even faster death. Since the relationship between language and ethnicity is strong, the death of a language may also mean the death of an ethnicity. A homogeneous population is the result, and hence nationalism ‘wins’. In this case it is the nationalism of both the majority and the larger minority. Small minorities seem to have little chance of survival. It is obvious, at least in this case study, that the size of the population plays a key role, which makes one wonder if this too is a deliberate cause. I mean a planned growth of the ethnic group, i.e. the larger minority.

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