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The Golden Bough of Kōkab: Traditional Rural Muslim Arabic Agricultural Narrative from Western Lower Galilee

Abstract In 1915, J. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* identified a core motif in ancient Mediterranean religions: the ritual sacrifice of a vegetation deity, often embodied in grain, to ensure the renewal of the agricultural cycle. Traditional Mediterranean threshing methods used by Arab peasants in Palestine until the 1950s–1960s involved trampling the grain and beating it with stones and pitchforks for days to separate it from the straw and chaff, a laborious process that evoked dismemberment. This article presents a text recorded in Kōkab Abu-l-Ḥēja, an Arab Muslim village in the western Lower Galilee, in 2018, accompanied by transcription, translation, and linguistic notes addressing some salient linguistic aspects. The text represents a specimen of agricultural narrative, that is, a description of traditional farming activities, specifically the reaping and threshing of grain. The text was narrated in a variety of the traditional rural Muslim dialect of Kōkab Abu-l-Ḥēja by a woman who was seventy-five years old at the time this article was written.

Keywords Palestinian Arabic, rural Muslim Arabic, Western Lower Galilean Arabic, agricultural narratives, Arabic dialectology

1 Introduction

In 1915, anthropologist J. Frazer published *The Golden Bough*, a seminal study of the development of religions from agricultural myths in the Mediterranean world. In it, he identifies a fundamental motif that recurs in ancient Mediterranean religions: the sacrifice of a vegetation deity or spirit, particularly of grain, a fundamental dietary component, to ensure the continuation of the annual agricultural cycle. Knowledge of cultivation and crop-processing methods in the traditional preindustrial world helps us understand the network of symbols and associations underlying the spiritual development of Mediterranean civilizations.

In this regard, the memories of previous generations, who lived traditional lives, preserving the practices, customs, technologies, and tools of the pre-modern world, are particularly valuable. The conservative traditional peasant society of Palestine offers a unique lens through which to view the deep layers of the past.

The present article focuses on the traditional narrative of agricultural practices in the Galilee. The text under analysis was narrated in the Western Lower Galilean Arabic dialect of Kōkab Abu-l-Ḥēja[1] and constitutes a case study centered on wheat threshing. Wheat threshing was a pivotal event in the agricultural cycle of Mediterranean societies. In the western Lower Galilean cultural milieu, it appears culturally structured, codified, and transmitted through narrative. In particular, the present study addresses linguistic, stylistic, and thematic aspects of the narration of traditional agricultural life.

The defining feature of this narrative content, namely, the representation of traditional agricultural activities, lies in its continuity over an immemorial period of time (Grant 1907; Howes 2022; Kloppenborg 2006; Palmer et al. 1881–1889) and in its perception, at the moment of narration, as belonging to an irrevocably bygone world, fundamentally distinct from the present. The Arab population of the Galilee born in the 1950s and 1960s constitutes the last generation to have directly experienced the transition from a traditional to a modern way of life (Soffer 1983). This transition coincided with the modernization of agricultural techniques and the industrialization of production processes promoted by the then newly established State of Israel. The narrators thus stand as the last witnesses to a bygone era endowed with profound symbolic, identity-related, and ultimately political significance (Irving 2023). Goal of this paper is to highlight the importance of traditional agricultural narratives for their linguistic, social, and cultural merit in the Arabic-speaking Galilean society.

As described below, in the traditional methods of wheat threshing used by Arab peasants in Palestine until the 1960s, the grain was trampled and shaken for days with stones and pitchforks to separate it from the straw and chaff, a process that evoked the symbolic association with the dismemberment of the ear of grain. In the traditional dialects of central Italy, threshing is referred to as *battitura* ‘beating’, and the act of separating the wheat grains from the ears is called *battere il grano* ‘to beat the grain’.

In recent decades, technological advancement and the resulting lifestyle changes have accelerated significantly, starting with younger generations in industrialized countries and gradually reaching across geographic distances, peripheral communities, social classes, and older age groups. Consequently, the preservation of the linguistic and dialectal heritage of traditional societies has become an increasingly urgent task and an ever more difficult challenge.

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[1] The name of the village is transcribed as pronounced in the local dialect.

For the Palestinian rural society, the establishment of the State of Israel marked a sudden and rapid modernization of lifestyle, accompanied in many cases by displacement and transfer of land to kibbutzim for modern intensive agriculture (Jayyusi 2007). As a result, traditional economic activities were largely disrupted, surviving only on a very limited scale.

The text presented in this study was recorded approximately eight years ago. The female speaker was the then sixty-six-year-old matriarch of a large family in Kōkab Abu-l-Ḥēja, an Arab Muslim village located in the western Lower Galilee, along Road 784, approximately twenty kilometers east of Haifa and just north of Kafr Manda. The informant lived separately from her husband, who had taken a second wife, an arrangement that was both religiously and socially permitted, yet commonly stigmatized and generally poorly tolerated by the first wife.

According to the village inhabitants' oral history and traditional genealogies, the Arabic type spoken by this woman is representative of the original local rural variety, in which OA **j* is pronounced as the voiced, post-alveolar fricative consonant [ʒ], as attested by Bergsträßer (1915: Tafel XXII), and the final *ʾimāla* of feminine nouns peaks on the [i] vowel in non-emphatic environments (Behnstedt and Geva-Kleinberger 2019: 18, 20).

In Section 6, the features of the traditional spoken variety of Kōkab Abu-l-Ḥēja that emerge from the selected text are highlighted. It is important to note, in this regard, that the territory of Kōkab Abu-l-Ḥēja is home to contiguous sub-varieties distinguished by some significant isoglosses, as shown by the data presented in Behnstedt and Geva-Kleinberger's atlas (2019). For instance, among other features, some residents pronounce OA **j* as the voiced affricate [ʤ] (Behnstedt and Geva-Kleinberger 2019: 14, 32), the final *ʾimāla* of feminine nouns exhibits various degrees and phonetical patterns of distribution (Behnstedt and Geva-Kleinberger 2019: 18, 20, 46, 54), while the internal *ʾimāla* (Abo Mokh and Davis 2018; Levin 1971) is absent from this variety, and the use of helping vowels in nouns between C_2 and C_3 oscillates between zero, [e], and [i] (Behnstedt and Geva-Kleinberger 2019: 44, 72, 86, 90). The affricate pronunciation of OA **j* is locally attributed to the influence of Bedouin varieties (Dashti et al. 2015).

2 Palestinian agricultural narratives

The text presented in this article belongs to a genre that has gained wide popularity among elderly Palestinians in recent decades: agricultural narrative (Shahin 1995; 1999; Sirhan 2014). Generally intended for a foreign or young audience, the agricultural narrative describes the daily activities of pre-modern times related to farming, animal husbandry, and household tasks in the social and geographical contexts of rural village life. These narratives evoke tools, implements, actions, and practices that are not familiar to foreign and/or young listeners.

This genre developed over the past century across the country, probably initially driven by the ethnographic interest of travelers and researchers, such as ʿAbbūd (1933), Baldenspreger (1980), Bauer (1926), Burckhardt (1822), Dalmann (1939), Haefeli (1939), Rogers (1989), Schmidt and Kahle (1918), Spoer and Haddad (1928), Stephan (1925), Thilo (1937), and von Mülinen (1908).[2] Agricultural narrative gained significant momentum after 1948 as part of a trend of preserving Palestinian traditions as marks of identity and evidence of the community's relationship to the territory (ʿAbbās 1989; al-Barġūṭī 2001; Farsun 2004; Halloun 1991; Kanaana 1994; Lubānī, 2018; Sarḥān 1989). For the Arabs of Mandatory Palestine, the establishment of the State of Israel marked the beginning of the Nakba, a devastating defeat, for most of them associated with the loss of their lands and original settlements, as well as the rapid modernization of their way of life (Swedenburg 1990).

In the memory of elderly individuals, including those born in the years immediately following 1948, the narration of traditional life is closely linked to the recollection and testimony of everyday experiences as well as the social and political conditions that characterized the period before the Nakba, yet free of explicit political references. The past is generally described without interpretation and indulgence in comparative judgment concerning the present unless explicitly prompted by the audience. These narratives retrace the shared habits and activities that everyone engaged in: they are consistently told in the third person plural: 'they used to do', sometimes connected to an explicit, collective subject such as 'the people' (*an-nās*), but also interpretable as an impersonal form: 'everyone used to do', or 'one used to do', which developed in Hebrew as well (Halevy 2020; Notarius 2021).

Especially when narrated by women, as these texts often are, the storytelling acquires a rhythmic, almost chant-like quality reminiscent of a memorized recitation. As Abu-Lughod (1986) notes regarding narratives of traditional life among Bedouin women, the use of the third-person plural and the recurrence of stereotyped actions result in the effacement of the individual 'I', evoking a collective identity rooted in a vanished, yet timeless, past. The past seems to be called upon almost ritually as a mythical time, while the rhythm of the recitation signals that both narrator and audience are being transported into another dimension, parallel to and distinct from the present. In general, the onset of the narration and of the journey into an alternate time is marked by a sharply rising intonation at the onset, namely, on the first stressed syllable of the initial word, which is usually short, monosyllabic, or bisyllabic (such as *kan*, in the excerpt below), and by a long pause following the first sentence, which introduces the thematic framework of the narration, as in the text presented here. As the transcription demonstrates, the chant-like rhythm is achieved through prosodic devices such

[2] On the impact of foreign scholarship on locals' perceptions and descriptions of customs see Geva-Kleinberger (2025); Geva-Kleinberger and Ben-Artzi (2013).

as frequent and emphasized pauses, vowel lengthening in pausa, and a marked downward intonation contour of the utterances.

Originally emerging from antiquarian and documentary interests, agricultural narrative is a genre common to all rural and semi-nomadic societies of the southern Levant, particularly those within the borders of present-day Israel. Over the past several decades, this genre, based on interviews with elders, has been a subject of interest in Palestinian scholarly and intellectual communities, giving rise to a substantial body of literature on it in Arabic and other languages, ranging from academic to amateur work.[3] This literature focuses on the surveying and preservation of customs, practices, and associated linguistic features, and is driven by the desire to safeguard the historical and identity-based connection to traditional territories (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007; Sayigh 1979).

Rural traditions and the bond with the land, as the horizon of pre-modern life, have not remained only the topoi of folkloric records and narrative of resistance; rather, associated with youth and transfigured into a timeless Eden, they have recently inspired literary biographies with reflective and lyrical tones. An example is Ahmad Agbaria's novel *Apricot Season* (2025), known as *Onat ha-Mišmišim* in the Hebrew original. Even the title signals that this is a story set in a place where nature and culture are deeply intertwined. The apricot tree evokes the mythical fruit of Paradise—its short season igniting longing and desire for it. *Apricot Season* belongs to the local literary genre of 'returns', much like Ghassan Kanafani's *ʿāʾid ʾilā Ḥayfā* [*Returning to Haifa*] (1969). Just as Kanafani imagined a protagonist coming back after years of exile to find Haifa altered and unrecognizable, Agbaria, too, envisions a return: after many years, Tarek comes back to ʾUmm al-Faḥm, only to find that the rural village has grown, yet, like many Palestinian villages reclassified as cities, it has evolved into a fragmented and dystopic space—lacking a true urban center or coherent infrastructure, defined instead by sprawling, unreadable zones.

The traditional Palestinian agricultural narrative genre discussed in this article is linguistically realized in local sub-varieties, shaped by the specific features of regional dialects. Particularly relevant are local differences in the lexicon used to describe objects and activities, as well as in the structure of narrative discourse—such as the use of verbal tense and aspect—as shown in Section 6.

3 Rural Galilean Arabic dialects: Focus on the Western Lower Galilean Muslim facies

The linguistic landscape of Palestine, with special focus on the historical region of the Galilee, has long been a focal point of scholarship on dialectal Arabic (Barthélemy 1935ff; Bergsträßer 1915; Cantineau 1938; Christie 1901; Driver

[3] For a survey, see Cerqueglini (2023b).

1925; Elihay 1974; Geva-Kleinberger 2004a; Greenfield 1978; Grotzfeld 1980; Henkin and Abu-Rabiah 2023; Hopkins 2012; Piamenta 1966; Schumacher 1887; Seeger 2009–2022; von Mülinen 1908). In particular, the customs, practices, and speech of Galilean peasants have been the subject of detailed investigation, due to their perceived social and cultural continuity with Aramaic and Canaanite communities up to Late Antiquity and the Islamization of the Levant (Bauer 1926; 1957; Blau 1960; Cerqueglini 2023a; Dalman 1939; Geva-Kleinberg 2018; Halayqa 2014; Hopkins 1995; Levin 1987; Neishtadt 2015).

Moreover, the Galilee, situated at the crossroads between Mediterranean ports and the major markets of Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon and close to the holy sites of various religions and denominations, has long attracted sectarian communities and religious groups, as evidenced by the numerous tombs of saints, prophets, and men of faith scattered throughout the region (Canaan 1924). As a result of these historical dynamics, the area hosts a kaleidoscope of dialects that vary according to sociological type in sedentary urban and rural, Bedouin, and Bedouinized varieties (Palva 2008; Rosenhouse 1969; 1984; 2008; Sonnen 1952; von Oppenheim 1943; Zuʿbi 2014; 2022), following traditional sociolinguistic classification (Cadora 1985; Jastrow 2013; Palva 2012; Procházka 2021). According to religious affiliation (Holes 1995), the Galilean Arabic dialects are divided into Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Druze (Bassal 2008; Blanc 1953; Geva-Kleinberger 2000; 2004a; 2004b; 2009; 2010; 2012; Hanauer 1935).

In addition to these historical and sociological classifications of dialects, the Galilee is further divided into geographical sub-areas (Behnstedt and Woidich 2005; 2011; Talmon 2002). The classification proposed by Blanc (1953) and Rosenhouse (1969) distinguishes between the Upper and Lower Galilee, with the dividing line running at the latitude of the village of Saḫnīn. Recent studies have also identified elements of differentiation between the dialects of the western and eastern Galilee, the latter being contiguous with and closely related to the Arabic varieties spoken in the Muṭallaṭ and Palestinian territories beyond the border (Cerqueglini 2023b; Jastrow 2004; Palva 1984; Procházka 2021; Zuʿbi 2021a). The recently published atlas, authored by Behnstedt and Geva-Kleinberger (2019), offers valuable insights into the Galilee's overall dialectal landscape and its principal diagnostic isoglosses.

Certain regional and communal dialectal varieties of Galilee have received considerable attention from specialized scholarship. Examples include dialects of the Jezreel Valley and the Galilean area contiguous to the Muṭallaṭ (Cerqueglini 2023b; Procházka 2021; Zuʿbi 2021), dialects of Nazareth and its region (Havelova 2000; Nevo 2006; Zuʿbi 2014), local Bedouin dialects (Rosenhouse 1980; 1982; 1984; Belinkov 2014), Jewish (Geva-Kleinberger 2004b; 2009) and Druze dialects (Geva-Kleinberger 2010; 2012; Marom and Geva-Kleinberger 2006–2010), more or less Bedouinized sedentary dialects (Rosenhouse 1969; Rosenhouse and Abu Dahoud 2017), urban coastal dialects (Geva-Kleiberger

and Tavor 2003; Jastrow 2009), and the rural Christian dialect of the southwestern Galilee (Abuhab 2025; Bassal 2008; Shehade 1995; 2024). In contrast, the rural Muslim dialect spoken in the southwestern Galilee, specifically in the Mediterranean hinterland where Kōkab is located, has remained comparatively underexplored.

4 Tenses, aspects, and rhythms of the agricultural narrative

The text presented below in transcription and translation was audio-recorded by the narrator's daughter in their home in Kōkab Abu-l-Ḥēja. The narrator, then sixty-six years old, recalled having participated in the agricultural activities described during her early youth, as was customary for women of her generation and those before her. This detail is particularly significant from the perspective of textual analysis: the text is narrated in the third-person masculine, using the plural pronoun 'they'. Such a choice may suggest that the narrator had not personally taken part in the events described. However, we know this is not the case here. The use of the third-person masculine plural in this local variety may function as an impersonal form—akin to the Hebrew construction—through which collective memory of the past is framed and the narrator's 'ego' fades. Alternatively, it may serve as a rhetorical device that functionally distances the narrator from the events being narrated.

In addition to the use of the third-person masculine plural person, other strategies typical of the agricultural narrative style rely on the use of the suffix conjugation (*katab/rikib*) and the plain prefix conjugation (*yuktub*, *yiġlib*, *yibʿaṭ*). The *b-* prefix conjugation (*byuktub*, *byiġlib*, *byibʿaṭ*), generally associated with the present tense and certain modal nuances, is not attested in this text. The vocalization of verbal stems for both the suffix and prefix conjugations varies according to root phonological pattern and stem vowel. In the case of the prefix conjugation, the stem vowel influences the vocalization of the personal prefix, similarly to what is described for the Muslim rural dialect of Saḫnīn, which lies only two kilometers northeast of Kōkab Abu-l-Ḥēja (Rosenhouse 1969). It should be noted that the overwhelmingly dominant form—both in agricultural narrative, which recounts routinely repeated actions situated in a time other than the present, and more generally in past event narration in the dialect of Kōkab Abu-l-Ḥēja—is the simple prefix conjugation, without the *b-* prefix, not the suffix conjugation.

As Cerqueglini (2023b) notes regarding the dialect of Bāḳa l-Ġarbiyye, the use of suffix conjugation does not correspond straightforwardly to the expression of past tense. In any case, the use of verbal strategies for tense/aspect/mood marking across discourse styles seems to vary even within sedentary rural Galilean varieties, and their investigation is still in its infancy. For example, ʿUmar et al. (2021) note that in the eastern Galilean variety of Kafr Kanna, suffix conjugation

is very common in the narration of past events, especially personal or autobiographical, and is found more frequently than prefix conjugation forms. It should be emphasized that prefix conjugation, also known as imperfective according to the grammatical tradition of Classical Arabic, is similarly used to express habitual or repeated actions. Therefore, in the description of seasonal agricultural tasks and activities, these forms may occur more frequently than in autobiographical narratives, where one would expect to find events that occurred only once, and are punctual or occasional.

From a broader survey and personal observations of the dialect of Kōkab Abu-l-Ḥēja, it appears that the suffix conjugation form serves aspectual and modal functions similar, but not identical, to those described for Negev Bedouin dialects (Henkin 2021). Deeper speculation on the time/aspect system is deferred to a dedicated discussion, as different discourse and narrative styles and genres should be included. The participle appears here solely in an idiomatic expression in the text. Unfortunately, despite the extensive body of studies and grammatical descriptions of Palestinian Arabic dialects, there is still a lack of reference research on the interface between syntax, semantics, and pragmatics in the tense-mood-aspect systems.

The text opens with the use of the auxiliary *kān* 'to be', lexicalized in the third-person masculine singular and shortened to *kan*, preceding the prefix verbal form conjugated in the third person plural. The narrative structure suggests that the use of the auxiliary *kan* signals a temporal stylistic marker that frames the entire narration in the past, as will be discussed in Section 6.

Another stylistic feature that characterizes agricultural narratives and contributes to the creation of a solemn, mythical, and timeless atmosphere is the chant-like cadence, achieved through prosodic devices analyzed in Section 6. This chant-like rhythm is typical of women's narratives concerning collective activities in traditional life, not only in the Galilee, but also among the Bedouins (Abu-Lughod 1986). Beyond the use of the imperfect, which marks the repetition of actions over time, the chant-like cadence symbolically evokes the unchanging return of the narrated actions—year after year, and from one generation to the next—thus representing the natural cycle of the seasons and the collective tasks that unfolded within them.

5 The text

The text describes the harvesting of wheat, its threshing, and its preparation for storage. The wheat was harvested, loaded onto camels in bundles, and brought to the threshing floor. There, it was stacked into a heap at the center. From the heap, it was gradually scattered around, and a horse would walk in circles, dragging behind it a wooden board embedded with stones, threshing the wheat and separating the grains from the ears and straw. As the horse moved around the

heap, the wheat on the ground was turned over with pitchforks so it would be beaten on all sides. This process lasted up to a week.

In the transcription, the sign ‖ marks a long pause or the end of a prosodic unit, while | marks a shorter, internal pause. The long pause is translated into English as a full stop, while the short pause is translated as a comma. The translation reflects the rhythm of the original language.

For prosodic reasons, some etymologically long vowels are shortened, as in light and auxiliary verbs, which form a single stress unit with the main verb. In some cases, the new forms lose their accent, as the prosodic accent falls on the main verb. In other cases, as in the verbs of the type C_2 = *w/y*, the thematic vowel is shortened, but the accent is retained for phono-syntactic reasons. In these cases, the shortened vowel is written with an accent, e.g., line 2: *yirúḥu yuḥuṣdūhin* 'they went to harvest them'. Such prosodic shortenings occur generally in the spoken language of this region. Other common prosodic shortening phenomena include the reduction of unstressed long vowels in word-final position, as in the third person plural forms of the perfect and imperfect verbs—a feature shared by the sedentary dialects of the area. More specific prosodic phenomena are related to intonational contour and depend on syntactic and pragmatic context and expressive needs.

Unfortunately, at the time of writing, no descriptions are available even of the basic prosodic system of the dialect of Kōkab Abu-l-Ḥēja (declarative, interrogative, exclamative sentences, etc.), as is the case for the vast majority of dialects in the area. There are, however, some valuable studies on pre-pausal and pausal forms (Shachmon 2011; Zuʿbi 2021b) in Palestinian Arabic varieties and on specific functions of intonation (thematization, focalization, etc.) in Eastern Arabic varieties (El Zarqa et al. 2024; Jaradat 2018), but these are based on data sets that do not specifically pertain to the traditional rural varieties of western Lower Galilee. The pre-pausal lowering mentioned by Shachmon and Faust (2017) does not seem to be realized in the traditional dialect of Kōkab Abu-l-Ḥēja. The only study to date that offers an analysis of prosodic units, their phonological and morphological effects, and their functions within a genre of traditional narrative (fairy tale) in a Palestinian Arabic variety is Cerqueglini (2023b). However, that study pertains to the dialect of Bāḳa l-Ġarbiyye, located in the north-central Muṭallaṭ region.

In the text presented here, the intonational contour affects words placed at the end of prosodic units or pausa. Pausal forms are realized through an extra lengthening of the last long vowel, e.g., line 4 *bē꞉dar* ‖ vs. line 5 *bēdar* 'threshing floor'. The symbol ꞉ represents prosodic lengthening.

Accents are also used when stress is heard in a position different from the expected, as in the case of *h-ál-faras*, in which the definite article is accented rather than the word, according to a rule affecting a restricted set of words in some Bedouin dialects (Henkin 2010; Rosenhouse 1984).

1 *kan yizraʿu ha-l-qamḥāːt* ‖
2 *w-yirúḥu yuḥusdūhin hēka b-manājil ʿala idēːhin* ‖
3 *w-yiḥammlūhin ʿaj-jmāːl* ‖
4 *w-yijibūhin ʿala l-bēːdar* ‖
5 *yaʿmalu hēk bēdar yisahislūːh* ‖
6 *w-yijibūhin ʿala j-jmāːl* ‖
7 *w-yiḥuṭṭūhin ʿala ha-l-bēːdar* ‖
8 *yiṣīru hēk yifirdūhin | dāːyir ma yíndār* ‖
9 *w-yaʿmalu ṭaʿṭūr b-in-nuṣṣ* ‖
10 *yijību ha-l-lūḥ bi... min ḫašab | w-yiḥuṭṭu min tiḥt…*
11 *yiqaddḥū | w-yḥuṭṭu ḥṣāwi min tiḥit | ʿašān yinaʿʿim l-qašš* ‖
12 *w-yijību h-ál-faras | w-yurbuṭūha hēk yḥuṭṭū-l-ha ʿala raqbatha hāy l-... tabʿat il-lūːḥ* ‖
13 *w-yiṣíru yuburmu yuburmu yuburmu yuburmu ta-tinʿam* ‖
14 *w-yiẓubbūha ʿa-janib | yiṣíru yijību š-šaʿūb | yiqilbūha ta-tinʿam n-nāḥa ṭ-ṭāːnyi* ‖
15 *ʾissa | baʿd ma tinʿam | yiqimūha ʿa-janib | w-yiḥuṭṭu mn-l-kūm uḫra dāːyir ma yíndār* ‖
16 *w-yiballšu yomēn ṭlāṭi jimʿa w-hinni yuburmu b-h-ál-faras ʿala ha-l-lūːḥ* ‖
17 *ʿala lūḥ ha-l-ḫašab* ‖

1 They used to sow the wheat grains.
2 They would go to harvest them like that, with sickles, by hand.
3 And they would load them onto camels.
4 And they would bring them to the threshing floor.
5 They made a threshing floor, and they slid it down over there.
6 They brought them (the grains) on camelback.
7 They placed them on the threshing floor.
8 They distributed them all around.
9 And they made a pile in the middle.
10 They would bring a board made of wood and put it on its underside…
11 they drilled it and placed gravel underneath so that the straw would soften.
12 Then they would bring the mare, tie her, and place that … of the board around her neck.
13 Then they would go around and around and around until the other side became soft.
14 They would put it aside and bring the *šaʿūb* and turn it until the other side softened.
15 So once it softened, they moved it aside and again spread part of the pile in all directions.
16. They initiated a period of two days, three days, a week, of going around with the mare at the board…
17. on the wooden board.

6 Comments

Line 1: The text begins with the auxiliary verb *kān* 'to be', whose originally long vowel is shortened for prosodic reasons. This auxiliary verb—lexicalized in the third-person singular—precedes the verbal form of the prefix conjugation *yiẓraʿu*, conjugated in the third-person masculine plural, which bears the main prosodic stress of the entire verbal construction. The historical *-ū* morpheme of the third person plural is regularly shortened when the verbal form does not carry any suffixes.

The object of the sowing is *ha-l-qamḥāːt*. In the word *qamḥāt*, plural of *qamḥ* and *qamḥa/i* (Seeger 2022 2: 1028), the long ā in the final syllable is further elongated for prosodic reasons, marking a pause. This phenomenon is common to all pause cases in the text, e.g., line 2: *idēːhin* 'their hands'.

The definite article in *ha-l-qamḥāːt* is preceded by the shortened form of the deictic adjective *hāḏa* 'this' (msg), lexicalized as *ha-* and attached to the article. Some words appear with two types of definite article: *il-* and *ha-l-*, the latter including the abbreviated deictic, e.g., line 4 *ʿala l-bēːdar* 'on the threshing floor' vs. line 7 *ʿala ha-l-bēːdar* 'on the threshing floor'; line 10 *ha-l-lūḥ* 'the wooden board' vs. line 12 *tabʿat il-lūːḥ* 'of the wooden board' vs. line 16 *ʿala ha-l-lūːḥ* 'on the wooden board'. Some words only appear with *ha-l-*, as in line 12 *h-ál-faras* and line 16 *b-h-ál-faras*. The transcription *h-ál-faras* (instead of *há-l-faras*) preserves the Bedouin stressed definite article *ál-*. The stressed article is attested in Bedouin dialects in a restricted set of words (like *faras* and *walad*) (Shawarbah 2017). In some local rural dialects, the word *faras* 'mare' probably entered as a foreign word from the Bedouin cultural sphere. The vocalisation of the definite article *al-* is a clear sign of the Bedouin origin of this word. Indeed, the definite article appears as *il-/l-* in local rural dialects. The function governing the distribution of *á/il-* vs. *ha-l-*, if one exists, remains unclear. They seem fully synonymous. *À propos*, in lines 16 and 17 the narrator repeats a word in order to correct herself: in line 16 she says *ʿala ha-l-lūːḥ* 'on the board', and in line 17 she says *ʿala lūḥ ha-l-ḫašab* 'on the wooden board'. It is interesting to note that the two constructions are perceived as equivalent, and that in line 17, *ha-* has been morphologized as part of the definite article and placed between the two members of the construct state.

Line 2: The long vowel of the phraseological verb 'to go' is shortened, but it is still accented *w-yirúḥu* '(and) they went'. The word *yuḥuṣdūhin* shows the insertion of a help vowel in the verbal stem, similar to the thematic vowel and the vowel of the prefix between C_1 and C_2. The verbal forms conjugated in the 3mpl preserve the final *-ū* before the suffixed object form *-hin* 'them' (Behnstedt and Geva-Kleinberger 2019: 196). The suffix *-hin* is also used as a possessive pronoun for 3pl 'their' (masculine and feminine) as shown in *ʿala idēhin* 'by (their) hand(s)'.

The adverb *hēka* 'like that, in this way' is characteristic of this dialect, as reported by Behnstedt and Geva-Kleinberger (2019: 224). This form alternates in this village variety with *hēk* in line 5.

The word *manājil* 'sickles' is the plural of the local form *minjal*, as elicited from the same narrator. The *mi-* vocalization of the nominal prefix in the singular form is in line with the data reported by Behnstedt and Geva-Kleinberger (2019: 54).

Line 3: In the word *ʿaj-jmāːl,* lit. 'onto camels', i.e., 'on camelback', the *-l-* in the preposition *ʿala* is assimilated into the following word's initial *j-*. It is not a residual part of any definite article, as is evident comparing it with the expression *ʿala j-jmāːl* 'on camelback' (lit. 'onto the camels') at the end of line 6.

Line 4: The word *bēdar*, 'threshing floor', appears for the first time in this line.[4]

Line 5: The personal prefixes of the prefix conjugation for verbs C_1 = ʿ in the first form are regularly vocalized in *-a-*, as shown in *yaʿmalu.* In the verb *yisahislūːh*, with extra lengthening of the last long, stressed syllable in pausa, a short final aspiration is audible, represented by the *-h*, stretching back to the original form of the 3msg suffixed pronoun. In this Galilean variety, the final aspiration for the 3msg suffixed object is not audible in regular non-pausal contexts. In regular, non-pausal contexts, the presence of the 3msg suffixed object is signaled only by the stress on the final 3mpl ending *-u* (< **ū*), as well attested also from other rural varieties in the region. The verb *sahsal/yisahsil* come from the quadrilateral root *shsl*, translated by Seeger (2022: 1 584) as 'ebnen, eben machen'.

Line 8: In the phraseological verb *yiṣīru*, the thematic vowel is not prosodically shortened as the main verb is separated from the phraseological verb by the adverb *hēk*. The verb *yifirdūhin* 'they distributed them (the grains)' shows that the internal pausa does not cause extra lengthening of the last stressed long vowel. The expression *dāyir ma yindār* means lit. 'circling (msg) all around as it circles'. The participle *dāyir* is the only active participle found in the text. The vowel *-ā-* is further lengthened to signify the extensive duration of the described action iconically.[5] The prefix conjugation of the seventh form *yindār*, a middle/intransitive voice, is interesting for morphological and prosodical reasons. Behnstedt and Geva-Kleinberger (2019: 331–333) note certain pronunciation instabilities related to forms VII and VIII of the verb, which yield different outcomes across various Galilee sub-regions. The examples they provide concern sound verbs. In the case presented here, the verb involves C_2 = *w*, yet its behavior is unexpected. According to the expected prosodic pattern, the *-ā-* in *yindār* should be further lengthened to *-āː-*. In practice, however, it is not, and the stress appears instead to be retracted onto the prefix, *yíndār* ‖. The same idiomatic expression is repeated in the same prosodic context in line 15.[6]

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[4] For a detailed discussion of the etymology and distribution of this word in connection with other terms related to threshing and recorded among farmers in Galilee and related dialects, see Bassal (2007; 2012), Geva-Kleinberger (2018), and al-Ḥurūb (2015).

[5] See Henkin (2010) for a discussion of iconic lengthening in Bedouin dialects.

[6] For a comparative overview on pausal forms, see Hoberman (2011), Shachmon and Faust (2017), and Zuʿbi (2017).

Line 9: At this point, we encounter the word *ṭaʿṭūr*, which the informant explained as meaning 'heap' or 'pile'. The informant's daughter added that the meaning of the word might derive from its similarity to *ṭarṭūr,* a common Arabic word that indicates a pointed, conical hat. The word *ṭarṭūr* is reported by Seeger (2022 2: 742) as 'blöd, unter dem Pantoffel stehend; Pantoffelheld' and 'eine art Kopfbedeckung'. Seeger also proposes to relate this word to *ṭanṭūr/a* 'Mütze' (Seeger 2022 2: 763), probably connected with the meaning expressed here.

Line 10: This is the first mention of the wooden board *ha-l-lūḥ bi- ... min ḫašab* used for threshing wheat—that is, for separating the grain from the chaff. At the end of the recording, the informant added that the tool was known as *lūḥ drās* 'threshing board'. The etymology of *drās* has been extensively discussed. Interestingly, **ḍirs/dars* 'molar tooth' may also be etymologically related to it. With the first consonant phonologically variable across dialects, the word for 'molar tooth' also appears in the Galilee as *dirs/dars* and even *jirs* in Taršīḥa, cognate of *jrs* 'to grind', and *zirs* in Tunisian Arabic (Behnsted and Geva-Kleinberger 2019: 152–153). Moreover, the alternative word for 'molar tooth', across Arabic varieties (Galilean *ṭaḥūni*) and other Semitic languages, such as Hebrew (*šinaym ṭoḥnot* 'molar teeth'), derives from the Semitic root *ṭḥn*, from which 'to grind' (Hebrew *ṭaḥanah* 'mill'). The etymological and conceptual association of molar teeth with millstones is also frequent across European languages (Latin *mola* 'millstone').

The informant's daughter provided the Hebrew translation of *lūḥ drās* as *morag* (Aranov 1977; Waters 2015). The Hebrew word *morag* has its direct Arabic counterpart in the word *mōraj/nōraj/nawraj* (Denizeau 1960).[7] The implement is also referred to simply as 'the board' (Halayqa 2014), and this is how the narrator refers to it in this passage.

The delicate operation of separating the grain from the ear marks the beginning of a process of transformation, whereby the wheat grain is first torn apart and then ground in order to become food. As the informant explained, numerous short blades were inserted on the underside of the threshing board. In the ancient Mediterranean world, this harsh process was imbued with symbolic meaning (Frazer 1915). Consider the Latin word *tribulum* for 'threshing floor' from which derive, among others, the Italian *trebbiatura* 'threshing', but also *tribolazione* 'tribulation', *travaglio* 'labour, suffering', and the French *travailler* 'to work, to labor'.

Line 10 breaks off with a hesitation. Indeed, the adverb *min tiht* at the end does not appear in its pausal form, which would involve the insertion of a help vowel. The pausal form of *tiḥt* is attested in the internal pause of line 11. The pausal form *tiḥit* in line 11 corresponds to the form of the preposition reported in the village by Behnstedt and Geva-Kleinberger (2019: 40). The help vowel *-i-*

[7] For further discussion of this tool, the etymology of its name, and its usage in the rural Palestinian context, see Geva-Kleinberger (2018) and Sobeh (2015).

between C_2 and C_3 also appears in the internal pause in *janib* in lines 14 and 15 (see also Palva 1965).

Line 11: The word *ḥṣāwi* is a collective noun designating small stones, pebbles (Seeger 2022 1: 259). The same root produces verbs for 'counting' , semantically parallel to Latin *calculus/-i* 'small stone', and *calculare* 'to calculate', derived from the ancient custom of using stones to represent counted entities. The final connector *ʿašān* 'in order to' is reported for Kōkab Abu-l-Ḥēja by Behnstedt and Geva-Kleinberger (2019: 248) alongside the alternative form *minšān*.

Line 12: The syllabification in the form *raqbatha* 'her knee' is in line with the form *raqbati* 'my knee' recorded by Behnstedt and Geva-Kleinberger (2019: 74). The proximal feminine singular deictic pronoun *hāy* (Behnstedt and Geva-Kleinberger 2019: 204) here seems to fill the gap of a hesitation. The informant does not remember the word for the horse harness that is fitted around the horse's neck and allows the horse to drag the threshing board in a circle around the wheat stack piled in the middle of the threshing floor. She uses the genitive exponent *tabʿat* 'of, pertaining to, belonging to' in the feminine singular form, in agreement with *hāy*.

Line 13: The fourfold repetition of the verb *yuburmu* iconically represents the duration of the threshing process, consisting of the horse going around the heap from which the grain bundles were scattered on the threshing floor. As for the expression *w-yiśíru yuburmu*, and more generally the frequent phrasal use of the verb *ṣār/yiṣīr* ('to become'), the translation 'to begin to' is certainly valid. However, in some cases, it may be more appropriately rendered in English simply by a temporal connector indicating posteriority or just a change in the action, such as 'and then ...'.

A general remark should be made concerning the use of help vowels in this dialect. In the text presented here, several such cases occur, e.g., *yuḥuṣdūhin, yifirdūhin, yuburmu*. In the transcription, I have used regular (non-superscript) vowels, since the help vowels are pronounced with the same length as regular vowels, and not shorter. Moreover, the help vowel corresponds to that of the verbal prefix, as attested by *yifrad* > **yifradū(hin)* > *yifirdūhin*. It is interesting to notice that in the form *yurbuṭūha*, the verbal form has retained the thematic pattern of the singular, without fall of the thematic vowel and replacement by help vowel (line 12).[8]

Line 14: The verb *ḍabb/yiḍubb* is pronounced an initial fricative fricative *ẓabb/yiẓubb* by the narrator. Seeger translates it 'in Sicherheit bringen, sorgfältig verwahren, aufheben, bewahren, verbergen, verstecken, aufräumen, wegräumen, einpacken' (2022 2: 713). The action seems to describe here collecting the grains of wheat from the threshing floor after threshing and storing them.

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[8] I thank the editor, Prof. Maciej Klimiuk, for his observations on the help vowels present in the verbal forms in this text.

The informant described the *šaʿūb* mentioned in this line as a kind of four-pronged metal rake with a wooden handle. As this passage of the text explains, the tool was used to turn the wheat over on the threshing floor so that it would be threshed evenly on all sides, and the straw—intended for various uses—would soften in the process. The word *nāḥa* used here for 'side' derives from the root *nḥy* (Hava 1982: 756; Seeger 2022 2: 1218), and is a cognate of Hebrew *lə-hanḥōt/ hanḥaya* 'leading (herds)' (Brown et al. 1975).

Line 15: The temporal adverb *ʾissa* (lit.) 'now' (from *ʾas-sāʿa*, lit. 'the/this hour/ time') is frequently used in the western Galilee as a discourse marker to signal a change in topic or a subsequent scene or action (Abuhab 2025). The temporal conjunction *baʿd* reinforces its pragmatic usage here. Interestingly, at the beginning of the sentence, in the word *ʾissa*, a glottal stop is heard before the first vowel. In general, in the local dialect, there is no initial *hamzah*. But the word *ʾissa* is pronounced with the initial glottal stop when it is used as a discourse marker to signal the beginning of a new thematic sequence or of a narrative unit. In its original temporal meaning, 'now', indeed, the word is commonly heard without the initial glottal stop (*issa*).

The temporal conjunction *baʿd* appears combined with a verb, and thus in non-pausal form, without the help vowel. In Behnstedt and Geva-Kleinberger (2019: 88), the form with the help vowel, *baʿed*, is reported for Kōkab Abu-l-Ḥēja.

The word *kūm* is found as *kōm*, pl. *kwām* in Seeger (2022 2: 1106) and translated 'Haufen; Bündel (Haare); große Menge.' The word seems related via phonetical shift **q* > *k* to *qōm/qōme*, pl. *qwām* 'zusammengehörige Gruppe, Bande, Haufen' (Seeger 2022 2: 1041). It refers to the bundles of wheat that were gradually pulled down from the central heap onto the threshing floor to be threshed. The word *uḫra*, literally the feminine singular form of the adjective *āḫir* 'other', is commonly used in the Galilee region as an adverb meaning '(some) more' or 'again' (probably from *marra uḫra* 'one more time').

The expression *mn-l-kūm* produces a sequence of four consonants. Interestingly the first three are all sonorants, i.e., with a high vocalic potential.

Line 16: The independent pronoun of the third person masculine (and feminine) plural *hinni* is uttered here as recorded by Behnstedt and Geva-Kleinberger for this village (2019: 182).[9]

Lines 15 and 16: In the word *yomēn*, the historically long vowel before the stressed syllable is shortened (**yawm-* > *yōm-*). The shortening of long, stressed vowels that lose their accent to the following long, stressed vowel (**yawm-ayn* > *yōmēn* > *yomēn*) is somehow similar to the shortening that happens inside prosodic words, such as those constituted by phraseological verbs and main verbs. For example, in **yisīru yúburmu* > *yisíru yúburmu*, the originally long, stressed

[9] For discussions of this and similar forms, see Behnstedt (1991); Blanc (1953); Diem (1972); and Rosenhouse (1984).

vowel is shortened (**yisīru* > *yisíru*), but it may maintain a secondary accent. The main prosodic accent is on the main verb (*yúburmu*).

Regarding the interface between syntax and the stylistic features that characterize this text, a final observation concerning the distribution of prefix (imperfect) and suffix (perfect) conjugation is necessary. The text opens with a temporal marker, *kan* (**kānu*), followed by the first verb in the prefix conjugation. This combination unambiguously indicates that the prefix conjugation is temporally anchored in the past. Specifically, given the nature and content of the text, the use of prefix forms suggests intense collective, repetitive, and regularly recurring (every year) actions of considerable duration that require substantial effort.

The narration proceeds exclusively through prefix forms. The initial auxiliary *kan* may establish a general temporal frame for the entire text, as if all the following prefix-conjugated verbs were governed by it. However, it is important to note that the prosodic units follow one another, and the presence of syntactic connectors signals variation in context, in which the prefix forms are used to indicate past actions—a usage deeply rooted in the Semitic languages since their earliest stages (Goldenberg 2013). Indeed, it seems that some Arabic dialects preserve functions of the prefix conjugation related to the perfective aspect and the past tense. In the present case, the issue cannot be definitively resolved, as all verbs describe repeated, collective, and reiterated actions, and the use of the prefix form is thus strongly linked to the aspectual nature of the action, and any temporal implication remains embedded and implicit.

Regarding prosody, as represented in the transcription and translation, the prosodic units are relatively short and fairly uniform in terms of intonation contour. Prosodic pauses in this text can be categorized into two types: internal and final. Longer prosodic units, in the second half of the text, may entail one or two internal pauses. Internal pauses occur within the main prosodic unit and are generally brief, without affecting vowel length. They contribute to giving the text a solemn, steady, and cadenced tone and emphasizing certain aspects or objects mentioned in the narration. In contrast, at the end of the main prosodic units, accented long vowels closest to the pause tend to undergo further lengthening. As a result, the intonation contour gradually descends at the end of each main prosodic unit, giving the text a repetitive and chant-like rhythm.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, although considerable work has been carried out (Perez and Rosenhouse 2022), it is essential to emphasize the importance of continuing to study the heritage of the Palestinian vernacular varieties, especially traditional rural dialects, which now represent a world that is irreversibly fading. Equal attention must be given to the necessary sensitivity to ethnological, anthropological, historical, and social data in linguistic research.

As the short text discussed here demonstrates, the culture-specific aspects of the ideology of narration and the resulting narrative structure (Sowayan 1995) provide a clear example of one way in which the specific profile of a cultural group can shape linguistic data. In many cultures across the world, narration is considered a sacred act and is entrusted to expert individuals, much like physical or spiritual care. Speaking of the past evokes the past, and this process carries both benefits and risks that the community must manage.

As this text demonstrates, in order to allow a different temporal dimension to enter the present, traditional rural Palestinian culture employs a range of strategies—rhetorical (initial temporal markers), semantic (collective and impersonal actions), prosodic (pauses), pragmatic (discourse markers), and morphological (verbal forms)—discussed in the previous section. These culture-specific aspects of narrative ideology are far from being mere folkloric curiosities; they directly shape the textual tapestry grounded in the discursive functions of verbal tenses and aspects—an area that remains underexplored in most Semitic spoken varieties.

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