

# KTHOBONOYO SYRIAC

## SOME OBSERVATIONS AND REMARKS

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper gives some observations and preliminary remarks on Kthobonoyo, the spoken form of classical Syriac as used in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. It presents a brief history of Kthobonoyo usage, and outlines its linguistic and sociolinguistic features.*

### INTRODUCTION

- [1] Recent history, beginning in the early decades of the twentieth century, witnessed a revival in the utilization of classical Syriac in both written and oral forms. Written utilization was not primarily in the form of religious-oriented literature as one may expect, but in various secular genres including national and ethnic-oriented poetry and prose, as well as journalism. Oral utilization became to be centralized around pop poetry and lyrics set to music (although a few written exceptions have been noted),<sup>1</sup> radio broadcasting,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Published lyrics set to musical notation include Gabriel Asad's ܩܘܨܢܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ (Aleppo, 1953), [Laila Haddad], ܩܘܨܢܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ (Jönköping, 1998), *inter alia*.

and the use of classical Syriac as a spoken medium of communication. While the written modality of this period has been studied by Brock,<sup>3</sup> Knudsen,<sup>4</sup> and Wardini,<sup>5</sup> there are no publications that I am aware of on the spoken modality which I shall refer to as Spoken Classical Syriac (SCS). What I aim to do here is to give some preliminary remarks on the subject. It must be stressed from the outset that the remarks made herein are entirely observational. A serious study would require a corpus of recorded spoken conversations which is now not available.

- [2] I shall begin with some terminology leading to a definition of Kthobonoyo, the form of SCS discussed in this paper. I shall then describe the history of Kthobonoyo in the twentieth century, following it with a preliminary account of the characteristics and features of this form of Syriac.

## TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

- [3] SCS is referred to with the Syriac term *leshono kthobonoyo*, somewhat a misnomer as it literally means ‘the written language,’ and less often with the term *leshono sephroyo* ‘the book language.’ For instance, one may hear the English utterance “He is speaking *kthobonoyo*.” It is important to note that the term *kthobonoyo* does not usually refer to the written form, despite its literal meaning. The term *suryoyo* is reserved for the written modality; e.g., “She is

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<sup>2</sup> The first broadcasting in Classical Syriac was by Abrohom Nuro in Lebanon in the 1970s. Radio Qolo from Sweden broadcasts some interviews in Kthobonoyo, while its usual broadcasting is a Kthobonized form of Turoyo.

<sup>3</sup> S.P. Brock, ‘Some Observations on the Use of Classical Syriac in the Late Twentieth Century,’ *Journal of Semitic Studies*, XXXIV/2 (1989), 363–75.

<sup>4</sup> E.E. Knudsen, ‘Lexical Innovations in Modern Literary Syriac’, in René Lavenant (ed.), *Symposium Syriacum VII*, 545–51; E.E. Knudsen, ‘An important step in the revival of literary Syriac: Abrohom Nouro’s Tawldotho’, *Oriens Christianus* 84 (2000), 59–65.

<sup>5</sup> E. Wardini, ‘Neologisms in MLS’, *Melanges de l’Universite Saint-Joseph* 53:5 (1993/4), 401–566, and 54 (1995/6), 167–324; E. Wardini, ‘Modern Literary Syriac: A Case of Linguistic Divorce’, in René Lavenant (ed.), *Symposium Syriacum VII*, pp.517–25; E. Wardini, *Neologisms in Modern Literary Syriac: Some Preliminary Results* (Dissertation, Oslo 1995).



ܠܗܘܢ ܕܡܘܨܪܐ ܕܡܘܨܪܐ—Grammar is the knowledge from which are learned rules with whose observance the vernacular mistake is distinguished from the accurate *kthoboyo* speech.” (There is always the remote possibility that ܡܘܨܪܐ was used in earlier periods to denote the spoken form, but this meaning was not recorded in any of the lexica.)

[6] The definition of *kthobonoyo* can be further defined along time and demography. While SCS was used in earlier times and perhaps continuously until the present, the lack of historical records makes it impossible to ascertain any of its linguistic features. For this reason alone, I opt to limit the definition of *kthobonoyo* to twentieth and twenty-first century usage, and reserve the more general term, ‘SCS,’ for earlier periods if needed.

[7] As for demography, *kthobonoyo* is primarily, and probably exclusively, a feature known in West Syriac and more precisely amongst the Syrian Orthodox, with a few hundred speakers or so at various competence levels. This is not to deny other religious communities who have competent scholars that can even converse in it.<sup>11</sup> In the late 1960s and early 1970s, for instance, the Syriac Catholic Monastery of Sharfeh had courses run by Abrohom Nuro on conversational Syriac. Earlier, the Maronite scholar Joseph Hobaïca published a guide for conversational Syriac with Arabic and French translations.<sup>12</sup> As for East Syriac, the number of its speakers is quite small and does not form a speaking community.<sup>13</sup> This striking absence of the spoken modality amongst the modern

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, during the Louvain Symposium Syriacum, one was able to hear Alber Abbouna converse with Malphono Abrohom Nuro in the classical language in East Syriac pronunciation. Just recently, I had a very lengthy and serious discussion (not mere niceties and formalities) with Fr. Emmanuel Youkhannan who conversed with me very eloquently and in the Western dialect.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Hobeïca, *Première Guide Pratique De la conversation dans la langue syriaque, “texte syriaque, arabe, français”, Manuel spécialement destine* (Beirut, my copy does not have the cover and is not dated), Part I (I do not know if a second part was published).

<sup>13</sup> Malpana Daniel Benjamin, who comes from a family of printers and publishers, tells me that while very few Chaldeans and fewer Assyrians can converse in SCS, he has not heard it himself (e-mail communication, 7/4/03).

Assyrians and Chaldeans is probably due to the fact that Swadaya, the colloquial, had raised itself to a literary language in the past few centuries.<sup>14</sup> This is echoed in the term used to refer to the classical language in East Syriac: ܠܫܢܐ ܥܘܠܡܐ *leshshana ‘attiqa* ‘the old language,’ as opposed to the modern written language. Turoyo, the vernacular of the West Syriac speakers, on the other hand, remains a vernacular and efforts to write it down have always been resisted by the clergy and *malphone* (though there are some recent attempts to use it in written form). One finds a similar pattern in the use of classical Syriac in written form. Brock<sup>15</sup> notes that during the twentieth century, the written literary production of West Syriac is by far more extensive than that in East Syriac. Ironically, it was East Syriac writers, like Touma Audo and Awgin Manna, who surpassed their western counterparts in producing lexical and grammatical works in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

[8] Because *kthobonoyo*, as we shall shortly see, has its own identity, users, style, and idiosyncrasies that distinguish it from the written form of classical Syriac, it qualifies to be considered a subtype of Syriac. Hereinafter, I shall use the term ‘Kthobonoyo Syriac’ or simply ‘Kthobonoyo’ (capitalized and unitalicized).

[9] To summarize our definition, Kthobonoyo is the spoken, not written, form of classical Syriac as used in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. (One can designate the written form by ‘Modern Literary Syriac’ following Knudsen and Wardini). The rest of this paper discusses the use of Kthobonoyo in the twentieth and twenty first centuries, and then briefly outlines some of its linguistic and sociolinguistic characteristics and features.

## USE OF KTHOBONOYO IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

[10] While Kthobonoyo was just defined as a subtype of Syriac that belongs to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it was born from an earlier tradition of SCS. How far was SCS used and to

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<sup>14</sup> H.L. Murre-Van den Berg, *From a Spoken to a Written Language, The Introduction and Development of Literary Urmia Aramaic in the Nineteenth Century* (1999).

<sup>15</sup> Brock, *Some Observations*, p. 364.

what extent is hard to ascertain. The lexical definitions of the term *kthoboyo* by Smith and Audo are a testimony to its existence.

[11] Necessity must have dictated the use of SCS at least amongst the clergy. In recent centuries, the linguistic background of the church hierarchy in the Middle East included Turoyo-, Arabic-, Armenian-, Turkish- and Kurdish-speakers. While most of the clergy were conversant in more than one language, there may have been cases where a common language was not available, in which case SCS would have been the only choice. This, of course, is a mere conjecture, and if indeed SCS was practiced, its use would have been quite limited.

[12] The communication between the Church hierarchy of the Middle East and its flock in India provides clearer evidence for the use of SCS in earlier periods. At least since the seventeenth century, visiting bishops to Malabar had no knowledge of Malayalam, the indigenous language of the Syriac Christians of India, and in reverse the local clergy knew none of the Middle Eastern languages apart from Classical Syriac. While sometimes Arabic translators were used, much of the communication relied on Syriac. Until this day, one finds a few Kthobonoyo speakers amongst the Malayalees, although the number is dwindling, being replaced by English. The use of SCS as a mean of communication continued until the Kthobonoyo age of the twentieth century.

[13] Another reason that gave rise to the use of Kthobonoyo in the early twentieth century is national identity, which intensified in 1908 when the Turkish İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti (Committee of Union and Progress, CUP), or the Young Turks, revolted against the Ottoman sultan, and forced him to restore the Ottoman constitution of 1876. This gave an opportunity to many *millet* communities to form secular organizations and movements that gave rise to a spirit of nationalism. Within the Syrian Orthodox church, the *irutho* movement was formed with much enthusiasm from activists like Naʿum Faiq. Unity was the main focus, not only unity within the Syrian Orthodox church, but also with other communities that belonged to the same “nation,” such as the Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syrian Catholics and Maronites. Hence, a notion of *ʾumthonoyutho* (belonging to a ‘people’ or ‘nation’) was developed, and in turn a movement of Syriac revival came into being. Proponents of Syriac revival saw in the use of SCS but one method with which the language can be revived. Speakers of

Kthobonoyo in the first half of the twentieth century included educators such as Yuḥanon Dolabani (1885–1969), and later Kthobonoyo was promoted by Fawlos Gabriel (1912–1971), Abdulmasih Qarabashi (1903–1983), Abrohom Nuro (1923–), and others.

- [14] In the second half of the twentieth century, the use of Kthobonoyo was enforced in the seminaries and some of the village schools in Ṭur ʿAbdin. It was not unusual for a pupil to receive a punishment if heard speaking in a tongue other than Kthobonoyo. Even Ṭuroyo was prohibited in schools. Teachers would go to the extent of assigning some pupils as ‘watchers’ whose duty is to report other pupils when they speak in a non-Kthobonoyo language. This attitude is echoed in a statement made in Kthobonoyo by Malphono Isa Garis, director of students at Mor Gabriel Monastery, “ܘܡܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܐ ܕܡܠܦܢܘܢܐ ܝܫܐ ܓܪܝܫܐ ܕܡܘܪ ܓܒܪܝܐܝܝܠ ܡܘܢܐܫܬܐ, “ܘܡܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܐ ܕܡܠܦܢܘܢܐ ܝܫܐ ܓܪܝܫܐ ܕܡܘܪ ܓܒܪܝܐܝܝܠ ܡܘܢܐܫܬܐ, ܘܡܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܐ ܕܡܠܦܢܘܢܐ ܝܫܐ ܓܪܝܫܐ ܕܡܘܪ ܓܒܪܝܐܝܝܠ ܡܘܢܐܫܬܐ—in my opinion, if any teacher, of whatever language, does not converse in the language which he is teaching, then he is not doing that which is right, and his training will not be successful.”<sup>16</sup>

- [15] Kthobonoyo was given a push after the immigration of the Syrian Orthodox from the Middle East to Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. Immigrants came from various diverse linguistic backgrounds. In the diaspora, they acquired English, Swedish, French, German, Dutch, Flemish, or Italian. Finding a common language is not always possible, and amongst the clergy and *malphone*, Kthobonoyo started to serve as a mini lingua franca. I can report from a personal experience how I had no choice but to communicate in Kthobonoyo. That was during a visit to the Monastery of St. Ephrem in Holland in 1988, the purpose of which was to teach the monks how to use the then newly released Syriac MLS fonts.<sup>17</sup> The monk who was assigned to learn this new technology from me spoke Ṭuroyo, Swedish, and a bit of Dutch, none of which I mastered. The only common language available to both of us was Kthobonoyo. I found myself struggling not only to

<sup>16</sup> *Heto [Heto]*, vol. 5, nos 8–9, 2003, p. 46.

<sup>17</sup> Gamma Productions, *Multi-Lingual Scholar, Wordprocessor User's Manual* (Santa Monica, 1989); G.A. Kiraz, *Alaph Beth Font Kit User's Guide* (Los Angeles, 1989).

communicate in a language that I have hitherto used only in a liturgical context, albeit for fifteen years, but also had to translate and coin, sometimes on the spot, computer terminology to get the lessons across. This experience gave rise to a number of neologisms: ܡܘܢܝܬܘܢ “monitor,” ܩܘܒܠܘܬܘܢ “keyboard,” and of course ܦܘܢܬܘܢ “fonts.” Instantaneous coinage of terms is one of the linguistic features of Kthobonoyo as we shall shortly see.

- [16] Today, Kthobonoyo has become more popular. One finds speakers communicating in Kthobonoyo even when their linguistic backgrounds give rise to another common, sometimes native language. Attendees of Syriac Symposia are now hearing Kthobonoyo more often.

## CHARACTERISTICS AND FEATURES OF KTHOBONOYO SYRIAC

### Nativeness and Aptitude

- [17] Kthobonoyo, as the *fushā* of Arabic, is primarily a learned, non-native language that requires formal training. Very few cases where Kthobonoyo is a native language do exist, and one such case was reported during the Syriac Symposium in Princeton in 2003 and this year’s Aram conference in Chicago.<sup>18</sup> In all of these cases, the children who acquire Kthobonoyo as a native language are multilingual children, speaking at least two other languages.

- [18] The aptitude level of Kthobonoyo speakers varies tremendously, despite the fact that speakers tend to be clergymen and *malphone* well versed in Classical Syriac. There are two main factors that affect aptitude: the level of mastering Classical Syriac, and the extent to which the speakers’ social context allows them to use Kthobonoyo. Any shift in these factors has a direct affect on the speaker’s aptitude. I am happy to provide a personal example. I began speaking Kthobonoyo in 1988 with a low aptitude level. As I began reading Syriac on daily basis as part of my M.St. degree in Oxford in 1990–1991, my Kthobonoyo aptitude increased tremendously, especially that concurrently I had the opportunity to speak it on regular basis with two friends in London until 1996. After I moved back to the US in 1996, I had little chance to speak

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<sup>18</sup> G.A. Kiraz, *Tabetha Syriac* (forthcoming).



Kthobonoyo and my aptitude level decreased until I decided to speak it at home with my children.

### Male Centricity

- [19] A significant sociolinguistic feature of Kthobonoyo, one which sets it apart from most other languages, is its male centricity. Most speakers are either clergy (by definition male) and/or male *malphono*, with very few female speakers. The result is an intriguing peculiarity of a language that is morphologically gender sensitive.
- [20] At least two types of gender related ill-usage are observed in the use of verbal forms, even when speakers have an average mastering of the written language. In male-female dialogues, the second person verbal paradigm is misused in *both* directions. Males often address females in a mixture of masculine and feminine forms. This observation was made when a number of speakers, including myself, addressed my Kthobonoyo-speaking daughter Tabetha; e.g., \*ܕܠܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ instead of ܕܠܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ “do not go.” This often happens in imperfect forms that end in the suffix *-in*, whereby the speaker may wrongly assume a silent *yudh* ending. I have also observed adult females addressing males in a mixture of masculine and feminine forms; e.g., \*ܕܘܪܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܘܪܐ instead of ܕܘܪܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ “you say.” Such ill-usage of verbal forms takes place when the speakers are new to each other. If and when the experience between the two speakers grows, less and less mistakes are made.
- [21] The other ill-formed usage of verbs that was observed takes place in third feminine forms. In a dialogue I had with an adult *malphono*, he was continuously referring to his wife in the masculine when constructing an ‘imperfect + ܐ’ form; e.g., \*ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ instead of ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ “when she wants to go.” This *malphono* in question was of course aware of the proper verbal conjugation in the written form, but as referring to a female is not common in Kthobonoyo, the wrong verbal form was used.
- [22] This male dominant feature of Kthobonoyo has effects beyond morphology and syntax. It puts, for example, a limitation on the genres of dialogues that take place. While one may imagine gender related topics discussed, one is guaranteed that they are always given from a male perspective. Additionally, the social status of speakers puts a limitation to the range of topics which are usually



systematically recorded (e.g., ܠܘܬܘܢܘܬܐ ‘airport,’ ܪܘܕܝܘܬܐ ‘radio,’ ܬܠܘܘܙܝܘܢܐ ‘television’), and one has to find them by digging up modern dictionaries that mix Classical Syriac with Kthobonoyo vocabulary.

### The Lexicon: Neologism and Coinage

[28] The primary difference between Kthobonoyo and the written modality is in the lexicon. On the one hand, the Kthobonoyo lexicon employs many new additions, and gives some of the existing words a new meaning. On the other hand, the Kthobonoyo lexicon employs only a subset of the larger literary lexicon. Much of Kthobonoyo vocabulary can be found in recent dictionaries, though always mixed with Modern and Classical Literary Syriac.<sup>19</sup> The neologisms put forward by Abrohom Nuro are the exception.<sup>20</sup>

[29] There are instances when a new word is coined when there is in fact an equivalent in the written lexicon. I, for instance, coined ܠܘܬܘܢܘܬܐ ‘water of fruits’ for ‘juice’ and used it for some years until Abrohom Nuro pointed out ܠܘܬܘܢܘܬܐ.

[30] In some cases, nominal variants of the same root are used for the same semantic feature by different speakers. I always used with my daughter ܠܘܬܘܢܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܘܫܐ ‘give me a kiss.’ The use of ܠܘܬܘܢܘܬܐ is motivated from the prayer of the Kiss of Peace from the Liturgy of

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<sup>19</sup> Recent dictionaries containing Kthobonoyo terms include Issa Hanna, *Mini-Wörterbuch Deutsch-Assyrisch* (1984); Simon Atto, *Nederlands Suryoyo Woordenboek* (1986); Simon Atto, *Süryanice-Türkçe Sözlük* (1988); Aziz Bulut, *Woordenboek Nederlands-Syrisch, Syrisch-Nederlands* (1993); Hatune Dogan, *Wörterbuch Syrisch-Deutsch, Deutsch-Syrisch* (Aleppo, 1997); Odisho Ashitha, *Hilqa de Leshana Assyrian-Arabic Dictionary* (1977); Younan Hozaya and Anderios Youkhana, *Babra Arabic-Assyrian Dictionary* (1998); Sabo Hanno and Aziz Bulut, *Wörterbuch Deutsch-Aramäisch, Aramäisch-Deutsch* (2000); Shlemon Khoshaba and Emanuel Yokhanna, *Zabreera Arabic-Syriac Dictionary* (2000); Joseph Malke, ܠܘܬܘܢܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܘܫܐ [Syriac-Arabic, Arabic-Syriac] (2003); Gabriel Afram, *Svenske Assyriske ordbok* (2005).

<sup>20</sup> Abrohom Nuro, *Tawldotho or Syriac Neologisms, Principles, Criteria and Examples* (1997); Nuro also put together a word list circulated privately in Syriac, Arabic, English and French.

St. James. Malphono Abrohom Nuru, however, opted for ܐܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ, to which Tabettha responded without any problem.

- [31] Kthobonoyo is rich in neologisms and coined terms, but as just mentioned there is no systematic recording of these terms. Sometimes a term is coined on the spot. For instance, when (then) my 3 ½ year old daughter and I were walking in an airport and we reached the escalator-like ‘moving floor,’ my inquisitive daughter asked, “ܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܐܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ” I instantaneously replied, “ܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ ܐܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ.” Others may coin a different word which results in an object having different lexical representations in Kthobonoyo.

### Simplified Grammar

- [32] While the phonology and morphology of Kthobonoyo are quite similar to Classical Syriac, the syntax of Kthobonoyo is a subset of that of the classical language.
- [33] The nominal absolute state is less frequent in Kthobonoyo, as well as the construct state (e.g., Kthobonoyo ܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ for Classical Syriac ܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ ‘the king of Spain’). Having said that, one finds common constructs such as ܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ ‘the mayor of Losser.’
- [34] Other grammatical features are absent in Kthobonoyo. Possessive and object suffixes of complex verbs are avoided (e.g., Kthobonoyo ܐܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ for Classical Syriac ܐܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ ‘he called me’). Active participle forms are used primarily as present tense verbs and hardly as nouns. The infinitive is quite infrequent, especially with an object (e.g., Kthobonoyo ܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ for Classical Syriac ܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ).
- [35] Nominal clauses with pronoun contractions are hardly heard in Kthobonoyo, but are quite frequent in literary Syriac. When Sebastian P. Brock was playing with his three-year old namesake Sebastian-Kenoro a game of hide-and-seek, he would use the literary form ܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ (i.e., ܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ ܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ), where one would expect in Kthobonoyo the longer simplified form ܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ. The substitution of the ܘܨܘܪܘܢܐ- structure in place of contracted pronouns is quite frequent in Kthobonoyo.
- [36] Word order is less free in Kthobonoyo than in Classical Syriac. In Kthobonoyo, the verb is hardly at the end of a phrase or



- (Beirut, my copy does not have the cover and is not dated), Part I (I do not know if a second part was published).
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