In 1951, the secluded Neo-Aramaic-speaking Jewish community of Zakho migrated collectively to Israel. It carried with it its unique language, culture and customs, many of which bore resemblance to those found in classical rabbinic literature. Like others in Kurdistan, for example, the Jews of Zakho retained a vibrant tradition of creating and performing songs based on embellishing biblical stories with Aggadic traditions.

Despite the recent growth of scholarly interest into Neo-Aramaic communities, however, studies have to this point almost exclusively focused on the linguistic analysis of their critically endangered dialects and little attention has been paid to the sociological, historical and literary analysis of the cultural output of the diverse and isolated Neo-Aramaic communities of Kurdistan. In this innovative book, Oz Aloni seeks to redress this balance.

Aloni focuses on three genres of the Zakho community's oral heritage: the proverb, the rewritten biblical narrative and the folktale. Each chapter draws on the author's own fieldwork among members of the Zakho community now living in Jerusalem. He examines the proverb in its performative context, the rewritten biblical narrative of Ruth, Naomi and King David, and a folktale with the unusual theme of magical gender transformation.

Insightfully breaking down these examples with analysis drawn from a variety of conceptual fields, Aloni succeeds in his mission to put the speakers of the language and their culture on equal footing with their speech.
INTRODUCTION

This book deals with three genres of the oral heritage of the Neo-Aramaic-speaking Jewish community of Zakho, Kurdistan. During the past three decades, there has been a renewed interest in research on Neo-Aramaic, and a substantial increase has been seen in the amount of research. However, the contemporary study of North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA) has focused almost exclusively on aspects of the language, such as phonology, morphology, sentence-level syntax, lexicography, dialectology, diachronic development, and language contact. Content-based aspects of the study of the language and its cultures, such as folkloristic analysis, narrative structure, discourse structure, and phraseology, have been almost completely neglected. This book is but a first step in an attempt to fill this gap in NENA scholarship.

This Introduction begins by providing some background on the Jewish community of Zakho, before looking at the language spoken in that community, NENA, and previous research on it. There follows a brief discussion of the study of folklore, and then a description of the audio-recorded database upon which this book is based. The Introduction ends with an outline of the structure of the book, after an explanation of the system of transcription and translation of the NENA texts used here.
1.0. The Jewish Community of Zakho

The town of Zakho is located in the northern tip of Iraqi Kurdistan, approximately ten kilometres south of the Turkish border and thirty kilometres east of the Syrian border. It is surrounded by high mountains. All roads leading to Zakho, including the main road from Mosul, go through rough mountain passes. The oldest part of Zakho, which includes mahallat huzaye ‘the neighbourhood of the Jews’ is an island in the centre of the River Khabur, which flows through the town (for the geography of Zakho, see Gavish 2004, 21–26; 2010, 13–14).

It appears that the Jewish community of Zakho is old, though there are few documents which provide historical information about it. The oldest historical sources which attest the presence of Jews in Zakho are letters, the earliest of which date to the 18th century. These often contain Halakhic questions about various topics directed to rabbis of other cities (responsa): marital contracts, legal disputes, and familial affairs (Ben-Yaacob 1981, 58–62; Gavish 2004, 27–30; 2010, 15). Some of these letters contain requests for help from neighbouring communities after disasters, e.g., the famine of 1880 and the wave of persecutions of 1892.

Jewish travellers arrived in Kurdistan as early as medieval times—Benjamin of Tudela and Petahyah of Regensburg in the 12th century and Yehudah Al-Ḥarizi in the 13th century (Brauer

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1 For more about the history and culture of the Jews of Zakho and Kurdistan, see Brauer (1947; 1993); Ben-Yaacob (1981); Gavish (2004; 2010); Zaken (2007); Aloni (2014a).
1947, 17–20; 1993, 38–40). However, Jewish travellers first arrived in Zakho only in the 19th century (Ben-Yaacob 1981, 58–62). The first Jewish traveller to mention Zakho is Rabbi David D’Beth Hillel, who visited the town in 1827 and found approximately six hundred Jewish families living there. He describes the old synagogue and some Jewish customs unique to the community of Zakho, which he finds similar to customs described in ancient history books (Fischel 1939, 124). Based on that similarity, he concludes that the Jews of Zakho are descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel. Israël Joseph Benjamin (‘Benjamin the Second’) arrived in Zakho in 1848 and found two hundred Jewish families there. He recounts that the chief rabbi of the town, Rabbi Eliyahu, asked for his advice in the matter of an ‘aguna woman’; contrary to Benjamin’s advice, the rabbi released her from the bonds of her marriage (Benjamin 1859, 24).

According to the mnemohistory of the Jews of Kurdistan, they are descendants of the ten Israelite tribes exiled by Shalmaneser V, king of Assyria, as recounted in the Hebrew Bible: “In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria. He deported the Israelites to Assyria and settled them in Halah, at the [River] Habor, at the River Gozan, and in the towns of Media” (2 Kgs 17.6; NJPS [1999] English translation). A married woman whose husband is missing but is still considered married according to Jewish law, and is thus unable to remarry. A comprehensive study of the history of quests to locate the Ten Tribes, see Ben-Dor Benite (2009). For an analysis of the role of the Ten Tribes in Jewish folk-narratives recorded at the Israel Folktale Archives Named in Honor of Dov Noy (IFA), University of Haifa, see Stein (2015).
generally thought to be Zakho’s River Khabur.⁴ According to Ben-Yaacob, it is possible that the Sambation (sometimes spelled Sabation), mentioned in the rabbinic literature as the frontier of the realm of the ten tribes, may be the Great Zab, another river of Kurdistan (Ben-Yaacob 1981, 12).⁵ Nachmanides identifies the Sambation as the River Gozan (in his commentary on Deut. 32.26). In many old and modern documents, the Jews of Kurdistan call themselves ha-ʾovdim ba-ʾereṣ ʾaššur ‘those who are lost in the land of Assyria’, an expression taken from Isaiah’s prophecy of redemption “And it shall come to pass in that day, that a great horn shall be sounded; and they shall come that were lost in the land of Assyria, and they that were dispersed in the land of Egypt; and they shall worship the Lord in the holy mountain, in Jerusalem” (Isa. 27.13; JPS [1917] English translation, with some modification).

In the middle of the 19th century, Zakho became the chief spiritual centre for the Jews of Kurdistan (Gavish 2004, 50–56; 2010, 44–50), and many sources refer to it as yerušalayim de-kurdistan ‘the Jerusalem of Kurdistan’, since it became a centre of training for ḥaxamim ‘rabbis’, mohalim ‘circumcisers’, and šoḥaṭim ‘(kosher) slaughterers’.

The rabbis of Zakho were considered an important authority throughout the entire region. Its Great Synagogue could hold

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⁴ A tributary of the Tigris. A separate river which bears the same name is a tributary of the Euphrates.

⁵ About the Sambation in Jewish literature see Werses (1986) and Stein Kokin (2013).
up to three thousand people. Another synagogue, which also contained a bet midrash ‘study hall’ and a heder ‘children’s school’, could hold up to one thousand people. The historian Walter Fischel, who visited Kurdistan twice during the 1930s, copied a Hebrew inscription from a wall of the Great Synagogue (Fischel 1939, 124; see also Ben-Yaacob 1981, 61; Gavish 2004, 161; 2010, 162).

ashrei adam shomu li leshkod ul’l’dorotyi yi’i l’shamor motzoi fo’hi ci
motei me’a yi’am me’ot ma’at. shnat ha’kol’tz li’zrir la’el’k shnat arba’ah
l’malchot u’l’kam ba’er yir’ahu.

Happy is the man that hearkens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors, for he who finds me finds life, and obtains favour of the Lord,\(^6\) year 5568 of the creation [=the year 1798 CE], year 4 of the kingship of ‘Ali Khan Bag YRH [=may his glory be exalted].

The Jews of Kurdistan immigrated to Israel in their entirety in two waves during the first half of the 20th century.\(^7\)

Those in the first wave, during the 1920s and 1930s, immigrated mainly for religious reasons: coming to the Holy Land. Some social and political factors were also involved: World War I and its severe consequences; the British mandate over Iraq and Palestine; the deterioration in personal security of the Jews of

\(^6\) Prov. 8.34–35 (JPS 1917), English translation, with some modification.

\(^7\) There is evidence for the immigration of Jews to pre-state Israel even before this. Mann (1931–1935, I:488) has found a letter sent from the village of Sundur to Jerusalem in the early 18th century, which shows that individuals, at least, had immigrated by then (see Hopkins 1993, 51; Gavish 2004, 147; 2010, 150–51).
Kurdistan; and the decline in their economic status (see Zaken 2007). Migration during this period was undertaken on the initiative of individual immigrants. The immigrants arrived as small groups of families and individuals, sometimes youths without their parents, usually in caravans through Lebanon, and in many cases without the required migration certificates from the Iraqi authorities. They settled mainly in Jerusalem, in the ‘Kurdish’ neighbourhood. Their community was the first community of Jewish immigrants from Islamic countries in Jerusalem. In fact, it would be more precise to speak of several communities, since in general each group of immigrants from a particular town or village in Kurdistan established an independent community in Jerusalem, with its own synagogue and communal institutions. These communities occasionally sent emissaries to their home towns in Kurdistan with the aim of recruiting funds and more newcomers.

The second wave of migration commenced in March 1950, two years after the establishment of the State of Israel. The Iraqi government, as part of its efforts to deal with increasing internal instability, passed a law entitled ‘Supplement to Ordinance Cancelling Iraqi Nationality’, which stipulated that “the Council of Ministers may cancel the Iraqi nationality of the Iraqi Jew who willingly desires to leave Iraq” (Law No. 1 of 1950, *Official Gazette of Iraq*, 9 March 1950; see [http://www.justiceforjews.com/iraq.html](http://www.justiceforjews.com/iraq.html)). One year later, the ‘Law for the Supervision and Administration of the Property of Jews who have Forfeited Iraqi Nationality’ was passed (Law No. 5 of 1951, *Official Gazette of Iraq*, 10 March 1951; see [http://www.justiceforjews.com/iraq.html](http://www.justiceforjews.com/iraq.html)).
under which all Jewish properties were confiscated and they were all expelled (Tsimhoni 1989). Within two years almost all of the Jews of Iraq, including almost all of the Jews of Iraqi Kurdistan, had immigrated to Israel (Gavish 2004, 300; 2010, 316–317). Most of these immigrants, who were referred to by the immigrants of the first wave as ha-‘olim ha-ḥadašim ‘the newcomers’, remained for some time in the ma‘abarot ‘absorption camps’, then were settled in the Katamonim neighbourhood in Jerusalem and in Ma‘oz Tsion outside Jerusalem. The new reality brought about an unprecedented intergenerational gap between parents and children within the community. Unlike the immigrants of the first wave, the ‘new’ immigrants were able to take advantage of the young state’s modern education system, which naturally afforded them many advantages, but which was also guided by a ‘melting pot’ policy, one of the goals of which was the blurring of immigrants’ communal identities.

The historical social and geographic conditions of the Jews of Kurdistan influenced the character and development of their NENA literature (see Sabar 1982a; 1982c; Aloni 2014a, 21–84). The isolation of each of the Jewish communities in Kurdistan, spread across the many towns and villages of this rugged mountainous land, which remained largely unpenetrated by foreign

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8 For the changes in the social structure of the community, see Gavish (2004, 300–19; 2010, 316–36). The internal division of the community into ‘new’ and ‘old’ immigrants has an interesting linguistic consequence: Sabar (1975) describes the NENA of the ‘old’ immigrants as surprisingly conservative and as less influenced by Modern Hebrew in its lexicon, phonology, and syntax. Sabar explains this as a result of the less extensive assimilation of the ‘old’ immigrants into Israeli society.
cultures or armies up until the 20th century, enabled the Jewish communities of the region to preserve very old traditions (see ch. 2, fn. 6). The social structure, as well as the material culture, which very much resembled those known to us from classical rabbinic literature, contributed to this preservation as well. Ancient literary and exegetical genres, such as Aggadic Midrashim and epic songs about biblical themes, which embellish the original narrative with Aggadic traditions, continued to be created and performed in the Jewish communities of Kurdistan in modern times (see ch. 2).

A simple division of the literary heritage of the Jews of Kurdistan into oral and written literature will not prove accurate, since most of this literature, including some of what now forms its written portion, has been passed down orally and bears distinctive features of oral transmission. Thus, for instance, the Jewish NENA Bible translations published by Sabar (1983; 1988; 1990; 1993; 1995a; 2006; 2014), were committed to writing by ḥaxamim of the community only in 20th-century Israel at the request of scholars. On the other hand, the Midrashim for the three portions of the Pentateuch, Va-Yeḥi, Be-Šalah, and Yitro, also published by Sabar (1985; see also 2009), were committed to writing nearer to the time of their creation, being found in manuscripts from the 17th century; but they are also based upon traditions which were transmitted orally. Nonetheless, it will prove useful to distinguish between literature that has been preserved in manuscripts, which is literature of a religious character, and literature that is preserved only orally to this day.
2.0. North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA)

The Aramaic language is—or more accurately, the Aramaic languages are—one of the longest-lived, continuously spoken and documented living language groups, and one of the oldest languages spoken today. The oldest Aramaic documents still extant date back to the 9th century BCE. Aramaic, initially the language of the Aramaean tribes in modern-day Syria, gained historical prominence after it was adopted as the administrative language of the Neo-Assyrian empire, together with the Assyrians’ own language—Akkadian—in the 8th century BCE. It retained this status in subsequent empires, the Neo-Babylonian and the Persian Achaemenid empires. It seems that this unlikely historical occurrence—the adoption of a local language as the administrative language of what was the largest and strongest empire at the time—was due to the relative simplicity of the Aramaic writing system, compared to the Akkadian one. Aramaic became the lingua franca of the ancient Near East. Most of the Aramaic texts in the Hebrew Bible, written in what is usually called Biblical Aramaic, belong to this period of the language’s history: Imperial Aramaic.

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9 The leading contender for the title of the oldest living language is Coptic, a descendant of Ancient Egyptian.

10 Akkadian cuneiform included thousands of signs, and many years of training were required to master it.

11 Biblical Aramaic is the language of most of the book of Daniel, a large part of Ezra, one verse in Jeremiah (10.11), and two words in Genesis (37.47).
The diffusion of Aramaic across a very large territory, from Egypt in the west to India in the east, brought about dialectal diversification and fragmentation of the previously more uniform language. The division between Eastern and Western Aramaic dialects became the most decisive one. But processes of change were not consistent within the boundaries of each geographic region: independent dialects spoken by different ethnic and religious groups that lived in the same geographic regions came into being. The results of these dialectal diversification processes, which began in the 3rd century BCE, are reflected in the present-day Neo-Aramaic dialectological map.

The term ‘Neo-Aramaic’ covers all of the Aramaic dialects spoken today. The earliest written attestation of these dialects is five hundred years old.\(^{12}\) Neo-Aramaic is divided into four groups of dialects: North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA),\(^ {13}\) the group which includes all of the dialects of the Jews of Kurdistan; Western Neo-Aramaic,\(^ {14}\) spoken by Christians and Muslims in the vil-

\(^{12}\) There is evidence for the existence of Neo-Aramaic dialects long before that. For example, an Arabic list of medicines dated to the beginning of the 11th century specifies the names of these medicines in other languages, and one of them very much resembles NENA (see Khan 2007a, 11). On the gap in documentation between late antiquity and the early modern period, and on the earliest documented sentence in Neo-Aramaic (16th century), see Hopkins (2000).

\(^{13}\) According to Khan (2011, 708), this term was coined by Robert Hoberman (1988; 1989).

\(^{14}\) For grammar and texts, see Arnold (1989–1991).
lages Maʿlula Bakhʿa and Jubbaʿadin in the Anti-Lebanon Mountains north of Damascus; Ṭuroyo and Mlaḥso,\(^\text{15}\) two closely related Aramaic languages, each of which has several dialects and which are spoken by Christians in the region of ṬurʿAbdin, in the Mardin Province of south-east Turkey; and Neo-Mandaic,\(^\text{16}\) spoken by Mandaeans in the city of Ahwaz (in south-west Iran) and its environs.

NENA, spoken by Jews and Christians, originally in the wide area east of the River Tigris in Kurdistan, presents an exceptionally high degree of linguistic diversity. Scholars identify some 150 separate NENA dialects (Khan 2011, 709). Almost every village or small rural settlement in the vast mountainous tracts of Kurdistan had its own distinct dialect. Thus, for instance, the Jewish dialect of Aradhin was spoken by only four families, about thirty people, prior to their immigration to Israel (Mutzafi 2002a). The differences between several of the dialects are so significant that no mutual intelligibility is possible. The mountainous topography of Kurdistan, the scarcity of paved roads, and the sporadic character of human settlement in the region have all contributed to the emergence of this exceptional linguistic diversity.

As would be expected, geographical obstacles, such as the Tigris and the Great Zab rivers, are indeed important linguistic boundaries on the dialect map. Surprisingly, however, these geographical factors are not the only factors in determining dialect

\(^{15}\) For grammar and texts, see Jastrow (1992).

\(^{16}\) For grammar and texts, see Häberl (2009); for studies of Neo-Mandaic lexicon, see Mutzafi (2014).
The differences are particularly great east of the Great Zab river, i.e., in the Trans-Zab dialects.

For comparisons between Jewish and Christian dialects, see Khan (2008b, 16), who discusses Jewish Amediya, Betanure, and Nerwa, in contrast with Christian Barwar; and also Mutzafi (2008a, 10), who contrasts Jewish Betanure with Christian Bishmiyaye. The differences between the Jewish and the Christian dialects of Zakho were not as extreme, though clearly there were two separate dialects (see Sabar 2002a, 4). For grammatical descriptions of the Christian dialect of Zakho, see Hoberman (1993); Mole (2002). For texts in the Christian dialects of Zakho and Dihok (Dohok), see Sabar (1995b). According to Mole (2002, iv–v, ix), the Chaldean community of Zakho was, up to the 1960s, relatively small. Immigration from surrounding villages, which were destroyed by the Iraqi government in 1976–1977, as well as a second wave of displacement in the late 1980s, led to the growth of that community, and brought about a diversification in the Neo-Aramaic dialects spoken by Christians in Zakho. The Christian dialect of Zakho is, therefore, not a homogenous dialect, and findings or data of different researchers (e.g., Hoberman and Mole) may consequently diverge.
The many Jewish NENA dialects can be divided into subgroups. The primary division is into three subgroups.

1. The first subgroup of Jewish NENA dialects is the *lišana deni* ‘our language’ subgroup. This includes the dialects of Zakho (Cohen 2012), Amadiya (Greenblatt 2010), Dohok, Barashe, Betanure (Mutzafi 2008a), Shukho, ‘Arodan (Mutzafi 2002a),19 Ḍatrush, Kara, and Nerwa, on the Iraqi side of the border; and two dialects—Challa (Fassberg 2010) and Gzira (Nakano 1970; 1973)—on the Turkish side of the border (Khan 2007a; Mutzafi 2008a; Fassberg 2010).

2. The second subgroup is spoken in the east of the NENA region, across the Great Zab, and is called the Trans-Zab subgroup by Mutzafi (2008b). This subgroup includes the dialects of Salamas (Duval 1883; Gottheil 1893), Urmi (Khan 2008a), Saqqâz (Israeli 1997; 2003; 2014), Sanandaj (Khan 2009), and Kerend (Hopkins 2002) in Iranian Kurdistan; and the dialects of Sulemaniyya and Ḥalabja (Khan 2004), Rustaqa (Khan 2002), Koy Sanjaq (Mutzafi 2004a), Ruwanduz, and Arbil (Khan 1999) in Iraqi Kurdistan.

3. The third subgroup consists of the dialects of Barzan (Mutzafi 2002b; 2004b).

Scholars believe that at the present state of research the drawing of a thorough and accurate dialectological map of NENA would be premature (Mutzafi 2008b, 409–10).

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19 This is the name of the village used by its Jewish inhabitants; its non-Jewish inhabitants call it ḌAradin.
The term ‘Neo-Aramaic’ brings to mind the idea of consecutive historical stages, with the Neo-Aramaic languages following historically on from previous Aramaic languages. However, this is not necessarily the case. It needs to be emphasised that all NENA dialects—indeed, all Neo-Aramaic dialects—have considerable historical depth, and that they are not direct descendants of any of the literary Eastern Aramaic dialects—Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, Syriac, and Mandaic—recorded in writing. The Neo-Aramaic dialects descend from ancient dialects that were spoken concurrently with the literary dialects, with only the latter being richly documented, thanks to the mostly religious corpora written therein. One of the indications of the ancient roots of Neo-Aramaic is the presence of Akkadian loanwords—predominantly names of agricultural tools and activities—which are found in Neo-Aramaic, but not in classical literary Aramaic. We must thus infer that the modern dialects are not identical with the classical dialects: the influences that they absorbed from Akkadian at the time when it was still spoken were distinct (Khan 2007a, 2, 11).

Over the past three decades there has been substantial growth in the linguistic scholarship of Neo-Aramaic. Many books and research papers have been published, among them dictionaries, grammatical descriptions, comparative studies, and theoretical investigations. Linguists have found a variety of important phenomena in Neo-Aramaic. Here four of these will be mentioned:

1. Partial ergativity (Khan 2007b; 2017; Doron and Khan 2010; 2012; Coghill 2016; Noorlander 2021). NENA
dialects exhibit ergativity. Ergativity is defined as a grammatical system which exhibits syntactic or morphological treatment of the sentence subject in sentences employing an intransitive verb identical to that of the sentence object in sentences employing a transitive verb—treatment which is distinct from that of the subject of the transitive verb. Various subgroups of NENA dialects show different degrees of ergativity, but none of them is fully ergative: ergativity is restricted to defined areas of the verbal system (e.g., it is found in past tense only, or only with verbs of a certain lexical aspect). Comparing the distribution of ergativity in NENA subgroups reveals a tendency to gradual grammatical change: the transition to a nominative-accusative system (a system which distinguishes the treatment of subjects and objects regardless of the transitivity or intransitivity of the verb), which is more common cross-linguistically. Neo-Aramaic is the only Semitic language that presents ergativity, and the influence of Kurdish, an ergative language, has surely contributed to the introduction of ergativity into NENA. However, this is not a simple case of areal influence, since the seeds of ergativity are to be found already in ancient forms of Aramaic (Khan 2007a: 14). It appears that this feature of the language, which existed in an undeveloped form, became fully manifested in the ‘sympathetic’ environment of the Kurdish language.

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20 As do Ṭuroyo and Mlaḥso.
2. Language contact (Kapeliuk 2011). Until the emigration of its minorities, Kurdistan was a unique laboratory for research into the horizontal, contemporaneous, relations between languages. In a single geographic region, simultaneously and for extended periods of history, many dialects of languages that are members of separate families were spoken: Aramaic (North-Western Semitic), Kurdish (Indo-Iranian), Turkish and Azeri (South-Western Turkic), and Arabic (Central Semitic). The investigation of the mutual influences between these languages is a fertile ground for interesting conclusions (Khan 2005; 2007a, 15; Haig and Khan 2018).

3. Processes of change in the Semitic family. NENA attracts the attention of Semitists for what it may tell us about ancient Semitic languages. The study of NENA within the framework of historical Semitic linguistics enables a deeper and fuller understanding of long-term processes of change in the Semitic languages. It also helps in producing a fuller picture of the linguistic situation of the Semitic languages in antiquity (Khan 2005). Research can trace processes involving the full manifestation of phenomena which had already appeared embryonically in the ancient languages (e.g., the phonemicisation of the two sets of allophones of the bgdkpt consonants; Khan 2005, 84–87), as well as processes whose complete life cycles have occurred within the chronological boundaries of Neo-Aramaic. Processes of the latter type are especially surprising, since they sometimes repeat similar processes that occurred in the
ancient languages, with no apparent causal connection: what might be called the recycling of linguistic phenomena (e.g., the unification of the phonemes /x/ and /ŋ/, newly formed by the split of bgdkpt, with the phonemes /ḥ/ and /ʿ/, respectively, similar to the merger which took place in ancient North-Western Semitic languages; Khan 2005, 87–93). This brings to mind concealed linguistic DNA, hereditarily passing from one temporally distant language to another within the same family.

4. Historical dialectology. The dialectological picture that NENA presents has challenged the picture of linguistic reality painted by linguists of previous generations: a picture of monolithic languages, devoid of significant dialectological diversity, with clear and defined boundaries. The overwhelming dialectological diversity within NENA has led scholars to speculate that the dialect picture in antiquity may have been equally diverse. This assumption aids in the understanding of many details in classical texts.²¹

²¹ For instance, it is possible to explain differences between the three main reading traditions of Biblical Hebrew—the Tiberian, Palestinian, and Babylonian traditions—as reflecting dialect differences. It is possible to explain the (rare) divergence in several cases between the Tiberian vocalisation and the consonantal text in similar fashion.
3.0. The Study of Folklore

An important part of the present study centres around folkloric texts. This section, then, offers a brief discussion of the preliminaries of the discipline of folkloristics.

3.1. Jakobson and Bogatyrev’s ‘Folklore as a Special Form of Creation’

Given that this study analyses verbally performed items of folklore, a question arises: is there anything that marks off folk-texts and distinguishes them from other forms of verbal or literary expression? That is, is there anything that justifies treating items of folklore as belonging to an independent category, deserving of its own research methodologies? The answer to that question, according to the article ‘Folklore as a Special Form of Creation’ by Roman Jakobson and Petr Bogatyrev (1980 [1929])—regarded by many as the founding manifesto of modern folkloristics—is, of course, yes. Folklore is indeed a special, unique, form of human creativity, and it cannot be categorised as any other form of artistic creativity. Its nature is particularly dissimilar from written literature, since in folkloristic creativity an inherent component is what Jakobson and Bogatyrev (1980 [1929], 7) term the “preventive censure of the community.” “An item of folklore per se begins its existence only after it has been adopted by a given community, and only in those of its aspects which the community has accepted” (Jakobson and Bogatyrev 1980 [1929], 4–5). Society is the preserving medium of the folkloric work of art, and the survival of a given work depends on its further transmission: “in folklore only those forms are retained which hold a functional
value for the given community” (Jakobson and Bogatyrev 1980 [1929], 6).

According to Jakobson and Bogatyrev the relationship between a potential item of folklore, one which exists as knowledge common to many members of a community, and any actual, concrete, individual performance, is parallel to that between the two Saussurean concepts of langue and parole:

In folklore the relationship between the work of art on the one hand, and its objectivization—i.e., the so-called variants of this work as performed by different individuals—on the other, is completely analogous to the relationship between langue and parole. Like langue, the folkloric work is extra-personal and leads only a potential existence; it is only a complex of particular norms and impulses, a canvas of actual tradition, to which the performers impart life through the embellishments of their individual creativity, just as the producers of parole do with respect to langue. (Jakobson and Bogatyrev 1980 [1929], 9)

The difference between oral and written literature is particularly salient when comparing the potential survival and longevity of the two: as opposed to folklore, a written literary work “retains its potential existence” (Jakobson and Bogatyrev 1980 [1929], 6). It can be revived and become influential once again after long periods, even centuries, of complete disregard and neglect by society. Its survival, or at least its potential survival, is not dependent upon intergenerational transmission or acceptance.

In the field of folklore the possibility of reactivating poetic facts is significantly smaller. If the bearers of a given poetic tradition should die out, this tradition can no longer be resuscitated, while in literature phenomena which are a
hundred or even several hundred years old may revive and become productive once again! (Jakobson and Bogatyrev 1980 [1929], 7)

Despite the methodological separation between oral and written literature which the authors draw, an interesting form of relation between the two is possible, a reciprocal relation between folklore and written literature—the ‘recycling’ of folklore. Despite their categorical differentiation, their separate functions in culture, and their different paths of development, artistic literary works and folkloristic works may influence one another and may constitute the raw material of one another. The authors address this type of relation in discussing Pushkin’s poem ‘The Hussar’, commenting that it is “a characteristic example of the way in which art forms change their functions in passing from folklore to literature and, vice versa, from literature to folklore” (Jakobson and Bogatyrev (1980 [1929]: 13–14). Pushkin based his poem on a popular folktale, but reworked it into a highly sophisticated and ironic poem, whose folksiness serves as an artistic device. The poem later reverted back to the realm of folklore, becoming part of a popular piece of Russian folk theatre.22

The close association between the inception of the theoretical framework of folkloristics and that of linguistics is notable throughout the article, both of whose authors are indeed famous for their contributions to linguistics: using key concepts of theoretical linguistics, the authors claim that the adaptation of an

22 For a similar case of the relationship between NENA oral and written literature, the book Toqpo šel Yosef (Farhi 1867) and the story of Joseph and his brothers, see Aloni (2014a, 27–30; 2014b, 339).
item of folklore by a society, and subsequent changes that the item of folklore undergoes, are parallel to processes of grammaticalisation and other innovative transformations in language. An incidental variation of a linguistic generalised principle—a lapsus or an element of personal style—cannot be considered a part of a language’s grammar, unless it is gradually accepted into the general system. A parole incident, a personal performance, will remain defined as such unless it is integrated into the langue. This can happen only if the coincidental change matches the internal rules of development of the language.23

3.2. The Inherent Injustice of Analysis

Analysis of a verbal item of folklore, or of any item of folklore, almost always consists of analysis of a recorded, transcribed, written, concrete performance of that item, a performance that is but one of many possible performances of it. Analysis detaches the item of folklore from its broader original context. Any particular performance of an item of folklore emerges organically from the context in which it is performed—complex contexts many of whose constituent factors are normally disregarded and discarded in documentation and analysis. An actual performance is

23 Naturally, almost a century after its publication, Jakobson and Bogatyrev’s article has been followed by numerous important discussions and theoretical formulations regarding folkloristics and its object of study, which are beyond the scope of the present book. See, for instance, Finnegan (1977); Ben-Amos (1982); Bendix (1997); Shuman and Hasan-Rokem (2012); Honko (2013); Noyes (2016).
specially crafted by the performer (and by the environment—audience reactions, for instance), consciously and unconsciously, to match particular aspects of the situation: the event, the day, the place, and so on. A given analysis must disregard a substantial portion of these aspects of the particular situation. It is this necessary disregarding, partially intentional and partially arising from ignorance, that creates an injustice towards the item of folklore being analysed, the inherent injustice in any analysis.²⁴ It is brought about by the distinction between a concrete performance of an item of folklore and its abstract, potential, ‘dematerialised’, existence, common to many members of the community—a distinction which is so fundamental to the study of folklore.

3.3. The Study of Folklore as the Rejection of Folklore

Ironically, the inception of the study of folklore is linked to the rejection of folklore itself. The rise of folkloristics as a discipline occurred simultaneously with, and was driven by, the major forces and processes of change of Western modernity. One component of the cultural changes brought about by modernity was a rejection of the ‘traditional’. Folklore, tagged as traditional, was rejected as being a feature of non-progressive cultures and societies, the opposite of how modern society perceived itself. The flourishing in Europe of the documentation, collection, and study

²⁴ This inherent injustice brings to mind the inherent injustice of the law pointed out by scholars of jurisprudence: the law must always ignore many of the relevant details of a given incident, many of the variables of a complex realistic occurrence, in order to be able to make effective generalisations (see Cover 1993).
of the folklore of various cultures during the 19th and early 20th centuries may thus be explained as an assertion, and a reinforced self-recognition, of the progress of modern society. Folklore was showcased as signifying precisely what modern society is not (Bendix and Hasan-Rokem 2012, 2; see also Bauman and Briggs 2003).

4.0. The Database of Jewish NENA Recordings

All of the NENA material contained in this book is drawn from a database of audio recordings of native speakers of Jewish NENA, members of the Zakho community, now living mainly in Jerusalem. I have collected the recordings over the past eleven years by means of fieldwork, with the project commencing in April 2010. Thirty-three speakers have been recorded for the database, which now comprises approximately 150 hours of audio recordings. Various spoken genres are represented in the database: enriched biblical stories, epic songs, different types of folktales, moralistic stories, fairy tales, jokes, proverbs and parables, food recipes, personal memoirs, poetry, mnemohistory, and conversations of various types.

25 Twenty of the recorded speakers were born in Zakho; nine were born in Jerusalem into Zakho families; and four were born in Barashe, Challa, Kara, and Sandu, respectively.

26 Thirteen women, twenty men.
It was Prof. Geoffrey Khan who first encouraged me to start recording speakers for this project in 2010, stressing the importance of the documentation and study of the NENA dialects.27

On a personal note, the contribution of the thirty-three women and men whom I have recorded, and in whose homes I have spent numerous hours—their contribution to my study, to my knowledge, and indeed to my life, has been invaluable. When I started my fieldwork, I set out to find informants, but what I have found was wonderful people.

5.0. Note on Transcriptions and Translations

The transcription system used throughout this book for the NENA texts is the one used by Prof. Geoffrey Khan in his NENA grammars (see, for instance, Khan 1999; 2004; 2008a; 2009). In addition to the standard Semitic consonant and vowel signs, intonation signs are employed: a superscript vertical line (a’) indicates an intonation unit boundary; a grave accent (ā) indicates the main nuclear stress in an intonation unit; and acute accents (á) indicate non-nuclear word stresses in an intonation unit. Usually, vowels in stressed syllables are long and vowels in unstressed syllables are short; long vowels in unstressed syllables are marked with a macron (ā) and short vowels in stressed syllables are marked with an acute accent (á). Usually, vowels in stressed syllables are long and vowels in unstressed syllables are short; long vowels in unstressed syllables are marked with a macron (ā) and short vowels in stressed syllables are marked with an acute accent (á).

27 See Khan (2007a, 1): “The description of these dialects is of immense importance for Semitic philology. The dialects exhibit linguistic developments that are not only interesting in their own right but also present illuminating parallels to developments in earlier Semitic.”
marked with a breve (ā). Hyphens are used in the following cases: between the g-k-, b-p- and qam- prefixes and their qatēl verb base; before cliticised copulas -i- -le -ila -ilu; after the cliticised prepositions l-, b-, bəd-, ta-, etc.; after the conjunction u- ‘and’; after the cliticised relative particle dad-; before or after other cliticised elements: be- ‘household of’, la- ‘no, not’ -ši ‘also’, etc. Words or phrases in Modern Hebrew are written between superscript capital H letters (H…H).

Morpheme-by-morpheme glossed NENA texts are provided in ch. 1, §14.0, and ch. 3, §4.0.

English translations are as literal as possible; tenses are kept as in the NENA text, at the expense of standard English style. An example of a particularly difficult word to translate is the word hənna. The literal meaning of hənna is ‘this’ or ‘this thing’. Pragmatically it has several functions: a substitute for a word that the speaker is unable to remember (sometimes the speaker will add the forgotten word immediately thereafter); an

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28 This is also true for vowels whom the speaker chose to pronounce particularly long or short in their connected speech for various reasons (i.e., non-phonemically).
29 Also with a prosthetic vowel: gə-.
30 The hyphen is kept when the verbal prefixes g-k- and b-p- are assimilated to the subsequent consonant, e.g., qeqbal, p-payš.
31 In some cases it is difficult to decide whether a phrase is a loan from Modern Hebrew or whether it is a loan from an older layer made prior to immigration to Israel.
32 For a study of Jewish Zakho NENA narrative syntax, see Cohen (2012, 237–357).
anaphoric pronoun referring back to an object or a concept mentioned earlier; an abbreviation replacing an idea that all participants know it refers to; and as a euphemistic substitute for words that the speaker wishes to avoid saying. The word hanno is translated as italicised ‘this’ throughout the English translations.

6.0. Outline of the Book

The three chapters of this book explore three genres\textsuperscript{33} of the rich oral heritage of the Jews of Zakho: proverbs, enriched biblical narratives, and folktales. The three genres chosen for this book, or rather the analysed units of each of these genres, progress so to speak from the smallest unit, that of the proverb, to the larger unit of the motifeme, and then to the largest unit of a complete folktale.\textsuperscript{34}

The first chapter deals with an important member of the family of gnomic genres: the proverb. The chapter provides contextualisation within the framework of paremiology, the study of proverbs. It suggests that what is lacking in the existing documentation and analysis of Jewish NENA proverbs (and indeed, in those of other languages as well) is a key factor in the understanding of the phenomenon of the proverb: the performative

\textsuperscript{33} For the centrality of genre as a category in the study of folklore, see Ben-Amos (1969; 1976a; 1976b); Seitel (1999).

\textsuperscript{34} Indeed, these three units are of different analytical statuses: the proverb and the folktale are both genres recognised by the community of speakers as such (i.e., emic genres; see the discussion in ch. 2, §3.1), whereas the unit of the motifeme is an analytical unit derived from a theoretical methodology (about the unit of the motifeme see ch. 2, §§3.2.2, 4.0).
context. The chapter presents a new collection of Jewish Zakho NENA proverbs.

The topic of the second chapter is the genre of enriched biblical narratives. The chapter proposes a tool for analysis of such narratives: the concept of the transposed motifeme. In order to achieve an understanding of this term, the chapter gives background for the concepts of motif and motifeme in the study of folklore. It describes the methodological approach in which the concept of motifeme is used: thematology. The chapter examines one example of an enriched biblical narrative, the narrative of Ruth and Naomi and King David as told by Samra Zaqen, and demonstrates an analysis of it using the concept of the transposed motifeme.\(^{35}\)

At the centre of the third chapter is a folktale, ‘The King and the Wazir’ as told by Ḥabuba Messusani. This folktale is a rather unusual one, since it is built around a relatively uncommon motif in folk-literature, the motif of magical gender transformation. The chapter contextualises this motif in the scholarship of folk-literature, and proposes a reading of the folktale.\(^{36}\)

The book ends with some Closing Remarks.

\(^{35}\) The recording of the narrative recounted by Samra Zaken is available for listening at [https://nena.ames.cam.ac.uk/dialects/78/](https://nena.ames.cam.ac.uk/dialects/78/).

\(^{36}\) The recording of the folktale told by Ḥabuba Messusani is available for listening at [https://nena.ames.cam.ac.uk/dialects/78/](https://nena.ames.cam.ac.uk/dialects/78/).
