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NURSERY RHYMES OF MESOPOTAMIAN ARABS

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents concise information on the folk lullabies chanted by Iraqi Arab mothers to their babies, pointing out certain peculiarities of that particular subgenre of oral literature in the Mesopotamian region of the Arab world as reported in the work of prominent Iraqi folklorists. In addition, a number of the authentic verses have been compiled in the original (in scientific Latin transcription), as well as their rough translations into English.

Keywords: *oral literature, nursery rhymes, lullabies, Mesopotamia, dialect, diglossia.*

1. Oral literature is as old as mankind. While literacy, generally recognized as man's most important invention, has made its impact over the last five thousand years – and intensely so no more than the last five hundred – the products of oral tradition have circulated throughout the world since time immemorial as the most precious, but generally free, goods. From the depths of the ages, even from so-called extinct languages, we are being reached and influenced by a far greater quantity of oral literary work than we can usually conceive; the traces of these influences are far deeper than is known.

It is a mere delusion that oral literature plays, in more recent times, an unimportant role. Since the appearance of literacy, its role has been lessened so much that it has now become almost imperceptible; but it is still vital, for it holds as firmly as ever certain ranges of life that are inaccessible to the written word. The live word has never ceded and will never cede all its domains to the written one. At the same time, a good part of mankind is still acquainted with oral literature only, and it will stay so for long time to come. This, too, should serve as a modest reminder of the truth that no people has outlived its own literature, while opposite cases are innumerable.

The treasury of the world's oral literature hides nowadays an immense quantity of jewels – such that it will never be definitively measured or counted. The number of genres, types and species is practically inexhaustible – *Encyclopedia Britannica* estimates it by a vague measure called *myriad*. Innumerable are even the languages and dialects¹ in which birth was given to the hundreds of great and dozens of

¹ During the 1980s it seemed that some sort of consensus was achieved between researchers in the field of sociolinguistics and demographic linguistics on the number of living languages in the world. Many

glorious works from that unique library, as well as to the millions of medium, shorter and very short texts, mostly rhymed, often in the form of songs. Those which pass successfully through the refined sieves of time we usually call *the filigreed work of the folk arts*.

2. A human being is inevitably crucified between life and death on the one hand, and between individuality and collectivity on the other. Mankind has been singing and suffering since primordial times, giving birth to culture and realizing the birth of its own self through it. One of the man's strongest emotional experiences stems from his relationship with the helpless little being that comes from a mother's womb in order to give man eternal life. Thence, when listening to the authentic folk poems or chants sung by a mother to her little child, one can hear, or feel, the ancient hum of universal music living in the mystery of the language.

That is one of those fields where poetical rapture exalts, in the first place, in the uttered word, where that word represents the topnotch wealth and where its influence is such that we rather consider it timeless. However, many parts of that treasure fall into oblivion faster than its seeds sprout and a great deal of it will never again bear fruit.

3. The Arab world is spread out on a large geographic territory. In the course of fourteen centuries it has covered the south-west region of Asia and a broad strip of North Africa. In this placement hides one of the reasons that made the dialectological map of the language we justly call one and same name, Arabic, so complicated that, when more distinct zones of it are compared, it comes close to multilingual image. Moreover, the total reality of that language is heavily burdened by what is called *diglossia* and in certain countries by bilingualism, too².

The Arab people is held to be one of the ancient peoples and many great scientists from the East and West have deemed the Arabic language – whether with argumentation or on intuitive grounds – as a treasury of hidden data on the past of

sources, quoting 20,000 languages and/or dialect names classified into 4,500 or more living languages, suggest such a conclusion (cf. Bugarski 1986:92–107; 158–210; Crystal 1996:284–287, etc.) Some newer researches go still further, demonstrating that the total number of living languages reaches 6,703, mentioning no less than 39,000 names both for these and for already extinct languages and dialects (cf. Grimes 1996). In fact, this “inventory-making” discrepancy depends mostly on the criteria for what is considered a *language* and what a *dialect*.

² Arabic is an Afro-Asiatic language belonging to the Semitic family, to the central group of it, and to its southern branch. This diverged to many spoken dialects which are considered but different forms of one and same language. Strong diglossia makes it, according to W. Marçais (*La Langue arabe*, 1930) “a two-headed monster” as there is no *functional concordance* between the literary dialect on the one hand and the spoken vernaculars on the other: while the former is not at all spoken language the latter are not used in writing; few exceptions on both sides just confirm this rule. Though both *diglossia* (Greek) and *bilingualism* (Latin) are compound words meaning basically one thing – the presence of two languages, yet the difference between them is essential: bilingualism is generally known as the practice of an early adopting and equal, or parallel at least, use of two quite different languages (for example, Arabic and French, or Serbo-Croatian and Hungarian, etc.)

the human language, as well as a reservoir of future knowledge about the nature of linguistic phenomena and phenomena connected with the mind.

But we are not going to speak here of that famous Arabic language known from the classical books and the translations made by Hunayn ibn Ishaq's school³, in which many immortal antique works were found and the importance of which for the development of western spirituality was matchlessly described by Eco in his *The Name of The Rose*, not that Arabic language because of which Spanish nobles, from pre-Renaissance until Columbus's time, disregarded their mother tongue so to compose verses and write love letters in Arabic.

4. The Arabic language which we today call *classical* and in which pagan Arab knights' magnificent poems were rendered, as well as the Holy Writ of Islam and the verses of the glorious poets and philosophers of the late Middle Ages, until Hulagu's invasion and the burning of the Baghdad Library in 1258, that language is the product of an ancient, insufficiently explained but undoubtedly ingenious standardization.

The Arabs have never spoken that language nor has it ever been the vehicle of the oral tradition. *It is not a mother tongue, but is taught in schools* (B. Grimes). It gave birth to the second most widespread alphabet on the planet, yet it has always been, and still is – even in its modernized variant – a language of the written word only.⁴

By the increase of strategic character and global financial power of the Arab countries, the written Arabic language acquired the status of a *world language*, i.e., one of the official working languages in the UN, and today it is studied at many prominent universities of the world. Owing to the great classical Arabic grammarian schools we know many features of the old Arabic spoken dialects, which have always differed very much from that language – in many cases even beyond the bounds of mutual intelligibility.

Changing spontaneously and reacting with other Semitic and non-Semitic languages over the huge territory spread out from Iran up to the Atlantic coast and from Constantinople to the heart of Africa, the ancient Arabic dialects gave, in the

³ Christian physician from Al-Hira (808–873 A. D.) and head of translators' *divan* at the court of the Abbasid caliph Al-Ma'mun. He was the founder of perhaps the biggest and most important translation school and "workshop" in history, which was afterwards lead, with equal success, by his son Ishaq ibn Hunayn.

⁴ In its modernized variant it is still the language of science, the main portion of the artistic literature and mass media. Arabic dialects are spoken today by 200 millions people in addition to a few more million of persons who use it as the second language. Literary Arabic is different from any of the Arabic spoken idioms approximately in the same degree in which the Slavic-Serbian at the beginning of the 19th century stands apart from today's spoken idioms of Serbian/Croatian language, but these dissimilarity is sometimes even bigger – like the difference between Latin and the contemporary Romanic languages and dialects. Analogue to this palette are also the differences between these idioms alone. Hence some authors, replicating Marçais, describe the Arabic language as *a multi-headed dragon* – cf. *poliglossia* and *spectroglossia* (Bakalla 1984:87).

course of ages, numerous modern spoken dialects which form groups of kin provincial idioms and sociolects. It may be said generally that the differences between these groups are directly proportional to the geographic distance which splits one from another. On the basis of the newest researches in the fields of sociolinguistics, demographic linguistics and oriental studies we can say that on the territory of the Arabic language today there are five dialectal groups divided in no less than thirty spoken dialects. Taking into consideration the fact that each of these idioms branches into a smaller or greater number of subdialects or local idioms, the most radical authors categorize them even as separate languages.⁵

These dialects have not been systematically studied in the philological and literary-scientific institutions up to more recent times. Consequently, there was no possibility for massive and systematic studies of the Arab oral literature, including the Arab folk songs for small children. Despite some valuable individual contributions of certain European orientalists since the end of the 19th century, it is not exaggerating if we say that that literature is nowadays *terra incognita* and, in any case, unknown outside the narrowest expert circles. The situation is no better in the Arab countries either, where almost no recording and collecting of this national treasury had been done before the sixties of the 20th century. Moreover, any popular editions for a wider audience are still missing.⁶

5. On its outermost north-east, limited by the *Two Tributaries* – the Tigris and the Euphrates (whence the ancient Greek name *Mesopotamia*), the Arab homeland is neighboring with Turkey and Iran. On a big part of this territory members of three linguistic families coexist – Semitic, Indo-Iranian and Ural-Altai: the Arabs, Jews, Syriac; Kurds, Persians, Gypsies; Turks, Turkmen (Azerbaijanis), Cirkassians, etc. Existence of common Islamic states through many centuries in this region brought about mutual imbuing of cultures and left deep traces in the languages of all the peoples living there. This applies to the modern Arabic dialects of Mesopotamia

⁵ Cf. Grimes 1996. It is essential to notice – contrarily to what the Islamic dogmatists claim and many of the western Arabists inconsiderately convey as granted – that all the contemporary spoken dialects rose from the old dialects and *not from the language of classical literacy* which was standardized some thirteen centuries ago. A slight influence of that language onto the modern spoken dialects must be admitted, yet many Arabs groundlessly hope that possible increase of that same influence in future would obligatorily guide to uniting of the Arab linguistic space; on the contrary, it would rather lead to the emancipation and self-reliance of individual spoken dialects and to definite crush of the delusive unity of the Arabic language.

⁶ Let us point out here to the most significant contributions of the European Arabists in the field of the oral literature: Sachau 1889, Meissner 1902, Littmann 1902, 1905 i 1935, Weissbach 1930, Montaigne 1935, Jastrow 1981. Distinguished works of the Arab authors are: Al-Kirmili 1933, Al-Sarisi 1980, Salloum 1983 and 1988 (with A. Muhanna), Al-Hajjiyya 1967–1991 and, when speaking of the songs for small children, especially Qadduri 1980/1984/1988 and 1989, Al-Diyuhji 1970 and Al-Batini 1986. The theoretical enlightening made by the Egyptian folklorist Dr Nabila Ibrahim Salim is important. The West lastly witnessed significant works too by a number of Arabic immigrants (Muhawi 1989, Al-Shamy 1995, Boushnaq 1987). Unlike the Arabs, the Jews in the Arab environments have done much on recording their own as well as “neighbors” songs and tales of Muslim and Christian inhabitants of those environments since much older times. There are manuscripts of Baghdadi Jews containing collections of poems for small children and some of these manuscripts had been made back in 1852 (cf. Avishur 1987).

which absorbed many alien influences, particularly from Persian and Turkish, on all levels of generating the language: in the phonetics, syntax, morphology and, perhaps most of all, in the lexicon; this is also true in various forms of folklore inheritance and applies even to certain *subjects* and *motifs* that are found in the nursery rhymes.

The songs for small children that we shall try to present here belong to the creativity of the Arab people in this language or, to be more exact, in some of its concrete spoken idioms that are current in today's Iraq.⁷

6. Any attempt for recasting of such poems, abounding in local peculiarities and features of so-called *baby talk*, especially if oriented toward satisfying requisites of metre, rhythm and rhyme, would inevitably lead to drastic losses in the meaning of the text, threatening to result, eventually, in the absurdity of poetic assimilation. That would certainly blur lexical-semantic image of the source language to which no scientific attention has so far been dedicated by the orientologists of today's Serbia or any other lands of the former Yugoslavia.⁸ Therefore, in the following translation I will confine myself to establishing relations of equivalence between shorter portions of speech on the level of the meaning of the text itself and, as far as possible, on the level of individual lexemes and phrasemes, sacrificing to that goal many stylistic, prosodic and other formal elements unless necessary.

I. THE LULLABY

Like elsewhere, the lullaby is one of the most ancient species of the traditional folk, or oral, literature by the Arabs of Mesopotamia. Its verses are inseparably linked with the music expression – the song is sung by the mother to her child so as to soothe it and send it to sleep.

The lullaby is sung to every child from its birth until around the age of two years, while the child is being swaddled by swaddling-bands (Ir.: *gum*), nursed more

⁷ These idioms may be, for the needs of this work, reduced to the main three: (1) north-Mesopotamian, called also *Mesopotamian qiltu Arabic* (after the way of pronunciation of the 1st pers. masc. sing. perf. of the verb *q l = to say*), or Mosul vernacular, isogloss of which, squeezed from the east-side by wide areas of Kurd and Turkmen (South-Azerbaijan) languages, twists down the main road reaching Tikrit, i.e., about 130 miles north from Baghdad; it is spoken by about five and a half million of people in Iraq, about 200,000 in Jordan, 300,000 in Syria and up to half a million in Turkey; (2) mid-Mesopotamian or *Mesopotamian gilit Arabic*, or Euphrates Arabic, or Baghdadi Arabic, which covers a broad region around Baghdad with vague borders above Samarra in the north, around Al-Ramadi on the west (going off Baghdad in a narrow strip about 600 miles more along the Euphrates) and Baaquba on the east, down to Al-Kufa in the south; it is spoken by over 15 million of people out of that 11.5 million in Iraq, a bit less than 2 million in Syria, more than a million in Iran, half a million in Jordan and no less than 100,000 in Turkey; it is transforming today into the spoken standard that governs all the public addresses, talks on the radio and TV as well as most of the religious sermons, so it is sometimes also called "the Iraqi Arabic"; (3) southern, or Nejd Arabic which has no less than one million but more probably about three million native speakers in Iraq and about 10 million more in the wider region.

⁸ All the verses have been translated to English directly from their original idioms.

frequently, and while it sleeps in the cradle (Ir.: *k r k*). In modern families with few children this period may be much longer, but in the former times, from whence all the forms of the oral literature and folk music have bloomed, including this subgenre in particular, the cradle never stayed empty for long: as soon as a baby became ten to fifteen months old, its younger brother or sister would come to occupy it so a great deal of the mother's attention would necessarily turn onto the newborn child. Besides this, an infant's habits grow firmer since the sixth or seventh month of an age: it goes to sleep faster and easier and shows interest in new activities, so by slow degrees the lullaby loses its function.

The importance of the lullaby can hardly be overestimated: by it the child gets in touch for the very first time with the language, poetry and music, it represents the first higher form of child's relationship with the mother and, through the mediation of the mother, it becomes the first form of baby's entering the outer social milieu. The dual nature of this song, its lyric and music character, is a legitimate component of its structure. Paul Valéry once defined poetry as prolonged hesitation between sound and meaning; the lullabies are first in proving this. Mom ilo Nastasijevi⁹ thought of them in the first place when he described the authentic melody of verses as *sound of maternal melody*.

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When the child in the cradle starts crying, its grandmother, the mistress of the house, urges the young mother (her daughter-in-law) by the following words: *lul la(h) all iyn m/itn m* (=lull him/her, sing him/her a lullaby to get him/her to fall asleep); by so saying, she in fact allows her to leave any other work for the sake of the child.¹⁰

During the first weeks and months the lullaby is under the exclusive competence of the mother. The grandmother, an aunt or a much older sister of the infant may also offer assistance, though it happens rarely; their role will become prominent only after the first half of the year, when the child begins to sit, when it gets to know the *walker* and when it starts walking all by itself. But in the course of that time, during the second half of the year, it will grow up enough for other species of songs: dandlers ('a n at-tarq), hand-clapping songs ('a n at-ta f q), standers ('a n al-wuq f), walkers ('a n al-maš), etc.

Other wives of one and the same man, if any and if they do live under the same roof, never interfere with the child-rearing business of their co-wives, at least not in that first phase.¹¹

⁹ Serbian poet of the first half of 20th century, famous for perfection of form and musicality of verse.

¹⁰ According to the Iraqi ethno-musicologist Husain Qadduri (Qadduri 1989) who made the collection on the basis of a long field research started in 1974 and implemented in different regions of the Iraqi Arab speaking population. The book comprises music notation of all the songs/poems as well as a popular-scientific review on this specie of lore. Each song is furnished with the data on the name of the singer, her age and the date and place of the record.

¹¹ This should not be understood quite literally – it would be better to say that they live *in the same yard*, or *at the same site*, or, sometimes, *nearby*. In the Arab sedentary environments, especially those situated inside the old downtown sections, the house yard of average people is surrounded by the main home premises, while in shepherds-nomadic milieus each wife of all wives married to one husband

Unlike the “official” Arabic words for *lullaby*, the spoken idioms of Iraq have for this genre a number of precise but simple names made out of one single word and from one and the same root: *dilillaul*, *l luwwa* and *til l*, from the verb *l l – yil l*, meaning *to lull* [a baby]. Those other words are not in use but can be found among the entries of the written language dictionaries, meaning *cradle-song* (*u niyatu-l-mehd*, *tern matu-l-mehd*) or *sleeping-song* (*u niyatu-n-nawm*, *u niyatu-t-tenw m*) and are always compounds of two nouns, where the second is in the genitive case and attached to the first (Lat: *status constructus*). Some sources mention also a neologism *tehw da* (< *hawwada* = to relax, to appease) suggested by the Language Academy of Damascus; but this word, no matter how very scrupulously designed, has never been confirmed by practice – nobody uses it and only few know of it.

The etymology of that strange verb is obviously Indo-Iranian. In Persian, the lullaby is called *l l*; this is also what *sleeping* is called in “children’s talk” and that is exactly the main refrain of lullabies; *to recite* or *to chant/hum a lullaby* in Persian is said *l l // goft n*. Judging by this, all mentioned Iraqi names for *lullaby* (as the starting „*d*“ in *dilillaul*, pronunciation of which varies via *dilill l* to *dilill l*, is not radical, neither is a radical “*t*” in *til l*) have grown out of imbuelement through ages with the great neighboring Iranian culture. In more distant parts of the Arab homeland neither this root nor its derivatives were recorded. The forms of the refrain in the syllables of which main role plays the sound “*l*” appeared in some other areas of the Arab lands – those in direct neighborhood of Iran and Mesopotamia, but rather infrequently and with less variety.¹²

No wonder, then, in the notable similarity between the words *dilill l* and *l luwwa* and the corresponding root found in many a European language (cf. Lat. *lallare* – to sing a lullaby, Ger. *lullen*, Eng. *lull*, Sv. *lulla*, etc.) Numerous variants of the “baby-talk” onomatopoeia for the rocking of the cradle at lulling a child, mostly of re-duplicating type (cf. Skok 1972), conform with the Serbian verb *ljuljati*. The same root is, consequently, akin to the Iraqi dialectal name of the lullaby as well as to the most frequent refrains in it (cf. *l la*, *l l*, *li lu*, *l la*). These “exclamations”, having almost

may possess her separate tent disposed around the *mudif* – the guests’ tent, under which main social, daily and evening activities are taking place. Likewise, in the agricultural and fishermen’s villages besides the rivers reed houses and huts are used for the same purposes. The common law orders the polygamist husband to provide each wife and children born with her similar conditions for any kind of independent lodging whatever. Houses with open lawns viewing onto street – today the most frequent pattern in Baghdad – are but a product of newer times and taking example by the western style of living which also eradicates the roots of polygamy.

¹² Likewise, the Kuwaiti “bye-bye” is witnessed in the form of *l luw š*, in Qatar it is *hil l*. In Egypt and other, more remote regions, these refrains starting with an “*l*” do not appear, but for soothing the child there are known colloquial verbs like *hannin–yannin* and *hanhin–yanhin* (Badawi 1986, 914), sometimes also *hedhed–yhedhid*, but uprising of these to the abstract level as deriving the alleged nouns as *h n na*, *tahn na hedh da* denoting lullaby was not confirmed by authoritative sources. However, in all these words one can feel antiquity of genesis of names as being derived not from rational notion and description of situation (like Serbian *uspavanka*, or Arabic *u niyatu-l-mehd* or German *Wiegenlied/Schlaflied*, etc.) but from an endeavor to express pure gentleness by sound – an emotion provoked by the situation.

identical descending-ascending stress on the final syllable as in Serbian similar songs, are found in the lullabies of different areas of Iraq, all meaning just what would first come to the mind in Serbian: *lalaj, ninaj, nanaj, pajki, papaj...*¹³

Without any intention to enter deeper etymological and psycholinguistic discussions, we shall dare to suppose that this root comes from the “soft” or “liquid” syllables consisting of an “l” and a vowel, which mother, in her unique identification with the child, repeats humming, in a monotonous and soothing modulation, as if she were imitating the swinging of the cradle and vibrations of the universe, endeavoring to stop the crying of her own infant and bestow on it calm and sweet sleep.¹⁴

In the original texts of Arabic lullabies one can often notice other “key-words” too, like those used by Indo-European peoples (as Serbian *buji-paji, nina-nana* or *lula-lala*, Russian *bajushki-baju*, German *heiapopeia* and *in die Heia gehen*, French *dodo*, English *lulla* and *bye*), which are made mostly of syllables consisting of optimal, i.e., labial and nasal consonants and following vowels, or, in some cases, exclusively of vowels (*aaaa-a, iii-i*, etc.)

This is being witnessed by typical refrain segments of Arabic lullabies from many regions, according to the documented examples from Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar and other Arab countries: *n n -n m n n -n m, ninn ninn, nam nam nam, m mma n m ninn, b ba n m nam, ll ll, l luw š, l l-il-l l, hill lu*, etc.¹⁵ Such strong similarities can hardly be occasional, so it would worthwhile to seek an explanation based on the presumption that they resulted from a universal feature.

Unlike its “official”, descriptive name, the Iraqi word *dilillaul* has not been derived from the root denoting *sleep/ing/*, nor does it directly point to the cradle (cf. Germ. *Wiegenlied*, Russ. *kolybel'naja*, French *berceuse*, Arab *tern matu-l-mehd*)¹⁶ but is built up of fluid material of the primordial origin (cf. Eng. lullaby). The Serbian name *uspavanka* is an autochthonous word, according to the credible lexicographical sources and not a calque of younger origin, coined upon German *Schlaflied* or *Schlummerlied*, as one could easily think. All this gives chance to a number of possible names for such poetical-music entity: we are entitled to say that such a song

¹³ Serbian gentle baby-words for “sleep” (imperative). Yet the existence of the Iraqi verb from which, observed from the system point of view, comes the Iraqi noun for *lullaby*, is more than hypothetic.

¹⁴ In Hanafi’s dictionary of the Baghdadi vernacular (Al-Hanafi 1978–1993) we find that the word *dilillaul*, besides its meaning of *lullaby*, is also used as a “word for making children sleep”. The deserving amateur-philologist cites here the absolutely most popular verse in all Iraqi lullabies (*dilillaul, aduwwek al l u s kin i - aul* = bye-bye, your enemy is weak and lives in wilderness) as well as a tradition that might be, in all likelihood, a modified remnant of a myth. Namely, it is said by the Bedouins that, if a child stays all alone in its cradle and cries for a long time, a serpent comes to it and starts singing the following rhymes: *dilillaul y ibn wi rt, dilillaul; tib u tift mri rt, dilillaul; wi-le- ind d il-edfa ak; wi-le- ind di s il-er a ak; e feb sek u-lsa ak* = bye-bye, son of my little young (she-)neighbor, bye-bye; do not cry, it hurts my gall bladder, bye-bye; if I had arms I would rock you; if I had breasts I would feed you; I’m afraid I’ll kiss you and bite you).

¹⁵ Qadd r 1989, 20–21.

¹⁶ Arab: *u niya* – song; *tern ma* – recitation, rhymes; *mahd* – cradle.

is an *uljuškuša* or *uljuškaljka*, *ljuljalica*, *lulaljka*, *libaljka*, *ninaljka*, *ninuškaljka* or *zibaljka*; most of these names have also been confirmed.

All the lullabies of the world sing to the child about the mother's love, the child's prosperous future and the virtues of peaceful sleep so those topics are found in the Iraqi lullabies too. However, it seems that the Iraqi lullabies possess certain features different from our usual notion of that particular poetic genre of the folk children's poetry as a whole. At least, they differ very much from our usual understanding of it and, in a way, from the concept of a lullaby dictated by common knowledge.

A traditional lullaby sung by the Arab mother in Mesopotamia tells the child, in the first place, the tale of its mother's miserable life, her hard work and her difficult and subordinated position in family, about its father who left home a long time ago and is far away for the sake of trade or seeking a job, about the humiliations and slanders and, finally, though not obligatorily, about its famous ascendants and its mother's hopes that her child will find happiness in its own life.¹⁷

That is why the melodies of the songs, as opposed to the romantic and often sweetish European lullabies, are deeply melancholic and sad, and some of the main metaphors in their lyrics, full of misery and grief, cannot possibly be properly understood without the knowing of the local customs and way of life. Summer in Mesopotamia is long and very hot, but nights in the desert areas are windy and cold during the rest of the year. When a mother finishes her daily and evening activities, she has to swaddle, breastfeed and lull her baby. So she sits next to the cradle and sings as if the cradle itself and the baby in it are the cosmic embers on which she is going to warm up her tormented soul in the dark, chilly night. The child in the cradle hears the melody of the song and catches its rhythm, but it is still in the early stages of the senses and mind development so it has not yet adopted the language and did not understand a word. As such, the Arab Mesopotamian folk lullaby occurs not only as a children's song, but as a substantial form of lyrical creativity inside the female half of the population, whereas the poetic subject (the wife and the mother) is facing herself and meditates on her own life.

This explanation presents the lullaby in a different light – as a specific form of *reflexive women's poetry* or a unique elegiac genre of female (maternal) songs.¹⁸

¹⁷ During the 18th and 19th century, when the Europe was enchanted by folk literature, great Romanticism poets wrote idyllic lullabies, which we can read today in the main anthologies. Several centuries earlier the court poets of Arab and Byzantine rulers were creating lullabies by commission – in the honor of newborn princes and princesses, praising their glorious origins and their splendid future. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* notes that this kind of poetry flourished in Indochina in the 15th century and that, for example, panegiric lullaby in honor of future holders of Burma's throne was named *ayegyin*.

¹⁸ Perhaps the lullabies from the other parts of the country were carrying similar messages, but the era of the rapid rise of the standard of living, accompanied by putting the concept of childhood on a high pedestal, made this feature disappear from the popular memory. In addition to the specific position of women in a tribal and polygamous society, it is not possible to see clearly why our own or other European folk lullabies would be all idyllic and perfectly versified (as they are commonly conceived under the impact of Uncle Andra's, J. J. Zmaj's or Schiller's and Lermontov's verses), whilst the Mesopotamian Arab lullabies abound in the images of hard maternal life and oppression of women.

Built up on the inevitable clichés composed of gentle words of ancient and often onomatopoeian origin, these songs were formed by more or less successful improvisation, from the daily impressions and current inspirations, in loosely rhyming prose that seeks to follow the rhythm of the swinging cradle. Carried over from mouth to mouth, on both social axes, horizontal and vertical, they were building models for further development of new and new songs. The best ones, in which the harmony of text and melody was brought to perfection, have been passed down from generation to generation, so in some lullabies one can observe traces of deepest antiquity, motifs and language elements specific for certain already extinct cultures. Poetry and sorcery were always in the deepest mutual kinship, so over the centuries some lullabies have turned into magical poetic-musical creations, which are considered to be powerful means of defense against the evil eye and evil demons. Only in the light of these distinct circumstances some specific subject-matters in certain lullabies sung by Arab mothers may be viewed and understood as we will find in the pages that follow.

It is evident, too, that in these lullabies the praises addressed to the male babies outnumber those addressed to the females. A newborn son is considered as the future breadwinner and defender of his own family; he embodies the extension of the fraternal and tribal lineage, so he is given a greater significance. The usual misconception found in all patriarchal societies is that giving birth predominantly to female children is the “guilt” of the woman. That belief has produced two typical models of local lullabies: while a son’s mother in the poems “floats like a ship with open sails”, the mother of a female child “bows her head in shame” (see song 34–37). The third subject-matter, which by itself brings about a somewhat special but, at the same time, the most common model of lullabies, is the one in which the mother tells her child *her life story* as if she were telling it herself. Even if a young wife/daughter-in-law “proves” as fertile and, after she had given birth to maybe two, three or even more children – including the “little dickweeds” – she had earned and taken over her status as the mistress of the house, her worry that she still might be driven away and lose her children remains.¹⁹ In addition, the mother of female children knows that a destiny similar to hers is awaiting her daughters once they grow up and get married. That’s why the lullabies sung to the female babies often are full of painful regret. In the songs 38 and 39 the two mothers apparently bore daughters again (i.e., after having born a few female children) and, while singing their magic songs in order to protect the baby from evil powers that could endanger it during the sleep, each one of them is feeling a kind of irritating inspiration so strong that the second mother (song 39) is driven to make the most horrifying verses that can be imagined in a lullaby:

*My daughter, may you fall asleep and never wake up
May your dress float up to the surface while you sink down to the bottom
May your luck be that of the fishes and may you yourself turn into water.*

The answers to these and similar questions have yet to be derived from comparative researches of the subject matter based on future work that would present to us images from second and third cultures.

¹⁹ Although the Sharia law limited the unilateral husband’s right to divorce in that certain measures against its misuse had been stipulated, the wife has no legal security during her lifetime concerning the preservation of her marriage and living with her own children born in it. She has no choice but to return to her kindred as soon as her husband says three times in a row that she is “set free”, which means that he is divorcing her.

Albeit the family life and the status of women among the desert graziers, as well as in the rural areas and poorer urban neighborhoods of the Arab-Islamic world, had not changed much until recently, and although the lullaby is a poetic subgenre extremely resistant to changes, nevertheless, lullabies of this kind are found less and less and they can be heard more and more rarely. This is especially the case in the cities and among the wealthier segments of the population, where female children normally go to school, women get employed and do not give birth to more than two or three children. On the basis of the social and age structure of his female informers, their statements and descriptions of previous and current way of life and ways of raising children, as well as on the basis of the topics of the poems he had recorded, Qadduri reckons that the Iraqi mother had brought nothing new into the inherited patterns of songs for infants, including even the lullabies, since the beginning of the 20th century and especially from the thirties onwards. Consequently, many of the songs had surely been forgotten even before he started his recording campaign and only those most popular ones that once gained an overall liking have endured to the present day. Today, children all over the planet go to sleep with cartoons on television, on videotape or DVD.

LULLABIES – THE TEXTS

1 Bye-Bye (basic verse)²⁰

°Aduwwek °al l u s kin i - oul	Your enemy is weak and lives in the desert
Dililloul ya-l-walad ya-bn dililloul	Bye-bye my boy, my son, bye-bye
°Aduwwek °al l u s kin i - oul	Your enemy is weak and lives in the desert

2 Bye-Bye (various areas of the country)

Dilill l ya-l-walad ya-bn dilill l	Bye-bye my boy, my son, bye-bye
°Aduwwek °al l u s kin i - l	Your enemy is weak and lives in the desert
Di-n m wi-n-nauma heniiyya	So have a sound sleep
U n m il- zayyil bi- - iniyya	Like the sleep of a gazelle's fawn on a hill
Di-n m yumma u lek rabb il-m yin m	Sleep, my son, for you're guarded by God, who never sleeps.
Di-n m u ni ahedd lek	Sleep, I will cradle you
Wi-l-° fya min il-l h ti lek	And dear God will give you health.

3 Bye-Bye (Baghdad)

Dililloul dililloul ya-l-walad ya-bn dililloul	Bye-bye little boy, my son, bye-bye
Yumma °aduwwwek °al l u s kin i - oul	My child, your enemy is weak and lives in the desert
Yumma ila°na min id-diniyya as ra	Leaving this world, my child, is a loss
U ya ° n u šibih il-muwe in °al -l-mun ra	My eyes, [man is lonely in it] like the muezzin on the minaret
Yumma °al im alm t gaulen ya-galb	My child, so it is said for [us] the oppressed [women]
°Ayn ter ni la- ni sef ha au la am [i]l-meyt	You see, my eyes, I'm neither bold nor insensitive
Ter ni al ma u awwa i - b seleyt	You know me, I'm Halima, but under my dress I feel pain
Yumma m l wi ih den(n)e it bi-l-g °	I'm ashamed, my child, I bow my head
°Ayn all wis di l -wis d ²¹	Do bring your pillow, child, next to mine
Ya °ayn w all il- ar be etr d	My eyes, let every trouble go far from us
Yumma ni imni n e b il- ayya° n	My eyes, from where shall I get what they took from me
Yumma il-yeum seb°a u r mellet	My child, on the seventh day my soul was already dead
Ter r il -°az za wi n allet	Oh, if I only knew where my dear soul went
yumma ni min em t iym t galb	Oh, my child, once I die my heart will die, too
Yumma ti n il- bi ba min i - ub	My child, Habiba came to me [early] in the morning
Ya ° n u b- d is-suf f u may il-qadd	My eyes, with sufuf in her hand and herbal tea for babies
Yumma min šifithe kul il-wi a° r	As soon as I saw her, my child, all the pain disappeared
Yumma dililloul ya-l-walad ya-bn dililloul	Bye-bye you little boy, bye-bye
Ter °aduwwwek °al l u s kin i - oul	You know, your enemy is weak and lives in the desert
Dililloul ya-bn saww lalla	Bye-bye my son, do fall asleep.

²⁰ MP3 file attached.

²¹ This song begins and ends in masculine as if the mother is singing to a boy. However, change to the feminine here is obvious – the words are addressed to a female child, which we could anticipate back in the 5th verse.

5 Bye-Bye, My Sweet Baby (Sadda al-Hindiyya)

Dililloul yumma dililloul	Bye-bye, my sweet baby, bye-bye
Ga ^ʿ adna ^ʿ al msenn yati-š-ša	Here I am, sitting on the river bank
Tumur il-mer kub tib ^ʿ a il- a	Boats are passing by, carrying my letters away
Nib ^ʿ a ^ʿ al il-b yum zuma	I'm sending them to the one who promises everything but fulfills nothing
I - riš r b u ayya ^ʿ il- a	Allegedly, the stranger-traveler carried them and lost them –
Ti na l ni kum ²²	Either come to me, or let me come to you
L nig a ^ʿ ir-re w t minkum	Or else I'll no longer hope you'll come ²³
Dililloul yumma u saww lall	Bye-bye, my sweet baby, go to sleep.

6 A Stranger²⁴

ar ba u r t r yib	I am a stranger [here] and my neighbors are strangers
Wi m l b-he-l-dinya b yib	There is no one in this world who loves me
Wi li la šita w ir-re l yib	It is a winter night and my man is far away.

7 The Wind Blew

Yumma gab il-hawa w-indegget il-b b	The wind blew, my child, and the door slammed
Gilit lif n il-y um l-a b b	Today I'd be, I thought, with my beloveds ²⁵
Yumma 'a r il-hawa e b	But lo and behold, my dear child, that was only a liar wind.

10 Bye-Bye, My Son (Kut)

Dililloul yabn dililloul	Bye-bye, son, bye-bye,
L ti isb n ²⁶ ir-re l w l	Don't think a husband's like a father
Feyya mi il fey il-buw r	His shadow is like a palm-tree's shadow
L b m anna u l uw r	Which gives no shelter nor protection
L ti isb n ir-re l ayyer	Don't think a husband is goodness
L alet il-mudda y ^ʿ ayyer	And the longer with you, the worse he becomes to you.

²² Using the 1st person plural instead of singular is not rare by the Arabs, even in the speech of educated people.

²³ These words are obviously addressed to the husband who is working somewhere far away from home.

²⁴ Al-Ha^ʿ iyya does not state the names of the informants from whom he recorded the songs or the places from which they originated. Instead, he says: "I have recorded the lullabies in these areas of Baghdad: Al-Fadh al, Al-Mahdi, Hammam al-Malih, Al-Sayyid Abdullah and Al-Qaragul." (Al-Ha^ʿ iyya 1973:8). Judging by the dialectal variety present in the poems of his collection, it can be safely assumed that the informants were mostly migrants from the other parts of Iraq.

²⁵ This plural here is used for reasons of decency, but the woman, as a matter of fact, is awaiting her husband's return from a journey.

²⁶ This woman is, most probably, addressing her female child using the word *son*. However, it may also be that she is using 2nd person singular and talking to the child having in mind herself or women in general.

12 The Ships of My Heart (Misan)

Duw n g gelb im ammala agš š	The ships of my heart carry a load of straw
U šilhin ʿal m y il-ʿa š	They float on thirsty water
ʿEb t bi-l- urba ʿabl š	I live in strangeness through no fault of my own
Gelb ʿim ayyum w-intires	My heart is gloomy and full [of worry]
U min difʿat il-mer(e)d rikas	It has sunk under heavy rowing.

18 Oh, You Lucky One

Y misʿida u bi ti ʿala-š-ša	Oh, you lucky one, your house is on the river bank
U idd m bi ti yisba il-ba	In front of your house ducks are floating
U mni n m milt uraft	And wherever you go, you grab up!

19 Infectious

Tgull is-saʿ da l tumurr n	The happily married tells me: “Don’t pass by [this way]
Wi l min šer yiʿn tušurb n	Don’t draw water from our well
Hemmi hw ya wi f taʿd n	You’ve got a lot of worries, I fear you’re infectious.”

21 My Heart is Just About to Tear Out

Gelb imʿallag min ʿur ga	My heart is just about to tear out from my chest
W ʿ ini itb g in-noum b ga	And the eye steals sleep stealthily
U r g abur y men yi ga	My saliva is mere gall – woe to the one who’d taste it! ²⁷

22 He’s Threatening Me With a Slipper

Yumma yitheddn bi-l-kl š	My dear child, he’s threatening me with a slipper
Yigull a laʿ m le maʿ š	Out! – he shouts, there’s no bread for you
Wa l le weled yilʿab bi-l-fr š	As you don’t have a son to play on the bed!

23 I Wanted Sons

Ridit il-wild min baʿad il-ʿiy n	I wanted sons more than I loved my own eyes,
Baʿad il-ʿam m il-m y inn n	And even more I loved their uncles, who have no mercy
Ridithum bi-l-ʿam u daumin ywann n	Now I want those uncles to go blind and moan forever. ²⁸

²⁷ Al-Ha ʿiyya thinks that this woman is singing like this because she is a widow with a little child, so she is now dreaming secretly of a man.

²⁸ This woman is a widow who, after the death of her husband, stayed under the protection of her brothers-in-law. She is complaining to her child, saying how she had liked and respected her husband's brothers (better than her own eyes or her own child), but they do not treat her in kind; on the contrary, they are tormenting her – that is why she curses them so angrily.

24 May the One Who Has Tormented Me

Yumma ri t i - alamn y alma il-f g My child, may the one who has tormented me be tormented by the One who is up there
Wi y^çaliga b-r s il- isir f g May He hang him at the top of the bridge from the front side
U b-ri la ad d wi b-ragabta g With his feet in chains and a shackle around his neck.²⁹

27 They Were Shepherds

Ri^çy n nau ^çind ahiln They used to be our shepherds
Humma a ^çadau w-i na nizilna Now they've risen and we've fallen down
Y ba it il-eswed y ba itna Oh my black luck, oh bad luck of ours!

32 Get Up, Let Us Roam

G m ya-yumma da-nh m Get up, my child, let's roam [through the desert]
Nimš b- ariyya wi sm m We'll walk in the hot sun and racing wind
Belk nilg wl galba ra m We may find someone charitable to care for us.³⁰

33 Sleep, Son of My Young Neighbor (Serpent's Song, unknown source)

L l, l l, dilill l ya ibn uwi rt Sleep, sleep, bye-bye, son of my little young neighbor
L l idi n l-erfa^çak I have no arms in which to take you
Wa l ri l en l-edfa^çak I have no legs to rock you [in the cradle]³¹
Wa l dw es l-er a^çak I have no breasts to feed you
W-e f e abbek w -elsa^çak I'm afraid if I kiss you I'll bite you
U tiz^çal ^çaleyya uwi rt And my little young neighbor will be angry
L l, l l, dilill l ya ibn uwi rt Sleep, sleep, bye-bye, son of my little young neighbor.

34 The Mother of a Son Raised Her Hand High

Umm il-weled meddet ir ^ç The mother of a son raised her hand high
Mi li-s-sef na il-š let šir ^ç Like a ship with wide open sails
Wi-l-m ^çidhe weled denne et li-l-g ^ç And the one who has no son bows her head in shame.³²

²⁹ Judging by the details of this image, the song originates from the Turkish times. Al-Ha iyya could not have recorded it before the 1950s or 1960s, when it obviously was still not forgotten, so it must be assumed that this song must have been extremely popular between women in earlier times.

³⁰ Literally: guardian, i.e., the man, the husband and father, whose heart knows no mercy.

³¹ The mother needs to sew, knit, or do something else with her hands while lulling her baby, so the cradle is furnished with a piece of rope that is pulled by the leg.

³² This is a mother who has been giving birth to daughters only: that is why she is crying over her tragic destiny.

35 I Don't Want a Daughter That Wears the *Abbaya*

Ma er d il-bneiya um ^ʕ ab ya	I don't want a daughter that wears the <i>abbaya</i>
Er d il-weled lebb s aya	I want a son that wears the <i>saya</i> ³³
B ir em t w yimši war ya	He'll see me off tomorrow when I die.

36 I Don't Want a Son That Wears the *Saya*

Ma er d il-weled lebb s aya	I don't want a son that wears the <i>saya</i>
Er d il-bneiya um ^ʕ ab ya	I want a daughter that wears the <i>abbaya</i>
B ir em t wi t ^ʕ aiyi wr ya	She'll wail for me tomorrow when I die.

38 You'll Marry a Robber

N m yumma n m	Sleep, my child, sleep
Re uli ila ^ʕ ar m	Your man is a robber
Ḥalla by t il-kib r	Who does not steal from the rich
Wi nize ^ʕ al -l-yit m	No, he attacks the orphans. ³⁴

39 My Daughter, May You Fall Asleep and Never Wake Up

[Fl na] yumma nimti l ga ^ʕ adti	My daughter, [the name], may you fall asleep and never wake up
oubi ufa w inti rikasti	May your dress float up to the surface while you sink down to the bottom
Ba t is-sime w il-m y irti	May your luck be that of the fishes and may you yourself turn into water.

³³ The finest woolen baize (in Serbian folk poetry: *oha sajalija*).

³⁴ In this song the mother sings the lullaby to her baby daughter to make her sleep and, at the same time, to protect the child from the evil eye; therefore, she predicts the future to the daughter, telling her that her future will be the nastiest possible, for she will marry a husband who is an outlaw but whose sins are beyond anything that can be seen in the blackest nightmare: he will attack orphans, being too much a coward to attack the houses of the rich.

CONCLUSION

As one of the most ancient forms of poetic expression, the folk lullaby of the Mesopotamian Arabs has maintained its primary role, which is one and the same everywhere on the planet. It is a song that is sung to the child in the cradle to help it fall asleep. However, in addition to the widely known functions of the lullaby, here we see its distinctive role in giving vent to the suffering of the Arab wife and mother, subordinate to the severe norms of a strictly patriarchal, tribal and polygamous society. Hence the Mesopotamian Arabic lullabies are not just *children's songs*, or *songs for children*, but also a distinctive form of reflexive-elegiac women's poetry.

In these lullabies archetypal, topical, motific and linguistic elements are perfectly preserved so they can be traced back to ancient times. Nevertheless, just as the products of the verbal creativity of backward European and non-European peoples was still unknown at the time of pre-romanticism and romanticism, so these songs remain unknown still today outside the cultural sphere in which they have been created.

Today's circumstances are a far cry from what they were in the late 18th century, when the translations of the *Hasanaginica* showed that on the forgotten periphery of Europe there lived folk songs of classical beauty, deserving of general admiration. However, it is hoped that the beauty and richness of the Mesopotamian Arabic lullabies' lyrical expression will attract the attention of the poetic spirits and researchers of world literature among the future readers of the Serbian translations presented in this little work. It is to be hoped so, for the lullaby of today, be it in Mesopotamia or elsewhere, shares the fate of other forms of oral literature, losing its diversity and richness of motifs and rapidly going out of use.

SUMMARY

This article presents, in translation to Serbian, the lullabies chanted by the Iraqi Arab women, with a concise overview of that particular genre of oral literature *en general*, as well as of some of its peculiarities in the Mesopotamian region of the Arab world as reported in the work of prominent Iraqi folklorists, including analysis of some linguistic items, among which the unique verb *lula – yiluli* (of asserted Indo-Iranian origin) and its derivatives play a notable role.

One of man's strongest emotional experiences takes rise from his relationship with the helpless little being that comes from a mother's womb to give all of us eternal life. Thence in the preserved authentic ditties sung by a mother to her little child, one can hear even today the ancient hum of that universal music in which the sound of pure emotion is greater than what seems to be communicated to us by the meaning of the text itself. However, the rhymes recited or sung by Mesopotamian Arab mothers to their babies, while overflowing with spontaneous feelings and often reaching the heights of the finest poetry, display a host of facts related to women's life in the considered area, reflect the traditional forms of some little-known social practices, and highlight certain aspects of early childhood.

These poems abound in local singularities, so any attempt at translating them in an artistic way, oriented toward satisfying the requisites of meter, rhythm and rhyme, would inevitably lead to heavy losses in the meaning of the text, threatening to turn this endeavor into a rather absurd exercise in cultural assimilation. Therefore, the translation has confined itself to establishing relations of equivalence between shorter portions of poetic discourse on the level of textual meaning and, as far as possible, on the level of separate lexemes and phrases, sacrificing to that goal most prosodic and other formal elements of the original verses.

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