

# LANGUAGE DEATH AMONG THE JEWS OF SINGAPORE: THE CASE OF THE OBSOLESCENCE OF THE ARABIC DIALECT

AHARON GEVA-KLEINBERGER\*

## 1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND<sup>1</sup>

Joan Bieder notes that ‘long before Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles (1781-1826) secured Singapore for the British East India Company in 1819, Jewish merchants from Arab countries had been trading from the Persian Gulf to India and beyond’.<sup>2</sup> The most successful nineteenth-century Jewish trader was David Sassoon (1792-1864) who established a trading chain in the Far East. It began at Surat in India, whence it spread to Bombay, Puna, Calcutta, Bangalore, Madras, Rangoon, Malaysia, Singapore, Shanghai, Kobe in Japan, the Philippines,<sup>3</sup> and Indonesia.<sup>4</sup> The first Arabic-speaking Jews reached India from the area presently called the *Middle East* as early as the end of the seventeenth century, and settled in *Surat*. *Suleymān ‘Ibn Ya‘qūb*, from Syria, was the first prominent Arabic-speaking merchant of the city. Then in 1833 David Sassoon, a Baghdadi merchant and financier, established a new community, in Bombay. The Sassoons were the ‘*Rothschilds*’ of India, and began to play a prominent role in the city’s life.<sup>5</sup> Next they formed a merchandizing network all across the Far East: in *Burma*, *Singapore*,

*China*, *Hong Kong*, *Malaysia*, *Indonesia*, *the Philippines*, and *Japan*. Their major formal business was textiles, but they also traded in opium.<sup>6</sup> This family established new communities in India as well – in Puna, Calcutta, and Delhi, and they left an enormous archive in a semi-secret Arabic language written in developed Iraqi Rashi script, called *Sūqi* in their language.

The first Jewish traders to live in Singapore came from the Baghdadi community in Calcutta. From this city the East India Company administered Singapore, as well as the Malay outposts of Malacca and Penang. In 1826 the company made Singapore the capital of the three settlements, thus fostering lively trade between Calcutta and Singapore. From the start, Singapore promised to be highly successful. As the orthodox Baghdadi Jews advanced from outpost to outpost, they maintained their religious practices, going to great lengths to observe the rituals of their faith, especially *kashrut*, the *kosher* laws that dictate what may and may not be eaten. They also carried with them their prayer books, prayer shawls, and phylacteries.

On 1 September 1841<sup>7</sup> the British government in Singapore recorded the Jewish Synagogue Act, allowing the Baghdadi Jews to rent for a nominal sum property in the town of Singapore to be used as a synagogue. The first was established that year on the boundary of Boat Quay, a commercial district crowded with warehouses that served

\* University of Haifa.

<sup>1</sup> I thank Rabbi Mordechai Abergel and Mr. Eli Saada Ching for helping me during my fieldwork in Singapore. I also express my thanks to all my linguistic informants there.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore* (Singapore: Suntree Media, 2007[?]), pp. 17, 24.

<sup>3</sup> T. Salvotti, *Juden in Ostasien* (Berlin: Nordland-Verlag, 1941), p. 67. There he expresses anti-Semitic attitudes and remarks. About the Jewish community of Manila he says: ‘Auf den Philippinen macht sich nicht nur der Einfluß der jüdischen Zentrale in Shanghai geltend, sondern auch der Juden in den Vereinigten Staaten. So ist es kein Zufall, daß der höchste Verwaltungsbeamte der Philippinen am ersten Tage des jüdischen Pesachfestes 1940 (23. April 1940) in Manila der Einweihung eines jüdischen Heimes beiwohnte und eine stark beachtete Rede hielt’.

<sup>4</sup> Several Baghdadi Jews in Singapore were born in Surabaya in Indonesia. I myself met a linguistic informant who was born in East Timor.

<sup>5</sup> Bieder, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15. See also Jack Ballas, ‘ha-Kehilá ha-Yehudít šel Singapúr’ [Hebrew: The Jewish Community of Singapore] in *Nehardea* 1990, 8, p. 23; and Amir Balaban, ‘Kehilát Yehudéy Singapúr’ [Hebrew: The Jewish Community of Singapore] in *Eretz ha-Yael*, 1993, 7 (2), p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> See Ezra Yehezkel-Shaked, *Jews, Opium and the Kimono* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass Ltd., 2003), p. 9: ‘Opium had many uses. White pellets of the drug were exported from India to China for medical purposes and it was sold in various forms to millions of addicts, to be swallowed, sniffed or smoked. Miserable victims would be tempted into addiction by being offered the drug in the form of coloured sweets. Once the British discovered the immense profits that could be generated from the opium trade, the East India Co. imposed a monopoly. Huge areas in Bengal were set aside for growing poppies. Calcutta set up the Opium exchange, which acquired great financial prestige. The British granted concessions to those favoured and the Chinese importers paid in silver and gold which the British collected and exchanged for paper notes. As British rule consolidated in India, there arose a greater need for employees to oversee their affairs. This need was a godsend for Bombay’s Babylonian Jews, who saw enormous financial potential in the opium trade’.

<sup>7</sup> Bieder, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

as both homes and businesses. By 1841 the Jewish community of Singapore was just large enough to meet the requirement that a *minyán* (a quorum of ten men) be present to hold religious services. That year's census showed an enclave of 22 male and four female Jews living among the colony's 35,000 inhabitants. Although they had a synagogue, and soon a cemetery, the small community of Baghdadi Jews still looked to the larger communities of Calcutta and Baghdad for their spiritual roots and family ties. One of Singapore's six trading houses is thought to have belonged to a founding father of the community, Rabbi Abraham Solomon (1798-1884), called *Nasi*<sup>8</sup> (President of the community). The most detailed description of Solomon is from a young Englishman, John Turnbull Thomson (1821-1884), a surveyor for the East India Company in Singapore from 1841 to 1853. Thompson, who built Thompson Road in Singapore and many other public projects, was deeply impressed by Solomon. In his memoir Thompson tells of a dinner with the Baghdadi community patriarch, and how Solomon had adopted the British style.<sup>9</sup>

Gradually the stations of this network in the Far East absorbed other Jews, mostly from Baghdad, but some also from other Jewish communities in Iraq and Syria. The generic name of this group was *Baghdadi Jews* of the Far East, since these were the most prominent economically and culturally. The Baghdadi Jews were lured to Singapore by tales of the success of their rich brethren, who generally hired Baghdadi clerks. Many of the Baghdadi Jews dealt in opium. Raphael Ellias Sassoon, who went to Singapore from Aleppo, serves as proof that the Singapore Jewish community did not consist of Baghdadis alone, or make its living only by the opium trade. Raphael is an example of a pious Jew whose firm Sassoon & Co. (not related to the Sassoons in Bombay) did very well importing spices and dealing in gunny sacks.

In Singapore there were also those we may call *working class Jews*. They settled in the southern central part of Singapore, a mile or so from the coastline. They also lived among Chinese, Indian, and European neighbours around the residential area of Middle Road in a six-block area including Wilkie Road, Sophia Road, Selegie Road, Princep Street, and Short Street. In time, some of them created a poor but religious enclave similar to the one they had left in Baghdad. The Jews called this area *Mahalla*,<sup>10</sup> meaning 'neighbourhood', and it was very common to see there Jews garbed in the traditional Iraqi Arab fashion. The local nineteenth-century Jewish Baghdadi dialect resounded in these streets, along with Malayo and Chinese.

In the 1870s some Jews left the *Mahalla* and the 'Shop-House Synagogue' of the area. Abraham Solomon, aged over seventy, and another successful opium trader, Joshua Raphael Joshua, joined forces to erect a proper synagogue for the Singapore Jewish community. Having won government approval, Joshua's nephew Manasseh Meyer, an enterprising young businessman who had settled in Singapore, established a new synagogue, *Maghain Aboth*,<sup>11</sup> on Waterloo Street. Still today this synagogue plays a very important part in the life of the Singapore Jewish community. Later, Meyer decided to build a private synagogue, *Chesed-El*,<sup>12</sup> adjacent to his home. This is an elegant white stucco building. Meyer opened Chesed-El to the entire Jewish community, and many members of Maghain Aboth prayed there.

It is fitting to mention that David Marshall, Singapore's first Chief Minister, was an eloquent Jewish lawyer and humanitarian leader.<sup>13</sup>

In dialectological terms, we may also speak of a prestigious nineteenth-century Baghdadi dialect that absorbed some changes under the influence of other dialects of workers in this trading network. These dialects persisted, counter to the development of the later 1950s Jewish Baghdadi dialects, as Haim Blanc had described.<sup>14</sup> The first reason for this perseverance was the isolation of the Far Eastern Jewish communities. Secondly, as the dialect of the Baghdadi Jewish traders moved geographically from an Arabic-speaking region in the Middle East to the Far East it absorbed, as noted, influences of the local languages. As shown in my other articles on the dialects of these Jews in India and Burma, linguistically these dialects contain what I call *Hinduisms*, namely remnants of Indian languages; this reinforces the assumption that these dialects made their first stop in India. Below I probe the possibility that the Jews of Singapore also bear linguistically Indian features, since historically many of them came from the Jewish community of Rangoon (present-day Yangon) in Burma (present-day Myanmar), established on the way to the Jewish community of Penang in Malaya (present-day Malaysia), who eventually reached Singapore. We may note that after Singapore a community of these Jews formed in North Borneo, but more substantially in Surabaya and Bandung in the Dutch East Indies, (present-day Indonesia).

<sup>8</sup> Id., p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Id., pp. 26-27.

<sup>10</sup> Arabic محلة=neighbourhood. Id., pp. 31, 65-73.

<sup>11</sup> Hebrew מגן אבות [literally: protector of the Fathers]. Id., pp. 33-34.

<sup>12</sup> Hebrew: חסד-אל [literally: grace of God]. Id., pp. 46-48.

<sup>13</sup> Singapore's became independent on 9 August 1965.

<sup>14</sup> Haim Blanc, *Communal Dialects in Baghdad* (Cambridge, Mass.: Distributed for the Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University Press, 1964). Blanc describes in details the linguistic differences between the Jewish, Christian and Moslem dialects of Baghdad, as found until 1950s.

## 2. FIELDWORK

Singapore was my last stop to date in my fieldwork tracing the Judaeo-Arabic dialects in the Far East. I was first struck by the idea of researching the speech of these Jews, who originated in a milieu of *Qəltu* dialects, in 2002 through my acquaintance with members of this group, originally from India, who had immigrated to Israel and lived on the outskirts of Haifa. Later I discovered more Arabic-speaking people of Iraqi origin living in Israel, whose forebears had immigrated to East Asia mostly during the nineteenth century. One was an informant from Singapore, whom I interviewed in Jerusalem in 2003<sup>15</sup>. In September and October 2004 I conducted fieldwork in India among Jews of Iraqi descent living in Mumbai (Bombay), Pune (Puna), Delhi, and Kolkata (Calcutta). During my stay in India I also managed to record an informant from Yangon (Rangoon) belonging to this group. Subsequently I took more recordings of members of the Mumbai community, mostly elderly women. In February-March 2013 I enlarged the scope of my fieldwork in Hong Kong, Myanmar, and Singapore. This is the first-ever article written on the dialect of the Jews in Singapore, following several articles I wrote on the dialect of Baghdadi Jews in Mumbai and Myanmar.<sup>16</sup>

The demography of the Singapore Jewish community has wholly changed in recent years. Today it numbers 2000-3000 persons, but most are recent Ashkenazi immigrants, mainly from English-speaking countries and Israel. It was not easy to find linguistic informants who still spoke the Arabic dialect of the Singapore Jewish community. On my visit in 2013 I encountered fewer than twenty. Most of these Arabic-speaking Jews had roots in Baghdad, but others in different Jewish communities in Iraq, Aleppo, and Kurdistan. Some were not born in Singapore itself but in Malaysia and Indonesia. Most of the informants were aged older than eighty, and the youngest were over fifty. During my fieldwork I discovered that fewer than ten of these informants still spoke the Arabic dialect fluently, as against some 1500 speakers in the late 1930s. Today the linguistic map of the members of this community is entirely different as English is the vernacular while prayers

are offered in Hebrew. These Jews speak a dialect rooted in the *Qəltu*-dialects environment and they are identified as 'Iraqi Jews'; they do not have enough friends or relatives with whom they can still speak the dialect. Many have emigrated from Singapore, and outside this island city-state too it is hard to find linguistic informants in the dialect. Nor is there a new generation speaking this dialect and it is dying out very quickly. Some of the old speakers live in a nursing home. My fieldwork came too late, but it can still shed some information on the dialect, especially in comparison with other Iraqi Jewish dialects of the Far East.

## 3. LINGUISTIC DATA

Here I centre on interviews with two Arabic-speaking Jewish informants from Singapore, since they were the most fluent in their speech. They are Hilda Isaac [HI]<sup>17</sup> and Moshe Hai Sion [MHS].<sup>18</sup> Arabic-speaking informants born in Singapore were hard to find. Some were born in East Timor, Surabaya (Indonesia), Penang (Malaysia), and even Iraq, or their parents were born outside Singapore. The island was apparently a melting pot for the Jews, and their dialect also show a tendency to koineization. Although neither informant (HI and MHS) was born in Singapore, both had spent the greater part of their lives there and their speech represents the same features and does not reflect the same linguistic characteristics as those of the Baghdadi Jews of Iraq, India, or Myanmar. Most of the Singapore Jews were apparently born elsewhere; some arrived there at an early age.

As stated, the dialect of the Jews of Singapore, like that of Jews at other trading stations they established in the Far East, is a *Qəltu*-dialect,<sup>19</sup> for example, *ǧītu hōni* [I came here, HI]; *ǧaḥtu bi-l'India ʔaǧbaʕ snīn* [I went to India for four years, HI];

Phonetically, both informants show a change in the articulation of the consonants – also in comparison with the case of India and Myanmar. The Judaeo-Baghdadi [JB] /q/, a most prominent identifying consonant, is not pronounced in so uvular a manner in the Arabic dialect of the Jews of Singapore [JS]. In some JS words the \*q turns into another allophone, g – for example, *gidir*<sup>20</sup> [\*<*qidir*, cooking-pot]: *ʔaxallīya*<sup>21</sup> *bi-lǧidir* [I put it in the cooking-pot, HI]. The same applies to the JB /ǧ/,

<sup>15</sup> Šālḥa (Sali) Bint Mōši.

<sup>16</sup> P. A. Wexler, 1983. 'Notes on the Iraqi Judaeo-Arabic of Eastern Asia'. In *Journal of Semitic Studies*, XXVIII-II, pp. 337-354. See Aharon Geva Kleinberger, 2013. 'Dialectological fieldwork among the Arabic-speaking Jews of Bombay (Mumbai)'. *JALS (Journal of Advanced Linguistics Studies)*, New Delhi, India, 2 (1-2), Jan.-Dec, pp. 23: 'In 1983 Paul Wexler of Tel Aviv University wrote the first ever paper on the Arabic of the Iraqi Jews of East Asia. His article sets forth his first impressions of this community, which spreads over the borders of the Arabic-speaking Middle East, with its marginal Arabic dialects, eastward to Iran and Uzbekistan. Wexler's paper consists of notes alone, with no text. In 1985 he wrote another article on the Jewish languages of the Henan Province in China'.

<sup>17</sup> Born 1920, apparently in Iraq. Went to Singapore via India in 1927.

<sup>18</sup> Born 1924 in Penang and immigrated to Singapore at the age of five.

<sup>19</sup> Compare Otto Jastrow, *Die Mesopotamisch-Arabischen Qəltu-Dialekte* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1981), p. 164, footnote 1.

<sup>20</sup> Probably a Bedouin influence on JB.

<sup>21</sup> *ʔaxallīya* > *ʔaxallīya*.

standing for the ancient Arabic <\*r, which in JS is less velar; often it is performed as /r/ in place names, or even pronounced in the so-called ‘pseudo-English manner’.

The interdentalals have disappeared almost wholly in JS. This is a developing tendency since they exist in JB<sup>22</sup> and are even preserved in the Bombay Jewish-Arabic dialect. In the Rangoon Jewish-Arabic dialect /*\*t/* changes into its sibilant equivalent, for example, *snēn* [two; <\**tnēn*] and in JS, as the last stop *tnēn* is often heard. The Classical Arabic root \**√h-d-t* [to speak] becomes *ḥaddad* in JS, thus showing the disappearance of /*\*t/* by assimilation.

The emphatic Classical Arabic consonants are not articulated so emphatically in JS as in JB.

The vowels, which tend to be shorter in the Rangoon Jewish-Arabic dialect, do not show the same picture in JS but are nearer to the vowel landscape in JB.

Many linguistic characteristics of JB are found in JS, such as the use of *ʾāku* [there is] and *māku* [there is no], for example, *Malēyša, māku štaḡlōn, māku šēn*<sup>23</sup> [in Malaysia they {the Jews} used not to work, at all, AAN<sup>24</sup>]; *mā tištāḡal - māku ʾakal* [if you don’t work you don’t get food, MHS]. The genitive exponent *ḡāl* [of] used in JB is also used in JS, for example, *elkāzen<sup>E</sup> ḡālī* [my cousin, MHS]. The present-marker *qa-* used in JB is used also in JS, for example, *wāḡadi kalla bēbi<sup>E</sup>. elbēbi<sup>E</sup> qa-yibki, qa-yibki. ʾaš sawwet? sawwet wāḡad pīlo<sup>E</sup>, wāḡadi pīlo<sup>E</sup> wiḡḡās w hāy killīta. elbēbi<sup>E</sup> xallētha<sup>25</sup> bi-lkāmp<sup>E</sup>, bi-lḡabs; w ḡīt, w hāy-bēbi<sup>E</sup> ḡālī*. [A woman gave a birth to a baby. The baby was crying and crying. What did she do? She took a pillow, a pillow for the baby’s head and so on. She had a baby girl in the {Japanese internment} camp; she just went out and said: ‘This is my baby!’]

As we see in the examples above, in general all JS informants, including HI and MHS, mix English into their Arabic speech as it is the vernacular of Singapore still today as in the past. For example, we find *elḡāverment<sup>E</sup> mā yḡīdu ʾawādām ymutōn bi-ltāwn<sup>E</sup>* [The government did not want people to die in the city, MHS].

The Jewish community is called by the informants [Jewish] *Committee*, for example, *elkōmiti<sup>E</sup> mā kbīḡi* [the

(Jewish) community (of Singapore) is not big, HI]. An expression used for the wealthy Jews of the community is *gebīr<sup>H</sup>* pl. *gebirīm<sup>H26</sup>*. It derives from Hebrew (<Hebrew גביר: גבירים) and is not a deviation from the Arabic word *kbīḡ* (big), as popular etymology maintains according to one informant. The poor of the Jewish community are normally called *xāybīn* or *fūqara*. The word used for an *elder* of the Jewish community is *šīyyāb* [literally: grey haired] and a collective word for the youth in the community is *wlād* [children].

In Burma, which also underwent Japanese occupation in the Second World War, there is one word for *Japan* – *Ġapān<sup>E</sup>*, and a different one for *Japanese soldiers* or *Japanese rule* – *elĠapanāt*. But in JS the word for *Japan* is the same word used for *Japanese*, for example, *hadōli ēxis<sup>E</sup> ḡāl Ġapān<sup>E</sup>* [These were the axis powers countries with Japan, MHS]; *Ġapān<sup>E</sup> ḡād bāysakel* [The Japanese (occupation during the war) needed bicycles, MHS]; or *Ġapān qallo lHūtāḡ, lākin hadōli yihūd mā sawwu ḡiki wiyyāna* [but the Japanese government told Hitler: ‘These Jews did not do any harm to us’, MHS]. Only when a JS speaker shifts to English does he use the word *Japanese*, for example, ‘Japanese government’ and then he does not use *Ġapān* as a generic name. The Japanese occupation period is called *bi-l Ġapān*, literally ‘In Japan[’s time]’. In general the informants told many stories about the Japanese occupation of Singapore and often expressed their dislike of Japanese people. An exception was Shenozaki, a Japanese soldier who helped the Jews during the occupation: for example, *xōš ʾawādām wēḡed bass. wēḡed bass. w hūwwi bi-Singapūr. W kān Maḡalla ḡāl yihūd, Maḡalla<sup>E</sup> iz de vīlēḡ<sup>E</sup>. Maḡalla ḡāl yihūd. yʾuwnōnām hūwwi, ʾēmta ḡarb. Šenozāki, wēḡed bass. hūwwi<sup>E</sup> ḡōt sōšyal-fēr<sup>E</sup>. hūwwi wīyya yihūd ...xōš ḡad-qān<sup>H!</sup> hūwwi Shenozāki wīyya yihūd kallāš ḡadqān<sup>H!</sup> kill yōm, kill...<sup>E</sup> ēvri āḡār-dēy<sup>E</sup> yḡaddād wīyya yihūd* [There was only one (Japanese) good man. Only one. Only one. He was in Singapore. He was in the Jewish neighbourhood; *Maḡalla* is the Jewish neighbourhood. He used to help them (the Jews) during the war. There was only Shenozaki (who was a good Japanese man). He got (after the war) social-[wel]fare (from the government of Singapore). He was very good to the Jews...he was a real righteous man! Towards the Jews Shenozaki was very righteous! Every day he used to hold conversations with the Jews, MHS].

In JS, Chinese people are called *elĠināt*. The Chinese language is rendered by the English term *Ġainīz<sup>E</sup>*. All the informants evince great affection for their Chinese

<sup>22</sup> Compare e.g. Jacob Mansour, *Jewish Baghdadi Dialect* (Or Yehuda: The Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center, the Institute for Research on Iraqi Jewry, 1991), p. 246, sentence 8.

<sup>23</sup> The word *šēn* has in JB the meaning of ‘shame; disgrace; ignominy; a bad thing’ [<Classical Arabic probably from \**šā’in* شائن ‘dishonourable, scandalous, disgraceful’]. Actually a meaning shift seems to take place in JS, where *šēni* also carries a neutral meaning, i.e. [a thing; issue]. See also Aharon Geva Kleinberger, 2012. ‘Arabisch in Fern-Ost: Der arabische Dialekt der Juden von Rangun’. *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* (ZAL) 55, pp. 47-48.

<sup>24</sup> ʿAbdalla A. Nissim, Born in Singapore. His parents came from Penang in Malaysia. I met him at the nursing home of the Jewish community in Singapore.

<sup>25</sup> Here the word ‘baby’ evidently denotes ‘a girl’.

<sup>26</sup> Compare Reuven Kashani, *The Jewish Communities in the Far East* (Jerusalem: Va’ad Adat ha-Spharadim, 1982), p. 25. He mentions Sir Menashe Meir of the Baghdadi community of Singapore who was called *Gebir Sir Menashe Meir*.

neighbours, whom they prefer to the Moslem Malaysians who are called *elMalāyo*, a term also used for the Malay-sian language; it normally carries the Hebrew attribute <sup>H</sup>*sonē Yisrāʿēl<sup>H</sup>*: *elMalāyo<sup>H</sup>sonē Yisrāʿēl<sup>H</sup>* [The Malaysians – Jew haters, MHS]. Singapore is the only place in the Far East where the Baghdadi Jews did not prefer Moslems to their other neighbours.

As shown in the text above, there is a prominent morpho-syntactic deviation in the use of the article in JS as against JB and even as against the Indian Jewish dialects, especially that of Bombay. This tendency can also be located in the Rangoon dialect. In the text we find *wíyya yihūd* [with the Jews] with no article. The same use is found in HI speech, for example, <sup>ʔ</sup>*asawwi kállita māl yihūd ʔakəl* [I cook all Jewish dishes]. The Jewish-Arabic dialects of the Far East use *ʔallađi* [that], which is not found in JB, along with the use of *ʔilli* [that], which is also found in JB. But in Singapore I did not find examples for the use of *ʔallađi*.<sup>27</sup> This last sentence exhibits yet another syntactic phenomenon which appears often in JS and is also documented among the Arabic-speaking Rangoon Jews. The word-order in the sentence tends to be pidginized, as the object *ʔakəl* [food] appears last. This pidginization shows that JS has moved farther away geographically, hence also in dialectology, from Baghdad and from JB. Another example of this tendency is: *wāḥadi mağa, wāḥadi mağa, waldet bi-lkēmp<sup>E</sup>, waldet bi-lkēmp<sup>E</sup> w hī<sup>E</sup>preygnənt, yū nōw<sup>E</sup>, ḥablē, bi-lkēmp<sup>E</sup> waldet; tnēn ʔawādəm bi-lkēmp<sup>E</sup> waldu*. [A certain woman, a certain woman, she gave birth in the camp,<sup>28</sup> she gave birth in the camp, as she was pregnant; two people gave birth in the camp, MHS]. The sentence *tnēn ʔawādəm bi-lkēmp<sup>E</sup> waldu* also shows a deviation in the word-order as the verb appears at the end, which is unusual in Arabic. Apart from word-order, pidginization is

<sup>27</sup> According to Otto Jastrow, whom I consulted and cordially thank, *ʔallađi* is very rare in Iraq. It can be found in the Jewish dialect of Mosul in northern Iraq (and also in the Moslem dialect of the city), together with the use of *ʔilli*. Jastrow assumes that the development of *ʔallađi* in Mosul and Bombay is an inner procedure in the dialects, not a borrowing from the *fushā*. *ʔallađi* is also used in conditional sentences. See Aharon Geva Kleinberger, 2013. 'Dialectological fieldwork among the Arabic-speaking Jews of Bombay (Mumbai)', p. 29.

<sup>28</sup> Meaning 'Prison Camp' in Changi, which had operated for 14 months from 5 April 1943. Built to accommodate 600 prisoners, it held 3500 including 500 women and children. See Joan Bieder, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-107. See also Jonathan Goldstein, 'Some theoretical approaches for comparing Jewish life in Singapore, Manila and Harbin' in *Mizrek: Jewish Studies in the Far East* (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, Brussels, New York, Oxford, Vienna: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 29: 'Singapore was overrun by the Japanese during World War Two. Most of the Jews, who by then held British passports, either fled, joined His Majesty's Forces, or were incarcerated. See also Nathan Aluf, *Singapore Jewry at the Gates of Paradise* (Tel Aviv: Yaron Golan, 1996), pp. 28-29.

also evident in the difficulty using words correctly semantically, as the informant uses the formulation *tnēn<sup>29</sup> ʔawādəm* instead of the dual; and says *ʔawādəm* [people] instead of 'women'. Like the numeral, the attribute *xōš* (good) appears before the noun in other expressions, for example, *xōš ʔawādəm* [good people] or *xōš wlād* [good children, e.g., <sup>E</sup>*yū nōw<sup>E</sup>, māl skūl<sup>E</sup>, māl yunivérsiti<sup>E</sup>, xōš wlād* [As you know, {they were} educated children, university graduates, children from good homes, MHS].

In the culinary field JB and JS differ in some ways. The Jews of Baghdad use the word *Tbīt<sup>30</sup>* for the Jewish dish prepared for the Sabbath (*yōm eššubbāt*),<sup>31</sup> as do the Iraqi Jewish newcomers to Singapore such as HI's family. But the Jews of Singapore, like those of India and Burma, typically use another word, *Ḥammīm*, by which they have become readily identified. Likewise the JB word for *rice*, which is *təmmən*, is replaced by some equivalent Hinduisms such as *čāwəl* and Hinduized words for spices like 'curry powder' or Hinduized vegetable names; for example, *ʔaxalli čāwəl, w ʔaxalli tamāta, w ʔaxalli başəl, w ʔaxalli qanfəl, hīl w šwayya lkāli-pāwdər. mā kālī-pāwdər, ġēr, bī<sup>f</sup> šaġlāt-šaġlāt ġawwa* [I put {inside the cooking-pot} rice and I put tomatoes and I put onion and I put cloves and some curry-powder; no, not curry-powder, but other spices that I buy, and put inside {the *Ḥammīm*}, HI].

#### 4. TEXT SAMPLE

##### 4.1. A text (Hilda Isaac=HI)

1. *gebūr<sup>H</sup> - yġuḥōn wíyya gebirīm<sup>H</sup>*. 2. *w kān-wāḥəd<sup>32</sup> ma-ʔando flūs, biqūl midyəm<sup>E</sup>, mit<sup>33</sup> lā faqūr<sup>34</sup> wlā gabūr<sup>H</sup>, yġuḥōn həkəd<sup>35</sup>*. 3. *w ilfaqūr yxallōḥəm, mā-ʔandom qəd-minnəm*. 4. *balákit, hōni šwayya lkōmeti<sup>E</sup>, mā... mā-yimšōn killəš haʔall wāḥid wíyya lʔaxi<sup>36</sup>*. 5. *ʔokey<sup>E</sup>,*

<sup>29</sup> Compare in Rangoon *isnēn ʔoxti* [two of my sisters]; see Aharon Geva Kleinberger, *op. cit.*, p. 57, sentence 6.

<sup>30</sup> Aharon Geva Kleinberger, 2013. 'Dialectological fieldwork among the Arabic-speaking Jews of Bombay (Mumbai)', p. 34.

<sup>31</sup> As in JB, the word *šlā* [synagogue] is borrowed in JS from Classical Arab (<<سلا, literally 'prayer'); in JB it has a Hebrew suffix, pronounced in JB *-ōt*, i.e. *šlawōt* but in JS it has its dental equivalents *-ōt*, i.e. *šlawōt*. See Aharon Geva Kleinberger, 2012. 'Arabisch in Fern-Ost: Der arabische Dialekt der Juden von Rangun'. *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik (ZAL)* 55, p. 53 and Aharon Geva Kleinberger, 2013. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>32</sup> Examples of *Imāla* in this dialect.

<sup>33</sup> Interdentals are used flexibly in the dialect of the Jews of Singapore. Sometimes they become dental consonants and sometimes sibilants.

<sup>34</sup> In this word /r/ is used instead of /ġ/ apparently because of the rhyming with the Hebrew word *gebūr<sup>H</sup>*. Words of Hebrew origin normally keep the \*r and do not become the allophone /ġ/.

<sup>35</sup> Some Jews of Singapore articulate this word interdentally.

<sup>36</sup> In JB *lāx* (əlʔāxar), literally "the other one."

*mā-ktīg, ḡāḥ ktīg, balákit ʿala šlā yqatlōn, lēš qad-fāḥōnu tnīn šlā<sup>37</sup>, lēš sawwōn həkəd, ʿyū nōw<sup>E</sup>, ʿāku həkəd ʿprōblem wiḡ dēf ʿōwn<sup>E</sup>, wíyya benātəm, ʿyū nōw<sup>E</sup>. 6. balákit...willa-lā, kill wāḥəd b-bēto, ʿyū nōw<sup>E</sup>, mā-wāḥəd yədxəl ʿind əlʿāxi, mitil ʿaḡīd ʿaḡōḥ ʿindek (sic) ʿadoqlak telafōn “ʿkēn ʿāy kām<sup>E</sup>- ʿint qa-ḡḡī? ʿokey<sup>E</sup>, ʿibqa həkəd. 7. bi-ttāli...willa-lā? mā wāḥəd, qālət “kām!<sup>E</sup>”, tāl (sic), ʿhēv a kāp ov tī<sup>E</sup>, ʿišḡab šāy wiyyāyi”. 8. mā-ʿindəm həkəd, lā. [AGK: wilbnāt mālkom?] -9. yā<sup>E</sup>, libnāt, šāḡ kəlləm hōni yitḡawwzōn. 10. mīn ḥāy qa-yḡuḥōn l-Landən, qa-yḡuḥōn la-Mērikə, Frāns, yduḡōn walad, ʿyū nōw<sup>E</sup>, ktīg, ktīg<sup>38</sup> qa-yḡuḥōn, w kēf māku hōni, māku ksīg uwlād, w māku ksīg ʿabnāt<sup>39</sup> hamzēdi. 11. balákit ksīg wlād qa-yiḡōn min...mīn ʿAmērikə, qa-yiḡōn min Pēris, qa-yiḡōn min Spīn, w qa-yitxatḡbōn hōni, 12. mīnhəm qa-yitḡawwzōn wāḥəd wíyya lʿāxi, willa lā, māku zwīḡ. 13. lʿbnāt ysaḡōn la-wilayāt<sup>40</sup> mā-yitxatḡbōn, mā-yitxatḡbōn w lāzəm yḡuḥōn yiqʿadōn ʿandəm. 14. b-ḥāy lwilāyi əḡḡəḡḡāl yḡīd yḡūḥ...lāzəm əlmaḡa tilḡaqo. 15. ḥāy šwayya šāḡ hōni. 16. mā...kīf əlkōmeti<sup>E</sup> mā kbīḡe, kəlləḡ<sup>41</sup> šwayya.*

## 4.2. Translation

1. The rich Jews marry rich Jews. 2. People who are hard up – say the middle-class for example – not poor and not rich, they [can’t] marry. 3. Poor people aren’t eligible. 4. However, the community here is small, and it’s not easy [for couples] to go out together alone. 5. Okay, it’s not often, it doesn’t happen so much, but [when it does] there’s arguments in the synagogue and since there are two synagogues, and questions are asked why [this couple] behave like that – you know, there are problems with their own, among themselves, you see. 6. But...if not, everybody’s in in their own house, you see, and nobody interferes in anyone else’s business. Like if I want to go to your house and I phone you – Can I come?” “You can come,” okay, let’s do it like that. 7. But otherwise... if it’s not like that, if some girl says “Come and have a cup of tea, drink a cup of tea with me!” – 8. they can’t accept it, not at all. [Aharon Geva-Kleinberger: And what about your daughters?] 9. Yes, the girls, they all married here. 10. Some girls go to London, some to the USA or France – to find a husband, you see. Lots and lots of them go, because there aren’t many [Jewish] boys here – and there aren’t many [Jewish] girls here either. 11. Still, a lot of

[Jewish] boys come from... from the USA or Paris or even Spain and get engaged here. 12. Some of them get married, and if they’re not [engaged] there’s no marriage. 13. The [local Jewish] girls go to other countries abroad not engaged – without getting engaged, and they go to live with them. 14. If a boy wants to go abroad...the girl has to follow him. 15. This also happens here, although rarely. 16. This is because the [Jewish] community isn’t large but very small.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In the first third of the nineteenth century Iraqi Jews started moving to the Far East, after establishing trading stations in India. In my 2004 fieldwork with their descendants who still lived in India, for example, in Bombay who spoke Bombay Judaeo-Arabic [BJA], I found several shifts from their original dialect, for example, in phonology the tendency to shorten vowels.<sup>42</sup> JB and other Judaeo-Arabic dialects in Iraq demonstrate constantly and continuously the uvular (or post velar) pronunciation of *q* and such is the landscape of this consonant in BJA. However, the farther geographically eastward these Jews established trading stations, say in Rangoon, and then Singapore, the more this *q* lost its strong uvular characteristics. In contrast to JB, in BJA the interdentalals show the diametrically reverse mobility between the preservation of dentals and the shift to dentals. In Rangoon they tend to shift to their sibilant equivalents (*tnēn* [JB]>*tnēn*~*tnen* [BJA]>*snēn* [JR<sup>43</sup>]; two) and then in Singapore they lose almost entirely their interdentality in favour of *tnēn*. The same tendency is observed in the pidginization of the syntactical structure of the phrase as the Iraqi Jews moved farther east and established new communities and new trading stations. This picture is consistent with *Wave Theory*, namely the farther the Jews migrated eastward, the more Jewish Baghdadi characteristics they forfeited over time and with the establishment of each community. This process also reinforced pidginization in JS.

JS clearly shows a dwindling of the use of the JB *ʿalladi*,<sup>44</sup> which still survives in BJA and JR. Yet JS, like other Judaeo-Arabic dialects in the Far East, attests to their continued belonging to the *Qəltu*-dialects nucleus: the linguistic informants in Singapore still use the suffix *-u* in 1. sing. in the perfect, for example, *ḡītu* [I came] and the genitive exponent *māl*<sup>45</sup> [of].

<sup>37</sup> This word is used in JB and in all Jewish Arabic-speaking communities in the Far East.

<sup>38</sup> The informant used *ksīg* frequently during the meeting.

<sup>39</sup> Rare. Maybe as a rhyme echo-word to *uwlād* (compare sentence 13).

<sup>40</sup> This word is used by all Jewish Arabic speakers in the Far East.

<sup>41</sup> CA:<*kull-šay*ʿ

<sup>42</sup> Aharon Geva Kleinberger, 2013. ‘Dialectological fieldwork among the Arabic-speaking Jews of Bombay (Mumbai)’, p. 27.

<sup>43</sup> Judaeo-Arabic Dialect of Rangoon.

<sup>44</sup> Aharon Geva Kleinberger, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>45</sup> See more details in Otto Jastrow, *Die mesopotamisch-arabischen Qəltu-Dialekte*.v.1, v.2 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1978), p. 125.

All the Judaeo-Arabic Baghdadi dialects of the Far East use English in their speech, but in JS this usage is far heavier and salient as it signified and still signifies enormous prestige.<sup>46</sup> This is one reason for the demise of the local Arabic dialect, which was spoken there from the first third of the nineteenth century. In the Baghdadi communities of Burma and Singapore I traced Hinduisms reaching back to India. These are stronger in the Rangoon Jewish dialect than in the Singaporean. This bears out some historians' assumption that the source of the Jewish community of Singapore, which has Baghdadi roots, is the Jewish Baghdadi communities of India.<sup>47</sup> Here we see how linguistic data confirm historical data.

Demographically, the population composition of the Singapore Jewish community today is wholly different from what it was in the beginning, early in the nineteenth century. It is also different from the landscape of the 1950s, since many of its Jews today are of Ashkenazi origin. In the early 1950s there were about 1500 speakers of JS; now fewer than ten speak the dialect fluently. Most of the Jews of Baghdadi origin have left Singapore or have died, and their offspring have not preserved speech in this Judaeo-Arabic dialect. Thus, from an endangered dialect JS has almost become an extinct dialect, which in few years will fade into the limbo of forgotten things; the day is not far off that without documentation of these dialects they may disappear from under Far Eastern skies as if they had never existed at all. The sad fate of JS is the same as that of other Jewish Baghdadi dialects of the various communities in the Far East: in 2004 in India I was still able to find informants; now most of them are gone.

<sup>46</sup> Nowadays even Yiddish is spoken by some members of the Jewish community of Singapore. Strangely enough, Yiddish influences the Arabic-speaking members of the community, as I heard one of them cursing in a Yiddish-JS combination as follows: *ettūxəs<sup>y</sup> māli!* [literally: {on} my arse!] as the word *tūxəs* [arse] has a Yiddish phonology, but it derives etymologically from the Hebrew word תחת.

<sup>47</sup> Joan Bieder, *op. cit.*, p. 18: 'The first Jewish traders to live in Singapore came from the Baghdadi community in Calcutta. The East India Company administered Singapore, as well as the Malay outposts of Malacca and Penang, from Calcutta, and in 1826, the Company made Singapore the capital of the three settlements, thus helping to stimulate a lively trade between Calcutta and Singapore'. Likewise the Baghdadi Jews who went to Shanghai and established there a trading station migrated via India. See Maisie J. Meyer, *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Wangpoo* (Lanham, New York and Oxford: University Press of America, 2003), p. xi: 'Baghdadi Jews came to Shanghai via India and first settled in the foreign enclave in 1845. In over a century they were exposed to vast changes in their social, economic, and political environment. Their numbers possibly never exceeded [in Shanghai] a thousand'.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ALUF, N. 1996. *Singapore Jewry at the Gates of Paradise*. Tel Aviv: Yaron Golan (Hebrew).
- BALABAN, A. 1993. 'Kehilát Yehudéy Singapúr' [The Jewish Community of Singapore]. In *Eretz ha-Yael*, 7 (2), pp. 19-26 (Hebrew).
- BALLAS, J. 1990. 'ha-Kehilá ha-Yehudít šel Singapúr' [The Jewish Community of Singapore]. In *Nehardea* 8, pp. 23-24 (Hebrew).
- BIEDER, J. 2007(?). *The Jews of Singapore*. Singapore: Suntree Media.
- BLANC, H. 1964. *Communal Dialects in Baghdad*. Cambridge, Mass.: Distributed for the Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University Press.
- GEVA KLEINBERGER, A. 2012. 'Arabisch in Fern-Ost: Der arabische Dialekt der Juden von Rangun'. *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik (ZAL)* 55, pp. 44-61.
- . 2013. 'Dialectological fieldwork among the Arabic-speaking Jews of Bombay (Mumbai)'. *JALS (Journal of Advanced Linguistics Studies)*, New Delhi, India, 2 (1-2), Jan.-Dec, pp. 23-48.
- GOLDSTEIN, J. 2009. 'Some theoretical approaches for comparing Jewish life in Singapore, Manila and Harbin'. In *Mizrek: Jewish Studies in the Far East*. Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, Brussels, New York, Oxford, Vienna: Peter Lang.
- JASTROW, O. 1978-1981. *Die mesopotamisch-arabischen Qeltu-Dialekte*. v.1, v.2. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- KASHANI, R. 1982. *The Jewish Communities in the Far East*. Jerusalem: Va'ad Adatha-Spharadim.
- MANSOUR, Jacob. 1991. *The Jewish Baghdadi Dialect*. Or Yehuda: The Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center, the Institute for Research on Iraqi Jewry.
- MEYER, Maisie J. 2003. *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Wangpoo*. Lanham, New York and Oxford: University Press of America.
- SALVOTTI, T. 1941. *Juden in Ostasien*. Berlin: Nordland-Verlag.
- WEXLER, P. A. 1983. Notes on the Iraqi Judaeo-Arabic of Eastern Asia. In *Journal of Semitic Studies*, XXVIII-II, pp. 337-354.
- YEHEZKEL-SHAKED, E. 2003. *Jews, Opium and the Kimono*. Jerusalem: Rubin Mass.