

Three for the Price of One: The Dialects of Kerkennah (Tunisia)

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1. Introduction

The Kerkennah archipelago is situated 18 kilometres east of Tunisia's second major city, Sfax. It consists of two main islands, Gharbi / Gharbiya, also called Mellita, the smaller island, and Chergui / Cherguiya, covering an area of 160km². Ramla, on Chergui, is the main town, and on the two islands there are about ten small villages and the communities attached to them.¹ The north-eastern region of the archipelago is dotted with a cluster of islets. The highest point in the whole archipelago hardly exceeds twelve metres and a substantial area is covered by *sebkhas*, that is, salty marshes. The surrounding sea is very shallow and tidal fluctuations are a very characteristic feature of these islands. *Cercina*, the Latin name from which the Arabic toponym *qarqna* is derived, and the surrounding islands, were colonized by the Carthaginians, and Punic tombs, going back to the third century BC, have been unearthed in various parts of the archipelago. In 196 BC the Punic Carthaginian military commander Hannibal Barca passed through these islands on his way to his exile in Syria.²

The entry by G.-L. Feuille about *Cercina*, the Roman name for Chergui, in the *Dictionnaire d'Histoire et de Géographie Ecclésiastiques* offers very interesting information about this archipelago. In this entry one reads that, according to Pliny's account, *Cercina*, also called *Cyraumis* and *Karkinis*, was connected

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¹ Fehri 2009: 70.

² Fields 2010: 53 ff.

by a bridge one kilometre long to the smaller island *Cercinītis*, nowadays Gharbi, or Mellita. The islands did not escape the attention of such ancient travellers like Scylax, Herodotus, Strabon and Agathomeros. During the third century A.D., Diocletian annexed the archipelago to the Roman province of Byzacena, which corresponds to the Sahel region of Tunisia. Feuille also mentions the foundation, by Saint Fulgentius, Bishop of Ruspe (a city in North Africa), of a monastery on a *brevi scopulo* ('a small projecting rock') called *Chilari* whose location has not yet been identified but which might coincide with the northern islet of er-Roumadia where Roman ruins have been found. Moreover, catacombs have been unearthed in the northern village of Qrāten. *Cercina* had also its episcopal see and the episcopal list of the year 484 mentions one particular bishop, Athenius Circinatanus, who was sent into exile, during that same year, by Huneric, king of the Vandals.³ It is very interesting to note that the Christian past of the archipelago finds confirmation in its toponymy. In fact, the place name *knāyās*, 'churches', is mentioned by André Louis in his pioneering *Documents ethnographiques et linguistiques sur les îles Kerkena (Textes en arabe dialectal avec traduction, commentaire, et glossaire)*.⁴

The Kerkennah islands shared the fate of other Mediterranean islands in succumbing to the predominant rules holding sway in the region during the medieval and early modern times, namely the Muslims, the Normans, the Spaniards, the Venetians and finally the Ottomans. Today, the total population of the archipelago amounts to approximately 15,000 islanders but in summer that figure reaches about 80,000 inhabitants.⁵ Fishing, especially for octopus during the months of October and April, and agriculture, mainly dates, figs, and olives, are the main economic activities on the islands.⁶

Monographs and articles about the dialects of Kerkennah are inexistent, with the exception of the abovementioned monograph by André Louis.⁷ This lacuna in Tunisian linguistics, on the one hand, and the interesting typological aspects characterising the Kerkennah dialects, on the other, were the main motivations behind this research. The present contribution is limited to a preliminary examination of the linguistic data which the authors collected during their field visit to the Kerkennah islands in 2011. The field visit would not have been possible without the enthusiastic support and the generous assistance of Dr Abdelhamid Fehri of the Cercina Center for Research in Mediterranean Islands,

³ Feuille 1953: vol. XII, col. 160.

⁴ 1961-62: 26.

⁵ Fehri 2009: 68.

⁶ Fehri 2009: 73.

⁷ It is characteristic of the Tunisian dialectal area that areal linguistic studies are still rather scarce. In his *A Bibliography of Semitic Linguistics* (1940-2012), Gregorio del Olmo Lete lists only twenty-five monographs and articles from fourteen locations, namely Djemmal, Djerba, Gābis, Kerkennah, Mahāḍba, Mahdiyya, Marāzīg, Nifzāwa, Queue, Sfax, Sūsa, Takrīna, Tozeur, Tunis.

Tunisian Arabic has a long history of documentation, starting from Stumme (1893 & 1896) more than a century ago until very recently (Ritt-Benmimoun 2014), and is still on-going. The wealth of literature on Arabic dialects largely depends on accessibility to the field. In this regard, Tunisia is one of the few places where fieldwork has always been possible, even after the Arab Spring. In spite of this accessibility, it is striking to see that quite a few regions are still awaiting investigation. Moreover, even when a location has been covered, or partially covered, subsequent fieldworks often reveal that the state of affairs described previously substantially differs from what was discovered subsequently. The Kerkennah islands are one of these locations. The only references to it we know about are attested in Louis (1961-1962 & 1961-1963). We will contrast our findings with the data available in these works.

In September 2011, we were able to conduct a short fieldwork of ten days in Tunisia. We concentrated our efforts on the Kerkennah islands, where we stayed for six days. During our stay, we were able to record twenty individuals, eleven men and nine women, in nine different locations (ʔawlād Qāsim, Chergui, Mellīta, Mellīta š-ṣuġrā, ʔawlād ʔizz ad-Dīn, ʔawlād Bū ʔAlī, al-ʔAṭāya, ar-Ramla and al-Qrāṭen). Our target was, as it is common in traditional dialectology, to record what is referred to in sociolinguistic studies as NORM speakers. Dialectology has traditionally been concerned with the description of the oldest forms of speech. Often, though not always, these are most typically found amongst the oldest, least mobile members of a community, preferably women. We, thus, intentionally fully endorsed the bias of traditional dialectology in not selecting a representative sample of the speech community.

Tunisian dialects are usually divided into two types: pre-Hilalian and Hilalian. While Hilalian dialects are often described as “Bedouin” varieties, pre-Hilalian are considered to be the descendant of the type of Arabic spoken in the region as a result of the arabicization wave in the wake of the Islamic conquest of Northern Africa. Linguistically, this usually translates in the unvoiced uvular (although quite fronted when compared to eastern realisations) reflex [q] of etymological /q/, and the loss, or absence, of gender distinction in the plural forms of verbal paradigms and agreement patterns. Inversely, Hilalian dialects realise etymological /q/ as [g] and exhibit gender distinction minimally in the singular in verbal paradigms (*ktābt* vs *ktābtī*) and maximally in the plural in verbal paradigms (*ktābtu* vs *ktābtin* or *kātbu* vs *kātbīn*) and agreement patterns (*rġāl ḥilwīn* vs *bnāwīt ḥilwāt*):

- (1) *ktābt* vs *ktābtī*
- (2) *ktābtu* vs *ktābtin* and *kātbu* vs *kātbīn*
- (3) *rġāl ḥilwīn* vs *bnāwīt ḥilwāt*

If a dialect has (1), then it may or not have (3), and if a dialect has (2), then it has (3). In dialects which neutralized gender distinction in the singular (pre-Hilalian), the use of the feminine plural *-āt* in noun-adjective phrases is very

unlikely. In Hilalian dialects that neutralize gender distinction in the plural, remnants of feminine plural agreement are still attested in noun-adjective phrases (Pereira 2010).

2. Kerkennah Dialect 1 (KD1)

The best way to capture the most salient features of the main dialect we recorded in the Kerkennah islands is to reproduce a piece of transcription. The speaker, a woman from ?Awlād Bū ?Alī, was in her sixties in 2011.

*našmlū fi z-zbīb, z-zbīb našmlū naqlīw lə-šdām u niṭṭiwēh bi lə-šsal əmtāš z-zbīb u nətsaḥḥrū-h, šaxšūxa nqūlū-lhe šaxšūxa yašni nharrs əz-zbīb, nfarrik hāk əl-xubz mtāš əš-ššir illi yākil qadd mən hakk qūl kirš-u tnaḥxat, u * nuqušdu nāklu nitsaḥḥru ḥatta nəšəbš u miš ki waqət tawwe, waqət tawwe yžirru-lək hāk əl-gurd u hāk ət-tfātif w əlkullike, hne la, ma našrfū-hū-š, awle na bū-ya māt əšgīr, māt w āna šgīre ma našraf ḥatt šay, waqtilli širt nharrs əl-ḥalfə, niftil əl-ḥalfə, nharrs əl-ḥalfə, nimši l-ḥayy nžīb əl-ḥalfə, nixsil-he, u š-šəbke tašməl, nqūlu šəbke, tašməl mən hōni ḥatta l-gād, maniš qārye, yilzəm-ni hāk il-šəbke, nbīḥḥa lkull min muxx-i waqtilli yžīw wlād-i wl yži rāžī-i wla ḥāže, flān xda arbša xamse wāḥid iššrin, wāḥid, šōle l-ḥalfə, našmlu šōle bāš naxədmu bāš nšīš, māle miš ki tawwe, tawwe kull ši ḥāḡer, kull ši, əlmakarōne hāye ma našrfū-hā-š, waqtał yšīru lə-šrās nqūlu tawwe yišrīw əl-makarōne, taww šnī hāy əl-makarōne, ma našrfū-hā-š bukkul, šrafnā-he kən waqt əkbirne u waqtilli šurne, u nimšīw l əž-žinne tawwe žnān ki ḥāḡa nkōbrū-h baš yžīb-əlna d-dallāš w əl-baṭṭix, ha-lli yišrīw fi-h tawwe ma yži-š əš-štar ūka wəld-i wəld-i žnān-u w ukka yqul-kum ašlī-h huwe, l əl-dallāš nniḥḥīw-ah qadd-n hāk, əd-draš našməl b əl-lūbye u lṭəm-ne, əl-bisbās našməl b əlwāb w əṭəmne, fi dār ibn-i ḥāḡi, amme tawwe ṭhawwlet l ḥāḡi, u naxədmu, naxədmu, āme tawwe, daqqa waḡda hbaṭna, ma bqīnā-š kif əqbəl, ma bqīnā-š nduqu ḥalfə, ma bqīnā-š nnažžmu nkōbru, ma bqīnā-š nnažžmu naxədmu, l-kābūr ma tašrfū-š ā ?*

The most striking feature when one hears this dialect is the absence of raising of medial /ā/ as in the following items: *mtāš* “of”, *hāk* “that”, *yākil* “he eats”, *dallāš* “melon”, *šrafnā-he* “we knew it”, *bāš* “in order to”. As far as final -a is concerned, instances of raising appear in the following items: *nqūlū-lhe* “we call it”, *tawwe* “now”, *lkullike* “everything”, *hne* “we”, *šgīre* “small (f.)”, *šəbke* “net”, *šōle* “way of conditioning food for preservation”, *māle* (dis-course marker), *kbirne* “we grew up”, *šurne* “we became”, *žinne* “garden”, *huwwe* “he”, *āme ~ amme* “but”, *lūbye* “green beans”. Absence of raising was recorded in the following items: *šaxšūxa* “typical Tunisian dish”, *la* “no”, *āna* “I”, *nbīḥḥa* “I sell it” and the expression *daqqa waḡda hbaṭna* “we became old”. From other texts we also get *llōṭa* “underneath”, *sabša* “seven”. Raising

in this dialect appears therefore to be triggered by the vicinity of front consonants, including velar /k/. Lexicalised exceptions are *āna* “I” and *la* “no”. Raising is inhibited after back phonemes: /q/, /x/, /ħ/, /ʕ/ and the emphatics. It is worth noting that /h/ does not inhibit raising. It should also be added that final /a/ raising is a purely phonetic phenomenon and not morphological, because both feminine -a and etymological final -ā are eligible to raising. The state of affairs described here sharply contrasts with Tunis Arabic in which mostly medial /ā/ is raised. Final /a/ is raised only in monosyllabic words (*sne* “year”, *mye* “hundred”).

As far as etymological /ay/ and /aw/ are concerned, they monophthongize to /ē/ and /ō/ respectively, as suggested by the following items: *ṣēf* “summer”, *xēr* “good”, *ʕlē-he* “on it”, *wēn* “where”, *ṣahrēn* “two months”, *ʕēn* “eye”, *lēt ʔd-dxūl* “wedding night”, *smēn* “two names”, *wlēḏāt* “kids”, *fōq* “above”, *hōn(i)* “here”, *llōḥa* “underneath”, *tōṣəl* “you arrive”, *zōz* “two”.

This dialect is a /q/-dialect and therefore a pre-Hilalian variety and, as in most pre-Hilalian varieties, the interdentalals are maintained. It is also, using Cantineau’s terminology, “non-differential” since short vowels are elided in unstressed open syllables, whether high (/i/ and /u/) or low (/a/). We recorded one item in which unstressed /u/ in open syllable was not elided: *muramməl* “sandy area”. A contamination from standard Arabic is very unlikely because the conversation was completely informal. Given the differentiability of dialect KD2 (see below), such a form could be a remnant from an older stage of the dialect when short vowels were more stable. Despite being non-differential, a phonological contrast between /i/ and /u/ appears to be kept, as suggested by the pair *qumt* “I got up” vs *qimt* “I took away, carried”. The dialect discussed here also agrees with pre-Hilalian varieties in maintaining the weak element in III/y verbs in the plural: *ngannīw* “we sing”, *yžīw* “they come”, *gallāw* “they made more expensive”.

3. Kerkennah Dialect 2 (KD2)

The most fascinating discovery from a dialectal point of view appeared when we recorded an elderly woman called ʔĀyṣa in ʔAwlād Qāsim on the very first day of our fieldwork. She just happened to be walking in the street when we were recording. We only managed to get a two minute recording, reproduced below:

*ismaʔ yaʕmlū-lhe zōz ufuʔ fōḥa min hōn u fōḥa min hōn u kān ṣḡire (?) yzidū-he min tāli *yilḥaqū-he, w yfarrṣu l-fōq zōz əʒlūd u yaʕmlū-lhe šanāziq u l-fōq ʔaraf māri (?) u yzayynū-he ki l-ʕarūsa, riḥāna u šʕīriyye, naʕmlū-lhe tayyāriyye u mḥarṣa u nḥuṭṭu ʕalē-he l-kūfiyye, ki l-ʕarūsa, ē ki l-ʕarūsa, u tdūr u yā ḥasra kānt b tlāʕalāf ḥatta wallāt b xamsa u ʕiṣrīn ʔd-dōra, ʕala mā*

gallāw aḥlē-ne d-dinye, u rabbi yā wlēdi yhaddi ṣalē-ne d-dinye...əl-baġla, yhiżzu kān əl-wlayyid yhibb yqīmu l-wlēdāt əṣ-ṣġār (...), xāṭər yʿayyṭu w yxāfu yrakkabū-hum tlāṭa wlēdāt w ydūru bī-him, ʿa l-karrīta ʿala l-baġle, w ydūru bī-him fi l-blād...ywarriṣu kull dār yāqfu qaddām-him, illi yhibb ywarriṣ ywarriṣ u yiṣiṭṭu qaddām-him u yaʿmlu n-nōba qaddām əd-dyār...kull qadīr u qadr-u...u rabb-i wallāhi qabəl kān xēr min taww, tawwe saggid saggid, raṣṣān bi l-xall...tawwe ġalāt yāsīr əl-aṣḥād maṣāṣ taqdar

As noted above, we are dealing with a /q/ dialect (*yqīmu* “they carry”), interdentals have been maintained (*tlāṭalāf* “three thousand”), medial /ā/ is not raised (*kān* “if; only”), there are instances of final /a/ raising (*dinye* “world”) and etymological /ay/ and /aw/ monophthongize respectively to /ē/ and /ō/ (*xēr* “good”, *hōn* “here”). A closer look, however, reveals a different raising pattern from the first dialect discussed above. We notice for instance the absence of raising in *ṣarūsa* “bride”, *rīḥāna*⁹, *dōra* “tour”, *nōba* “celebration”, *mḥarṣma*¹⁰, *fōta*¹¹. Raising is heard in *ṣṣēriyye*¹², *tayyāriyye* (particular kind of *mḥarṣma*, Zwāri & Šarfi 1998: 669), *kūfiyye* “a type of headdress”, *tawwe* “now” and also in the bound pronouns *-he* and *-ne*: *yzayynū-he* “they embellish it” and *aḥlē-ne ~ ṣalē-ne* “on us”. What this suggests is that raising of final /a/ in this variety is not only sensitive to the consonantal environment but also vowel harmony: raising is triggered after non-emphatic front consonants (except /h/) and front vowels. The word *baġle* “mule” is attested once without raising: *baġla*. While at first glance this might sound like an inconsistency, a closer look at the intonation pattern suggests that the underlying form is *il-baġle ā?* “The mule?” with a raising contour. Final /ā/ here is best interpreted as the pan-Tunisian question marker clitic = *ā*.

Another salient feature of KD2 is the maintenance of /a/ in unstressed open syllables in the following items: *ṣanāṣiq* “flags”, *qadīr* “potential”, *ġalāt* “it got expensive” instead of *ṣnāṣiq*, *qdīr* and *ġlāt* as it would have been realised in the first dialect discussed above. The form *qabəl* “before” also appears in the text, which suggests that this dialect did not undergo the widespread North African shift CvCC -> CCvC, unknown in Maltese (cf. Maltese *qabel*). The speaker also produced *yrakkabū-hum* “they make them ride” with what sounds like an intrusive /a/ instead of expected *yrakkbū-hum*. These items sounded so noteworthy to Dr Abdulhamid Fehri, who was conducting the exchange with

⁹ Refers to a gold or silver chain worn over the bride’s dress, on her chest (Zwāri & Šarfi 1998: 304).

¹⁰ Squarish headdress worn by women under the *kūfiyya* (Zwāri & Šarfi 1998: 669).

¹¹ Garment made of precious, sometimes embroidered, fabric worn by women (Zwāri & Šarfi 1998: 554).

¹² Gold or silver necklace decorated with small crescents (Zwāri & Šarfi 1998: 193).

the informant, that he himself commented *yarakkabū-hum...rīt-ha hāy* “*yarakkabū-hum...have you seen (heard) this?*”. It is not entirely clear why a vowel is maintained or added in this position. Maintenance of short vowels in this position is not uncommon in the Bedouin dialects of the Eastern Maghreb (i.e. Benghazi, Benkato 2014) but in a pre-Hilalian context this is, as far as our knowledge goes, extremely unusual. Early attestations of pre-Hilalian dialects suggest that short vowels were also maintained in such positions, as exemplified by the first known text in Maltese, the “*Cantilena*”, in which one finds forms such as *mirammīti* “house, building” or *miballimīn* “builders” (that is *miṣallimīn*). If we consider this vowel to be some kind of epenthesis, we would have to resort to a phonotactic account of the type $\emptyset \rightarrow \text{ə} / \text{C}_1\text{C}_2, (/ \text{C}_1\text{C}_2/ \text{sequences are resolved by anaptyctic insertion})$. Both the maintenance (a) and the epenthesis (b) scenarios can be summed up as follows:

(a) *yakkib* + *-u* → *yakkibu* → *yakkabu*

(b) *yakkib* + *-u* → *yakkibu* → *yakkbu* → *yakkabu* → *yakkabu*

From a purely linguistic point of view, and irrespective of diachronic evidence, the maintenance scenario is more parsimonious than epenthesis because there are fewer rules involved, as we would only have to resort to some kind of euphony to account for the vocalic shift $/i/ \rightarrow /a/$.

Other unexpected vowel patterns can be observed in the following items: *qaddām* “in front” instead of expected *quddām*, *bī-him* “with them” instead of *bī-hum*, *yāqaf* “he stands” instead of *yūqaf* ~ *yōqaf*. The latter strikingly resembles Maltese *yieqaf*.

The difference between KD1 and KD2 lies, therefore, in the fact that:

(1) raising of final $/a/$ is also sensitive to vowel harmony, a feature seemingly absent from the first dialect, and

(2) the vowel $/a/$ in unstressed open syllables is not systematically elided. This last feature stands out compared to the rest of pre-Hilalian dialects so far documented in the Maghreb.

4. Kerkennah Dialect 3 (KD3)

Our hosts in Kerkennah informed us that the people living in Mellita spoke a different dialect, characterized by the realisation $/g/$ of etymological $/q/$. We were able to record an old couple, Hāmid Bəlḥāz and his wife Khadija. The recording conditions ended up being rather poor because of a fan, no wind-shield and a low input volume. We also only managed to get a 12 minute recording. Despite these limitations, the collected data confirmed that it was a $/g/$ dialect, as evidenced by the following tokens: *təlga* “you find”, *gālū-li* “they told me”, *gfatt* “I stayed”. All the other features appear to be similar to those found in the first dialect discussed above. No raising of medial $/ā/$: *kān* “he

was; if; only”, *nāklu* “we eat”; Raising of final /a/ irrespective of its morphology: *ħalfē* “kind of grass”, *sne* “year”, *baġle* “mule”; Etymological diphthongs /ay/ and /aw/ monophthongize to /ē/ and /ō/: *hōn* “here”, *šaddēt* “I passed”, *marrtēn* “twice”. The dialect also agrees with other pre-Hilalian dialects in the treatment of final /y/ + /w/: *nimšiw* “we go” as opposed to *nimšu*, found in Hilalian varieties. While much more data is needed to further characterize this dialect, it seems that except for the voiced reflex /g/ of */q/, this variety almost completely merged with KD1. Two intriguing questions arise from Mellita:

1. Why is there a /g/ dialect in this location, and
2. Why only /g/ survived as a distinctive feature.

Local history recalls that the inhabitants of Mellita came from the south, mostly from the area of Gābis, characterized by its Bedouin dialectal features. While the second question can only be answered by sociolinguistics and is beyond the scope of the present paper, there is little doubt that saliency and Labovian stereotypy are at work.

5. Other Salient Features

Amongst the features that drew our attention, one could mention final epenthesis in the following items: *waqət* “time”, *qamaħ* “wheat”, *širs* “wedding”. The short vowel /a/ was recorded [o] after /g/ in the speech of some speakers: *mġoṭṭi* “covered”, *ġonnēne* “we sang”. The dialect also exhibits a series of doublets such as *qḍakkar* vs *tfakkar* “remember”; *walla* and *šār* “become” used as inchoative auxiliaries: *wallāt šandi mart ibni taqli hiyye* “my daughter-in-law started doing the cooking at my place”, *waqt illi širt nharris il-ħalfē* “when I started beat the esparto”, *amme tawwe šāru ynaḍḍfū b əl-mākināt* “but now they started to clean (the octopus) using machines (instead of their hands)”; *mašāš* vs *mā bqā-š* “not anymore”; *l-ašbād mašāš taqdar* “people can’t bear it anymore”, *ma bqinā-š nnažžmu naxədmu* “we can’t work anymore”. It is also common in the case of nouns referring to low individuated human groups to trigger feminine singular agreement. Consider the following exchange:

- *nsā tuqšud?* “Some women sit down?”
- *ē, tlāfe nse yuqšdu* “Yes, three women sit down.”

Another interesting syntactic construction involves the negative copula without the negation marker -š in counter-assertive negative question-like utterances: *māni žēt-ək āna?* “Didn’t I come to your place?” *māk tašraf lə-ħməde inti?* “Don’t you know what the *ħməde* refers to?”.

Although not unknown in other parts of the eastern Maghreb, the dialects of Kerkennah also exhibit a close set of adverbs and proforms augmented with the suffix -ik(e) ~ *ikāye*: *lkullike timši mšā-ya f əl-širs* “they all go with me to

the wedding”, *əž-žanne hōnīke xdəmt-u* “I worked in the garden here”. The form *gādīke* “over there” was also recorded once.

6. Comparison with Louis’ Texts

In the texts collected by Louis more than half a century ago, we find both short vowel elision and maintenance in open syllables: *qđīmā* “old”, *nkəmmḷu* “we finish”. However, items in which short vowels are maintained seem much more numerous, as in the case of *išəyyīḥuh* “they dry it”, *ihəḥḥəṭu* “they lower”, *bəḥāyəm* “animals”, and many others. As far as raising of medial /ā/ is concerned, it is surprising to see that Louis noted it in quite a few number of items: *bās* “for”, *nās* “people”, *hakkākā* “so”, *kān* “he was”, *quddām* “in front”. Most of the non-raised items which he gives are pharyngealized: *dār* “house”, *qāfəd* “standing”, *qāmu* “they stood up”; although *quddām* (see *quddām* before), *wāḥid* “one”, *šašā-hum* “their dinner” are also attested. Examples of raising of final /a/ are easier to find: *ḥəttā* “even”, *ammā* “but”, *tāwā* “now”, *sāhlā* “easy”. He reports also without raising *ḥatta* “even”, *wəlla* (also *wəllā*) “he became” and *marsa* (also *marsā*) “port”. While the uvular /q/ is the norm, a number of lexemes with /g/ also appear: *gudəs* “staying” (but also *iqoddəsūh* “they make him stay”), *nāgā* “she-camel”, *garfa* “bottle”, *itsāgdu* “you hurry up” (see *saggid* in KD2 above). Louis also reports diphthongs in -v + -u, such as *bdāw* “they started”, *yaftiuhum* “they give them”. Although examples of monophthongization to /ē/ are reported (*tnēn* “two”, *bēn* “between”), Louis notes mostly /i/ and /ū/: *zūz* “two”, *fūq* “two”, *līl* “night”, *ḥūr* “better”, *šalīh* “on it”. Louis also reports instances of epenthesis in final CC clusters: *baḥər* “sea” (*bḥar* in our data), *ḥabəl* “rope” (*ḥbəl* in our data).

Compared to our data, it seems that in the time of Louis’ fieldwork, the differential dialect was much more common than today, given the number of tokens he was able to record. As far as raising is concerned, while we do find instances of final raising in his texts, the kind of distribution we found does not tally with his data, especially the triggering factors in KD2, where consonant environment combines with vowel harmony. Louis also recorded much more consistently the raising of medial /ā/, a feature we only encountered in the speech of mobile speakers such as fishermen. People who lived most of their lives in Kerkennah seem to never raise the medial /ā/. The same thing can be said about the realisation of etymological /ay/ and /aw/ for which he gives mostly /i/ and /ū/ and that we recorded consistently as /ē/ and /ō/ and never /i/ and /ū/. In consequence, the only diachronic observation that can be safely made in the light of Louis’ data is the fact that the differential nature of the dialect of Kerkennah was much more prominent some decades ago and is highly vestigial now, still to be found only in the speech of very few speakers.

7. Conclusion

Our fieldwork resulted in the identification of three different varieties of Kerkennah Arabic. The most common one nowadays is the one exemplified by the text presented in the first section (KD1). The most salient feature is what could be called ‘reverse *imāla*’ as opposed to, say, Tunis Arabic whereby medial /ā/ is not raised and final *-a* raises conditionally. Two other vestigial varieties were also detected. The differential pre-Hilalian dialect, represented by the second text we presented (KD2), seems to be highly marginal at the present time. It was found in the speech of one speaker out of our twenty NORM informants. The third variety, KD3, spoken only in the town of Mellita, seems to be identical to the first dialect except for the /g/ realisation of */q/. It is striking to see that the differential nature of Kerkennah Arabic, although already evidenced by Louis’ texts, never made its way in any discussion about Maghrebi Arabic. This dialect is particularly outstanding compared to other pre-Hilalian dialects of North Africa precisely because all of them are, to the best of our knowledge, non-differential. The only living remnant of the differential nature of early pre-Hilalian is Maltese. The conservative dialect of Kerkennah is therefore of paramount importance for the history of Maghrebi Arabic as it is the missing link between the highly innovative pre-Hilalian dialects of present-day Maghreb and Maltese.

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