

The use of ‘veiled language’ in Soqoṭri poetry

MIRANDA J. MORRIS

Summary

Soqoṭra is well known for its rich and unique flora and fauna, both marine and terrestrial. In 2008 it was officially declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site: ‘globally important for biodiversity conservation’. The islanders who live there, however, are equally noteworthy: they speak their own unique language, Soqoṭri, and have used it to create a rich and complex oral literature. Poetry and song used to be a normal part of everyday life on the island, a natural way of communicating with others, be they human, animal, spirits of the dead, jinn, sorcerers, or the divine. The paper discusses the concept and use of ‘veiled language’ in Soqoṭri oral poetry and song. Examples are given which demonstrate different levels of use of such ‘veiled language’, from the readily comprehensible to the really obscure. To date, Soqoṭri poetry has been little studied, and this interesting aspect of the skill of the island’s poets has not been previously addressed.

Keywords: Soqoṭra, oral poetry, poetic devices, MSAL (Modern South Arabian Languages)

Introduction

Much Soqoṭri poetry — indeed, Soqoṭri experts would say the best Soqoṭri poetry — made use of a poetic device, which in Soqoṭri is variously called:

*di-ḥarf*¹ (dim. *di-ḥāwref*) (ec.ds.²), ‘concealed’ (from the verb *ḥerif* / *yḥārif* / *l-āḥrif*, ‘to hide, conceal something’),

or

di-xīlīyā (w.ds.), *di-ḥīlīyā* (ec.ds.), ‘placed beneath’ (from the verb *xīlā*, *ḥīlā*, ‘to be or lie

beneath’ and prepositional *xālā*, *ḥālā*, ‘below, beneath’). For example: ‘*aig wə-di-hi mgāšā ol išmīṭal kāl di-ḥarf wə-di-ḥīlīyā*, ‘a man and his sons spoke only in veiled language, a secret language incomprehensible to others’,

or, less commonly,

di-ḥṣbik, ‘tightly wrapped around’ (from the verb *ḥībuk* / *yḥṣbik* / *l-iḥībək*, ‘to tie something tightly around the belly to stave off hunger pangs’). For example: *birōt ‘iṣā wə-šīṭō‘o wə-sāḳer; ḥībēkə se b-šekā se b-m^{er}, šīṭō‘o*, ‘she had given birth, the woman, she was hungry and it was a time of drought; she tied a length of cloth tight around her belly, she was starving.’³

I loosely translate these terms as ‘veiled language’, that is, words or phrases with more than one possible meaning, or layers of meaning, the true intention of the poet being intelligible only to people of superior wit and insight, or to those in the know, who share some secret knowledge with the poet. Such poetry makes much use of figurative

¹ The transliteration system used here for Soqoṭri is similar to that of the *Proceedings* with the following exceptions:

Consonants: x in place of kh, k in place of q, and with the following additional symbols: ś (voiceless palato-alveolar lateral), š (emphatic palato-alveolar lateral), ž (voiced palato-alveolar fricative).

Vowels: in addition to long /ā/ and short /a/; long /ē/ and short /e/; long /ī/ and short /i/; long /ū/ and short /u/; the following symbols for vowels are also used: long /ā̄/ and short /ā/; long /ē̄/ and short /ē/; long /ī̄/ and short /ī/.

Stress is marked with an accent (‘) over the vowel of the stressed syllable, as *dō‘o*, *dō‘ūt*, ‘understanding; knowledge’, *dālak*, ‘many’.

In addition the voiced palato-alveolar lateral (ž) represents a palatal version of /l/ in forms where an original /l/ is realized as (ž), as in *ṣežimo*, ‘evening meal’, from the root /ṣlm/; in the doubled /ll/ of the Arabic *اللّه*, ‘God’, the symbol (l) is used to represent a ‘darker’, velarized sound.

² Abbreviations: sg. = singular; pl. = plural; du. = dual; dim. = diminutive; m. = masculine; f. = feminine; lit. = literally; ec.ds. = ‘eastern and central dialects’, w.ds. = ‘western dialects’; s.t. = something; s.o. = someone; pass. = passive; < = derived from; / / encloses root letters.

³ *mgāšā* (sg. *mūgšām*), ‘sons’; *šīṭō‘o*, /ṣī‘/, ‘to be (very) hungry’; *sāḳer*, ‘a time of drought, a time of hunger’; *m^{er}* (pl. *imrāhur*, *mīrihor*), ‘belly, stomach’; *šekā* (pl. *šekāk*, *iškoḳ*), ‘length of cloth, formerly of unbleached calico (*mārikān*)’, a length of 6–8 *dirā‘* (a measurement: the distance between the elbow and the tip of the middle finger) was worn as a shoulder wrap or as a waistcloth. These notes are from my forthcoming *Soqoṭri Lexicon* (in preparation).

language, metaphor, and metonymy; the response of the audience varies: different listeners often having different interpretations. A poet used ‘veiled language’ to demonstrate his skill with language and to show that he was a person of greater insight and deeper understanding than others. Skilful use of ‘veiled language’ also showed up any weakness in rival poets, for if they failed to understand the underlying meaning of a poem they would not be able to compose appropriate lines in response, and so would reveal themselves as being inferior in perception.

‘Good poetry’ is described variously by Soqoṭran poets⁴ as follows:

1. *tāmētil qaʿānihin / biššul ḥakkētīn*
 2. *yāšqēlits di-beh dēhen / di-bē-dōʿo nāhōrsən*
1. Good poems are oblique and indirect, (like) long, winding tunnels penetrating deep into the mountains.
 2. The person with insight and intelligence can make out their true meaning, which is beyond the capabilities of the slow-witted and indiscriminating.

or

1. *tāmētil qaʿānihin / biššul ḥeffētīn*
 2. *išītīsən di-beh dēhen / di-bē-dōʿūt nāhōrsən*
1. Good poems are oblique and indirect, their real meanings hugged close to the chest.
 2. (The English translation of the second line remains much the same as the example above)

or

1. *tāmētil qaʿānihin / biššul ḥakkētīn*
 2. *išītīsən di-beh dēhen / di-bē-dōʿūt nāhōrsən*
1. Good poems are oblique and indirect; they rub and grind their way through (to the truth).
 2. (The English translation of the second line remains much the same as the examples above.)

or, in a triplet:

1. *tāmētil qaʿānihin / biššul ḥeffētīn*
 2. *il-tāḡōdān ker ḥōyhi / qerqāher dāmxōlān*
 3. *išītīsən di-beh dēhen / di-bē-dōʿo nāhōrsən*
1. Good poems are oblique and indirect, their real meanings hugged close to the chest.
 2. They make their way along the ground, stirring up the

⁴ Most of the examples given here are from *Island Voices: the Oral Art of Soqoṭra* by Miranda Morris and Ṭānuf Sālim Nuḥ di-Kishin (forthcoming).

red dust as they go along (i.e. concealing themselves and obscuring everything around them).

3. (The English translation of the third line remains much the same as the second line of the examples above).⁵

The ability to use and interpret ‘veiled language’ was seen as dividing ‘real’ poets from the many everyday versifiers. It is on such grounds that older people criticize most modern poetry, claiming that whereas ‘good’ poetry is, by definition, difficult to understand, most modern poetry can be understood by anyone. One disgruntled elderly poet said this about the poetry of Soqoṭra today:

1. *kon mazīdihir wā-dālāk / mākēli wā-girīḥā*
 2. *wā-di-ʿātrāš mən tīdi / inṣtir wā-šālṣbā*
1. Those who claim the skills to circumcise are many; those who claim to do battle with evil spirits are so numerous that they can be scooped up (like earth).
 2. And every child weaned from its mother’s breast thinks itself a poet and others rush to try and do the same.⁶

‘Veiled language’ was also used in speech to enable two or more to hold a private conversation in the presence of

⁵ *tāmētil* (e.ds.), *tāmētil* (w.ds.), (sg. *tāmīlo*), ‘a story around a poem’ (the forms *tāmētil qaʿānihin*, *tāmētil qaʿānihin* treat *tāmētil* as a fpl. for agreement, while the form *qaʿānihin* treats it as a fsg.); *qaʿānihin*, *qaʿānihin* (f.) (m. *qaʿānhan*, *qaʿānhan*; pl. *qaʿānihin*, *qaʿānihin*, *qaʿānihin*), ‘curved, bent back on itself’ (as *di-qaʿānihin*, ‘scorpion’), i.e. oblique, not readily understood, with a sting in the tail; *biššul* (sg. *bīli*), ‘thing’; *ḥakkētīn* (sg. *ḥākək*), ‘a deep tunnel-like cave (which can hold people and their animals)’; *ḥeffētīn*, from the verb *ḥaf / yāḥfif / l-ahyef*, ‘to hold close to the chest or under one arm’; *ḥakkētīn*, from the verb *ḥak / yāḥkik / l-ahkək*, ‘to rub, saw away at something, to wear s.t. down, wear it through’; *yāšqēlits*, /š-qlt/, ‘to work s.t. out; to see beneath the surface to the true meaning; to guess correctly’; *išītīsən*, /š-t-ʿy/, ‘to understand, to see beneath the surface to the true meaning’; *tāḡōdān*, /ʿdv/ (ec. ds.), /gdv/, (w.ds.), ‘to go, travel’; *ker*, ‘along’; *ḥōyhi*, ‘earth, soil, ground’; *qerqāher*, ‘fine red dust, soil’; *dāmxōlān*, /dmxl/, ‘to stir up; to mix things together, usually inappropriately’; *dēhen*, ‘intelligence’ < Ar. *dihm*; *dōʿo*, *dōʿūt*, ‘discrimination, understanding; knowledge’ (the variants *dōʿo*, *dōʿūt* are a result of the differing dialects of the reciters/transmitters); *nāhōrsən*, /nhr/, ‘to pass by; to pass by someone, somewhere without stopping; to precede’.

⁶ *mazīdihir*, /zdr/, ‘a man able to carry out certain minor operations, and especially the circumcision operation, which in earlier times was performed on adolescents to ready them for marriage’; *dālāk*, ‘to be many’; *mākēli* (w.ds.), *mākēli* (ec.ds.), ‘a male exorcist or shaman, formerly called on to unmask witches suspected of harming people or their property’; *girīḥā*, /grh/, pass., ‘to collect earth for building purposes; to collect in a heap, to pile up’; *ʿātrāš*, /ʿ-t-r-š/, ‘to be weaned’; *tīdi* (pl. *līdāhe*) (w.ds.), ‘breast’; *inṣtir*, /ntr/, ‘to compose a poem; to sing or recite a poem’; *šālṣbā*, /š-lby/, pass. ‘to wish to resemble, be like (s.o.); to see as most desirable’.

others (for instance, by illicit lovers, to pass messages to one another, or to speak together covertly). In more modern times this use of 'veiled language', with its implications of deception and (possibly shameful) secrecy, has come to be regarded with suspicion, and Soqotrans increasingly disapprove of it and see it as contrary to the precepts of Islam; but even in earlier times many were fearful of it, as we see in these lines, in which the poet describes people who are not to be trusted:

1. *Al!lh ber feza'k de šet'arher / dilakut beyh di-xeyliya*
 2. *di-ol yašmital sawl / biši ribana mitikafa*
1. Lord, I am afraid of that tribe, for they are so slippery and two-faced (lit. they make copious use of 'veiled language').
 2. They do not speak in a straightforward way, and can never agree on a right and proper course of action.⁷

'Veiled language' was also put to strictly practical — and morally neutral — uses, such as one member of a family secretly describing to another which animal to fetch and slaughter for a guest (who would otherwise be constrained by good manners to refuse any such offer from his hosts).

'Veiled language' was seen as a very useful talent to develop, as the following lines from a poem show, where the poet rejoices at his grandson's growing proficiency in these skills:

1. *dīya de šam di-ber 'ibrāhe / yāka' bā-di-xīliya*
 2. *gišurk ašōnif heyh bā-ayn / bā-šeriyek bā-di-ātām beyh*
 3. *di-ol išiniš ber bergōb / ber šawak ol yāka' beyh*
1. What a good day it was when my grandson began to understand 'veiled language'!
 2. (For then) I could send him a signal with (my) eye, give him a sideways glance (whose meaning) we both understood and shared.
 3. One that the fool (lit. child of dung) does not see, and the slow person (lit. child of coldness) does not understand.⁸

⁷ *feza'k*, /fz/, 'to fear'; *šet'arher* (pl. *šet'arhur*), 'clan; tribe; people'; *sawl*, /swyl/, 'appropriate, suitable; good, agreeable'; *biši*, 'there is no(t) ...; nobody; nothing'; *ribana mitikafa*, a stock phrase in Soqotri poetry, meaning 'a right and proper course of action agreed to by all', from *ribana*, 'guidance from the wisest, oldest present' (*rēbihon* was an old term for 'head man'; later this was largely replaced by *muqaddam*, and then by *shaikh*); *mitikafa*, from the verb *ōtikif*/w-t-kl/, 'to agree together on s.t.; to be good, suitable, appropriate'.

⁸ *dīya* (pl. *ilīya*) (m. and f.), 'good; healthy'; *šam*, /šym/, 'sun; (one) day' (f.); *ber 'ibrāhe*, 'nephew; grandson'; *yāka'*, /wk/, 'to know (often s.t. secret), to find out, realise the truth, the true motives of s.o.; to be perceptive, clever'; *gišurk*, /gst/, 'to be able to do s.t., to manage';

Examples of the use of 'veiled language' in poetry

Most of the seven examples of poetry which follow are couplets, the basic building block of Soqotri poetry and song. To begin with, for comparison, a straightforward piece using straightforward language, humorously critical lines about a tight-fisted fisherman.

1. *ber fībeb di-ğašōntan / Abdullah di-halēlan*
 2. *d-iqōr di-hi šōda / af təkōlaman eyh il-ārhan*
1. Everyone knows for certain that 'Abdullah is quite idiotic, walking here and there:
 2. He's concealed his fish for so long that the bluebottles are swarming all around him!⁹

Lines that can be readily understood by anyone on the island.

Next is an example in which a certain level of 'veiled language' is used, but not in any complex way.

1. *talāt še' 'arāhon kerōkihim / il-kīhon wā-dišmim bisan*
2. *hibask išan bā-karākāhor / gidiri di-ī'am k-ol kēsa'*
3. *heb bā-šam ol āndoḳ hēsān / mān merā'ādihon terhēsān*

Literal translation:

1. I have three tawny she-goats of the same type, one of them the same colour all over.
2. I have shut them away in the dusty, red plains with not a thing to taste other than withered and desiccated (fodder).
3. Not even for a single day have I allowed them to go off to feed hungrily on the green pastures.¹⁰

ašōnif, 'to signal to s.o. with the eyes; to make a secret signal to s.o. that you want to talk to them privately'; *bergōb* (w.ds.), *bir'ub* (ec.ds.), (i) 'poor, tasteless grazing on which livestock fail to thrive; someone who is weak and of no use or help to others'; (ii) this can also be glossed as *ber gōb*, lit. 'child of dung'; *šawak*, /hək/hkk/, 'cold(ness), cool(ness)', and the verb 'to be(come) cold; to feel cold', hence also to be rather slow and idle.

⁹ *fībeb*, /fbb/, pass. 'to be certain, to know for sure'; *ğašōntan*, 'stupid, brainless' (< Ar. *gaššāš*, 'deceptive, false; cheat, impostor'); *iqōr*, /krv/, 'to hide, conceal'; *təkōlaman*, /kml/, 'to leap'; *il-ārhan* (sg. *di-ārhan*), 'buzzing fly; bluebottle' (from *garho* (w.ds.), *ārho* (ec.ds.), 'voice; sound').

¹⁰ *talāt*, 'three', from Arabic (Soqotri *šilē*; *šā'te*, three); *'arāhon* (sg. *ō'oz*, /ʔz), 'she-goat'; *kerōkihim* (sg. *kērkaḥim*), 'yellow-coloured, tawny' (from *kērkaḥem*, 'turmeric'); *kīhon* (sg. *kan*), 'type, sort; colour, appearance'; *dišmim* or *dēhmim*, (of goats) 'of the same grey-brown colour all over'; *hibask*, /hbs/, 'to shut in, shut up'; *karākāhor*, 'dusty plains of fine red soil'; *gidiri*, 'never a!, not a!'; *ī'am*, /t'm/,

These are lines composed by a poet who is making fun of himself: (i) ‘three tawny she-goats of the same type, one of them the same colour all over’ refers to the testicles and the penis; (ii) ‘with not a thing to taste other than withered and desiccated (fodder)’ refers to a dearth of sexual gratification, while; (iii) ‘to feed hungrily on the green pastures’ refers to successful sexual encounters. The composer of the lines was in fact an old man deploring his lack of sexual activity.

Most Soqoṭrans would not find the following lines too hard to interpret either:

1. *səlləmən ənhə wə-māṭΛ / lə-ħà lə-di-ol yaḥlītə*
2. *di-ol ināsaḥ ki-yiḳtīni / loṭ ʾərahon ki-gizol šeber*

Literal translation:

1. Greet on my behalf and make certain my greetings reach the one over there who is quite without shame.
2. Who does not wipe his face clean when he has eaten, just like goats when they are feeding on the *šeber* plants.¹¹

To understand these lines, the hearer has to appreciate the significance of the ‘*šeber* plants’. These are a group of plants, mainly Euphorbias, which contain a milky latex. They survive the long months of the dry season and goats are herded to browse on them at times of dearth. While not regarded as a nutritious or particularly beneficial feed, eating them lessens a goat’s need for water and at least fills the belly. It is well known, however, that the latex that drips from such plants when they are damaged stains the muzzles of the goats feeding on them and causes sores in and around the mouth.

These lines were composed by a woman who had discovered that her lover has been boasting to others of his conquest (i.e. of what he has ‘eaten’). She is angrily pointing out to him that this is inexcusable, while at the same time warning other women to beware of such men.

A further example of ‘veiled language’ that is not too hard to interpret:

pass., ‘to taste’; *ḳəša*, /ḳš/, ‘dry, dried out, desiccated’; *əndoḳ*, /ndk/, ‘to give; to allow’; *merəʾadihon* (sg. *mirʾid*), /rʾd/, ‘pastures, places with browse, grazing’; *terḥəsən*, /rḥs/, ‘to gobble, to eat greedily (of livestock especially)’.

¹¹ *səlləmən*, ‘to greet’ (< Ar. *sallam*); *māṭΛ*, /mṭv/, ‘to make reach; to send instructions, give orders; to deliver’; *lə-ħà*, ‘over there’; *yaḥlītə*, /ḥ-t-tv/, ‘to be shy, embarrassed, of a retiring nature’; *ināsaḥ*, /nšḥ/, ‘to wipe the mouth’; *yiḳtīni*, /ḳ-tnv/, ‘to eat’; *loṭ*, ‘like, just as’; *gizol*, /gzl/, ‘(small stock) to crunch and chew away at a tough plant; (especially goats) to feed on bitter and caustic plants’; *šeber*, *heber*, ‘bitter; caustic’.

1. *di-ho ʾəḳḳriyā təʾamer ənhə / di-ho bə-ḳḳriyā di-ḥəgəher*
2. *ber ol ḳəbaʿk di-ho zəyfa / bə-šΛm di-nibititin*

Literal translation:

1. Oh my Lord, give me a guardian for my date-palm plantation!
2. For I held nothing back but used all my strength on the day of pollination.¹²

Here the poet is in fact begging God to give him a son (‘a guardian for my date-palm plantation’). He has played his part, he says: ‘For I held nothing back but used all my strength on the day of pollination’, that is, he made love to his wife as energetically and as often as possible.

These next lines demand rather more interpretation.

1. *əzʾəmo di-ḥḥul ḥəsən / əlmiso lə-məʾəḳgəhəm*
2. *gəzəlo šimilə / wə-fəxərə libbētin*

Literal translation:

1. At the same time every year she sat with them, crouching down beside the kid pens.
2. Spinning wool with her left hand and spreading her skirts wide.¹³

To unpick the layers of meaning:

- (a) ‘her left hand’: in particular this gives us a clue that these lines probably have something to do with sorcery, for the left hand is traditionally associated with evil and pollution;
- (b) ‘at the same time every year’: in earlier times, when these lines were composed, the great majority of the she-goats were mated at the same time of year so that they would give birth some five months later in the winter rainy season. It is at this time that the witch is seen to be:

¹² *ḳḳriyā*, ‘a plantation of date palms, usually large and containing palms of more than one owner’; *ḥəgəher*, ‘guardian, caretaker’; *ḳəbaʿk*, /ḳbʿ/, ‘to hold back part of s.t. for future use; to hold in reserve; to set aside’; *zəyfa* (w.ds.), /zʾf; ʾzʾfə (ec.ds.) /fʾy/, ‘strength, power, energy’; *nibititin*, from the verb /nbʾ/, ‘to pollinate (date palms)’.

¹³ *əzʾəmo*, /zʾm/, ‘to sit down, to be seated’; *ḥḥul*, /ḥyl/, ‘to return annually, come, happen year after year; to come around again a year later’; *ḥəsən*, ‘with them’, i.e. with the she-goats and their kids; *əlmiso*, /lms/, ‘to sit crouched down low beside the wall of a house, pen, etc. (as a poor person, a beggar, or a thief crouching out of sight)’; *məʾəḳgəhəm*, ‘small pens for suckling kids’; *gəzəlo*, /gzl (w.ds.), /zʾl/ (ec.ds.), ‘to spin’; *šimilə*, /šml/, ‘left hand’; *fəxərə*, /fxr/, ‘to spread the legs wide (as to urinate)’; *libbētin*, ‘a woman’s waist string, holding her skirt in place; a piece of cloth worn as a minimal waistcloth’.

- (c) 'crouching down beside the kid pens' (the small pens in which the kids are put while the adult goats are out at pasture): i.e. she sits quietly out of sight, hoping not to be noticed, while she counts — and casts her spells on — the goats and their young;
- (d) 'spinning wool': most pastoralist women spun sheep's wool, and at all times of the day, but here too there are undertones of sorcery, since witches were said to 'spin' the flesh of their human victims before eating it;
- (e) 'spreading her skirts wide': usually associated with women urinating, here the spreading of the skirts implies a desire to conceal something or to do something in secret.

These lines were composed in an outburst of anger against a witch who had laid a curse on the goats belonging to the poet, making them sicken and their milk dry up, or causing them to give birth to male kids rather than the valuable and greatly desired female ones.

On the surface the next two lines appear to express a straightforward longing for rain — a common theme of Soqotri poetry and song:

1. *ʿaf miʿ mok xòyhur di-şērib / mən kədəmāno nəfñək*
2. *kol meyhókif gihimētīn / il-xòdor w-əthōrən*

Literal translation:

1. How long must we wait for you, winter rainclouds of the *kədəmāno* stars?
2. (We have) nothing but clouds spreading over the sky in the late morning, offering shade for a time and then departing.¹⁴

These lines were composed by a man who already has daughters but longs for a son. He calls on God to grant him one. The meaning of his lines is: 'When, God, will You give us life-giving rain (i.e. a son) instead of only these passing clouds (i.e. the daughters I already have).' Soqotran listeners understand very well that whereas a son remains at his father's side, a daughter only 'offers shade' for a limited time: i.e. she is of invaluable help at home, but only until she gets married, when she moves away to work in her husband's home.

¹⁴ *xòyhur* (w.ds.), *həyhur* (ec.ds) 'dark clouds which bring rain'; *şērib*, 'the winter rainy season'; *kədəmāno*, 'stars whose rising signals the first rains of winter'; *nəfñək*, /fnk/, 'to wait for; to anticipate eagerly'; *meyhókif*, 'clouds which spread to cover the sky but which are unlikely to bring rain'; *gihimētīn*, /ghml/, 'arriving in the late morning'; *xòdor* /xdr/ (w.ds.), /hđr/ (ec.ds.), 'to construct a (temporary) shelter (against rain, sun, wind)'; *əthōrən*, /thr/, 'to leave, depart'.

And finally an example of a much more complex and skilled use of 'veiled language':

1. *ʿinēm tər túbur mōshīt / di-ídher bə-fəgāno*
2. *kəşəho də ol kərλšΛ / ol hΛtmēmhiyon di-ğōwşef*

Literal translation:

1. Why are you looking at *mōshīt* grass, you who live in the bare, infertile wastes?
2. That fresh green grass is not the wretched *kōrşΛ* grass of the salty ground of *ğōwşef* (or: the wretched, brittle *kōrşΛ* grass of *ğōwşef*).¹⁵

To begin to understand what the poet really intends by these lines it is necessary to understand a number of factors. To take them in order as they appear, it is necessary to appreciate that:

- (a) *mōshīt* is a tall, green grass (from the verb *shΛt* /*ishΛt* /*l-ishΛt*, 'to sweep'), i.e. grass growing tall enough to make a broom. It is also necessary to know that such grasses are rare on Soqotra and are associated with the lush green meadows of the high, central Hāgəher Mountains;
- (b) *fəgāno* is a barren area which contains nothing which might enable a person to survive there: no water, shade, homesteads, folds, pasture, etc.;
- (c) *kəşəho* are the first green shoots that come up after rain, i.e. fresh and tender grass;
- (d) *kərλšΛ* refers to a group of coarse, creeping, perennial grasses, mainly of saline ground; but as regards the poet's use of this particular form, it is also necessary to know that:

- (i) *kərλšΛ* is a diminutive form of *kōrşΛ*, and a derogatory diminutive. In other words, the very worst type of *kərλšΛ* grass;
- (ii) after rain, the *kərλšΛ* grasses do not produce fresh green shoots above ground (as do the *kəşəho* in line 2), but instead respond by repeated tillering (branching from the base of the stem), or by rhizomes (horizontal stems that are either underground or prostrate on the soil surface), or stolons (stems creeping horizontally on the ground surface and rooting at the nodes). In other words, as grazing they are greatly inferior to the *kəşəho* grasses;

¹⁵ *tər túbur*, /-t-br/, 'to look at, to study carefully; to watch'; *ídher*, /dhr/, 'to be from (an area), to originate (from); to live in an area'.

- (iii) these types of grasses are in particular grazed by sheep;
- (iv) traditionally the status of sheep and those who owned them was low compared to the status of goats and those who owned them.
- (e) *ħaṭm̄m̄hiyon* can be interpreted in two ways: firstly, as a term for the area of the southern plains which lies between the tideline and the escarpment foothills, terrain which is glossed as: ‘an area bare of vegetation through which livestock hurry to reach somewhere else’; secondly, a form derived from the verb /ħṭmm/, whose basic meaning is ‘dried-out, shrivelled, brittle’, as *ḫīrob ħaṭm̄m̄hiyon*, ‘dead, friable, splintery pieces of wood’;
- (f) *ġṭw̄ṣef* is the diminutive form of *ġḷṣf*, ‘a shallow bowl or depression in the ground’. It also means ‘a place to sit down and rest’ (from the verb *ḳ̄ṣaf* (ec. ds) / *ġḷṣaf* (w.ds.), ‘to sit down and rest for a bit’), and is the name given to a group of small coastal settlements.

Finally it is necessary to know that traditionally the tribespeople of the interior regarded those who lived along the coast as inferior: they were fishermen,¹⁶ tied

¹⁶ This attitude has changed: fishing has now become an enviable source of income, unlike pastoralism.

labourers, deserters from ships, slaves or former slaves — essentially, people of no known tribal origin.

After taking all these points into consideration, what have we learned about the meaning of these two lines — some dozen words? The poet who composed these lines was a tribesman from the mountain interior and he is addressing a man from the coast. He is warning him against even thinking about making any advances to a tribal girl from the mountains. He tells him that he should not look longingly at ‘fresh, green grass’ (the young mountain woman), for he is a man who has nothing to offer except ‘bare, infertile wastes’. Better that he should stick to his own ‘dried-up’ women, for these women are accustomed to the barren, salty ground and poor pastures of the coastal areas.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of many Soqoṭran poets, transmitters, and lovers of Soqoṭri poetry. In particular she would like to thank Ṭānuf Sālim Nuḥ di-Kishin, co-author of the forthcoming *Island Voices*, for his patience in helping to tease out the many layers of meaning to be found in these and other pieces of the allusive and often cryptic poetry of Soqoṭra.

References

- Morris M.
(in preparation). *Soqoṭri Lexicon*.
Morris M. & Di-Kishin Ṭ.S.N.
(forthcoming). *Island Voices: the Oral Art of Soqoṭra*.

Author's address

Miranda Morris, 7 Union Street, St Andrews, Fife, KY16 9PQ, UK.
e-mail miranda@mirandamorris.com