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**TEMETHEL AS THE MOST BRIGHT ELEMENT  
OF SOQOTRAN FOLKLORE POETRY**  
*(The final draft of 2007. It slightly differs from the finally  
published text of the article in FO)*

*To Prof. Alan S. Kaye*

Every field researcher of the Soqotri Modern South Arabian language from the first steps in his work on the island will meet these, beloved among the islanders, very useful, sharp-witted short poetry jewels of folklore, which are named "temethel" by the Soqotrans themselves.

Temethel (sg. temtilo – bold characters used in this paper for stressed vowels) are mainly four-line stanzas composed mostly in old times. They are the finest examples of the oral folklore poetry of Soqotra. Soqotri has no written form and, likely, did not have it ever in the history staying unwritten and alive for ages. This language exists now as a mother-tongue of Soqotra's herdsmen, fishermen, and townsmen, being, in

reality, presented in a variety of dialectal differences and individual performance peculiarities. Above this, when an informant is not familiar with some old words because of his young age, or he is living in a town, not in highlands with tribes, or when he wouldn't like to stop his speech in order to remember the right word, he simply can change the word or the sound with an equivalent or with "suitable" *abracadabra*, too. That's why the research in Soqotran poetry items, even in so perfectly composed mostly by unknown poets and so well shaped by time and tradition as temethel are, requires additional efforts and native speakers' reliable help.

Everyone of Soqotra's men should know a number – as more as the better – of temethel-stanzas, because it helps him to demonstrate his link with the society's tradition and common knowledge. During a wedding or any other celebration gathering, even in the end of 1970s, poetry competitions appeared being like duel exchange with short stanzas between their participants, one after another. The most "educated" was a winner. From our talk with Soqotrans we can conclude, that knowing of a number of temethel (even only one from the top of the short list!) could and will play a role of a password for a field researcher in his contacts with them, especially Soqotran Bedouins. This way you can demonstrate your respect toward their language and culture as well as your knowledge, even a little, of methel d-**Siqatra** – *the language of Soqotrans*.

From the formal point of view, the Soqotran temethel look similar to Russian *chastushki*, the short oral Russian folklore verses, also used in feasts when people – men and women from the countryside – are exchanging these four-line songs mostly for fun – often on the verge of decency and/or political loyalty (see *chastushki* of the Soviet period in 1920-1970s).

However, Soqotran temethel's topics are wider and the temethel' genre is much older, having its roots in ancient tribal poetry. Their social and cultural role is also deeper (in spite of some influence of the Soviet like People's Democratic Republic of Yemen's (PDRY) [please, decipher the abbreviation!] period on the islanders folklore). It extends from people's philosophy and common sense ideas spreading among the islanders from their youth up to denigrating other tribes ( like *hija'* invective poetry in Classical Arabic) and bawdy eroticism which manifestations, however, are not so essential for the genre, as in *chastushki*.

If we distinguish the main groups of Soqotran temethel using our field observations made and folklore materials collected our classification will be as follows:

- 1) people's general philosophy temethel group (explaining general common sense ideas);
- 2) heroes' temethel group;
- 3) frivolous temethel group;
- 4) tribe or person mock or praise temethel group;
- 5) ribald temethel of various degrees;
- 6) modern temethel (authors' temethel);
- 7) emigrants' temethel (emigrant authors' temethel);
- 8) "political" temethel (a folklore reply to political and social issues).

Modern, mostly emigrants', and "political" temethel may have Arabic borrowings taken from Arabic dialects or Classical Arabic (Islamic, political terms, and etc.) and "mixed" grammar (Arabic words may have "pidginized" forms, as well as grammar forms of Arabic can be broken).

We also should expect there could be some additional groups of temethel too which could be specified along with

more field research and Soqotran folklore heritage corpus recording, analyzing, and conservation).

Here we present only the most popular temethel in transcription and in free poetical translation (made as close as possible to the original verses - their rhymes and meanings) and accompanied with word for word comments.

The 1st group, people's philosophy and common sense temethel, has the top one item of Soqotra's temethel list, the most cited verse:

temethel qa'onhen. (1)	The indistinct proverbs
bešol hayefeten: (2)	Are all very fine things:
yišeyn-sen d-bi-dehan, (3)	The clever will hear them,
d-b-ol dehan y'ayhof-sen. (4)	The stupid will lose them.

(highlanders dialect of the Northwestern

Coast) 1

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- (1) temethel (as) scorpions (Sg. qa'onhen scorpion )  
(or, otherwise, indirect, twisted things)
  - (2) (are) fine/delicate things
  - (3) the one who-(has)-mind hears them
  - (4) the one who-(is)-without-mind loses them

**1** – When this article was under editing in the end of 2007, we'd found there are Soqotran bloggers (!) appearing in the Internet with some temethel pieces written with Arabic font. We also posted “temethel qa'onhen...” written with Arabic font:

تماتهل قعونهن بشول حيفيتن

يشينتصن د بي دهن د بل دهن يعيهفصن

and received such a folklore variation of it in a reply:

تموئل قعوئهن بشؤل حَفَانَت

\* اشقالتسن دبي داهن وديل داهن جارودسن

We can do a quite good transcription of this written Soqotri text, using author's *harakat*, which will be as follows:

*Temethel as the Most Bright Element of Soqotran Folklore Poetry*

\*tamotel qa'onhen bišsol haŋfeten

\*išqal t-sen d-bi dehan di bal dehan garod-sen

and determine that this time we have this very text performed by a Hadiboh, the main town of the island, Dialect speaker, because he uses "tamotel" instead of "temethel" and prefers "garod" to lose (cp. Arab. j-r-d), not "ayhof" to lose (cp. Arab. ġ-y-b). The form išqal t-sen means *he learns them* (Soq. qal to know > š-qal to learn). Stylistically, the imperfect form \*(y)išqal t-sen *he learns them* should correspond with the imperfect form \*(y)igarod-sen *he loses them* as well, but here we find a perfect form instead: \*garod-sen *he losed them*.

As it is clear from its content, this little verse is a key-note for all the temethel gamut, because it determines Soqotrans' view on the four line folklore maxims as a genre.

From the same philosophic temethel group are:

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l-'am ši 'irhon delak, (1)	If I have lots of goats
loṭ ška' 'il dirfonten, (2)	As much as thorns
'ndiroffon	
loṭ sela bi renhem, (3)	As much as fish in waters
ḥamre t(d)-bi rikibe. (4)	As much as slime in morass.

(highlanders dialect of the Northwestern Coast)

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(1) if (there are) with me a lot of goats

(2) as much as thorns in "diroffon" (pl. dirfonten; as Dr. Miranda Morris said in her e-letter to the author, "diraffan, plural dirafonten' is a shrub Hibiscus (of which there are 7 species on the island, and which has terribly penetrating hairs on the leaf)"; 'il is a plural form of a connective (possessive) particle d-

(3) as much as sela -fish in the sea ("sela" is, according to the author's note, is a needlefish and, according to Dr. M. Morris, "sela is a species of sardine which arrives in shoals in the summer months")

(4) (as) slime, which (is) in a swamp

ta‘aboren we tśinin (1)      Let you **look** and you rather  
see  
’irhon di we l-oken. (2)      Goats here and which **soon**  
will be.  
we ‘ag ye‘ober ‘agi (3)      But the **man** sees a **noble**  
man,  
ma‘lhe ko we l-osem. (4)      If he **died**, like he's **here**  
again.

(highlanders dialect of the  
Northwestern Coast)

- 
- (1) (you) look and see  
(2) goats – this (these) and (which) have to be  
(3) and the man sees a man  
(4) noble and if he will die (even after his death)

Here we place also verses raising self-respect feelings of a single person, stressing his own pride and independence:

‘ak ‘aḥamil li noffin (1)      I shall **take** upon myself  
l-ighom to-ho šmeda‘k! (2)      To **meet** with who **knows**  
me!  
‘ak ‘aqadaḥ li noffin (3)      I shall **light** up for myself  
śiyot min dyo niśisyon! (4)      The **fire** by my **tinder**!

(highlanders dialect of the  
Northwestern Coast)

- (1) (I) want to take upon myself
- (2) to be invited when I am known
- (3) (I) want to light for myself
- (4) fire from (by) my tinder (= sticks)

The 2nd group of temethel are verses composed within or after traditional Soqotran legends or heroic people's stories. One of such stories tells that once a boat with two Soqotrans, a father and a son, was captured by a Christians' ("Francs") ship. The old father had some gold adornments on him, and he thought that "Francs" will kill them both to take this gold. When the "Francs" got drunk at night, he and his son took swords and killed them all. When many men were killed a little bird, which was sitting on the mast, began to sing taking the bloodshed for sunrise. This legend is reflected in the following verse:

bidış hit, fırgit, 'ol śiniş, (1)	Lied you, little bird, you didn't see,
şah nigeş 'ol 'iberş. (2)	Early morning you didn't see.
dir di-şhar śiniş – (3)	Blood of men you just have seen –
yitehan hashan. (4)	It's a work of swords.
	(highlanders dialect of the Northwestern Coast)

- 
- (1) lied you, bird, (you) didn't see
  - (2) early morning (you) didn't see
  - (3) blood of men (you) have seen –
  - (4) the swords are working

The heroic fight of Hagi Rahabhen (**ḥagi raḥabhen**) also became a theme of a verse. Hagi Rahabhen is the legendary patriarch of one of the most renown Soqotran tribes of Bedouins – the Keshen tribe (kešen is a name of a place at the mountains, that is why the right form of this tribe's name is " 'il-kešen" (pl. – *those from Keshen*; sg. m. "d-kešen" and sg. f. has a special form "kušino"). He (and after that his tribe) is mostly known for another story, which tells that when one of "Francs" with his two children – a boy and a girl – came to the island, Rahabhen d-Keshen kidnapped both children, made the situation so, that the boy thought his sister was eaten (!), ran away and told his father about. After that the "Francs" decided to leave the island, and Rahabhen married the white (Christian) girl. Their male descendants are known on Soqotra as "ber farangiye" , i.e. Franc's girl son(s). Prof. Vitalij Naumkin was the first to publish his recorded variant of this story in 1988 .  
\*\*

But our verse was devoted to another famous deed of Rahabhen. The legend tells, that he killed two flying giants called Rebehine (rebeḥine) with a sword as they were sitting in a tree. When he was asked , what he would like to get as a reward for his fight from material goods, he said, he wanted to have only a verse! So it is:

ḥagi, ḥagi – min ṭorinek! (1)	Hagi, Hagi – you're a kingfish!
notemod lgoteten. (2)	We just gathered trophies.
zu'e min 'il-ḥar tebete! (3)	Take the best for you as you wish!
šigdaḥk Rebeḥine. (4)	You crushed the monsters' bodies.



(highlanders dialect of the  
Northwestern coast)

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(1) Hagi, Hagi – (you are) from kingfish (sg. **ṭonik**, pl. **ṭorinek**)

(2) (we) are \*gathering (or \*dividing?) trophies  
(possible from the root lqt – **loqot** to gather something)

(3) take min the best what you want (**il-ḥar** , possibly,  
from Arabic < 'al-ḥayr *the good*)

(4) (you) obtained Rebehine ( **rebeḥine** is a dual form  
(with **-ine** ending of dual) and a joint name of these two  
flying monsters. The root here is rbḥ – the same as in the  
verb **rabaḥ** to swim (there is a legend on Soqotra about  
their birth in the eastern part of the island; it is the legend  
of Atar tribe and the old man of Lot.)

The 3rd group, the frivolous temethel, is also widely  
represented among this popular folklore poetry genre. Some  
items of this kind are linked with usual but spicy situations;  
some others are built on transparent allegories like this verse:

zeḥe het 'am metate? – (1) Circumcised are you or not  
yet? –

'iddaḥ 'inhi , Digawaś! (2) Tell me please, Digawah!

zu'a megedhel hi-ki (3) Take the burnt stick with us  
ahead

l-eqoleb (h)-es le meyrhir! (4) Let us two make it burning!

(highlanders dialect of the  
Northwestern Coast)

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(1) not circumcised (are) you or circumcised ?

(2) inform me, **Digawaś'** (this is likely a proper name of a man – there are endemic proper names like Duhar, 'Abbas, Ney'irhen and etc. on Soqotra – but could be also a nickname made by formula " **d-i-f'1** ")

(3) take an extinguished fire-brand (**megedhel**) for both of us

(4) to turn it to burning fire-brand (**meyrhir**)

The 4th tribe or person mock or praise temethel group as well as the 5th ribald (indecent, obscene) group of temethel were actually out of our field research aim and interest because such materials need special time and approach. Although there is a big number of these verses in Soqotran folklore as well as among our sound recordings (they have been often performed by young men and boys for fun), and thus have to be mentioned in our temethel's classification.

The 6th, 7th, and 8th groups are, in fact, separated branches of the main, emerged in 20th century, modern temethel united group. However, there are important differences between Soqotran emigrants' and local modern authors' poetry within this genre. "Political" verses too are themselves a very special thing being a folklore reaction on the expansion of new social realities, as an unexpected strange product of a new order and ideology, and on new Arabic related terms penetration into the islanders' daily life – and their poetry as well.

With the beginning of the labor Soqotran migration in 1930s-1960s to the Arab Gulf, even before-oil, states, the emigrant Soqotran poetry emerged. It was based on Soqotrans' special feelings of love and emigrants' deep-rooted nostalgia towards their homeland island. In the same time, its texts were filled with new - Arabic (classical and dialectal) - words,

constructions and locutions, often pidginized, but reflecting new socio-linguistic situation around them. When in the 1970s cassette recorders appeared in markets, the recorded cassettes with emigrant authors' poetry reached the island, and this poetry, due to its outlook as a message home about new prospects and possibilities (for men to work and for women to marry abroad to make their life better) in another place, became very popular in Soqotra. Even listening to such tape-records was a fun, because the emigrant poets often recorded their verses sitting at the street cafe tables, where their verses were accompanied with big cities people's voices and car movement' sounds, thus producing a kind of "audible but invisible show". So it was at the end of the 1970s at least. \*\*\*

We are presenting here only two examples of this kind of temethel. The first verse is composed in a traditional style with visible Arabic influence, but with some respect to both Arabic and Soqotri oral speech grammar still:

ḥabbit ti-š we ḥabbit noffin (1) I loved you and I loved myself

w-aktar min 'emrar 'ol gozik (2) And I had no pain from woes.

loṭ gozik min soqoṭri – (3) My pain is from Soqotra –

min 'ašoqaṅ ho moḍik! (4) From 'Asoqaṅ I'm lonely!

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(1) ḥabbit ti-š < ḥabbeyt-iš (Arab. dial. of South Arabia, however -iš is a 2 f. sg. dependent pronoun in the both, South Arabian Arabic and Soqotri); t-iš<sup>v</sup> is a Soqotri form with the preposition t- and the 2 f. sg. Dependent pronoun -iš<sup>v</sup>.

(2) w-aktar min 'emrar < w-aktar min ('al -) 'amra:r (Arab. dial.)

(3) I suffered from Soqotra

(4) From 'Asoqan I was feeling lonely [far away? separated?]

The second verse is actually a temethel-styled beyt/stanza of "hedona-hadon" **qasida**-poem" also used some times as temtilo without "hedona-hedon" refrain. It is old enough and speaks rather about short-time migration to Aden (possibly, while a British colony). Its hero, maybe a "lyric hero" as well, is suffering from high prices in Aden. The degree of pidginization of the Arabic borrowings here is very high:

ta‘ban weyli be ‘aden (1)

min ketar meḥaseba – (2)

ḥey ši bey telat miya (3)

we ‘ada ’ol ḥaṣṣala! (4)

-----  
(1) my friend (or myself (?)) – it's Arabic weyl-i *my misfortune*) is tired (ill) in Aden

ta‘ban < ta‘aba:n (Arab.); ‘aden < ‘aden (Arab.)

(2) from a lot of expenses (calculations)

min ketar meḥaseba < min katrat ’al-muḥa:saba (Arab. dial. and Classical )

(3) there is nothing from three hundreds with him  
ḥey ši or ḥoy ši (Sqt.) "nothing with him"; bey < bi-(h) (Arab.); talat miya < talat miyya or talat miyyat šillin (Arab. Dial) = 15 South Arabian Dinars issued since 1964; but the local people in the mainland as well as on the islands kept on calculating money in Shillings after former East African currency used in the South before 1964, not in Dinars, even in the 1970s)

(4) and (he) didn't get (any) food

'ada < ġada: (Arab.); 'ol (Sqt. negation); ḥaṣṣala < ḥaṣṣal-ha (Arab. dial.) – or with the negation: ma: ḥaṣṣal-ha ši

Modern Soqotran poets also are composing their verses in temethel style. Temethel of this 6th group are simpler than the classical samples of old times, but they are more expressive and lyrical, in accordance with modern times stylistics. There is also an Arabic, Colloquial and Classical, cultural influence on this poetry branch:

ho ḥa d-yikahab she-ken, (1) I am now staying with you  
we qhonk di-min 'amq síbobi! (2) And reached the  
middle of old age.  
we 'ilbib sere ḥomir, (3) But my heart's over  
mountains –  
sere 'adiye tikahab! (4) The pass of 'Adiye – is  
staying!

(Saad Muhammad al-Keshri from  
*Qalansiya*.)

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(1) I (am) here, who is sitting with you  
(2) and became in the middle of my age  
(3) and (my) heart (is) behind Homir (a name of a  
place)  
(4) behind Adiye mountain-pass (is) located

'ol 'iborki d-ho 'eyni (1) You, my eyes, you didn't  
see it,  
'idmi'o ki qa'edo (i)d-ki (2) When a tear was falling  
from you.

'ilbib ta d-(y)irebon hi-ki, (3) That my heart so ordered to  
you,  
šaf šhayak le qalemoti. (4) To my lungs invited pity.

*(Abdalla Ahmad Teysi from Nouged:)*

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(1) didn't saw (you), my two eyes  
(2) when a tear has dropped from you two  
(3) the heart ordered you two (to do) so  
(4) invited a pity to my (two) lungs  
šaf = daf to invite

The 8th group of temethel – the "political" one – is an understandable reply to not only political but politically connected life conditions changes which were very fast and hard to be “right-understood” by the island's inhabitants. This reply is naturally coming in special, but traditional, form of folklore poetry (in Soqotra like elsewhere in the world, for instance, in Russia even in the same time of 1960s-1970s). We have here even a three-line temthilo combining a traditional pastoral life situation with modern social relationships which are here criticized:

‘edog miš(h)er we `ilil `ol ‘edog. (1)  
wašalto ho qo taḥ teneyn – (2)  
we rafi bi-s qeyyada (3)

-----  
(1) sucked the kid and the lamb did not suck (the baby animal of goats or sheeps when it is unable to eat should be sold immediately according to local practice!)  
(2) (I) took it (them) to the coast both (two)

**wasalto** < wassalt (Arab. dial.); **teneyn** < 'itneyn (Arab. dial.) but in South Yemeni dialects it is usually **sinteyn**

(3) and "congratulated" with it (them) *Qiyaada the administration*:

**rafi** < raffeyt (Arab. dial.); **qeyyada** < qiya:da (Arab.)

From the point of view of the variety of rhymes and themes accompanied with the clearness and brightness of poetical shapes as a distinctive feature of this genre, temethel should be considered as an important target of a special language research and a significant object for Soqotran folklore heritage conservation. This article presents only the initial general outlook of this cultural phenomenon, so we hope this short survey could help to form a reliable base for such linguistic and folklore heritage saving efforts in nearest future.

## References

\*<http://alseqatri.maktoobblog.com/715264/>

2) من الأمثال السقطرية رقم

\*\* Naumkin, V.V. 1988. Sokotrijtsy (The Soqotrians). Historical-ethnographical outline. Moscow: Nauka [304 pages with tables, drawings and photographs. In Russian with Soqotri transliterated words and texts].

\*\*\*Close poetic ties between the Gulf Soqotrans and the island have become recently an object of a special research: Nathalie Peutz (Princeton University) *Reorienting Heritage: Poetic Exchanges between Soqotra and the Gulf*. AIYS and Yemen at MESA 2007 (Montréal, November 17-20, 2007). See: <http://www.aiys.org/mesa.html> and <http://www.mesa.arizona.edu/annual/07mtg/sun11.htm>

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