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Language of Spirits: Parallels Between Rhymed Prose (*Sadī'*) of Pre-Islamic Arabian Soothsayers and Verbal Behavior of Shamans

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Abstract. The speech behavior of soothsayers (*kuhhān*), who lived in pre-Islamic Arabia, was characterized by the use of rhymed and rhythmic prose, the formulaic structure of utterances and their enigmatic nature. Furthermore, their speech was ecstatically performed and featured a specific language that was different from the generally accepted mode of everyday communication. As a consequence, their utterances were perceived by their audiences as emanating from supernatural beings. The article draws a parallel between the speech peculiarities of the *kuhhān* and texts that serve for 'communication' with spirits in shamanic/shamanistic cultures. From a functional point of view, in both cases the texts exhibit a number of distinctive properties that mark sacred pronouncements dictated by otherworldly forces. There are also similarities in the contexts and circumstances of text production of soothsayers and shamans. The conclusions of the article can serve as another argument in favor of a typological affinity between these two groups of religious specialists. This affinity has previously been examined mainly through the prism of their social functions and non-verbal behavior. This article, on the other hand, emphasizes the linguistic characteristics of this affinity.

Keywords: sacred, divination, shamanism, pre-Islamic Arabia, soothsayers, spirits, *ḍjinn*, *sadī'*, rhymed prose

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Язык духов: параллели между рифмованной прозой (*садж*) доисламских арабских прорицателей и речевым поведением шаманов

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Аннотация. Прорицатели-*кахины* доисламской Аравии имели ряд отличительных особенностей речевого поведения. Это широкое использование рифмованной и ритмизованной прозы (*садж*), формульная структура высказываний, их энигматический характер, экстатические формы речевого поведения, а также использование вариаций языка, отличающихся от общепринятых в бытовой коммуникации. Считалось, что эти особенности маркируют высказывание, полученное от потусторонних существ. Можно провести параллель между особенностями речей, приписываемых *кахинам*, и характерными чертами текстов, служащих для тех или иных форм «коммуникации» с духами в культурах, где распространены различные формы шаманизма. С функциональной точки зрения, в обоих случаях отличительные свойства приписываемых потусторонним силам высказываний подчеркивали сакральный характер текстов. Также имеется сходство контекста и обстоятельств порождения текстов *кахинов* и шаманов. Сделанные выводы могут служить еще одним аргументом в пользу утверждения о типологическом сходстве между *кахинами* и шаманами, ранее рассматриваемого через призму общности их социальных функций и наиболее характерных особенностей невербального поведения.

Ключевые слова: сакральное, предсказания, шаманизм, доисламская Аравия, *кахины*, духи, *джинны*, *садж*, рифмованная проза

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Introduction

Shamanism, a widely spread phenomenon both in geographical and semantic terms, has always been a fascinating resource for comparative studies. These studies concerned the examination of similar features within a certain culture or similar phenomena in different cultures, often transcending the boundaries of various traditions associated with shamanism. As M. Oppitz stated, “shamanism – in short – is highly specific and ephem-

eral, bound to a myriad of heterogeneous local conditions and developments. It is this local peculiarity that provokes comparison with peculiarities in other shamanic surroundings, in the hope of finding common features on a wider geographical scale” (Oppitz 2017: 62). My article goes even further in attempting to detect elements of shamanism in the activities and verbal production of the soothsayers of pre-Islamic Arabia that is distant both spatially and temporally from the societies in which shamanism is practiced.

First, I have to define the term “shamanism” that it has many connotations and meanings that may distract us from of discussion the immediate topic of our study. The definition used here follows the characterization of J. Towsend who stated that “a traditional shaman is a person who has direct communication with spirits, is in control of spirits and altered states of consciousness, undertakes soul (magical) flights to the spirit world, and has a this-material-world focus rather than a goal of personal enlightenment” (cit. ex Walker 2001: 38). Spiritual journeys (be it ascending to the sky or descending to the underworld) are one of the most prominent features of a shaman (Eliade 2004: 5). However, the figure of a shaman blends with other religious specialists in archaic societies, especially those of a priest or a magician (Eliade 2004: 5), a storyteller (Putilov 1997: 58–59), a healer (Corradi Musi 2013: 8). Furthermore, shamanism in its various manifestations remains alive even in modern societies. Thus, it is possible to find ‘shamanic’ features in behavior or beliefs within a certain culture without stating that this culture is shamanic or labelling someone as a shaman. As M. Eliade noted, “the presence of a shamanic complex in one region or another does not necessarily mean that the magic-religious life of the corresponding people is crystallized around shamanism. This can occur (as, for example, in certain parts of Indonesia), but it is not the most usual state of affairs. Generally, shamanism coexists with other forms of magic and religion” (Eliade 2004: 5), and thus we will not hesitate to employ the terms “shamanic” or “shamanism” in the broad sense of these words. Since this article discusses the role of shaman from a linguistic point of view, a special stress is put on the ‘communication’ with spirits and its formal characteristics.

Soothsayers of pre-Islamic Arabia and shamans – previous comparisons

In the pre-Islamic Arabia we find individuals who acted in the sphere of religion and were viewed by their society as specialists in communicating with deities and spirits. These individuals, named “soothsayers” (*kāhin* pl. *kuhhān*)¹, are often mentioned Arabic sources written after the rise of Islam. A characteristic feature of soothsayers’ divinations was the use of the rhymed and rhythmical prose (*saḍīʿ*). Their pronouncements were believed by their listeners to be emanating from otherworldly forces and differed substantially from an ordinary speech. In this sense, there was a semblance be-

tween the inspired speeches of the soothsayers and the orations of poets (*shā'ir* pl. *shu'arā'*). The Arabs believed that poets, like soothsayers, could communicate with otherworldly forces. This widespread belief persisted after the victory of Islam. The belief in male (*hādīs*) and female (*halīla*) demons of inspiration who visit poets and whisper poetry to them is still alive in various parts of the Arab world, especially in Yemen. The demons of poetry are perceived as beings (or, more often, poetic images and allegories) who speak in coherent, measured sayings. For example, a modern poet described his spirit in this way: "He (*hādīs*) said: I came to you quickly; // I am not one of those who disappears [when needed]. // Hold on [to me] to extract [verses]. // And he answered me with measured speech" (Yosefi 2018: 38).

Unfortunately, when it comes to studies related to the *kuhhān*, as well as pre-Islamic Arabia in general, we face the problem of sources. Almost all we know about the religious life in Arabia before Islam is based on later Islamic sources, some of which are simply forged by medieval Muslim scholars. For this reason, thorough source criticism is required when it comes to dealing with the texts attributed to soothsayers. However, for the purposes of the current study one can rely on some Muslim accounts from pre-Islamic Arabia. Even if they do not convey correctly the authentic texts of the *kuhhān*, one could find here a general *idea* of how soothsayers' texts and behavior were perceived in the later epoch. This imaginative picture somehow reflects the actual state of affairs in Arab society two or three centuries before these works had been compiled. Muslim scholars also had opportunities to hear examples of the original archaic *sadj* ' , because in the Bedouin environment the ritual reciting of *sadj* ' persisted for a very long time after the victory of Islam, and some typical kinds of texts are still recited and certain evidently pagan practices performed until the present day by the Arabs. Moreover, there is additional information about the beliefs concerning the 'communication' with spirits in the Quran and sayings of Muḥammad in which he criticized the pre-Islamic religious beliefs and practices or rebuffed the attacks on him by Meccan pagans.

As far as we know from the later sources, soothsayers were professionals communicating with deities and spirits. Initially, the 'revelations' were spontaneous and people usually believed that the supernatural beings 'transmitted' to the *kuhhān* during their trances. The *kāhin* himself could not initiate a revelation; he was passively waiting for it. As a rule, soothsayers received messages from a supernatural being well known by them, often of the opposite sex. Such an 'agent' from the parallel world was called *djinnī* (pl. *djinn*); other names for them were descriptive terms like *ṣāhib* ('companion'), *khalīl* ('friend') or *tābi* ('follower') (El-Zein 2009: 56). One typical feature of a soothsayer during the séance of communication with spirits was his or her ecstatic state of mind, as well as strange or even asocial forms of behavior. A good illustration of this kind of trance is given in *The Biography of the*

Prophet by Ibn Hishām. The *ḍjinnī* (in the text – *ṣāhib*), who brought a revelation to a female soothsayer from tribe of *Banū Sahm* “descended upon her,” saying:

darr
mā adarr
yawm ‘akr
wa nahr

[Abundantly] brought!
What is [profusely] brought
The day of cutting sinews
And slaughter?

When the tribesmen heard about it, they said: “What does he want?” After that, the *ḍjinnī* came to her again and said:

shu ‘ūb mā shu ‘ūb
taṣra ‘fīhi ka ‘b al-ḍjanūb

Tribes, what tribes,
[On that day] the glory of the south will perish.

According to this story, the tribesmen of *Quraysh* were puzzled and they understood the meaning of the message only after the Battle of Badr, which it allegedly predicted (Ibn Hishām 1911: 198–199).

This fact distinguishes the archaic image of an Arabian soothsayer from that of a shaman, who, as a rule, “differs from a ‘possessed’ person, for example; the shaman controls his ‘spirits,’ in the sense that he, a human being, is able to communicate with the dead, ‘demons,’ and ‘nature spirits,’ without thereby becoming their passive tool. To be sure, shamans are sometimes found to be ‘possessed,’ but these are exceptional cases for which there is a particular explanation” (Eliade 2004: 6). Nevertheless, there is enough evidence to reinforce the notion that soothsayers were able to enter into the state of trance through their own free will, or at least, when asked about something or in response to a request for divination. On the eve of the rise of Islam, the Arabs often perceived soothsayers as ordinary fortunetellers and turned to them exclusively with particular requests (Piotrovskij 1981: 11). They also played the role of mediators in disputes, which is quite typical for shamans (Borko 2004: 35). In such cases, a soothsayer could extend influence outside the community and become a mediator in inter-tribal disputes (Kudelin 2003: 19). The *kuhhān* also had other roles: they were healers, finders of missing cattle, confirmers of kinship and so on (Izutsu 2002: 186). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the ability of the soothsayers to interpret dreams was probably due to their perceived proximity to supernatural

beings, who were thought to be their source of veridical visions. This evidence allows us to draw another parallel between the *kuhhān* and shamans. E. Torchinov attributes to the shaman “the functions of a healer, a sorcerer and a psychopomp or conductor of the dead souls to the other world. In some cases, the shaman uses his abilities for ‘lesser purposes’ like predicting the weather, searching for lost things using his / her fortunetelling skills and so on. Fortunetelling and divination are also an important function of the shaman” (Torchinov 1998: 97). The soothsayers of Arabia fulfilled the same array of the ‘pragmatic’ social functions.

In this context, the legendary story of soothsayers *Shakk* and *Ṣāṭiḥ*, cited in *The Biography of the Prophet* by Ibn Hishām, seems to be very illustrative (Ibn Hishām 1911: 14–16). Despite the abundance of extremely vivid and, in a certain way, fantastic details, this story serves as a vivid illustration of later ideas about the role of *kāhin* as a fortuneteller. These ideas, on the one hand, reflect the customs that actually existed in pre-Islamic Arabia, and, on the other, illustrate the further evolution of the perceptions concerning the soothsayers’ source of inspiration that emerged after the final victory of Islam. According to this story, Rabī‘a b. Naṣr, the king of Yemen, saw a vision (*ru’ya*) that frightened him and called all the “soothsayers, wizards, fortunetellers [by the flight of birds] and sorcerers” to interpret this vision. However, the king wanted to test them and said that he would accept the interpretation only from those who could tell him what exactly he saw in his dream. The first to come to the king was *kāhin* *Ṣāṭiḥ* who described the king’s vision in this way:

ra’aytu ḥumama
kharaḍjat min ḡulma
fa waḡa ‘at bi arḡ tuhma
fa akalat minhā kull dhāt ḡjumdjuma

I saw a coal
[That] came out of the darkness
And fell in the low ground (Tihāma),
And ate everyone who has a skull.

This story, which is legendary by all means, nevertheless gives insight into the ideas about the functions of the soothsayer as an interpreter of dreams and visions.

Linguistic parallels between soothsayers and shamans

Parallels between shamanism and the early stages of religion among the Semites have already received academic attention (Capelgrud 1967; Miller 2011). The Arabian *kuhhān* have also been compared elsewhere with the shamans according to their social functions, behavior and presumed ways of

communication with spirits (Piotrovskij 1981; Piotrovskij 1984; Zwettler 1990; Izutsu 2002; Rozov 2017). However, there is a lack of studies, comparing the linguistic peculiarities of texts uttered by soothsayers and shamans as well as common features of their verbal behavior. This task has many dimensions, for “language in shamanic ritual, likewise, communicates on more than one plane – physical, symbolic and subtle – and may mediate several levels of communication between this world and the other, between the shaman and audience, between shaman and spirit, between the inner and the outer worlds of the shaman, and between the physical and the subtle realms” (Walker 2001: 42). Taking into account such considerations, the researcher has to study not only the formal or structural features of the texts in question, but also their stylistic peculiarity, different means of production and their perception by the audience.

Some present studies have described the essential features of shamanic (Bogoraz 1919; Walker 2001; Birtalan 2012), and more broadly, sacred speech (May 1956; Ferguson 1985; Du Bois 1986; Samarin 1987; Webb 1997; Nekliudov 2003; Yelle 2003; Passalis 2012). The term ‘sacred speech’ here designates any verbal communicative contact with supernatural forces or in social events that presume to be an act of the hierophany, according to M. Eliade’s definition (Eliade 1987: 21). Respectively, this term refers to speech separated from profane, mundane forms of communication. This separation is maintained, firstly, by a combination of linguistic, stylistic and poetic techniques, and, secondly, by the context of speech production, i.e. circumstances of contact with the sacred. The language of religion and spiritual life is not characterized only by the choice of a poetic structure of speech, since the use of various discursively marked forms of language plays an important role as well. Thus, the language of religion or, in other words, this linguistic instrumentarium used for expressing religious feelings contains the following genres: spiritual songs and religious hymns, recitation of sacred texts, prayers, magic and divinatory formulas (Samarin 1987: 88). These forms of speech are used primarily in religious acts that presuppose ‘communication’ with the supernatural, including shamanic rituals and incantations. As noted by R. Jakobson, the magical (or fideistic) function of language is the transformation of an absent or inanimate ‘third person’ into a full-fledged addressee of a message and a participant in communication (Jakobson 1960: 355). This kind of ‘communication’ could be directed in both ways: from supernatural to human beings (ecstatic speech of prophets, shamans and soothsayers, predictions, interpretation of dreams), and vice versa – from humans to deity (prayers and votive formulas). In this article, we are interested predominantly in the first two types – the top-to-bottom communication (i.e. from supernatural beings and spirits to humans). The typical features of shamanic texts compared to the texts of the Arabian soothsayers are listed below.

Coherence. *Rhyme, rhythm and parallelism* are the most essential feature of shamanic speech. These features create a special cadence of the sacred text. Its emotional impact is enhanced by a variety of voice modulations and intonations upon utterance. In many cultures of the world, words addressed to supernatural beings or ‘received’ from them are characterized by a certain degree of order, occasionally called ‘coherence’. There is a close relationship between poetry and the realm of the sacred. Because of this, it is often quite difficult to separate religious discourse from other marked forms of speech that differ from the everyday language, especially the poetic or ceremonial linguistic registers (Webb 1997: 49). Poetic inspiration was often attributed to the actions of supernatural forces and entities; according to archaic views, poetry was not ‘made’ or ‘created’ by the poet, but rather ‘extracted’ from an outside source (Nekliudov 2003: 111–112). “The gift of a prophetic, poetic word is given to the chosen people by the gods, either directly or with the help of some magical object, most often it is honey, which, of course, emphasizes the sweetness of poetry. This gift gives its owner a special power” (Saveljev 2006: 21) Perceived as emanating from a supernatural source, rhymed and rhythmic poetic speech was considered especially effective. This can be explained by the fact that in an archaic worldview the rhythmic order of the Universe played an important role: “the time of archaic perception (and in many ways, as a rudiment, even everyday modern perception) is more likely a rhythm than time per se” (Kasevich 1996: 144). The rhythmically ordered speech, thus, reflected the structure of the Universe, uniting the human microcosm with the macrocosm. We can say that the “actions of the ‘grammarian’-poet and the priest have the same meaning: both of them struggle against chaos to reinforce the ‘cosmic’ organization with its principle – a solid, stable place in which the divine and the sacred dwell. The poet and grammarian ... build ‘the image of the world revealed in the word’, like a priest who builds during the ritual (in particular, with the help of words) this world itself” (Toporov 2005: 499). Although this is usually understood as an imitation of reality by poetic language and other forms of art, a closer analysis shows that often (for example, in rhyme) words imitate natural sounds, and thus reality. The mimetic function of poetry creates a virtual bridge between language and reality, the illusion of mastering the natural, cosmic language (Yelle 2003: 56). Thus, “language in shamanic ritual, likewise, communicates on more than one plane – physical, symbolic and subtle and may mediate several levels of communication – between this world and the other, between the shaman and audience, between shaman and spirit, between the inner and the outer worlds of the shaman, and between the physical and the subtle realms” (Walker 2001: 42).

In many cultures of the world, the words addressed to supernatural beings or ‘received’ from them are characterized by a certain degree of order, they are ‘coherent’. In this regard, one could mark the social, psychobiological

function of rhyme and rhythm. It is well known that traditional and archaic cultures are especially sensitive to the rhythm of music and songs. Shamans-healers achieve a special state of consciousness by means of rhythmic incantations. The rhythm is often repeated, which probably should affect the central nervous system (Passalis 2012: 13–14). According to I. Dyakonov, “the rhythm that arose, perhaps, as an indispensable means of collective labor, was the first and the most important technique of developing figurative representations of reality within the collective mind’s framework. It also contributed to the creation of a well-known physiological mood, right up to the ecstatic uplift, necessary for the emotional adoption of words and actions as magic” (cited in Frolov 1991: 226).

The main distinctive mark of the texts attributed to the *kuhhān* is the intensive usage of rhymed and rhythmized prose (*sadjī*‘) along with syntactic parallelism. These features were closely associated with the supernatural sources of speech. A well-known *ḥadīth* describes the link between *sadjī*‘ and soothsayers, as seen by the prophet Muḥammad. Once, two women had quarreled and were brought to the court of the Prophet, because one of the women took a stone and threw it into the stomach of another woman who was pregnant and later had a miscarriage. At the trial on this occasion convened by Muḥammad, a relative of the woman accused of killing the baby gave the following speech (Al-Bāḳillānī 1997: 87):

*kayfa nadiya man lā shariba wa lā akal,
wa lā ṣāḥa fa stahall?
a laysa damuhu ḳad yuṭall?*

*How to demand a bloodwit for someone who did not drink or eat,
And did not cry out, and did not begin [to live]?
Is it possible to pay for its blood?*

After that, Muḥammad asked: *a sadjī‘an ka-sadjī‘ al-kuhhān* “Is this *sadjī*‘ like *sadjī*‘ of a *kāhin*?” (in alternative version *a sadjī‘atan ka-sadjī‘at al-djāhiliyya* “Is this a *sadjī*‘ utterance like a *sadjī*‘ utterance of the Age of Ignorance?”) and refused to take into account the testimony of this man. It is no coincidence that the soothsayers and poets – who extensively used a coherent, well-structured form of speech, – are listed in the Quran among individuals possessed with the *djinn* – *madjīnūn* pl. *madjānīn*. Here are some vivid examples of the Quranic ayahs that condemn the soothsayers and poets for their interactions with evil supernatural entities: “Indeed, that is how We deal with the criminals, indeed they, when it was said to them, ‘There is no deity but Allah,’ were arrogant and were saying, ‘Are we to leave our gods for a mad poet (*shā‘ir madjīnūn*)?’” (37:34–35); “So remind [O Muḥammad], for you are not, by the favor of your Lord, a soothsayer (*kāhin*) or a madman (*madjīnūn*)” (52:29).

The difference between a poet and *kāhin* was rather vague in that epoch, for their source of inspiration was believed to be the same. However, by the beginning of Muḥammad's prophetic mission, it was already quite tangible. This phenomenon is reflected in the language used for sharing the knowledge obtained through contact with the supernatural forces. Poets used rhymed lines with a quantitative poetic meter (*shi'r* – poetry in the proper sense of the term or in other words – poetry per se, composed in accordance with the rules of the Arab metric system – '*arūd*'), while *sadī* was a hallmark of the soothsayers' speech. The social roles of soothsayers and poets were different as well. The poet acted as a herald of the tribe, defending the honor of his relatives and ancestors in the face of his tribe's neighbors. On the eve of Islam, the role of poets was changing in the context of the development of the early Arab state. Poets often became panegyrists at the court of rulers, praising the merits of their patrons and belittling those of their rivals. This, however, did not prevent poets from enjoying a certain freedom, including freedom to leave a patron and to find a place at another court, or even become a freebooting adventurer. The image of the pre-Islamic poet that can be found in pre-Islamic and later Arabic poetry, as well as in the works of Arabic philologists, significantly differs from the image of a soothsayer. A typical poet is described (often – by himself, in his own poems) as a brave warrior, endowed with courage, nobility, generosity, and other attributes of a respected member of the tribal society. He undergoes various adventures and produces admiration among friends and fear among his rivals. He also enjoys the favors of the opposite sex – a feature that was often reflected in poems. As for the soothsayers, they mainly acted in the religious sphere. They were professionals in communicating with deities and spirits, and also showed asocial forms of behavior and could have had some kind of mental and physical disabilities (Zwettler 1990: 78). Another important difference is the connection between the Arab poets and the *ḍjinn*, perceived as ties of friendship or collaboration, which makes the late pre-Islamic concept of poetic inspiration quite different from that of soothsayers. The Islamic tradition presents the soothsayers as being completely under the control of their *ḍjinn*. It was believed that when a demon took possession of a *kāhin*, he would not speak on his own behalf, but rather become a mouthpiece of the demon; therefore the speech of the soothsayer is fragmented, occasionally disjointed or consisting of single words (Yosefi 2019: 43).

Formulaic structure. *Special organization* of the text and *formulaic structure* are also a prominent feature of shamanic utterances. Fixed formulas, which are typical for other oral genres of speech like epic poems, incantations and charms, not only facilitate remembrance of a text and its reproduction, they also play an important role in separating an inspired text from mundane, profane forms of communication. Special organization of the text with the initial and final formulas bears the same function – the text lies in a

‘frame’, which, along with the internal structure of the sacred text, excludes it from the profane conversations. This ‘frame’ seems to correlate with the rites that precede and terminate the ritual, putting it beyond the boundaries of the profane world. The sacred text was often perceived by the archaic mind as an animated entity. Its beginning and ending corresponded to the rites of passage: the text was ‘born,’ ‘lived’ and then ‘died’ (Yelle 2003: 22). This allows us to mention a kind of iconicity – the internal structure of a text repeats the structure of a ritual, and thus it is determined by a metalinguistic reality.

The structure of a shamanic text is characterized by the constant rhythmic repetitions of significant elements and formulas. The repetition at all levels of the text makes the message effective in the minds of those who reproduce and perceive it (Yelle 2003: 11). Formulas serve as a ‘key’ to invoke or drive out a spirit or spirits. For example, Mongol shamans have special formulas for praising the spirits at the beginning of the invocation ceremony. Every shaman has his/her own forms of praise for the deities and usually sings them every time he/she starts a ritual (Dulam 2010: 24). Another evidence is from an Italian woman healer who specialized in the cure of illnesses provoked by evil spirits and the evil eye. She believed that somatic disorders were a result of the intrusion of spirits into the body of a person, and that these spirits could be unleashed by the gaze of envious or hostile individuals. “Her ritual of healing required the use of appropriate magic formulae, pronounced in dialect and learned as a young woman from the person who had transmitted this profession as an inheritance, recourse to the energies of fire, water, and metal, and the use of specific paraphernalia and special gestures” (Corradi Musi 2013: 8).

The archaic texts delivered in *sadj*‘ also have stable formulas that designate the beginning of a sacred utterance. These are the particles of oath (*wa...*) and divination formulas beginning with words ‘when’ or ‘if’ (*idhā...*). One of the best examples of these beginnings is found in a text ascribed to the *kāhin* Ṣāṭiḥ, who predicted the capture of Yemen by Ethiopians. Of course, the authenticity of this text raises certain doubts; however, as has been shown above, it is a legitimate source for studying later ideas about the formal side of the speech of the soothsayers. When Ṣāṭiḥ was asked to confirm the veracity of his words, he replied (Ibn Hishām 1911: 17):

wa rabbi al-samā’i wa al-arḍ
wa mā baynahumā min raf’in wa khafḍ

I swear by the heaven and the earth,
And by things between them, That rise and go down!

Another striking example of this feature in pre-Islamic traditions of inspired speech can be found in the texts attributed to one of the fiercest rivals

of Muḥammad, *kāhin* Maslama b. ʿUmāma al-Ḥanafī, known in the Muslim tradition as Musaylima al-Kaḏhdhāb (‘The Liar’). Muḥammad claimed that Musaylima received his inspirations and was directed by a supernatural being or demon (*shayṭān*). (Yosefi 2019: 44). At the same time, it is important to note that most of the texts attributed to Musaylima have reached us in numerous variations, while the formulaic beginning, the structure of sentences and the general meaning have been preserved. For example, al-Ṭabarī cites the following oath delivered by Musaylima (al-Ṭabarī 1890: 1934):

*wa al-mubaddirāti zar‘an
wa al-ḥāsidāti ḥaṣdan
wa al-dāriyyāti kamḥan
wa al-ṭāḥināti ṭiḥnan
wa al-‘ādīnāti ‘adīnan
wa al-khabizāti khubzan
wa at-tāridāti tardan
wa al-lāqimāti laqman
ihālatan wa samnan*

*I swear by [those, who] scattering of sowing,
And reaping the harvest,
And sifting wheat,
And grinding flour,
And kneading the dough,
And baking bread,
And crumbling [bread],
And breaking [bread] into pieces,
With fat and butter.*

And in the book of the Ḥanbalī scholar Naḏīm ad-Dīn Sulaymān b. ‘Abd al-Kawīyy al-Ṭūfī al-Ṣarṣarī (657–716 AH/1259–1316 CE) *Al-Intiṣārāt al-islāmiyya fī kaṣhf shubah al-naṣrāniyya* (‘Islamic victories in revealing the dubious arguments of Christianity’), a different version of the text is given (Al-Ṣarṣarī 1999: 617):

*wa l-zāri‘āti zar‘an
wa l-ḥāsidāti ḥaṣdan
wa l-ṭāḥināti ṭiḥnan
wa l-khabizāti khubzan
wa l-akīlāti aklan
wa l-lāqimāti laqman
ihālatan wa samnan*

*I swear by [those, who] sowing seeds,
And reaping the harvest,
And grinding the flour,*

*And baking bread,
And eating food,
And breaking [bread] into pieces,
With fat and oil.*

The same formulas are widely used in the early Meccan surahs of the Quran. The first listeners of the Quran compared it with the speech of a soothsayer or a poet, as already mentioned. It is impossible to avoid noticing the similarity of these fragments to the beginning of surah 100 *The Assaulters* of the Quran:

*wa al-‘ādiyāti ḍabhan
fa al-mūriyāti kaḍhan
fa al-mughīrāti ṣubhan
fa aṭharna bihi naḡ‘an
fa wasaṭna bihi dīam‘an*

*By the snorting chargers,
By the strikers of fire,
By the dawn-raiders,
Blazing a trail of dust,
Cleaving there with a host! (100:1–5)*

This is a very expressive surah whose great importance is recognized by both Sunni and Shi‘a Muslims (Vasilenko 2014: 194–195). At the same time, the opening oath, formalized by the expression *wa al-fā‘ilāti fa‘lan*, is consistently maintained in the text of Musaylima where every line contains words derived from the same root. It seems more archaic than the text of the Quranic surah, whose beginning consists of words derived from different roots and having different morphological models. The same could be said about surah 79 “Those Who Pull Out”, which belongs to a similar type of texts. However, while preserving a stable model of the opening oath, *wa al-fā‘ilāti fa‘lan*, the words derived from different roots are used:

*wa al-nāzi‘āti ḡharḡan
wa al-nāshīṭāti naṣhtan
wa al-sābiḡāti sabḡan
fa al-sābiḡāti sabḡan
fa al-mudabbirāti amran*

*By those that pluck out vehemently
And those that draw out violently,
By those that swim serenely
And those that outstrip suddenly,
By those that direct an affair! (79:1–5)*

It is likely that both the early Quranic surahs and the texts attributed to Musaylima formally follow the same tradition that usually prescribes that predictions should be preceded by a certain oath formula. This helped the audience to understand that the recited text belonged to a particular genre of speech emanating from a supernatural source. It should also be noted that in addition to the pragmatic function expressed in marking the spoken text with features characteristic of the prophecy, the oaths also carried another purpose. They transformed utterances into statements endowed with power and therefore able to make effect reality. Finally, these oaths also set the rhythm of prophetic speech, making it rhythmic, which was supposed to have a strong impact, both aesthetic and psychological, on the audience (Hoffman 2004: 42).

Special forms of language. Shamans have often used a *language different from everyday speech* that testifies to its archaic nature. Thus, a special shamanic language is widespread among shamans of the Siberian and Circumpolar peoples. The special purpose of this idiom is to communicate with supernatural beings. It is characterized by an abundance of archaic lexical and grammatical forms, as well as great unity, in comparison with the language used in everyday life. Describing the language of the Eskimo shamans, V.G. Bogoraz argues: “Considering the data of the Eskimo shamanic language from the philological point of view, we primarily see a striking manifestation of the unity of all Eskimo dialects from Greenland to Asia. All of their vocabulary is connected and permeated with threads of close relation. In front of us words, aging and dying in one dialect, are turning into the category of magic and shamanistic. In another dialect they continue to live their natural life, and thus the natural, we can say, explains the supernatural... Moreover, exploring the language of Asian shamanistic spells, we find here elements that have disappeared in other dialect” (Bogoraz 1919: 494).

The Indonesian shamans of the Bugian ethnic group from the southern regions of Sulawesi Island also use a special language. It resembles the ancient Bugian language that has been preserved for us thanks to the cycle of epic poems *La Galigo* (May 1956: 80). At the same time, while speaking of the ‘shamanic language’, it is important to separate the ‘language of spirits’ from the ‘priestly language’. The former is considered to have a supernatural origin – this is the language in which the shaman or the priest ‘speaks’ with spirits – whereas the priestly speech is a special language, sometimes called a sublanguage of the priests’ caste and there is nothing supernatural in its use. However, both the ‘language of spirits’ and ‘priestly speech’ make use of archaic vocabulary (79–80). The same situation is observed among the shamans of Mongolia. “Many of the other dialogs and speeches however, can be characterized as ritualized language use and in that way differ from the everyday. The spirits (through the shaman) and the clients (through the interpreter) communicate with each other using poetic and ‘literary’ forms of speech” (Dulam 2010: 28).

In addition, shamanic languages abound with enigmatic words of dark meaning. A unique argot often plays the role of a special language of religious groups, having the purpose to unite followers. The register of speech, which differs from the mundane one, could also act as a marker of sacred communication characterized by using a special vocabulary or endowing the ordinary, commonly used words with a new, special meaning, evident for members of a religious group (Samarin 1987: 87). A vivid example of the 'high speech' used by political and religious leaders can be found in the North American tribe of Yurok. When the leaders of the tribe use lexical units of everyday language, a different, 'spiritual' dimension is attributed to their words. They no longer refer earthly realities, but to the unseen worlds of the tribal mythology (Buckley 1984: 474).

The speech of the *kuhhān* and poets was different from the quotidian language. The main marker of this difference was the use of rhyme and rhythm. The language of poetry and prophecy would also differ from the Arabic dialects used in everyday life, being represented by a sort of *koine* universally understood in all tribes. According to A.A. Dolinina, "while examining the ancient Arabian poetic tradition, one should not overlook a curious circumstance: despite the fact that the poets were representatives of various tribal groups, and each of these groups, logically, had to have its own dialect, verses of the tribal poets, according to the tradition, were understandable to the inhabitants of the entire peninsula. Indeed, the language of poetic texts that have come down to us is a single language, the same one in which the Quran was articulated and recorded" (*Aravijskaja starina* 1983: 7). According to medieval Arab philologists, including such fierce apologists as al-Bāḳillānī who plagued for the uniqueness of the Quranic style, texts of pre-Islamic poetry, the speeches of soothsayers and, undoubtedly, the text of the Quran are examples of this 'high' or 'pure' language (*'arabiyya*) (Zwettler 1978: 101). The 'high' language differed from the dialects of everyday communication, which gave a special status to the speech delivered by means of a shared 'high' language. The presence of coherence, rhyme and rhythm serve as the barrier that separates the sacred speech from the profane one.

Ecstatic verbal behavior. *Ecstatic forms of verbal behavior* could also be mentioned among outstanding features of shamanic speech. These are glosolalia and xenoglossia ('speaking in tongues'). They are especially prevalent in cults, which pay great importance to ecstatic states of consciousness and "communication" with spirits. Ecstatic speech behavior could be found both in very archaic shamanistic cults and in the Modern world religions (in particular, for the denominations of Christianity it is especially common among the Pentecostals). There is an assumption that ecstatic forms of speech are associated with the so-called 'internal speech' (according to L.S. Vygotsky): "Similar subdominant forms of speech – not yet fused with thought or rudimentary, residual forms, such as involuntary repetitions (ech-

olalia) or mumbling (glossolalia) – we observe in children’s speech behavior; they are also observed in archaic cultures. Probably, it is precisely the subdominant forms of speech that can be interpreted in these cultures as the voices of spirits, as the ‘language of the gods’ (cf. the shamanic nonsense-speech and nonsense in general in magic texts), which is associated with the mystical comprehension of the poetic word in archaic traditions” (cit. ex Nekliudov 2003: 109). As M. Eliade noted, “it would be extremely fruitful to investigate the extent to which ecstasy techniques lead to linguistic creativity, and to study its mechanism. After all, it is known that the shamanic ‘language of spirits’ not only imitates cries of animals, but also contains a number of involuntary formations, probably due to pre-ecstatic euphoria and ecstasy” (Eliade 2004: 440).

However, not everyone who hears the ‘voices of the spirits’ is considered by the audience to be a shaman or, to use the idiom of the charismatic directions of Protestantism, a ‘vessel of the Holy Spirit’. ‘Communication’ with the supernatural must always take place in an appropriate context, and the audience must recognize the authority of the shaman and his or her utterings. After all, the shaman’s communication with the spirits is valued and considered authoritative only if the ritual is performed in the right social context and the shaman’s behavior is approved by his society (Hamayon 1993: 31). Otherwise, the shaman risks being dismissed as a lunatic or possessed. In addition, the actions of the shaman may not be caused by any special mental state: he can simply play the social role accepted in his culture as an artist plays on stage (29–30). From the perspective of an observer inside the shamanic tradition who believes in the possibility of contact with supernatural beings, “it is easy to notice how the shaman differs, for example, from the ‘obsessed’: he owns his ‘spirits’ in the sense that he, a human being, manages to communicate with the dead, with ‘demons’ and ‘natural spirits’, without turning into their weapon” (Eliade 2004: 6).

These forms of linguistic performance are similar to charms and spells which often include a variety of semantically meaningless (in a profane setting) syllables, words and phrases – *abracadabra*, but whose meanings are essential for the ‘connoisseur’. Quasi-words of this kind constitute a distinctive feature of oral spells and charms in various cultures of the world. This phenomenon can be explained by the popular belief in the effective power of the sacred speech. In general, ‘meaninglessness’ or ‘obscure meaning’ could be considered as a characteristic feature of the magical words. This feature has a double function, first, it separates magical speech from profane diction and, second, it demonstrates the important role of intonation and rhythm (Passalis 2012: 8). In other words, the semantically meaningless pseudo-words of ecstatic speech and spells are united by one common feature: they do not transmit logical information, but, at the same time, they serve as a code of non-verbal communication (Jaquith 1967: 2–3). As a vivid example,

we could mention words with an obscure meaning in the speech of Darkhat shamans. The Darkhats are one of the small ethnic groups of Mongolia that professes Buddhism and various local beliefs. In the process of Buddhism's spread in Mongolia, a large number of distorted words from Chinese, Sanskrit and Tibetan penetrated their speech. Nevertheless, the use of mysterious words with obscure meanings was a hallmark of the Darkhat incantations even before contacts with the Buddhists. One of them is the word of obscure etymology *sal(u)/sāl(u)*. This word is pronounced to conjure up various local spirits (Birtalan 2012: 245–246).

As for the *kuhhān*, they were notorious for their mumbling (*zamzama*), which was often contrasted (unfavorably) with the clear and understandable speech of the prophet Muḥammad (Zwettler 1978: 158–159). This detail allows us to once again argue for the resemblance between the speech of the soothsayers and that of the shamans in the state of trance. An interesting aspect is the etymology adopted by Arabic philologists for the word *sadj*‘, derived from the verb whose meaning is ‘to crool’ or to ‘coo’. This term does not only denote the coherence of rhymed and rhythmic prose, but it also links soothsayers’ *sadj*‘ with that ‘animal languages’ of the shamans, spoken during their trances. “Most often, shamans imitated the cries of birds, and in many cultures the words ‘magic’ and ‘song’ (especially singing that imitated voices of birds) are often denoted by one word. ... Understanding languages of animals, primarily the language of birds, all around the world is being synonymous to the revealing the secrets of the nature and, as a result, gaining the ability to prophesy” (Eliade 2004: 98). The shaman’s identification with the sky birds indicates his or her proximity to the inhabitants of the heaven (spirits) and the ability to travel through higher, heavenly spheres – in other words, to make an ecstatic journey to the other world (Eliade 2004: 98). Another feature that distinguished the Arabian *kuhhān* from ordinary people was their erratic and asocial behavior. A typical characteristic of the soothsayers was their desire for a secluded lifestyle and isolation from society. Often, bodily imperfections or other distinctive features of their appearance differentiated them from the rest of the people, as already mentioned (Zwettler 1990: 78). The *kuhhān* usually made predictions in the state of trance, during which they could wrap themselves in a bedspread, making chaotic movements and issuing ecstatic cries (Piotrovskij 1984: 20–21).

Conclusion

All these features of the shamanic (and more broadly – sacred) speech account for its profound effect on its listeners and performers. Belief in the power of words arises from their supposedly supernatural source, namely the invisible spirits, and their distinction from the ordinary language forms. The speech of a shaman has a special, performative character: “Meaning is gen-

erated from the speaking of the words. Words in the shamanic experience do not simply represent power, they are power. Shamanic language is not simply a representation of phenomena, it is a phenomenon” (Walker 2001: 57). The common belief in the power of the sounding word or its relationship to creatures and phenomena of the supernatural world suggests the particular effectiveness of shamanic speech. It is not only an act of communication, but also an action and performance. The word acts as an instrument, a force that actively transforms and changes the world. The poetic imitation and the special structure of the text create a virtual bridge between language and reality, the illusion of mastering the natural, cosmic language. (Yelle 2003: 56). Many cultures of the world regard the word as a semi-material substance or even an animate being (Nekliudov 2003: 109–110). The speech ‘emanating’ from a supernatural being was and is still believed to be different from the ordinary speech and to possess some distinctive features, such as rhyme, rhythm and an elaborate verbal structure.

We find this belief in pre-Islamic Arab culture, in which the inspired words of soothsayers and poets were credited by their listeners with the power to change the world. A number of formal features distinguishes the texts of the soothsayers and separates them from the profane genres of speech, marking the texts as belonging to the sphere of the sacred. These features are the presence of rhyme and rhythm, the enigmatic nature of the message, which was often attributed to an invisible supernatural being, a special speech register and vocabulary distinct from the language of everyday communication. An utterance endowed with these features was considered especially forceful, able to transform this world and even create a separate, different one. This raises the question of a typological similarity between the shamanic speech and the utterances of the *kuhhān*.

Our findings allow us to draw a compelling parallel between the shamans and *kuhhān* by focusing not only on their ritual similarities or common social functions, but also by bringing into discussion the linguistic and stylistic features of their respective utterances. However, our study is far from exhaustive and further comparative studies, both linguistic and historical, are needed to reach a definitive conclusion regarding this complex, but fascinating subject.

Footnotes

¹ The transliteration of Arabic terms was done according to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam (EI)* published by Brill.

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