From the krum to the kerem-kerem Bird:
On the Ever-changing Colours of Referentiality and Myth

F. Johnson (1939) defined the Swahili noun *kerem-kerem* as ‘the name of a bird, Bee-eaters, *Merops*’. I propose that it originated as a culture word imported from the Near East. As for Swahili I depend on Johnson’s dictionary, I have no possibility to establish to which part of the Swahili-speaking area the *kerem-kerem* belongs. I have not found the entry in the online dictionary of living Swahili at the Yale Web site of the Kamusi Project. Exclusive reliance on Johnson is known to be problematic. In any case, tracing the mode of entry of a loan into Swahili is important:

Etymology, among the other things, is important for detailing the lexical history of particular languages. We not only want to know what languages are the ultimate sources of loans in a language, we want to know the mode of entry – the vehicle for their transport into a language, for example, that English is the conduit responsible for most of the lexis that is ultimately Latin and Greek in origin. We also want to know, as precisely as can be defined, where the loan ended up, namely in Kisanifu, Kiamu, Zairean Swahili, etc. It is obvious that not all the loans ... are universally known or used in all dialects (Hinnebusch 1993).

English as a conduit does not apply to the ultimately Greek etymon I propose for *kerem-kerem* on the evidence of a passage from the Talmud which would date the loan (a Near-East culture-word pertaining to the zoological lore) to the first millennium AD. A tradition of this kind may have existed in Graeco-Roman eastern Mediterranean, although the evidence we have is from the Babylonian Talmud, written in a variety of Aramaic mixed with Hebrew, and therefore from the Sasanian area.

Looking south, we notice that Sasanian and Byzantine interests clashed in
Southern Arabia and the Horn of Africa. Persian loans are pervasive in all varieties of spoken Arabic and of Swahili as well. As to Greek, its influence as a language of confessional culture on Ethio-Semitic was so pervasive as to impinge on syntax (which, however, does not seem to be relevant for Eastern Africa). The term we are discussing was probably imported from the eastern or southwestern shores of Arabia. In the Gulf, Mashmahig (i.e., Bahrain) used to have a Christian community organized as a bishopric. Up to Islamization, this certainly was the religious identity of the island of Socotrā as well, off the shores of southwest Arabia in the Indian Ocean.

Unlike the Palestinian Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud was compiled in lands that belonged to the Sasanian empire. No new material was added to the former after the middle or the second half of the fourth century, whereas the Babylonian Talmud was compiled around AD 500. Both corpora are loose, often divagating commentaries on articles of law from the same collection, the Mishnah, compiled in Palestine in the early third century. There was considerable interaction between Babylonia and the Greek-speaking eastern provinces of the Roman empire, even if the two polities were adversaries. Greek loanwords abound in both the Talmudic corpora, but the knowledge of Greek, widespread in certain circles of the Parthian empire, appears to have been dwindling in Mesopotamia; in general, Talmudic authorities from Babylonia do not appear to have known Greek. If we look south to pre-Islamic Yemen (Doe 1971) it appears that that country traded both with the Graeco-Roman world and with the Parthian (and then Sasanian) kingdom. Local polities on the southern shores of the Red Sea brought to a clash of interests between the two empires. For example, in Yemen, the kingdom of Ḥimyar during its final, Judaizing period was in the Sasanian orbit. It eventually destroyed a Byzantine ally, Najran, also in Arabia. This led to the invasion of Arabia from another Byzantine ally, the Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum.

A passage in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot, f. 6b, relates about the krum bird from exotic lands (‘the cities of the sea’: ports and lands overseas); the krum is supposed to be colourful, or, better, as having colours changing according to daylight. The accuracy of the description of a folklore item is questionable (after all, chicken were well-known, yet there was a tradition about the rooster crest changing colour at night); however, since the nineteenth century, attempts have been made at identifying the krum with some colourful, exotic bird, and a current hypothesis even argues that the krum is a bird that has its colours changing as it reflects light. Lewyson’s Die Zoologie des Talmud (1858: 183) proposed for identification the bird of paradise, but this contrasts with ancient knowledges as transmitted through trade. There has been a failed attempt, in the modern Hebrew lexicon, to refer krum, by neologization, to the hummingbird. Again, this bird from the Western hemisphere cannot be the Talmudic krum; even in this case only renaming, and not identification, was involved. However, in the Gər dictionary, which gives colibri (‘hummingbird’) for krum,
a footnote to the entry *dibšón* (a neologism indicating *krum*) may cause one to think that an actual identification is meant. In a note, Steinsalz (1976: 29) refers *krum* to two Afrotopical species belonging to the family *Sturnidae*, namely, *Lamprocolius splendidus* (whose area of diffusion is Equatorial and West Africa, eastwards up to Sudan), or *Spreo superbus* (whose diffusion area is East Africa and the coasts of the Red Sea). Steinsalz suggests that these two species have some features ascribed to the *krum* by the Talmud. Indeed, the colours of their feathers are mostly structural, rather than pigmental. For this reason, they change at sunrise. However, let us point out that *Lamprocolius* has metallic colours, and that the best-known species, *Lamprocolius chalibeus*, is dark green with steely reflexes. Instead, *Spreo superbus*, also of the *Sturninae* subfamily, has several colours (also with metallic reflexes).

Here, we are not concerned with the identification of the *krum*. Clearly, the Greek *chróma* (χρώμα), ‘colour’, is involved in the etymology of *krum*. (Greek χ used to be transcribed as k in Hebrew in Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine times. The Hebrew grapheme <k> corresponds to the Hebrew phoneme /kl/, which had, and still has, two allophones: [k] and [x].) However, a folk etymology based on a Hebrew verse from the Bible emerged when the exotic bird entered Jewish culture and then the Talmud. The noun *rum* in *Psalms* 12, 9 means ‘worm’ (more common, in that sense, is *rimmá*). The lexical root (according to the current Hebrew morphological model, unknown in Talmudic times), is *rmm*. The word that follows the one we are discussing is *zullût*, ‘cheapness’. In another context, *rum* would be better translated as ‘heigh’, from the root *rwm*. Actually, the sense of the verse under consideration is not unequivocal. Some understand: ‘The wicked ones go around when [moral] stature is low among people’. An alternative interpretation is: ‘The wicked ones will go around begging, once the humble among the people will rise’. However, the Hebrew text has the word *rum* preceded by the prefix *k*-#, which means ‘as’, ‘like’: hence the Talmudic interpretation from Tractate *Berakhot*, which identifies the word with the *krum* bird. Mandelkern’s concordance of the Bible (1896: s.v., 356 col. b) actually accepts *krn* as root. Jastrow’s dictionary (1886-1903) of Talmudic literature (which is not reliable when it comes to etymologies), under the entry for the post-Biblical Hebrew root *krkn* (‘changing one’s colour, said of one’s face, out of shame’), suggests a valid connection with a Semitic term for ‘saffron’. It is questionable (I would rather say: out of question) that it applies to *krum* as in the *Psalms*. The Talmudic passage under discussion provides a homiletic exegesis for the relevant fragment of the verse. Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Eleazar both interpreted: ‘Whenever someone needs to resort to the help of other people, his face changes [colour] like the *krum*’. Then, the passage asks: ‘What is the *krum*? When Rab Dime came [to Babylonia from Palestine, in the first half of the fourth century AD], he stated: “There exists a bird, in the cities of the sea [i.e., overseas], whose name is *krum*. As soon as the sun rises, it [i.e., the bird] changes to various colours.”
My hypothesis is based on the etymology of the Swahili term *kerem-kerem*. The pre-Islamic kingdoms of Southern Arabia held commercial and colonial relations with present-day Swahili-speaking areas of East Africa (Doe 1971), where Swahili language (a Bantu language with Arabic lexical elements) and culture are, however, a product of Islamization. Traditional trade has always existed between the Gulf and Zanzibar up to the present century. Until recent times, trade between Mesopotamia and India, through the Gulf, used to be intense. As to Roman trade to India, it passed through the ports of Arabia Felix, i.e., Yemen. During the Talmudic period, Bahrain (referred to as Mashmahig in the Talmud) was a trade station between the Sasanian and Roman empires. Potts (1985) provides interesting evidence on the trade across the Gulf. In Bahrain, trade with China is documented, e.g., by coins, starting from the end of the Sasanian period, i.e., shortly before the rise of Islam; a large amount of coins documenting trade with China are known from the Muslim period. On the relations between Rome and China, Teggart (1939), who tries to reconstruct the distribution of ethnic groups in the intermediate land mass, is still useful.

Henri Grosset-Grange’s thesis, published after his death (1993), is a glossary of ancient and modern Arabic nautical terms from the Indian Ocean (Troupeau 1995). On the Arab trade routes in the Indian Ocean up to the Middle Ages, Hourani’s book on maritime history (1951 and 1985) can be seen. In his history of the Islamic community of Kerala, South India, Dale (1990) points out that in the fourteenth century, Ibn Battuta mentioned the presence, there, of individuals ‘from as far away as East Africa and the interior of Iran’ (ibid.: 157). The South Indian coast ‘had attracted West Asian merchants’ as early as ‘at least half a millennium prior to the birth’ of the founder of Islam (ibid.: 156); the community has its roots in a trading colony, and proselytizing and expansion into the rural hinterland took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹

What is of interest to us here is that if Talmudic *krum* and Swahili *kerem-kerem* share the same Greek etymon, and are a lexical reflection of the same folkloric tradition of seafarers in the Indian Ocean, then it is striking that the bee-eater, a very colourful bird, is found in lands such as Arabia, Mesopotamia (which is relevant because of the Babylonian Talmud), Palestine, Italy (the present-day standard Italian name for the genus is *gruccione*). The bee-eaters found in Swahili-speaking lands were indeed exotic for foreign seafarers, but the kind ‘bee-eater’ was not: they could have found them at home, had they looked for it. My conjecture is that seafarers or colonists from Southern Arabia or the Gulf, or assimilated local people, possibly already aware of the Hellenistic/Oriental lore (known to us from the Babylonian Talmud) on the exotic, colourful *chröm* + [ending] bird, identified the latter with a conspicuously colourful

¹ A large literature exists which discusses various aspects of trade in the Arabian Sea. With reference to Roman, Jewish and Christian trade, Brown (1956), Fischel (1969), Miller (1969) and, more recently, De Romanis (1996) can be seen. For a general introduction to the Muslim trade see Chaudhuri (1985), with good maps and charts.
bird of East Africa, namely, the bee-eater, regardless of the fact that bee-eaters are not exotic at all in those lands to which the *krum* lore referred.

Even if there is ground for this hypothesis, yet I cannot suggest any date other than a *terminus post quem*. (On the problem, and methods, of dating in historical linguistics, see Alinei 1991). In particular, I do not know whether this conceptual and lexical process took place after the rise of Islam: after all, much folklore of Hellenistic origin found its way into the scholarly works of the Medieval Islamic world (however, I know nothing about the existence of the *krum* lore in such sources).\(^2\) On the other hand, the date of the Bantu migrations in eastern and, later on, southern Africa is not relevant for our conjecture, if we admit that seafaring and the related colonial activities took place independently from them. If the linguistic repercussions of trade which in the end moulded Swahili culture and language through the contact of Arabic and Bantu languages are earlier than usually presumed, a difficulty is met: in fact, Southern Arabia was, in turn, a land of linguistic colonization by Arabic, carried out by the Islamic conquerors. Even though Southern Arabian dialects survived, the language brought by seafarers to East Africa and, in particular, to Zanzibar (the Swahili epicentre) was – as far as we know – Arabic, and not Southern Arabian, which, instead, colonized Ethiopia. In East Africa, as in the rest of the Islamic world, Arabic became the language of culture because it was the language of the Koran. Can anything relevant for the etymology of *kerem-kerem* be found in the huge corpus of Medieval Arabic literature? Or else in the more recent Arabic texts from East Africa? (on these, cf. Hamès 1995).

In a work on the ornithological imagery now in progress I oppose the hypothesis of different etymologies, which, however, remains the strongest. I discuss as well the origins of the *krum* lore in relation to the versions in Hebrew of the Phoenix myth. They focus on its immortality, which they consider as a reward for some merit acquired in Adam's or Noah times (Yassif 1984).

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\(^2\) It goes without saying that in the zoological lore of medieval Arabic texts the identification of a zoonym is problematic at times. For example, in McDonald (1991) the crux is *sim* and *'ishār* in the *Book of Animals* by ‘Amr b. Bahr al-Jahiz (d. 255/868). Section 5 in Nissan (1995) provides a discussion – in terms of the notion of 'default by example' and prototypes in a cognitive linguistic perspective – of François Viré's description (1978) of the poteiform conceptions of the rhinoceros in Islamic tradition and in Persian iconography in particular.
REFERENCES


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