



BOOK REVIEW

A Review of *An Annotated Corpus of Three Hundred Proverbs, Sayings, and Idioms in Eastern Jibbali/Šḥarēt*

Peter Unseth¹

¹ Dallas International University

<https://doi.org/10.64830/001c.144565>

Journal of Language, Culture, and Religion

Vol. 6, Issue 1, 2025

Castagna, Giuliano, with a contribution by Suhail al-Amri. 2024. *An Annotated Corpus of Three Hundred Proverbs, Sayings, and Idioms in Eastern Jibbali/Šḥarēt*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers. 256 pp.

It is a joy to welcome and acknowledge Giuliano Castagna's collection of Eastern Jibbali/Šḥarēt proverbs, for multiple reasons. A collection of proverbs from an under-documented language, translated and explained, is always a joy. In addition, speaking as a linguist, the inclusion of linguistic notes for almost every proverb is an uncommon bonus. I appreciate his opinion: "For linguists, proverbs are of particular interest and importance" (Castagna 2024, 22). Plus, all this is available for free download from the internet – this is a welcome book.

The proverbs are from the Eastern Jibbali/Šḥarēt language, spoken in Doha on the edge of the Arabian peninsula, on the coast of the Indian Ocean. The language is one of the Modern South Arabian (MSA) languages, all spoken by small communities at the southeastern end of the peninsula or an adjacent island. These MSA languages are not forms of Arabic, but a totally separate branch of Semitic languages.

After introducing the languages of the area, the book has a brief grammar sketch (p. 28–33) followed by a summary of the phonology (p. 34–44). Some points of phonology are still not settled, e.g., "[š] is mostly an allophone of /k/, but it does have a phonemic load" (p. 32).

This book is the largest collection of published proverbs from any MSA language. The proverbs in this book are identified as being from four sources: three minor/obscure printed sources and twenty proverbs collected by elicitation. Castagna had previously published a collection of 210 *Jibbali/Šḥarēt* proverbs, all from one source, filling eighty-nine pages (2022). This book surpasses that article in that it contains more proverbs, has longer explanations, and is also freely available for download. The only other collection of MSA proverbs available in English is fifty-five pages in Morris's monumental three-volume collection, *The Oral Art of Soqatra* (2021).

The linguistic notes about the proverbs are often detailed, generally written for those familiar with Semitic languages, e.g., “The verbal class to which verbs like *ekaʃ* < *√wķʃ*, a third person perfective meaning ‘to find’ (JL, 290), belong is discussed in Rubin (2014, 109–10): he examines the cases of *edaʃ* ‘to know’ (JL, 286) and *égaḥ* ‘to enter’ (JL, 288), and affirms that their having a **w* as a first root consonant and a pharyngeal as a third root consonant obscures the differences between the Ga and Gb types. He further adds that *edaʃ* can be regarded as a Gb in Mehri, whereas *égaḥ* has no Mehri cognate. Therefore, it is likely that *ekaʃ* is a Gb in Jibbali/Šḥarēt too, and this is confirmed by alKathiri and Dufour (2020, 210). Cf. the Mehri proverb *flän hummäh aṭōbāk lēh* ‘NN, sein Name paßt zu ihm’ (Sima 2005, 76)” (p. 74–75).

Digital copy allows researchers to conveniently study a wide variety of questions. For example, there are six proverbs that are second-person negative imperatives, e.g., “Don’t be like a goat who found the knife” (p. 56). Also, it allows a reader to find the twenty-one proverbs where the “Š1-stem” is discussed. It also allows readers to search for words, enabling readers to count that there are more proverbs about goats than sheep. This allowed me to easily discover that, unlike most proverb collections from Muslim communities, there are no proverbs that mention “imam,” “mullah,” or “mosque.”

Eastern Jibbali/Šḥarēt does not have a clear history of being recognized as a separate language (p. 10), nor a standardized spelling system (24ff). Fortunately, the author explained the spelling system used in the book.

Aside from citing Archer Taylor’s classic definition of “proverb,” all of the citations of paremiological literature are from five chapters in the excellent *Introduction to Paremiology* (Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Varga 2015). For example, in describing the proverb, “What has been paid is paid,” Castagna explained, “From a paremiological point of view, this proverb exhibits a strong element of tautology,” citing Norrick from the 2015 book (p. 124). Another example of using paremiological vocabulary is his analysis of “The little sprat says, ‘the sand in my mouth.’” Castagna identified this as a “wellerism” (p. 142).

The title makes it clear that the book is not just a collection of proverbs, but also “sayings and idioms,” e.g., “A ram without horns... a weak fellow, idiot” (p. 200). There are also three sayings identified as “friendly curse” or “mild curse,” e.g., “May your brain shrink!” (p. 199).

Castagna provides cultural explanations for proverbs that refer to local customs and idioms. For example, the following proverb is unclear to outsiders: “So-and-so has hung up the gall bladder against him. This saying describes a forgetful person, on the basis of the folk belief that one can cause a person to forget something by hanging a gall bladder and speaking that

person's name" (p. 67). Another example with a helpful translation is, "The youth is spring (the season)... This is said of a person whose appearance and/or circumstances improved with age" (p. 102). The following example is also given, a helpful translation, explaining that it is used sarcastically: "*ḥaleṣ^m heš a-šīžīt* 'I would make a continuous fast for him'... This is used sarcastically, with the opposite meaning. Therefore, the person in question is deemed not to be worthy of any consideration" (p. 137).

Castagna does something not often found in proverb collections: he explains how a proverb can have very different meanings. "It has not been fractured and has not been sprained.' This proverb is used in two ways: either as a comment about an action which, although frowned upon, has not caused any trouble, or about a problem whose solutions are all likely to have the same outcome" (p. 115). It shows a careful and alert analysis to note and explain these two different interpretations. Similarly, he has two contrasting explanations for "The face which is never ashamed is a bad face" (p. 138). He also showed how another proverb had three different applications (p. 120). This sort of detail is always welcome.

Many proverb collections identify proverbs shared or borrowed from other languages, and this is no exception, such as identifying the same proverb in Mehri, e.g., "*erṣxaléyāté kelée-brēs* 'The area is deserted, the wolf eats his son' is formally comparable with Mehri *arž xli kawb ytäyw ḥabrēh*" (p. 96). However, a helpful distinctive of this book is that Castagna identifies a number of proverbs as containing loan words from nearby languages, such as from Arabic, Shehri, and Mehri. e.g., "*e-ged yabiṣan bə ḥanufəh* The valuable thing shows its own value... The language of this proverb is admittedly a mixture of Jibbali/Šḥarēt and Mehri" (p. 58). Another example of loan words in a proverb is "*ə šek ɔ saṣi b-ɔ daṣi*. You have neither someone to strive (for you) nor to speak out (for you)... The two terms *saṣi* and *daṣi* are clearly Arabic loanwords" (p. 177). It is helpful to know that these two words are loans, strategically borrowed into this proverb to achieve the bisyllabic rhyme. He also identified another proverb where an Arabic loan word was inserted as the final word to achieve a rhyme: *ədīlīn ɔ nfaṣ b-ɔ šfaṣ* "He is neither useful for work nor for playing" (p. 94).

Castagna pointed out a saying whose rhyme was formed by poetic license overcoming grammar: "*ədīlīn məḥīk b səḥīk ...* So-and-so, annoyance and oppression." The two words *məḥīk* and *səḥīk* rhyme. He explained that the vowels in the verb stem *shák* "to crush" had been "altered in order to rhyme," as *səḥīk* (p. 176, 177). This resulting proverb contains words that rhyme two syllables: *məḥīk* and *b səḥīk*. The pattern of rhyming two syllables is also found in "*ədīlīn ɔ kédəṣ b ɔ fédəṣ* He doesn't harm and he doesn't help" (p. 65).

The entry for the following proverb has multiple interesting features: “*her hōt ḥzūt tākšēf yāhēbās ʔḥz rēmʔnem* When the snake wanted to behave badly, God threw it in the sea... This is said upon learning that a crime might have taken place, had the criminal not been hindered by circumstances” (p. 169). The proverb is not clear to outsiders, so there is an explanation about when it is used. There are also signs of sound-based art. The first two syllables are alliterative, *her hōt*, and the last two syllables rhyme, *rēmʔnem*. The second, third, fourth, and fifth words have the vowel ʔ in their first syllable. Also, there are two words in the proverb that have the same two initial consonants and vowel, though in different order: *ḥzūt* and *ʔḥz*.

The book has a five-page index listing locations, ethnic and dialect groups, scientific names for plants, and many linguistic terms, such as circumfix, lip-rounding, pronoun, negation, reduplication, suffix. It also contains some common nouns: “glow-worm,” “labor pains,” “poverty,” “snake.” Some nouns are found in multiple proverbs, such as “horn(s),” which is found in six proverbs; “eye,” “camel,” “goat,” “father” are found in three, “mother” and “donkey” in two. Nine proverbs are translated into English with “God,” but there are four different words that are translated as “God”: *ḥḥz/ḥḥz, allah, arahʔmún, ḥazíz* (with Arabic influence visible).

Castagna specifically noted Jibbali/Šḥarēt proverbs that have counterparts in English: “The spilt water cannot be collected” and “There is no smoke without fire” (p. 205). In Paczolay’s study of proverbs across Europe (plus some parts of Asia), this second proverb is documented in more communities than any other (Paczolay 1997, 33). It is interesting to add Jibbali to the list. Castagna also uses some English proverbs to explain Jibbali proverbs, citing “He who is not taught by his family is taught by time.” He explains, “This self-explanatory proverb is a near-equivalent of English, ‘Experience is the best teacher’” (p. 211). Additionally, he cited another English proverb as an explanation of a Jibbali proverb: “Cross your bridges when you come to them ... the literal meaning of this proverb is ‘he gets the ointment before (the animal) limps’” (p. 212, 213). One of Castagna’s proverbs is a dialogue proverbs that is found in other parts of the Middle East (e.g., Neo-Aramaic, Arabic): “They asked, ‘Where is your ear?’ ‘Here,’ he said, reaching round his head to point to the ear on the other side” (p. 149). It was not Castagna’s goal to document Jibbali/Šḥarēt proverbs that match proverbs from far away, but it is clear that proverbs travel far, with the Jibbali being part of the network.

Some proverbs are unclear unless the reader knows the story that the proverb refers to, what some call “anecdotal proverbs.” He helpfully explains the story for such proverbs, such as, “You, Kieza, wake up. You have no husband and no *baydhah*” (p. 109). Other examples with stories explained include “So-and-so became like a slave who ground a ton of grain” (p. 91) and “He who has strong men at his back can show off in the arena” (p. 99).

I am glad to recommend this book to others, both to proverb scholars and scholars interested in MSA languages. This book will be consulted by both kinds of scholars for many years.

Peter Unseth
Dallas International University

Published: October 17, 2025 CDT.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

REFERENCES

- Castagna, Giuliano. 2022. "A Collection of Jibbali/Šḥarēt Proverbs from Ali al-Shahri's Publication The Language of Aad/ادغة." *Old World: Journal of Ancient Africa and Eurasia* 2 (1): 1–89.
- Hrisztova-Gotthardt, Hrisztalina, and Melita Aleksa Varga, eds. 2015. *Introduction to Paremiology: A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies*. De Gruyter Open.
- Morris, Miranda J. 2021. *The Oral Art of Soqatra: A Collection of Island Voices*. Brill.
- Paczolay, Gyula. 1997. *European Proverbs: In Fifty-Five Languages, with Equivalents in Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Japanese*. Veszprémi, Hungary: Nyomda.