

Kumzari: The Forgotten Language

Said Al Jahdhami

Department of English Language & Literature, Sultan Qaboos University, P.O. Box 42,
PC. 123, Muscat, Oman

Tel: 968-241402378 E-mail: saidj@squ.edu.om

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Abstract

Arabic is the first widely used language in Oman. It is not uncommon, however, to come across Omanis who converse in minority languages other than Arabic. Remarkably, these languages are of three different families: Indo-Iranian languages such as Kumzari, Lawati, Zadjali, Baluchi; Modern South Arabian languages such as Harsusi, Bathari, Hobyot, Mehri, and Jabbali /Shehri; and Bantu language family which includes Swahili. Named after the ethnic groups speaking them as mother tongues side by side with Arabic, the number of speakers of these languages varies as some are spoken by thousands of speakers while other languages may claim only a few hundred speakers. Academic work geared towards exploring these languages is scarce indeed, especially languages such as Kumzari, Harsusi, Zadjali, Bathari and Hobyot, a fact that makes them lesser-known and uninvestigated as opposed to their counterparts. In view of this, the focus of this paper lies on one of the lesser-known and unexplored minority languages spoken in Oman, namely Kumzari. In line with this, the study highlights the genetic affiliation of Kumzari, its speakers and their location, views on the origin of its name and its future status.

Keywords: Kumzari, Minority language, Kumzar, Oman, Musandam, Indo-Iranian

1. Introduction

Linguistic diversity is a prominent feature of the Omani society for its social fabric is made of several multi-ethnic groups that converse in some ethnic group languages along with Arabic. Most speakers of these languages learn Arabic simultaneously with their ethnic group languages whose use is largely confined to the home domain as opposed to Arabic whose use is predominant in all spheres of life. A minor number of speakers, however, speak Arabic as a second language. The majority of these languages are named after the tribal communities conversing in these languages whose number of speakers varies from one language to another ranging from thousands of speakers in cases like Mehri, Swahili, Kumzari, Harsusi, Lawati, Jabbali, and Baluchi, to a few hundred speakers in cases like Zadjali, Bathari and Hobyot (Al Jahdhami, 2015 b). While some of these languages have been given some linguistic attention, several others are in need to be explored and brought to the realm of academia. Cases in point are languages such as Kumzari, Zadjali, Hobyot, Harsusi, and Bathari (Al Jahdhami, 2013). To this effect, this study aims to give attention to Kumzari as one of these languages through giving insight into its genetic affiliation, its speakers and their geographic distribution, the etymology of its name, as well as its future status.

2. Genetic Affiliation

Kumzari is a member of the Southwestern Iranian language group that belongs to the Indo-Iranian language family which splits into: (1) Iranian languages among which are Persian, Kurdish, Balochi, Pashto, and Tajik; and (2) the Indo-Aryan languages which are Hindi and its many related languages (Thomas, 1930; Lamberg-Karlovsky, 2002; Anonby, 2003 & Ozihel, 2011). The Iranian language group is made of two main subgroups called eastern and western Iranian languages which further divide into northern and southern languages. Examples of eastern Iranian languages comprise Ossetian, Waziri, Pashto, and Pamiri, to name but a few, whereas examples of western Iranian languages include Persian, Lurish, Bakhtiari, and Dari (Sims-Williams, 2003). The figure given below displays the family tree of the Iranian language group and its sub-groups. Languages shown in red are extinct languages compared to those shown in green which are not. The position of Kumzari in the family tree is marked in blue in the southwestern sub-group.

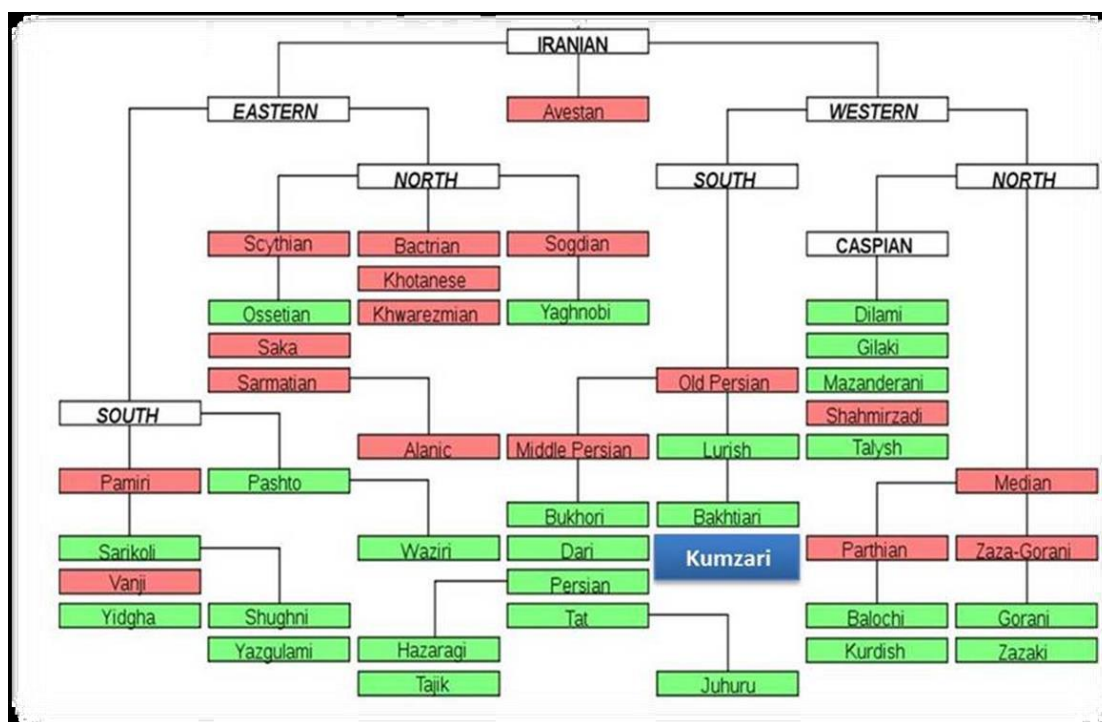


Figure 1. Family Tree of the Iranian Language Group (Sims-Williams, 2003)

The first academic work done on Kumzari dates back to the thirties on Thomas' (1930) work on Kumzari spoken in Oman several decades ago. According to Thomas, several languages have collectively contributed to the making of Kumzari; Arabic and Persian were the two main substratum languages that significantly influenced the lexicon and structure of Kumzari in addition to other languages such as Bushiri, Lakki, Luri, and some dialects of Persian and Kurdish. A look at Kumzari spoken in Oman nowadays, however, shows that its grammatical and syntactic structure is Iranian, but its lexicon is immensely influenced by Arabic lexicon manifested in the huge number of Arabic borrowings used in the lexicon of nowadays Kumzari. Few other languages such as Persian, Urdu, Hindi and English have also contributed to the Kumzari lexicon (Al Jahdhami, 2013 & Al Jahdhami, 2015 a). Such massive influence of Arabic lexicon can be justified by the fact that Kumzaris are speakers of Arabic too, which still makes Arabic the first substratum for Kumzari loanwords that tend to be introduced by the young generation who have more exposure to Arabic compared to their elders.

3. Where Kumzari Is Spoken

Kumzari is a non-written language spoken by a tribal community in the northern part of Oman, namely in the Musandam Peninsula that overlooks the Gulf of Oman. The big bulk of Kumzari speakers is found in a coastal mountain village called Kumzar at the northeastern part of the Musandam Peninsula. A smaller number of speakers are scattered over different cities within the Peninsula such as Khasab and Daba (Al Jahdhami, 2015 a). Such geography, however, does not entail dialectal differences between Kumzari spoken in Kumzar and Kumzari spoken in other cities. Several miles to the north of Kumzar, a small Iranian island

called Larak Island is the homeland of a language called Laraki that bears some structural and lexical resemblances to Kumzari which makes intelligibility of Kumzari to Laraki very marginal despite such resemblances (Anonby, 2003; Anoby & Yousefian, 2011). The following map shows the Musandam Peninsula where Kumzar is located at its end part.



Figure 2. Map Showing the Location of the Musandam Peninsula and the Village of Kumzar in Oman (Bethany World Prayer Center © 1999)

Kumzar makes the tip of a massive steep mountainous chain in the Musandam Peninsula that is about 150 kilometers long and goes up to 1800 meters in altitude (Ozihel, 2011). This mountainous landscape has played an enormous role in creating a conducive environment for the birth of the Kumzari language spoken in the enclosed village of Kumzar as well as for the making of a distinct dialect of Arabic called the *Shihi* dialect spoken by the inhabitants of the Peninsula (Al Jahdhami, 2013). Such landscape also stands behind the old name of Musandam '*Rus al jibal*' which literally means 'mountain peaks' (Thomas, 1929). Musandam was also called 'the land of Shihis' in reference to the tribe of the people living there. The new name Musandam is believed to be a blend of the two Arabic words *matraqah* 'hammer' and *sindan* 'iron' making a picture of a hammer that keeps hitting the iron which describes the continuous sea waves that keep hitting the mountains (Al-Aghbari, 1992).

4. Origin of its Name

Kumzari is a polysemic term used to refer to the language and its native speakers alike. Morphologically, it is a demonym derive attained from the word 'Kumzar', the name of the village in which Kumzari came to existence, denoting the meaning of 'a member of the tribal community that dwells Kumzar'. Kumzari the tribe is thought to be a sub-tribe splitting from a bigger tribe called *Shihi* or *Shuhuh* dispersed over different cities of the Musandam Peninsula (Thomas, 1930; Al-Aghbari, 1992). The mother tribe, *Shihi*, is said to be the descendants of the leader of the great tribe of Azd, Malik Bin Faham, that migrated from Yemen to Oman thousands of years ago owing to the destruction of Ma'arib dam (Al Muntada Al Adabi, 2002).

Three possible views can be cited on the origin of the name 'Kumzar' . The first view

stipulates that the name 'Kumzar' originated as a compound of two Arabic words *kam* and *zar* used together as an interrogative statement that literally means 'how many (persons) visited (the village)?' (Al-Aghbari, 1992). Such view reflects the fact that Kumzar has served as a harbor for ships heading to and out of the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Gulf. Proponents of this view believe that Kumzaris have always been speakers of Arabic, but both geographical isolation and intense contact with speakers of other languages have resulted in having their Arabic influenced by other languages both lexicon and structure wise. Geographic isolation from the mother tribe sustained by the rough steep mountains from three sides and the sea from the fourth side in addition to intense contact with outsiders visiting the village played a key role in the emergence of the so-called 'Kumzari', a language that is intelligible neither to the *Shihis* nor to other neighboring tribal communities (Al Jahdhami, 2013).

The second view states that the name 'Kumzar' has originated as a blend of two Arabic words '*kimmah*' and '*wzar*' that were used by outsiders to refer to the villagers based on their distinctive attire (Thomas, 1929). In accordance with this view, the villagers were known of a unique attire made of a cap worn on the head and a wrap worn around the body, named in Omani Arabic as '*kimmah*' and '*wzar*' respectively. Accordingly, a blend of the two words naming the unique attire has been used to name the village whose dwellers wore a cap '*kimmah*' and a wrap '*wzar*'. A third linked view claims that the landscape of the village stands behind the name Kumzar; a view of its mountainous landscape reveals the shape of a cap '*kimmah*' and a wrap '*wizar*' put together, which has given the village its name (Al-Aghbari, 1992). Although Kumzaris have different opinions on which view sounds sturdier, proponents of each view fail to show evidence for one view over another. Yet, the first view sounds more convincing given the strategic location of Kumzar and the fact that it is the commonly acknowledged view among Kumzaris.

5. Kumzar

The tough landscape of Kumzar makes it indeed isolated from the other nearby localities owing to the steep mountains on three sides and the sea on the fourth side. Due to such landscape, access to the village is only possible by a helicopter or by sea. Boats are the only means of transportation used by the Kumzari community to get in and out of Kumzar. A bird's eye view on the village shows that its houses lie on two sides of a small valley that divides the village into two sides. According to local statistics, the population of Kumzar is more than 4000 people relying mainly on fishing for their living in addition to some modern jobs in or outside Kumzar (Al Jahdhami, 2013). The following picture shows the small village of Kumzar surrounded by the mountains and the sea.



Figure 3. A Bird's Eye View Picture of the Village of Kumzar (Musandam net)

A very unique characteristic of the village is its small space where no space is left for new construction. Due to its very tiny space, houses in Kumzar are very adjacent to one another, and there is literally no space left for new construction. The village is even too small that the villagers do not have enough space for burying the dead in designated areas. Therefore, the scenes of graves scattered in the pathways and backyards of houses is a usual daily scene in Kumzar. A story narrated by the elders says that a plague outbreak occurred many years ago leaving lots of casualties whose number is too big to be accommodated by the little space left in the village (Al Jahdhami, 2013). The small size of the village as well as its hard landscape stand behind the migration of some Kumzaris to other cities such as Khasab and Bukha. Most Kumzaris who live in Kumzar move to other cities in summer to avoid the sizzling heat of summer in Kumzar leaving Kumzar a half-empty village. A return to Kumzar is made around August or September when the heat cools down.

6. Future Status of Kumzari

The future status of minority languages in Oman is not very promising; Kumzari is not an exception. Two leading factors could be cited to have a noticeable impact on the future status of Kumzari in the long span. First and foremost, there is an evident decrease in the number of Kumzari speakers with high language proficiency. The number of Kumzari speakers is estimated to be around five thousand speakers, but the number of the tribe members is even higher than that of those conversing in Kumzari (Al Jahdhami, 2015 a). Thomas (1930) mentioned that all Kumzaris spoke Kumzari some eighty years ago, but a look at the current situation shows that Kumzaris fall into four different categories as long as their language competence is concerned. There are those who speak the language fluently, those who do not really have good grasp of the language and thus would make use of Arabic to compensate for the lack of native vocabulary, those who have passive knowledge of Kumzari and those who

literally cannot communicate in their ethnic group language. For the worse, there are some speakers who do not identify with Kumzari as a local language, and thus they show no concern to inter-generational transmission.

The influence of Arabic on Kumzari is another factor that plays a role on the future status of Kumzari owing to the fact that Kumzaris are speakers of Arabic too. Such influence is more obvious among the younger generation who have more exposure to Arabic through means such as media, schooling, social groups and workplace. There is a propensity among the young educated generation to introduce Arabic borrowings to Kumzari lexicon either modified to fit the Kumzari phonotactics or imported as literally used in Arabic (Al Jahdhami, 2013). This is done to compensate for their lack of native equivalents or due to considering Arabic equivalents more prestigious compared to native ones. Such tendency is manifested in the use of Arabic borrowings in Kumzari everyday lexicon. Some of these words tend to be used and circulated among other age groups which eventually find their way into the Kumzari lexicon.

7. Conclusion

The paper shed light on Kumzari language, one of several minority languages spoken in Oman that belong to three diverse language families: Indo-Iranian languages (Kumzari, Lawati, Zadjali, Baluch); Modern South Arabian languages (Harsusi, Bathari, Hobyot, Mehri, and Jabbali /Shehri; and Bantu languages (Swahili). It showed its genetic affiliation, its speakers and their geographic dissemination, reasons behind its name, and its future status. Such overview is an attempt to raise awareness of the local community in Oman and the linguistic community about the significance and need to revive minority languages.

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