# Language revitalization, land and identity
# in an enclaved Arab community in Cyprus

MARILENA KARYOLEMOU

This article appears in:

*Endangered languages and the land: Mapping landscapes of multilingualism*

Cite this article:

# Language revitalization, land and identity
# in an enclaved Arab community in Cyprus

**Marilena Karyolemou**

Department of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies
University of Cyprus • Kallipoleos 75 • 1678 Nicosia • Cyprus
[makar@ucy.ac.cy]

## Abstract

The Cypriot Maronite Arab community exemplifies how the loss of a land which functions as a vital space for a vernacular minority language spoken and protected within this space, can lead to drastic changes in communicative patterns and subsequently, to an acute language shift and complete language loss.

In this presentation I will focus on the following: (a) on the role that the loss of a land may play both for language use and for any efforts to revitalize a language that is severely endangered and on the verge of extinction, and (b) on the way land is perceived in relation to identity and how political and social changes might affect speakers' perception of what they conceive as "their" land.

**Keywords:** Cypriot Arabic; identity; land; language revival

## Introduction

Cypriot Maronites are an indigenous minority community living in Cyprus since medieval times. Although they came to Cyprus –a predominantly Greek speaking island– as medieval immigrants on the footsteps of the Lusignan kings who established the Latin Kingdom of Cyprus as early as 1192, they were very soon acclimated and, despite historical upheavals and political tribulation that gradually affected their number and vitality as a community, they ended up considering the island as their new home (Hourani 1998).

The Cypriot Maronite Arab community has seen a dramatic shift in the use of its vernacular, after they were expelled from their villages situated in the North West coastal area of Cyprus as a result of the Turkish invasion that took place in 1974. Maronites gradually left their villages between 1974 and 1980, not being able to live under conditions of restriction, reclusion and inactivity that were imposed upon them by the Turkish army and Turkish Cypriot administration.

Spoken in Kormakitis, the bigger and more important of Maronite villages, Cypriot Arabic or Sanna ('our language') is an indigenous form of Arabic that diverges from Classical as well as from other modern varieties of Arabic due to its early detachment from the Arabic speaking world, subsequent isolation and contact with Cypriot Greek (Borg, 1985, 2004). Sanna has aligned its phonetic system and phonology with (Cypriot) Greek with the adoption of a five vowel system comparable to the Greek system, the collapse and complete loss of length distinctions for vowels and of emphasis for consonants. Among the features that one might consider as resulting from contact with Cypriot Greek, is the retention, from the long series of laryngeal and pharyngeal consonants of Arabic, of only a glottal stop /ʔ/ and a consonant [ħ] which seems to be an uvular variant of velar [x] with no phonemic value; the adoption of several phonotactic rules from (Cypriot) Greek such as

the manner dissimilation rule requesting one in a series of two stops to change into a fricative, ex. "he wrote" [kitep] but "I wrote" *[ktupt] becomes [xtuft], "he killed" [kitel] but "I killed" *[ktilt] becomes [xtilt] (Borg 1985: 18) and the development of an extensive paradigm of geminates in word initial position. These phonological changes affect the essence of Semitic roots: the root as a stable and unchangeable combination of a series of consonants does not apply to Sanna (Roth 1972-73). Extensive reduction of the nominal paradigm, systematic replacement of broken by external plurals, syntactic copying (ex. the order of appearance of nouns and adjectives) and semantic adjustment as well as extensive code switching are some of the consequences of Cypriot Arabic contact with Cypriot Greek (Borg 1985, 2004; Güle 2013, 2016).

Today, Sanna is a mother tongue to a number of elderly speakers mostly originating from Kormakitis. The approximate number of speakers – all degrees of competence considered – vary according to source from a low 900 to a high 1400 (Karyolemou 2010). Most of these native speakers age 55+ with the oldest being 100 years old. In the range of 40-55 years, those people who were born and raised in Kormakitis are still to be considered native speakers of the language. However, no speakers under the age of 40 have acquired the language natively, and competence, under the age of 30, is extremely limited, sometimes not even attaining passive knowledge of any degree. Language transmission was affected by the conditions of modern life as well as by the political events of 1974 when Maronites massively left their villages to be relocated in the south of the island. Maronite social networks opened up to the Greek speaking community they were increasingly interacting with, mixed marriages increased and intergenerational language transmission ceased. According to estimations provided by George Skordis (see Karyolemou 2009) of the NGO Xki Fi Sanna, in 2075, i.e. one hundred years after leaving their villages, there will be no Maronite speaking Sanna left.

The role of Sanna as a medium of communication has been quite restricted: used exclusively as a communal language for intra communication and as the language of intimacy and secrecy, it was never extended to other domains of use. It was specifically banned from schools where its use was regularly punished by Greek Cypriot or Greek speaking Maronite teachers who inflicted humiliating punishments to monolingual Maronite children who could not speak Greek anyway. Because it was excluded from formal and official communication, Sanna never developed a written form, although it was occasionally written with the Greek alphabet that the Maronites were more familiar with. And because traditionally not all Maronites spoke *Sanna*, but all retained their Catholic faith, religion primed over language as a common denominator among them.

## Cypriot Maronites as refugees: the consequences

As refugees, the Cypriot Maronites (CMs) were relocated in various, mostly urban and suburban, areas in the South of the island, mainly in the capital city of Nicosia. This relocation had the following consequences:

(a) A transformation of the rural character of the community that both affected the socio-economic status of its members as well as communicative patterns and the use of the vernacular, leading to an acute language shift and loss within a generation of speakers.

(b) A change in the way CMs relate to the land. Historically, CMs have kept close knit connections with Lebanon which they consider as their homeland. However, the trauma of the loss of their villages after 1974, and especially of the village of Kormakitis where CA has always been spoken led to a reinforcement of their attachment to the Cypriot land that often overrides their devotion to Lebanon.

(c) A negative impact on any efforts to revitalize the language *in* situ. Despite the fact that Maronites can currently regularly visit Kormakitis and some of them are even allowed to permanently live there under conditions, the fact that the village lies outside the control of the government of Cyprus and is not freely accessed by the population as a whole, makes any revitalization efforts *in situ* difficult to implement and negatively impacts on the prospects of Sanna being used as a language of intra-communication within a protected space.

## From a rural to an urban community

In the early 1970's, a few years before the Turkish invasion, the great majority of CMs living in their villages were working as farmers and breeders. Following the Turkish invasion of 1974, they were forced to leave their villages and were relocated in the urban and suburban centres in the South of the island. The younger generations of CMs, especially those born and raised in the South of the island, did not follow their parents'

agricultural professions but rather became civil servants, teachers, doctors, lawyers etc. professions that are typical of the organization and management of urban life. The oral nature of the vernacular made it unsuitable for the communicative needs of an urbanized and technologically advanced society. The new conditions of life only reinforced the trend towards the abandonment of the variety, already observed in Kormakitis in the early 70s (Roth, 1973-75; Borg 1985).

Their eviction from a land that served for centuries as a legitimizing space for their language, as a nest where it was natural to use it on a daily basis, had severe consequences for communicative patterns. CMs integrated now in the Greek Cypriot society, could not use their vernacular on an everyday basis. The lack of provisions for a community based educational system and their enrolment into Greek Cypriot education increased the need for them to integrate quickly and as better as they could to the Greek speaking sphere. Even the creation of a primary public Maronite school in the capital Nicosia in 2002 did not seem to boost the enrolment of young Maronites, both because of the dispersal of families and of the lack of a community specific curriculum. The rise in the number of mixed marriages (9 out of 10 marriages are today with a non-Maronite spouse) had as a consequence the exclusion of the language from the family sphere, where it was previously mainly used and protected in favour of the more dynamic and useful pair Greek Cypriot/Standard Greek. Acute language loss has been observed since 1974 –Roth also reports that even before 1974, the language was struggling to survive (Roth 1973-75, 2004). As a consequence, people under the age of 40 are not to be considered neither as native nor as active speakers of the language (Karyolemou 2009, 2010, 2012).

## Maronites and the land

In several recent studies focusing on the specificities of Maronite identity, *land* is reported to be an important attribute of Maronite identity. Tsoutsouki (2009: 206 & pas.), for instance argues that *land* (i.e. the attachment to the Maronite villages) is the most important common feature that defines the community as a whole after *faith/religion* and before *language* itself. Bielenberg (2010: 186-187) also counts *land* in second place after religion. According to Bielenberg, together with *behavior* (or *lifestyle*) they form a certain sense of community that distinguishes Maronites from other dominant or minority communities living on the island.

Historically speaking, CMs fled the Arabic conquest, migrating to Cyprus either directly from Antioch and other places in Syria or from Mount Lebanon where some of them found refuge during their retreat. Migration took place in successive waves between the 7th and 13th centuries. Although some researchers have recently argued that the vernacular spoken by CMs shows many more affinities with the Arabic of Syria and of some peripheral Arabic communities rather than with Lebanese

(Borg 1985, 2004), the Lebanese affiliation is very popular among CMs who consider Lebanon as their place of provenance and as their "mother land". This affiliation instantiates in the very popular –most probably false– etymology they accept for the bigger of their villages, Kormakitis, the name of which they consider to be a deformation of an original sentence "[naχni jina] Kur ma jiti" = 'we came [but] the people from Kur did not come'. This etymology keeps track of a historical separation between those Maronites who decided to migrate to Cyprus and their fellow people living in Kur (a village that still exists today in the western side of Mount Lebanon) – who stayed behind. This etymological explanation for Kormakitis is retained rather than the more plausible and historically attested Greek name on Κρομυακιάτι (> κρόμμυος = onion) 'the place that is full of onions', because it offers a rationalization (and thus a legitimization) as regards their place of origin. This rationalization has become part of a myth of provenance recounted over and over again and perpetuated from generation to generation. It is also an etymology that relates to a certain version of the history of migration which overrides the fact that part of the Maronite population who used to live in villages other that Kormakitis –Asomatos, Agia Marina and Karpasia– may have come to Cyprus directly from Antioch and other places of the then Byzantine empire, a hypothesis that might offer an explanation for the fact that these villages, as far as their inhabitants can remember, have been Greek speaking. Kormakitis is thus the only village that retained the use of Sanna well into the 21st century.

The belief that they are more closely affiliated to Lebanon influences CMs' social conduct and life decisions: trips are regularly organised to Lebanon and some of them report that they have being visiting the country as much as fifteen times (Baider & Karyolemou 2015); many among them have studied in Lebanese universities; regular contacts are established with Lebanese civic associations and with the Maronite clergy in Lebanon. The archbishop himself is a member of the Lebanese clergy; the first song ever written in the newly created writing system in 2011 bares the title "Ya Lubnan" [Oh Lebanon!] and praises the places, beauty and glorious past of Lebanon; news from Lebanon regularly occupy the columns of the Maronite press (Mion 2017). Finally, a number of community organisations use the Green Cedar (symbol of the Lebanese state) as their own emblem.

## Old land, new land

Despite the fact that the association with Lebanon is quite popular (Baider & Karyolemou 2015), recent developments that relate to the political situation of the island seem to create the necessary conditions for a re-investment of CM relation to the land. As it seems, the recent dramatic events caused by the Turkish invasion have blurred and even reversed their identification to the land, making the newly lost homeland in Cyprus as important for collective memory and self-definition as the mythical one lost when CMs allegedly left from Mount Lebanon. Hanatzia (2011) for instance, discusses how the Turkish invasion and the expel of CMs from their villages impacted on issues of identity and identification and argues that a new way to identify with land is also reflected in the way *historical memory* emerges though contemporary CM literary texts written in Greek (Hanatzia 2011: 64 and *passim)*. The recent trauma of depravation tends to create a new discourse on loss and memory where the Cypriot homeland reveals itself as important as –and sometimes as more important than– the mythical Lebanese affiliation (Tsoutsouki 2009; Mavratsas 2003). This new discourse is strongly influenced by the dogma "Δεν ξεχνώ" (I don't forget) forged within the Greek Cypriot community in the aftermath of the Turkish invasion who were also massively displaced from the north to the south of the island, but also embraced by the members of the Maronite community. This dogma preaches the need to preserve the memory of the lost territories until a return to the original land is made possible, not forcibly as a result of combat and strife but as a result of a peaceful solution of the Cyprus problem. This new identification and the process by which the Cypriot home supersedes the mythical Lebanese one is driven by the political and practical obstacles that oppose an eventual return to the Maronite villages. According to Taylor (2009: 7) the impossibility of return can become the nursing force that assigns a new mythical dimension to the lost land. "The lost home", she underlines, "may become the 'mythic place of desire' viewed from a distance, due to the undesired and often swift nature of departure and the impossibility of return". This extreme attachment to the lost homes –"the myth of home" as Zetter (1999) calls it– is not a naturally occurring phenomenon unanimously observed in all the refugee communities; it is a social construct built up under specific social circumstances, sustained by specific social institutions, organisms and traditions (schools, educational system, political parties, religious groups, etc.) and nurtured by a strong ideological stance that remains uncontested and unchallenged (Malkki 1992). As a consequence and despite the fact that forty four years have elapsed since the Turkish invasion, many people today in Cyprus still declare that they are from such or such village situated in the northern regions of Cyprus under Turkish occupation although they were not born or raised there and even if they didn't get the chance to visit this lost place of origin even once.

Balancing between we-here (Cyprus) and we-there (Lebanon) is very obvious in a video with the title "The third motherland" produced by Costas Constantinou and George Skordis in 2011. During this video, a group of CMs on a trip to Lebanon discuss their excitement and emotion on visiting a place they strongly identify with. However, several others give precedence to Kormakitis as their main place of reference, therefore setting the Cypriot host land over the Lebanese homeland: "…Kormakitis is something else", says one of them, "This is something that must be said. We love Lebanon but we love Kormakitis more." [11:14-11:36]. Another CM comments, in a rather cynical way, on the short

lasting and ephemeral effect of the identification with Lebanon as opposed to the more enduring and stable identification with Cyprus: "[when in Lebanon] I feel like home, […] I feel we are at home. But to be frank I feel better when I go to the stadium [in Cyprus] to watch my team, APOEL, play. This is where my real home is. Whatever we say here it is only words, we all say it…Sure. Here everybody comes and says 'we are from Lebanon', everybody becomes religious for three days and gets to know all the priests [34:28-34:54]". In this passage, the internal identification (Cyprus) seems to take precedence over the external one (Lebanon) that appears here fluctuating. Some elements of this internal identification reflect local cultural references common to Greek Cypriots as well (for instance here the identification with a specific football team, APOEL), while others are proper to the Maronite community (the land, specifically Kormakitis).

## Revitalization efforts and the land

In many cases of endangerment, an important factor for the success of revitalization efforts is demographic concentration and the existence of a geographical space within which the use of the endangered language is legitimized and can be protected. At the opposite, demographic dispersal and the absence of a clearly defined territory for an endangered language make revitalization efforts more difficult to implement. Sanna constitutes a special case: a geographical space where the use of Sanna is legitimized and could be protected does exist (Kormakitis), however, most of its speakers are not allowed into this space and those who regularly visit it do not live there permanently. Despite the fact that in June 2017, the Turkish Cypriot authorities announced facilitation measures to encourage Maronites to return to their villages, it is difficult to imagine that young Maronites, who as potential speakers represent after all the future of Sanna, would be persuaded to return to and live permanently in their villages, since opportunities for professional development and social advancement are not as promising as in the South of the island (Karyolemou forthcoming).

On the other hand, the government of Cyprus that has officially recognized the language and is bound and willing to take measures for its support and revitalization does not have control over this territory (the Turkish Cypriot authorities that control the area do not recognize Sanna whatsoever) and therefore cannot undertake or implement any sustainable long-term actions in favour of the language in Kormakitis. This situation frustrates a lot of CMs who would want to see Kormakitis become again a communicative nest for the language.

Despite the impossibility to invest financially or otherwise in a land that it recognizes as illegally occupied by the Turkish army, the government of Cyprus together with the Office of the Maronite Representative and Maronite NGO's, organize, since August 2007, an Intensive Summer Course in Kormakitis where young members of the community can learn Sanna from native speakers of the language who are trained as teachers at the University of Cyprus. The Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus finances through the Office of the Maronite representative the camp that hosts every year 80-90 young Maronites 5-17 years old who have a unique chance to get immersed in Sanna, if only for a few days, since no natural inter-generational transmission is taking place any more (Karyolemou 2010, 2012). The organisation of this camp has also a positive psycholinguistic effect on the community itself as, for the first time, its vernacular is dignified as a language that merits to be taught and learned (Karyolemou forthcoming).

The prospect of Sanna being revitalized, evidently does not depend on this week-long summer camp, neither does it rely on measures to document, standardized and teach the language that take place in the government control areas of Cyprus. It is strongly dependent upon the prospects for a political solution of the Cyprus problem that would make possible the free and unconditional return of the Maronites to their villages, especially to Kormakitis, where they would regain access to their life at the same time as hope for their language.

## References

Baider, F. & M. Karyolemou. 2015. Linguistic Unheimlichkeit: The Armenian and Arab communities of Cyprus. In U. Jessner-Schmid & C. J. Kramsch (Eds.), *The multilingual challenge: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*. 185-209. Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter.

Bielenberg, B. 2010. Language and belongingness among Cypriot Maronite Adolescents. In: Bielenberg, B. & Constantinou, C. (Eds.), *Empowerment through language revival: Current efforts and recommenddations for Cypriot Maronite Arabic*. 53–66. Oslo: International Peace Research Institute (PRIO): Oslo. PCC Paper 2/2010.

Borg, A. 1985. *Cypriot Arabic: A historical and comparative investigation into the phonology and morphology of the Arabic vernacular spoken by the Maronites of Kormakiti village in the Kyrenia district of North-Western Cyprus*. [Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, Marburg]. Stuttgart: Komissionsverlag.

Borg, A. 2004. *A Comparative Glossary of Cypriot Maronite Arabic (Arabic-English)* with an introductory essay. Leiden/Boston: Brill.

Brubaker, R. 2010. *From ethnic insiders to refugee outsiders: A community level ethnography of Greek Cypriot identity formation and transference since displacement*. Oxford Department of International Development. Unpublished MA. University of Oxford: Science in Forced Migration at the Refugee Studies Centre.

Güle, Ozan. 2014. *Structural convergence in Cyprus.* Unpublshed Ph.D. Munich: University Ludwig Maximillians. 241p.

Gulle, Ozan. 2016. Kormakiti Arabic: A study of language decay and language death, στο: V. Ferreira and P. Bouda (eds.) *Language documentation & conservation special publication* 9: Language Documentation & Conservation in Europe. 38–50. hdl.handle.net/10125/24658

Hourani, G. 1998. A reading in the history of the Maronites of Cyprus from the eighth century to the beginning of British rule. *Journal of Maronite Studies* II(3). citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi= 10.1.1.519.5939 (accessed 2019/22/03)

Karyolemou, M. 2019. A story at the periphery: Documenting, standardizing and reviving Cypriot Arabic. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language.*

Karyolemou, M. 2012. Aspectes d'identitat a la comunitat àrab de Xipre. In J. Argenter (Ed.) *Identitat, Europa, Mediterrània. Dinàmiques identitàries a la Mediterrània.* 117–132. Barcelona: Càtedra UNESCO de Llengües i Educació & Institut d'Estudis Catalans.

Karyolemou, M. 2010. The demographics of the Cypriot Maronite community and of Cypriot Arabic speakers. In B. Bilenberg & C. Constantinou (Eds.), *Empowerment through language revival: Current efforts and recommendations for Cypriot Maronite Arabic.* 1–7. Paper 2. Nicosia: PRIO.

Karyolemou, M. 2009. Minorities and minority languages in Cyprus. In A. Varnavas, N. Koureas & M. Elia (Eds.), *The minorities of Cyprus: Development patterns and the identity of the internal-exclusion.* 316–336. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Kyrmizi, M. 2007. Aspects culturels et linguistiques de Chypre : le parler vernaculaire maronite de Kormakiti. In: F. Baider (ed.), *Emprunts linguistiques, empreintes culturelles. Métissage orient-occiden*t. 159–176. Paris: L'Harmattan.

Malkki, L. 1992. National Geographic: The rooting of peoples and the territorialization of national identity among scholars and refugees. *Cultural Anthropology* 7(1), 24–44.

Mavratsas, C. 2003. The Armenians and the Maronites of Cyprus: Comparative considerations concerning ethnic assimilation. In M. Chéhab, Y. Ioannou & F. Métral (Eds.) *Méditerranée: Ruptures et Continuités* 205–210. Lyon: Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée Jean Pouilloux.

Mion, G. (2017). Un arabo cipriota romanizzato? Distacchi e identità fra variazione scrittoria e confessione religiosa. In C. Consani (ed.) *Aspetti della variazione linguistica. Discorso, sistema, repertori* 83–95. Milan: LED.

Roth, A. 1973-75. Le verbe dans le parler arabe de Kormakiti (Chypre). *Epetiris tou Kentrou Epistimonikon Erevnon* VII, 21–117.

Roth, A. 1986. Langue dominée, langue dominante: à propos de deux scénarios d'extinction ou d'expansion de l'arabe. *Hérodote* 42, 65–74.

Roth, A. 2004. Le parler arabe maronite de Chypre : observations à propos d'un contact linguistique pluriséculaire. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 168, 55–76.

Taylor, H. 2015. *Narratives of loss, longing and daily life: The meaning of home for Cypriot refugees in London.* Basingstoke: Palgrave | Macmillan UK.

Tsoutsouki, C. 2009. Continuity of national identity and changing politics: the case of the Maronite-Cypriots. In A. Varnava, N. Coureas & M. Elia (Eds.), *The minorities of Cyprus: Development patterns and the identity of the internal – exclusion.* 192–228. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Zetter, R. 1999. Re-conceptualising the Myth of return - Protracted exile and the Greek Cypriot refugees. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 12(1), 5–21.