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Economic Life of the Jews of Koya, 1918-1951

Bzhar Othman Ahmed[1]

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Abstract: This study aims to analyse the economic conditions of Jews in the city of Koya (Iraqi Kurdistan) from 1918 to 1951. From the outset of Jewish migration from Palestine to Iraq and Kurdistan, the Jews swiftly blended into Kurdish society and embraced its lifestyle. This led to the Jewish population distinguishing themselves from others, especially in economic activities. Their economic conditions differed, particularly in Koya. This research is essential as no studies have been conducted on the economic contributions of the Jewish community in Koya, despite their vital role in the economic development of the Kurdish population. This study employs a qualitative historical and textual analysis method, utilising an exploratory qualitative research design based on primary and secondary sources. The findings show that Koya's Jewish community dominated profitable areas such as jewellery, textiles, tailoring, spirits, and fragrances, which were essential to the economy. Their distinctive features were audacity and proficiency in business and professional endeavours.

Keywords: Economic life, Jews, occupation, Koya, Kurdistan

Introduction

The Jews have lived in Koya, Kurdistan, for centuries. They have mingled with the local society but have still maintained their distinctive identity. The Jews significantly contributed to Koya's economic success through their esteemed professions and considerable financial resources, securing a prominent position in the city's economy. This study is significant as it constitutes the first scholarly effort to document the lifestyle and economic state of the Jewish community in Koya, Kurdistan. It specifically examines the era subsequent to the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the British occupation of Koya. This period enabled the Jews in Koya to pursue broader employment opportunities and attain increased work autonomy. Nonetheless, the broader Kurdish civilisation, particularly the city of Koya, offered a highly favorable environment for Jews to participate in trade and enhance their professions. Although Jews may have encountered persecution in various regions globally by that time, they could seek refuge and security in Kurdistan, especially in Koya. In this region, Jews experienced complete freedom and coexisted amicably with Muslims.

The research gap in question stems from the lack of scholarly investigation into the Jewish financial contributions to the economic life of Koya. Despite their significant influence on the city's financial landscape, there is a dearth of academic research focused on this topic. Some sources believe that the Jews of Koya did not significantly influence the economic life of Koya and did not have a very significant role in this city. The accessible information on this subject is limited to a few testimonies regarding Jewish labour, lacking comprehensive details about their economic conditions.

This research aims to answer the question: What were the most important occupations of the Jews in Koya, and how did the Jewish community contribute to the economic life of Koya?

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It seeks to explore the most important financial resources of the Jews in Koya and the economic lifestyle of the Jewish community in the city.

This study employs a qualitative historical and textual analysis method, utilising an exploratory qualitative research design. It depends on both primary and secondary sources. The researcher examines many primary materials, including the Ottoman archives. The research also relies on additional sources, including books and articles, particularly those authored by Kurdish and Jewish scholars, who offer diverse viewpoints on the subject. The researcher utilises an inductive and textual analysis approach to investigate the economic involvement of Jews in Koya. Furthermore, the researcher employs the methodology of oral history to elucidate previously unexplored details of the Jewish community in Koya. This involves conducting interviews with various individuals from Koya or residents of the surrounding villages of Koya. These individuals and their families typically resided with Jews, providing this study with significant recollections and comprehensive information. They cohabited with the Jewish community in Koya. Furthermore, this research incorporates various photographs depicting Jewish culture and economic life in Koya, alongside the researcher's own field visits to the remnants of the Jewish community in Koya, enabling us to document and illustrate the subjects through several images in the background.

One important study related to this topic is Ofra Bengo's *Jews and Israel*. This book is regarded as one of the finest works on the Jewish community in Kurdistan. The author employed a qualitative and historical analysis and a comparative approach, drawing from multiple sources to present her findings. However, there is a scarcity of information regarding the Jews of Koya and their living conditions, which she briefly discussed in relation to the city. Hence, this study endeavours to demonstrate the economic livelihood and significance of Jews in Koya. Goran ʿAbdullah's article, "Historical research on Jews of Koya," published in a local magazine named *Kosar*, may not only be the first but also one of the most outstanding studies on the Jews of Koya. He employed analytical and oral history methodologies in his investigation, uncovering previously unknown Jewish assets that were not documented in any other sources. This study provides a complete examination of the lives of Jews in Koya. However, it lacks precise and in-depth material specifically linked to the labour and professions of the Jews in Koya, despite mentioning some types of their work. This resource holds significant value for us. Nevertheless, our research will enhance and supplement this scholarly work by incorporating data, documentation, and comprehensive examples. Jamal Fatḥullah Ṭayib published another article on this topic, "Jews in Koya 1918-1951: A historical and social study." This study employed qualitative and historical analysis methods and conducted interviews with Jewish individuals residing in Koya. Although his study is crucial for our research, he has not provided any details regarding the economic aspects of Jewish life in Koya. This study aims to provide detailed information about the economic life of Jews and their role in Koya. It utilises documents, memorised books, and the Jewish legacy in the area to do this.

This study contains an introduction and several sections that explore the economic function and livelihood of Jews in Koya from 1918 to 1951. It examines all economic sources of the Jewish community in Koya and their influence on the overall economic landscape of the population.

The Arrival of Jews to Kurdistan and Their Short History in Koya

Undoubtedly, there exists a documented account of the Jewish historical presence in Kurdistan, which can be traced back to the period of exile, commencing from the first century. Furthermore, there is substantial evidence of Jewish habitation in earlier periods, subsequent to the destruction of the Jewish nation created under the reign of King David—also known as

Prophet David—by the hand of the Assyrians. This information is documented on the seal of Seb or Seb-i Babili (Voltz, 2011). During the rule of Tiglath-Pileser III from 745 to 727 BC, he forcibly moved some Jewish individuals to several cities in Mesopotamia, including Sahazoor and Mosul, which were predominantly occupied by the Kurdish population (Merʿi, 2008). Under the reign of Assyrian King Shalmaneser (727-722 BC), Jewish King Hoshea son of Elah (732-723 BC) declined to provide tribute to the Assyrians. In response, the Assyrian ruler Sergon II (722-705 BC) launched an invasion of the Jewish hub at Samaria and forcibly transferred Jews to three cities under Assyrian control. Some Jews settled along the River Khabur in the Assyrian capital, Mosul (Ahmed, 2017). After the Assyrians were defeated, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem in 586 BC (ʿAbdullah, 2009), and forced the Jews to leave, making them slaves in Mesopotamia (Merʿi, 2008). Generally, it is widely accepted that the arrival of Jews in Kurdistan may be traced back to the late ninth and early seventh centuries BC (Bengo, 2019).

After Cyrus the Great restored some of the Jews to the Holy Land, and during the Islamic occupation, Jewish populations continued to exist in Mesopotamia, namely in Kurdistan (Aḥmed, 2019). A significant number of individuals adopted Islam following its introduction to the area, while others chose to adhere to their Jewish faith and paid the *jizyah*. Multiple witnesses in Kurdish territories have recorded the notable presence of a substantial Jewish community. Notably the Jewish explorer Binyamin bin Buna al-Telituli al-Andalusi (Benjamin of Tudela), who visited southern Kurdistan in 1170, recorded the existence of a significant number of Jewish individuals in that region who adhered to the obligatory tax and peacefully lived alongside the Muslim community. In 1230, Khaziri, a Jewish poet from Islamic Spain, traveled to Mosul and made valuable contributions to the understanding of Jewish culture and religion in Kurdistan. Zakariya Zahiri, a Yemeni traveler, explored Erbil, Kirkuk, and Mosul during the sixteenth century. According to Be'eri, it was recorded that the city of Imadiyye had approximately 25,000 Jewish inhabitants (Be'eri, 2012). The estimated figure is undoubtedly exaggerated. The predominant population of Imadiyye consisted of Kurdish Muslims, and there is no documented evidence of a substantial Jewish community in the area. During that period, the Muslim population is believed to have been approximately 25,000 or less.

To provide a full definition of Kurdish Jews, we can describe them as individuals who resided in regions predominantly inhabited by Kurds, adhered to the Jewish faith, and spoke the Aramaic language. The Jewish community in Kurdistan is regarded as the most ancient Jewish community outside of Israel when compared to other Jewish communities worldwide (Ṭayib, 2015).

Despite the administrative deficiencies of the Ottoman state in Koya during its rule, it is evident that justice was frequently upheld among different religious groups. An Ottoman document from 1279 AH (1863 AD) indicates that the Jews were treated fairly and without discrimination. Due to a conflict between a Muslim individual named Faqe Mohammed and a Jewish individual named Michael on the route connecting Koya and Balisan, the Ottoman government penalised the Muslim killer by imposing a prison sentence of seventy-seven years upon him, as he was found guilty. According to the record, the act was not classified as premeditated murder, as the document says:

> The Ottoman Supreme State… Identified by the number 508. In the province of Sharazoor, in the land of Koysanjaq, the father of the murdered Jew (Yassef) and the murderer of the Jew (Faqi Moḥammed) provided their testimonies on 10th Ribʿ al-Akhr, 1279 AH/22nd September, 1278. These testimonies have been compiled as part of the Shariʿah information file and have been sent to the state for review. The perpetrator, Faqi Moḥammed, personally recounted the details of the homicide, while the victim, who was the intended successor, observed the event. Unfortunately, the Shariʿah amnesty does not apply to this particular killer. The victim, Michael, was from the Koya district and had moved to the neighborhood

> of Nam, then to Balisan. Therefore, this jurist's involvement in the case is irrelevant. During their journey, Michael, who is now deceased, verbally abused Moḥammed, prompting Mohammed to physically retaliate. Unfortunately, the altercation resulted in Michael's death. However, due to the subsequent investigation and dissemination of information regarding this incident, its details have been comprehended. The article demonstrates that the killing of this Jewish individual was premeditated, not accidental, but rather a consequence of an altercation between them, as per the Penal Code for Involuntary Manslaughter No. 170/Article 4, taking into account the leniency of the city. Consequently, Faqi Moḥammed was sentenced to seventy-seven years of imprisonment, commencing from the eleventh day of Shawwal, 1279. The directive originates from the authoritative one who issues commands. On the date of 4th Shawal, 1279 AH, which corresponds to 10th December, 1278 in Rome. The individuals mentioned are Irfan Beg, Abdul Latif Subhi, Mukhtar Beg, Fakhraj, Faiz Haq, Mohammed Shad Ma'am, Mahmoud Jalaluddin, and Yousef Kabul. (I_MVL_00478_021645_008_001.)

In summary, the condition of the Jews in Kurdistan underwent various phases until the conclusion of World War I. Despite attempts by Islamic states and rulers to enforce justice among ethnic groups, Jews were sometimes subjected to threats from the local populace. This information is supported by an Ottoman document.

Jewish community in Kurdistan and Koya

The Jewish community resided in various significant locations and cities within Kurdistan, including Penjiwin, Beytnur, Nirve, Barzan, Brâsh, Jelli (Jekuje), Kuheriz, Shenduha, Shuhu, Shranish, Mizze, Shushi, Herli, Tasiya, Rulke, Rubâr, Refla, Geregû, Kidish, Kani Blaf, Erbil, Suleimaniye, İmadiyye, Kirkuk, Zakho, Duhuk, Bashkale, Koya, Halebje, Akre, Shaqlawe, and Rewanduz. Furthermore, numerous Jewish educational institutions and places of worship, particularly in Erbil, Kirkuk, ʿİmadiyye, Zakho, and Koya, were present (Merʿi, 2008).

The Jewish presence in Kurdistan can be explained by two main factors. Firstly, some Jews were expelled from Israel and sought refuge in Kurdistan. Secondly, there were Jews who were originally inhabitants of Kurdistan and adopted Judaism under the influence of other Jews. However, it is important to note that the Jews in Koya did not belong to the Kurdish ethnicity, as their language, culture, appearance, and composition differed from those of the Kurds. As an illustration, the majority of them had white and red complexions and possessed yellow hair. In addition, between 36 and 51 AD, the Emirate of Adiyabin (Ḥadiab) in Erbil was governed by a reigning family that embraced Judaism. Consequently, the Jewish community successfully established and strengthened its dominant position in the region of South Kurdistan for a period of time (Ṭayib, 2015).

Kurdish Jews resided in distinct residential areas throughout every Kurdish city and municipality. The Jewish community in Koya initially established their settlement in the Hawawan quarter, but eventually some Jewish families relocated to the Bafri Qandi neighborhood, where they constructed their own synagogue. This locality was alternatively referred to as the Jewish Quarter (Ṭayib, 2015). The synagogue is adjacent to the Ḥatik Mosque, and they were separated only by a wall. The mosque remains intact, while the remnants of the synagogue are visible next to to it (see Figure 1). Remnants of the Jewish quarter and Koya grand bazaar are also still present (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 1: The remains of the Jewish temple

Figure 2: The remains of the Jewish quarter in Koya

Figure 3: The remains of Jewish stores in the Koya grand bazaar

British officer W. R. Hey believes that the Jewish community existed in Koya and Erbil (Hey, 2010, p. 88). Meanwhile, the Jewish community in Koya tried to select the best and most fitting locations for their residences and localities. The current bazaar in Koya, specifically the main street of the city, serves as the primary location for the Jewish community in Koya. During an interview with Ibrahim Khosravi, he mentioned:

> The Jews residing in Koya state that the current location of Benjamin Saliḥok's house used to be the spot where the Jews of Koya conducted their business. The residence was initially occupied by a Sufi Salih named Sufi Saliḥ jeweler, also known as Sofi Saliḥ Zeringer. Subsequently, it became the abode of a widow named Majalay Damuchawkar, who was consistently occupied with the task of depilating women's facial hair. The Jewish community in Koya includes residents of the Baba Jolla, Salman Ḥati, Nazri Ishaq, and Nuri Ishaq households. Their present whereabouts are in the Koya grand bazaar, particularly the Brayan Kebab restaurant known as Kababkhanay Brayan, which was once renowned for being situated near the site of Isaac's palace. He claims to be a direct descendant of Isaac of Koya. He also asserts that former Israeli Prime Minister Isaac Rabin (Isḥaq Rabin) is a descendant of Isaac of Koya. Additionally, he mentions that former Israeli Defense Minister Isaac Mordakha (Isḥaq Mordakha) was born in Akre. In support of this notion of a previous priesthood, Maḥmoud Ḥamad posits that Isaac's father had a son named Robin, who likely held the position of Rabbi within their community. (ʿAbdullah, 2009, p. 16)

The Jewish community established its own residential area adjacent to the Garmak Mosque, sometimes referred to as the Jewish district. The term "Bafri Qandi" is still used. The Jewish community also owned land in Koya, known as the Jewish Hill, which is now referred to as the Hill Neighbourhood or the Jewish Hill (Grdi – Grdi Jwakan). The hill is situated to the east of Koya and is of considerable length. During that period, Koya possessed an antiquated wall encircling the urban area. The hill was located beyond the city wall. The area facing Koya, known as the Jewish Hill, was designated for the burial of deceased individuals belonging to the Jewish community. During the time of Governor Hadi Rashid Chawshly in Koya (1957-1958), a distinct neighborhood called Sayedawa[2] was established. This name was chosen in reference to Saeed Qazaz, the Iraqi Interior Minister, following the coup of July 14, 1958. The name of this neighborhood was later changed to Sarbagh (ʿAbdullah, 2009).

Ibrahim Khusravi gives more information regarding the Jews, and says:

> When the Jews were going to Israel, Malm Nasim, son of Malm Isḥaq, put his hand in mine and said, "Ibrahim, we are departing at this moment, however, we have not yet sold the Jewish hill." I claim ownership of it due to our intended return in a century. "Neither you nor I will disappear until the next hundred years," Khosrow said. "It is true that we will disappear, but my generation and your generation will be alive. We will not sell our land and property," Nasim said. (ʿAbdullah, 2009, p. 17)

The sentence mentioned above can be revised in multiple ways. Firstly, Malm Nasim's perspective on the longevity of the state of Israel and its potential downfall within a century is quite plausible. Secondly, the Jewish community maintains a steadfast belief in the enduring ownership of their land, even after the passage of several centuries. Thirdly, they have derived great pleasure from living in Kurdistan as a whole, and specifically in Koya. Furthermore, they eagerly anticipate the prospect of revisiting Kurdistan in the future. Fourthly, Israel aimed to incorporate Kurdistan into its territorial expansion plan, extending from the Nile to the Euphrates.

Furthermore, a Jewish temple was situated in the centre of the city street, namely in front of the current Baga Tea House and Sirwan Bakery, approximately 70 meters below Ḥaji Qadir Park, which currently serves as the main street of Koya. This was the location where successive Iraqi units were positioned with the intention of eliminating any traces of Jewish presence in the city street (ʿAbdullah, 2009).[3]

In 1941, Rashid ʿĀlī Gailani orchestrated a coup, aligned himself with the Nazis, and commanded the execution of Jews, resulting in the death of 500 Jewish individuals in Baghdad. This decree also extended to the Jewish population residing in Koya. They were subjected to multiple forms of attack, including insults and threats. The attackers said that the Jews had only three days remaining, that they would all be decapitated, and that their wives, homes, and children would be seized. Jaffa, a Jewish girl from Koya, was six years old during that period, she wrote her memoir:

> My father was a Jewish religious man who also engaged in commercial activities. My father informed my mother that we would seek refuge in the mountains of Pishdar due to the

[2] In 1954, Saʿeed Qazaz came to Koya with the intention of demolishing the cemetery and converting it into a residential area. He opted to sell the land to the residents of Koya at an exceptionally low cost. The back side of the land corresponded to a measurement of one dirham, while the front side corresponds to a measurement of two dirhams. Initially, the mullahs discouraged the purchase of the land, claiming it belonged to the Jewish community. However, they eventually acquired it for themselves, ahead of others (Ḥamad, personal communication, 2024).

[3] Haji Ḥamad, my maternal grandfather, was a very attractive young man. On numerous occasions, the Jewish people invited me to accompany them to Israel, promising that I would marry their most exquisite daughter. He would assert, "No, you shall entrust me with your most exquisite daughter, and I shall assume responsibility for your estate" (Saeed, personal communication, 2024).

> presence of a significant number of devout Muslims who would provide protection against any potential threats to us. The president of the Jewish community in Koya, namely Salih Moshka, Faraj Bayazora, and Nuria Ishaq Shmoil, met Hama Ziad Agha, son of Hama Agha of Koya, and Mullah Ḥawez to provide protection for the Jews of Koya. Hama Ziad of Koya resolved that any individual who attacks the Jews will not be tolerated and will face punishment. In addition, Mullah Moḥammad Jalizadeh (Mulla-i Gewre – Great Mulla), a highly respected religious leader, issued a fatwa during his Friday speech, explicitly stating that it is strictly forbidden to subject Jews to any form of torture. I recall that Mullah Muhammed had a close friendship with Rabbi Ishaq, who happened to be the father of Rabbi Nasim. (Jaffa, 2023, pp. 12-14)

The condition of the Jewish community in Kurdistan was significantly superior to that of Jews residing in other parts of the world. Simultaneously, the Jews in Koya experienced a far more favorable condition compared to their counterparts in other areas of Kurdistan. This was due to the protection provided by the Muslims residing in the city, particularly Ḥama Ziad of Koya (also known as Kak Ziad) and Mulla-i Gewre. They enjoyed protection and were able to worship God openly, while also living their lives according to their religious, economic, and social beliefs. At the same time, it is evident that several Jews in Koya decided to never sell what they owned and maintained the aspiration of eventually returning to Kurdistan. This is supported by the fact that a considerable number of Jewish residences and establishments persisted in Koya until later periods (see Figure 4). Although these buildings are now occupied by others, the elderly and their grandchildren would return to visit their places in Koya, expressing their affection for these doors and walls—even though the younger generation had no direct memory of them—as a way of reminiscing about the period when they resided in Koya. To illustrate this, we will include an image of a house in Koya that was previously owned by Jewish residents but is currently inhabited by Muslim residents. The current proprietor of this residence is of Jewish heritage, but he and his offspring have relocated from Koya and currently reside elsewhere. They fervently pressed their lips against the doors and walls of this dwelling.

Figure 4: The remains of Jewish houses in Koya

The Number of Jewish populations in Koya

There are varying viewpoints regarding the Jewish population in Koya due to potential inaccuracies in certain sources or improper reporting of the actual number of Jews residing there. Hence, we will examine all relevant material and statistics pertaining to the Jewish population in Koya, specifically focusing on the official censuses conducted by both the British and Iraqi governments to determine the exact number of Jews residing in Koya.

In 1878, Jacques Ritori, a missionary, visited Koya and made an approximate population estimate of 10,000 people. He counted the Jewish population as three families and also counted the Christian population as three families in Koya (Ritori, 2008). In addition, in the historical encyclopedia *Al-Muʿcem al-Tarikhi L'emaret Behdinan*, Re'uf references Taşkın as the source for page 302, which states that during the late nineteenth century, the Jewish population in Kurdistan, Iraq, was only 4,286 individuals (Marufoğlu, 1998). In 1896, Shmasaddin (Şemseddin) Sami documented information about Koya in his *Qamus al-Alam* as consisting of 252 villages with a population of 18,000 individuals. Among them, there were 500 Chaldeans and Nestorians, as well as 60 Jews in Koya (Sami, 2008). However, based on the 1920 British census data, the population of Jews in Koya was recorded as 623 persons (al-Rubaii, 2017). Later this number decreased. According to the 1947 census data, the population of Jews in Koya was recorded as 440 (ʿAbdullah, 1999), while others believe that the number was 441 individuals (Bengo, 2019; al-Rubaii, 2017). Nevertheless, the 1951 census recorded a Jewish population of approximately 400 individuals in Koya (Ṭayib, 2015).

Therefore, the maximum population of Jews in Koya never surpassed 600. These findings indicate that, in terms of population size, the Jewish community in Koya was the least populous when compared to the Muslim and Christian communities. In the eighth volume of his memoirs titled *Mirror: Families in Koya*, Tahir Ahmed Ḥawezi identifies the richest people in Koya during the years 1948-1949. These individuals, a total of 12, were all Jewish as they were engaged in diverse occupations, including public trade, and held prominent positions in the city's renowned profession. They had a distinctive approach to both shopping and work, which was characteristic of the Jewish community in Koya (Ḥawezi, 2020a).

Trade

Koya played a significant role as a centre for commerce in ancient times, connecting Sinaa and Sulaymaniyah in the east to Erbil, Mosul, Damascus, and Aleppo in the west. Additionally, it facilitated trade from the north to the south due to its proximity to the Taqtaq dam waterway. Merchandise was regularly transported through Taqtaq (Beg, 1325). It then moved to central and southern Iraq, passing through Prde (also known as Altun Kopri), Kirkuk, and finally reaching Baghdad (Aḥmed, 2019). The tobacco industry has been prevalent in the city since ancient times. Due to its significant economic value, the city features a Grand Bazaar and a Caravanserai (Khani Maḥmood Agha),[4] formerly owned by Mahmood Agha, which served as a

[4] An old architectural marvel in Koya is the Great Khan of Koya, also known as Khan Maḥmood Agha of Koya, which was constructed in the year 1806 AD. Koya served as a prominent hub for trade, connecting Baghdad, Basra, Kirkuk, Sablag, Mosul, and Aleppo. Maḥmood Agha constructed a substantial khan in Koya in 1806 AD with the intention of facilitating trade and the interchange of commodities, a venture that endured for a span of three years.
During ancient times, particularly during Ottoman rule, the existence of khans in each city and region served as a testament to the thriving commercial activity and the significance of the area. The year of construction of Koya Khan is determined to be 1806 AD based on the inscription found on the main door of the Khan. The inscription, carved in Persian on a piece of marble, states: "In 1227 AH /1806 AD It took three years to complete." The project's map was transported from Diyarbakir (Amed) to Koya, while the master was returned to Koya from Mosul. The overall layout of this building, known as Kawansara or the Great Khan of Koya, comprises a total of 61 rooms, with 33 rooms located on the ground floor and 28 rooms on the upper floor. Each of the rooms on the upper floor was equipped with a cooking space, specifically a fireplace. Four rooms on the lower level were exclusively designated for the executive committee of the cell. In addition to the cell, there were also a guard room, a room for government customs personnel, and a room for a specific profession of that era known as "Khamkhanachi," which involved dyeing textiles. The cell is constructed using materials such as stone, plaster, and marble, which are utilised to adorn the doors and windows. Initially, the individuals that took charge of the household were Mam Bakr, Haji Hussein, Haji Khadr Sabir, and Suwara Kaka Agha, who happened to be descendants of Mahmood Agha. Notably, The Khan served as a lodging establishment for merchants and visitors, with the upper floors designated for guests and the ground floors for their horses and mules. Until the 1960s,

resting area for caravans. The merchants were the ones who arrived at Koya (Beg, 1325AH). In his book, Claudius James Rich, who arrived in Kurdistan in 1821, notes the transportation of goods from Koya to Baghdad (Rich, 2012).

Owing to its strategic geographical location, the city quickly emerged as an important centre for trade in ancient times. According to certain accounts, the city witnessed a daily influx of 200 horses and various commodities, as it served as a bustling market. It possessed both a substantial caravanserai and the means to establish commercial connections. Trade from the cardinal directions of north, south, east, and west was at their peak strength (Aḥmed, 2019). Since the initial influx of Jews from Palestine to Kurdistan, they promptly merged into Kurdish society and swiftly acquired skills in industry, trade, and agriculture alongside the Kurds (Bengo, 2019).

The Jewish community in Koya predominantly controlled many enterprises in the city, including the trade of fabric, shoes, sugar, oil, tea, coffee, salt, and other commodities. They frequently transported the items such as tobacco, honey, cotton, skin, intestines, wool, hair, cheese, coconut, bananas, tomatoes, pomegranates, wheat, barley, rice, garlic, fabric, cows, and cattle. Man-made items such as garments, woodworking, metalworking, footwear, daggers, blades, and horseshoes were transported to Baghdad and other urban centres for commercial purposes (Zana Tayfur ʿAbdulsamad, 2019). Moreover, the trade also involved ingredients such as flour and poultry (Jaffa, 2023).

In addition, the Jewish community operated numerous private establishments within the primary marketplace of Koya (Ḥamad, personal communication, 2024). They often retailed their merchandise in their places of business, offering a variety of commodities and provisions to traders from neighboring cities who visited Koya and traded their provisions with the local populace. The Jews employed a commercial approach characterised by generating modest profits through sales in large quantities. This increased the popularity of their merchandise compared to that of other merchants in the city. For instance, a sack of sugar was priced at a few dirhams, but they sold it at cheaper rates compared to other merchants in Koya. This was because they prioritised making a profit from the sale of the bag itself rather than the sugar inside. Bags of sugar were costly at that time, so they consistently aimed to sell their products at significantly reduced prices in order to generate a modest profit through quick sales (Ṭayib, 2015). Jewish individuals participated in commercial activities in Kurdistan, utilising exchange systems as a result of their limited financial means (Be'eri, 2012). Among the Jewish community, there were several notable entrepreneurs, such as Faraji Baba Jolla, Salman Hati, Nazri Ishaq, Israel, and Rubel. Frequently, the Jewish community engaged in commercial transactions with a prominent individual named Nasim al-Baghdadi, who resided in Erbil. They possessed an inherent trait of maintaining consistent pricing in the market and in their labour. That is to say, they did not engage in bargaining or price negotiations (ʿAbdullah, 2009).

Another economic tactic employed by the Jewish community in Koya was to engage in the practice of offering goods for sale on a credit basis. They also had an adage that stated: "Transfer old loans for new loans and obtain your essential needs." Another factor contributing to the improvement of the Jewish community was the policy implemented by the Ottoman state in 1855. This policy offered amnesty to Jews and Christians on the condition that they paid money to the Ottoman state. This presented a favorable opportunity for them to continue employment and accumulate substantial wealth, in contrast to the young Kurdish Muslims, who were compelled to enlist in the armed forces. A significant number of them died on the

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this building served as a significant hub for commerce in both Koya and the surrounding region. The majority of shops and professionals utilised it as a storage facility (Ahmed, 2019).

frontlines frequently, while others were unable to pursue employment due to their ongoing military service (Ṭayib, 2015).

This demonstrates the assimilation of Jews into Kurdish society from the very outset of their settlement in Kurdistan. Due to the Jews' policies and attitudes towards selling, shopping, and trading, they have achieved wealth and prominence as businessmen in the city of Koya. These practices can still be utilised today to facilitate the efficient exchange of essential commodities, resulting in a better market.

Agriculture

Koya held significant agricultural importance as a result of its strategic geographical location. The local population's sustenance predominantly relied on agriculture. In the report of the governor of Koya, we observe that agricultural equipment in the Ottoman Empire during that period was less advanced. The inhabitants of this region were in the nascent phases of industrialisation and agricultural development. Despite their inability to utilise a cart, they resorted to carrying loads on the backs of their animals as they lacked alternative modes of transportation. Nevertheless, they had not acquired the knowledge and skills necessary to cultivate and gather crops. They manually gathered the crops. They exclusively used the feet of their animals for the purpose of gathering their grain. They possessed no other means to accomplish this task (Aḥmed, 2018).

According to an Ottoman report from 1906, the agricultural output of Koya consisted of 100,000 qiyas of cotton, 7,500 qiyas of sesame seeds, and 30,000 qiyas of tobacco. A total of 200 tons of garlic, 60,000 grams of eggplant, 200,000 grams of walnuts, 20,000 grams of watermelon, 5,000 grams of apples, and 5,000 grams of vegetables were harvested. Additionally, 5,000 measures of figs and 4,000 measures of almonds were produced (Marufoğlu, 1998).

Regarding agriculture within the Jewish community, it is evident that the Jews integrated with the Kurds upon their arrival in Kurdistan and engaged in agricultural activities (Bengo, 2019). Jaffa also recalls residing in the village during her early childhood and cultivating onions and tobacco (Jaffa, 2023). An inherent trait of the Jewish community in Kurdistan was their engagement in agricultural pursuits and their substantial ownership of land. Furthermore, certain regions of Kurdistan were home to settlements with names derived from the Hebrew language. Occasionally, they resided in a village with Muslims. It has been observed that their farming tools were rudimentary and constructed from wood (Be'eri, 2012).

At times, the agricultural production surpassed the local needs, leading to the surplus being sent to nearby cities through frequent transportation. The enumerated items comprised tobacco, honey, cotton, skins, intestines, wool, hair, cheese, coconut, bananas, tomatoes, pomegranates, wheat, barley, rice, garlic, fabric, cows, and cattle. In addition, man-made objects including clothing, carpentry, metalworking, shoes, knives, swords, and horseshoes were transported to Baghdad and other metropolitan areas for commercial purposes (Zana Tayfur ʿAbdulsamad, 2019).

It is evident from this observation that the agricultural activities carried out by Jews in Kurdistan, particularly in Koya and the neighboring villages, serve as an indication of their established presence and sense of safety within the region. Moreover, this is a feature that distinguishes Kurdish Jews from other Jewish communities worldwide. The surplus agricultural products of the Jews were exported to other towns and regions and traded in Kurdistan during ancient times. Several Kurdish settlements coexisted with Muslims and collaborated in agricultural activities.

Livestock and Butchery

As previously stated, certain Jewish individuals resided in rural areas, and as a result, one of their occupations in these communities was the rearing of animals, specifically cattle. They used the products for their daily necessities, and the surplus goods were dispatched to the neighboring cities of Koya, where some of them engaged in commercial transactions (Ṭayib, 2015). Consequently, certain Jewish individuals, particularly those who were pious, developed expertise in the field of butchery. If they discovered even the tiniest flaw in an animal, they would proceed to perform the necessary actions. They refrained from consuming certain animals and instead referred to them as "Tarifa" (Sabaḥ, personal communication,2024). Jews consume the flesh of animals that have been slaughtered according to their own religious practices. Based on their religious beliefs, they abstain from consuming meat that has been slaughtered by those who identify as Muslims or Christians (Zhakaw, personal communication,2024). In his sixth volume of memoir titled *Industry in Koya and Terminology of Animals and Birds*, Tahir Aḥmed Ḥawezi states about the sheep that belong to the Jewish community:

> Every morning, the Jewish people would transport their sheep and livestock to the Koya River in order to cleanse them. If their sheep became very obese and were unable to walk, they would cleanse them within their dwelling. If someone was extremely obese, they would be derogatorily referred to as a Jewish sheep (Dabastey Jwakan). Malm, a Jewish religious individual, has a highly acute three-fingered knife. He butchered animals specifically for the Jewish community, focusing on extracting the kidneys and liver. If he made an error, he would rectify it. Additionally, he would slaughter the puppy and name it "Tarifa," despite it being prohibited by their religious beliefs. These animals, some weighing up to 60 kilograms, were sold at a discounted price. The Christians consumed the meat, while the Muslims abstained from consuming [it] (Ḥawezi, 2020b, p. 152).

It is obvious that the Jews of Koya have expertise in the fields of cattle raising and butchery. These two occupations have become mutually beneficial, especially for religious individuals who hold them in high regard.

They provided religious regulations for the ritualistic slaughter of animals, especially those that exhibit even the slightest imperfections. If an animal experiences liver or lung issues, they abstained from consuming the meat derived from it and instead sold it to Christians at a discounted rate. In Koya, the Jewish community was renowned for its practice of extensively feeding and fattening their livestock, especially their sheep, a tradition referred to as "Dabaste." It is important to mention that several Jews owned flocks, such as Salman Ḥata, Faraja Jw, Ḥayum, and Ḥaskeel. Faraja Jw possessed extensive parcels of land in the villages of Marzan, Talaban, and Elnjagh (Ṭayib, 2015).

Industry and *Jollayi* (Weaving)

Despite the relatively limited technological advancements in industrial and investment equipment in Kurdistan, particularly in Koya, it is evident that the city of Koya and its Jewish community excelled in the field of industry. They successfully engaged in various industrial and production activities. Aside from the previously stated professions, the Jewish community engaged in numerous other lines of work, including *jollayi* (weaving), which has historically been present in the region of Kurdistan, with a notable presence among the Jewish community.

Weaving, an ancient craft, was employed to produce a diverse range of items such as *jajim*, *sejade*, carpets, shawls, and blankets for the Iraqi army and special blankets for new

brides and grooms (see Figures 5, 6, & 7). They built drapes specifically designed for the children with the purpose of shielding them from both the chilling cold and the scorching heat of the sun (see Figure 8). Overall, the blankets included various patterns, such as butterflies and deer. Additionally, the *sejade*, which was made by Muslims, featured minarets that symbolised those of the mosque.

Figure 5: The remnants of *jajim* created by Jolla

Figure 6: The remnants of *sejade* created by Jolla

Figure 7: The remnants of blankets for new brides and grooms created by Jolla

Figure 8: The remnants of drapes for new brides and grooms created by Jolla

Although many occupations and cultural traditions remain among the residents of Koya, others have been forgotten in the city, despite their past significance as vital economic foundations for the town. A significant cohort of participants collaborated and utilised particular melodies during these tasks. For example, the technique of weaving and sewing, commonly known as "*jollayi*," necessitated the involvement of a minimum of four workers. Throughout this endeavour, the workers would employ songs and jokes as a form of entertainment while working (Jolla, personal communication, 2024).

The functioning apparatus is commonly known as a factory, as it resembles a miniature factory and consists of multiple components, namely: Naward, Taxte, Foqa, Singi bin deste, Petate, Petaxte, Gurd, Shane, Dafe, Gures, Singi Prdoka, Singi Nawarde, Meko, and Xarak (Ḥawezi, 2020b).

Painting Fabrics (*Khamchiati*) and Selling

Another profession commonly pursued by the Jewish community was textile dyeing, referred to as *khamchiati*. This involved the process of boiling water in large vessels and using it to color various types of fabric, particularly during that era. They imported fabric materials from Baghdad, which they then dyed. They sold the dyed materials and garments in their clothing stores. They had special area for coloring (*khamchiati*). *Khamchi* was an additional profession pursued by the Jewish community in Koya. Typically, garments were produced for both ladies and men. The individuals who served as *khamchiati* in Koya were Alaju, Baleju, Salḥok, Ḥaskiah, Azarash, Mordecai, and Hayumi. The Jewish people themselves also ventured into rural areas to collect wool and garments for dyeing. Previously, certain Jewish individuals would place sizable cups around the villages of the Koya plain for the purpose of coloring (khamchiyati). One individual named Naum traveled to the village of Omergumet during the winter season to engage in the occupation of coloring. Omergumet is situated in the southwestern region. He resided at the residence of Qadir Hama Sur, together with individuals from neighboring villages such as Segirdkan and Kani Lele. They brought their textiles and equipment to Naum. Abraham and Wasook also worked in several other villages in western Koya, including Smaqa, Bayza Agha, Bani Maran, Shakha Piska, Darbasar-i Gawra, and Darbasar-i Gchka.The Jews provided an additional benefit to both themselves and the locals by purchasing herbs, specifically Glekha and Asterlik, which held significant value for them, particularly the Glekha. The object is onion-shaped and located beneath the ground. Subsequently, it is extracted, subjected to boiling in extremely high-temperature water, and then dried. They would then sell it to the Jewish community at an exorbitant cost. The Jews said that this particular plant has the ability to prevent garments from creasing, therefore serving as a substitute for the traditional practice of ironing. Asterlik was a plant with a stem that resembled a Glekha, but the stem retained its stick-like shape. They used it as a means of protecting their books from being damaged (ʿAbdullah, 2009).

Selling clothes and fabrics were among the other jobs by held the Jews in the city. Faraja Jw was one of the young men who worked as a cloth seller in Koya (Ḥawezi, 2020c). During that era, individuals would dress according to the different seasons, and the variety of available clothing options was limited. Wasta Daud, an acknowledged master in Koya, was one of the most attractive Jewish persons who worked as a *khamchi*. He subsequently embraced Islam under the guidance of Haji Asad Agha (Ḥawezi, 2020a).

This demonstrates that *khamchiyati* and cloth vending were two interdependent and mutually practised professions within the Jewish community. While there were distinct establishments and locations for each profession, Jews frequently engaged in both activities simultaneously. Occasionally, the Jewish community would venture into the villages to work as *khamchiyati* and thereafter conduct various economic transactions with the local inhabitants of the surrounding villages in Koya.

Production of Perfume and Wine

Alcohol was a prevalent drink among Jews and Christians, making it particularly popular in Kurdistan, especially in Koya. We observe that the Jews possessed expertise in the production of alcoholic beverages. The Jewish people produced alcohol from grapes by first softening or soaking them in water, then extracting the juice, adding herbs, and allowing the mixture to ferment in a container (Be'eri, 2012). Subsequently, they would place it within a bowl using a utensil derived from the container. An ignition was initiated, and then contained within a vessel

for an extended duration. During Jewish holidays, particularly the autumn festival named Kaprashine, it was customary for Jews to visit one another and for Muslims to visit them and offer congratulations. If the person being visited was not particularly religious, they would be offered a cup of wine, but those who were known to be devout would be offered a cup of coffee that they prepared themselves (Ḥamad, personal communication, 2024). Occasionally, wine was imported into the city from outside Koya and then traded. One of the individuals who engaged in this practice was a young man named Wsuwa Jw. He frequently purchased a substantial quantity of alcohol and brought it back to Koya. He would transfer the alcoholic beverage into small containers and sell it at an affordable price (Ḥawezi, 2020b).

Besides that, the reason for producing perfume in Koya was to mask the scent of alcohol and prevent people from realising that wine is being made in any houses (Ḥamad, personal communication, 2024). To do this, the fragrance of aromatic wild foliage and flowers is used. The process of creating the perfume was identical to that of wine, with the exception that the perfume possessed a delightful aroma. The entirety of the perfume was contained within a bottle, whether it was intended for use as a fragrance or frequently blended with soap (Be'eri, 2012). Laulav, also known as Laulav Attar, was one of the Jewish individuals employed in the occupation of perfumery (Ṭayib, 2015).

Jewelry

Jewelry making was a prevalent occupation among the Jewish community in the city. The Jewish community in Koya was widely recognised for this characteristic. In the Grand Bazaar of Koya, there were jewelry shops where they also engaged in gold trading (Ḥamad, personal communication, 2024). One prominent trait of the Jews in Koya was their practice of burying deceased young girls or women with all their gold, concealing it within their graves. This practice was short-lived because some people, those who were aware of this, took the initiative to excavate the graves, stealing the gold. Consequently, the Jewish community became aware of this situation and ceased the practice, opting to bury the deceased without any gold or cloth (Zhakaw, personal communication, 2024). The Jews were skilled jewelers, making various models and patterns of gold and silver (ʿAbdullah, 2009). Among the most famous Jewish jewelers in Koya were Shalkay Zeringer, Sofi Salih, Ble Khawara, Hayabai, Jamisa, Daudok, Leyla Sure, Rahmi Kuri Pishela, Ble and Marmo, and Yaqoy Zeringer. Others also worked in silver, including Shanto and Benjamin (Ṭayib, 2015).

Tailoring

The Jews in Koya also engaged in the occupation of tailoring. They consistently supplied the city with distinctive and exquisite textiles, while also providing tailoring services. Abraham Khayaṭ, a highly notable Jewish tailor in Koya, first established a small-scale business, which he subsequently expanded (Ḥawezi, 2020b). Gulizar, whose grandmother was originally Jewish but later converted to Islam and was named Sabih Khan, showed a collection of Kurdish women's garments from her grandmother's era, dating back to 1880 AD (see Figure 9). These garments were crafted by Jewish tailors in Koya (Ḥawezi, personal communication, 2024). Among the collection were Abayas, known as Charshi u Kambari (see Figure 10), which were sewn by Jewish tailors and worn by Jewish and Christian women for outings to the market and other outdoor activities (Zana Tayfur ʿAbdulsamad, 2019).

It is important to acknowledge that tailoring was not exclusively a profession for Jewish males, but also for Jewish women. In her memoirs, Jaffa highlights the presence of an

exceptional tailor named Alia in her community, who specialised in women's clothing (Jaffa, 2023).

Figure 9: Kurdish clothes were sewed by Jewish tailors

Figure 10: The Charshi u Kambari clothes

Attars

Perfumery was among the occupations pursued by Jewish individuals. They had a sack in their hands and occasionally used a donkey to travel to the villages and fulfill other minor requirements. They marketed a variety of goods, including rings, cosmetics, musical instruments, and select women's accessories. Those responsible for these actions included

Elijah, the younger brother of Reuben, Ḥasqel, Nissan Raḥimi, and Moshi ʿAttar (ʿAbdullah, 2009).

Giving loans (*Salam*)

Due to the economic disparity between the Jews, who were affluent, and the general population, who were impoverished, the latter frequently found themselves compelled to seek financial assistance from the Jews through the practice of borrowing money known as *salam*. During the winter, farmers were financially depleted and had to seek loans from the Jewish community. Subsequently, the lenders would be reimbursed by those who had borrowed from them with surplus funds, or alternatively, during the spring season, they would provide the borrower with cows, tobacco, or wheat and barley at a discounted rate. Here, the Jewish people achieved two advancements: Initially, the farmer was required to vend his harvest to the creditor. Furthermore, the Jewish community acquired the agricultural goods from the farmer at a discounted rate compared to the prevailing market price. This advantageous arrangement was possible due to the prearranged nature of the transaction and the upfront payment received. During World War II in 1942, a widespread outbreak of wheat and barley disease occurred in the Koya plain areas near the Iranian border. As a result, the Jewish community incurred significant debts to the local farmers. This increased the profitability of the Jews. The peasants fervently sought support from Jews to possess whatever resources are necessary to ensure people's salvation from death, as no other options were available (ʿAbdullah, 2009).

Conclusion and Suggestions

Through the completion of this investigation, we have arrived at several key findings. Firstly, it has been shown that the Jewish community in Koya achieved significant wealth accumulation. Secondly, the Jews held control over the lucrative industries of jewelry, textiles, tailoring, and the production of liquor and fragrances, which were vital to the whole commerce of Koya. Thirdly, the Jewish community in Kurdistan, specifically in Koya, demonstrated proficiency in conducting their business and professional endeavours. Fourthly, the Jews' exceptional skill and intellect contributed significantly to their riches and economic influence in Koya. Their expertise in *jollayi* (weaving), in particular, served as a lucrative financial asset.

Fifthly, the Jews' involvement in trade in Koya contributed significantly to its transformation into a prominent commercial centre in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. Simultaneously, Koya emerged as a major marketplace for imported goods, as well as the primary exporter of locally produced commodities. Sixthly, the Jews in Koya accumulated riches by providing loans to those they deemed trustworthy and charging interest on those loans. This served as a means of financial support for the inhabitants of Koya, and at times, the Jews even provided financial assistance free of charge to the population of Koya.

When examining the history and economic impact of the Jews in Koya, it is necessary to provide recommendations to address the current situation. Despite initial expectations that Koya would become a major commercial hub and contribute to the financial strength of Kurdistan, the city's financial development has been hindered since the departure of the Jewish community. Therefore, it is important to take steps to rectify this disparity. Regarding this matter, we propose numerous recommendations. Firstly, it is imperative to restore the road connecting Erbil—Koya and Sulaimaniyah—Koya, enabling it to accommodate two-way traffic like other urban areas, thereby enhancing transportation between these locations.

Additionally, focus should be placed on the tourist attractions and archaeological sites of Koya, a region renowned for its numerous points of interest, such as Taqtaq and Gomespan. Furthermore, it is crucial to prioritise the conservation and management of fish resources and animal husbandry in the region, as the soil conditions are highly conducive to these activities. Furthermore, it is imperative to promote the repopulation of rural areas and foster agricultural activities. Historically, both the city and its neighboring villages have been abundant in agricultural resources.

Likewise, it is crucial to prioritise the workforce and allocate resources towards investment in urban areas. Historically, Jews engaged in significant commercial activities and conducted a portion of their industrial operations within the urban area. It is important to incentivise wealthy individuals and the government to promote imports and industry within the city. As a result, numerous factories and industrial positions have been established in the city.

Moreover, it is crucial to focus on the cultural and sophisticated revitalisation of some industrial practices that were historically conducted within the city. A cultural centre should be constructed or a market should be refurbished, as there is still a significant demand for necessities that are now being provided in a traditional manner. Finally, the government should incentivise investors and entrepreneurs to relocate a portion of their manufacturing facilities and industries to the urban area.

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