



## Hermeneutic Nuances of Shoe-related Rhetoric in Iraqi Culture

Meis Al-Kaisi

Department of Arabic and Translation Studies

American University of Sharjah, UAE

*In loving memory of my father, Dr. Shakir Al-Kaisi, whose eloquence and distinctive expressions were a source of inspiration for this work.*

**ABSTRACT:** Culture is complex and sensitive and due to the heterogeneous nature of the modern civilised world we ought to reflect on these differences to understand the other. Thus, what seems to be acceptable in one culture may be perceived as unconventional and very offensive in another. As Raymond Williams once said in his *Keywords* (1983) cultures ‘just don’t speak the same language.’ Showing the sole of one’s shoe to a fellow human is considered offensive in Arab culture. Although the term ‘shoe’ does not seem to have a wide semantic range in the West, culturally speaking, on the other hand, in the Arab world, it does, and especially in Iraq. Iraqis seem to have unleashed their linguistic creativity in applying a myriad of meanings to the term ‘shoe’ that vary according to gender, age, status, context and circumstance. Whether in plural or in singular form, it may be used to amplify or exaggerate, or to offend and insult. Iraqis experience the *shoe* linguistically but also see it as a flying object and as a “weapon of mass-destruction.” Perhaps the most notable “pitcher” in this context is Muntazar al-Zaidi, the journalist, who threw his shoes at George W. Bush during a press conference in Baghdad in 2008 and accompanied that act with a statement saying: ‘This is a farewell kiss from the Iraqi people, you dog.’ And so, when confronted with a *shoe* in Iraq, thoughts come to mind, all of which are of negative connotation leading to an incontrovertible conclusion that the sought-after objective is an insult of some kind. This paper attempts to trace the origin of this cultural attitude and the offensive nature of shoes and feet in Iraqi culture. It also seeks to explain the various hermeneutic nuances (literal, moral, allegorical) of such rhetoric in Iraq. The Arabic term *qundara* (‘shoe’) is a keyword that symbolically represents a cultural gesture and articulates a linguistic attitude which all Iraqis, and most Arabs, can relate to. Most significantly, this paper aims to deliver a comprehensive record of a cultural keyword as well as a sociolinguistic trend which has yet not been scholarly addressed.

**Keywords:** Iraq, shoes, symbols, gestures, culture, acts of identity



## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Cultural Expressions: Gestures, Metaphors, and Symbols

Vilém Flusser (2014) says that ‘gestures are to be considered movements of the body’ which ‘can be described as “expressions of intention”’ (p. 1). To understand the gesture defined this way its “intention” needs to be outlined. Additionally, gestures ‘can also be defined methodologically’ as ‘movements of the body can in principle be explained by spelling out their causes.’ Therefore, Flusser says,

if I raise my arm, and someone tells me that the movement is the result of physical, physiological, psychological, social, economic, cultural, and whatever other causes, I would accept his explanation. But I would not be satisfied with it (pp. 1-2).

Flusser thus concludes that

a gesture is a movement of the body or of a tool connected to the body for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation... To understand gestures, these specific physical movements that we perform and that we observe around us, causal explanations are not enough (p. 2).

‘The definition of *gesture* suggested here assumes that we are dealing with a symbolic movement’ (p. 3). Hence, ‘gestures express and articulate that which they symbolically represent’ (p. 4).

The word ‘symbol’ as defined in Merriam Webster Dictionary Online denotes (1) ‘something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance; especially: a visible sign of something invisible’ like ‘the lion is a symbol of courage;’ and (2) ‘an act, sound, or object having cultural significance and the capacity to excite or objectify a response.’ This study explores the symbolism of the shoe and examines its physical and linguistic usage as a gesture of disrespect or disdain. Linguistically, the word ‘shoe’ is a keyword that articulates a feeling, and functions as a symbol of rejection. In line with what Highmore writes in his study on *Keywords and Keywording* (2022), certain words may seem ‘innocent but end up doing the ideological heavy lifting’ (p. 876). The Iraqi ‘shoe’ is certainly one of them.

As for the concept of ‘culture,’ Raymond Williams (1983) says that it is ‘one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language’ (p. 62). Williams focuses on ‘three broad categories of use’: (1) ‘the independent and abstract noun which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development from [18th century];’ (2) ‘the independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general;’ and (3) ‘the independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and specially artistic activity’ (p. 64). Williams concludes with: ‘culture is music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film’ (Ibid.). In Iraq, the shoe and shoe-related rhetoric is a culture in its own right. The shoe serves its conventional purpose as footwear but also holds significance as a tool for physical assault. Furthermore, it is employed linguistically to convey emotions such as anger, frustration,



or disappointment.

This paper delves into the historic, cultural, social, political, linguistic, metaphorical, and symbolic implications of the shoe in Iraqi society. The aim is to understand the semantics and pragmatics of the term. Its use as a gesture may appear straightforward, yet its impact is profound. It effectively conveys its symbolic meaning with minimal effort. This simplicity perhaps underscores its essence and “beauty.” As Flusser (2024) confirms: ‘the less a gesture informs (the better it communicates), the more empty it is, and so the more pleasant and “pretty,” for it can be read without very much effort’ (pp. 8-9).

## 2. Restrictions and Challenges

It is of great importance to note that dealing with Iraq’s cultural heritage is challenging as there are layers of complexities involved. Most significantly, in this context, is the lack of scholarly sources in addition to the loss of Iraq’s archives. Palumbo (2005) writes:

On 10 April 2003, the Baghdad National Museum was ransacked. More than 15,000 objects disappeared in two days and approximately 7,000 have been retrieved so far. A few days later, the National Library was set alight. Thousands of volumes and historical documents were destroyed. Outside the capital, looting at archaeological sites had started, especially in the south. The collapse of an organized system of protection allowed organized gangs to loot at a pace that surprised even those who had predicted this risk. (p. 225)

In 2018, *The Preservation of the Academic Heritage in the Middle East* (2018) published an online article stating:

After Baghdad was captured in 2003, many libraries in Baghdad were deliberately set on fire one after another. Amongst those libraries were the National Library, the Quran Library under the Presidency of Religious Affairs, the al-Mustansiriya University Library, the Fine Arts Faculty Library, and the National Archive...

Founded in 1920, the Baghdad National Library had many books, magazines, newspapers, microfilms, maps, photographs, and many official and unofficial documents dating back to the Ottoman period. The most important works and resources related to the modern history of Iraq and its political, social and cultural life were found in this library.

The fire destroyed at least 25% of the books in the library, 60% of the archives and the whole map and photography archives.

Hence, 75% of the books and 40% of the archives were preserved. However, assuming that accessing Iraq’s archives, libraries, and bookstores is a simple and uncomplicated process today would be a grave misconception. An Iraqi writer and journalist, Rudha al-Dhahir, once explained:

It is with great sadness that this country, that is Iraq, does not respect anything called



‘archives.’ In fact, Iraq does not have proper archives to refer to or to access. It proves difficult to communicate with Iraqis through emails, telephone calls or social media. You must come to Iraq and visit the National Library and seek access to its archives. Even then, matters are too complicated and you are often met with countless obstacles before you actually get to the Library or its archives. ... In summary, this is a ‘nation without memory.’ (R. al-Dhahir, Facebook Messenger audio conversation, 2 September 2020)

Literature might exist, predominantly in bookstores located on Baghdad’s renowned Mutannabi Street. Nevertheless, visiting Iraq may not be feasible for all. Baghdad, the once glorious capital of the Abbasid Empire (750-1258) and the scientific center of the Golden Era of Islam, today is - and for the past few decades has been - a city in turmoil, marked by heightened political volatility, sectarian conflicts, and an overall precarious atmosphere (Bahrani 2003, Adams 2001). In a recent study on Iraqi folklore (Al-Kaisi 2022), the author mentions how ‘in an ideal world, [she] would have travelled to Iraq ... [she] would have visited Baghdad’ (p. 201) but sadly, she is unable to do any of that. Indeed, Iraq’s unstable political reality and its unsafe environment are major obstacles which many Iraqis cannot overcome.

### **3. Objectives and Methodology**

The objectives of this study are twofold. One is to recognise and highlight a particular sociolinguistic trend in Iraqi culture. The second is to define and describe, and thereby preserve a record of, the Iraqi shoe-related rhetoric.

This study primarily draws upon information collected from online newspapers, magazines, social media, and informants. Quantitatively these proved to be more informative, although qualitatively they may - but not necessarily have to - be questionable. In fact, since this is a study of a culture and of a sociolinguistic trend, informants - that is, speakers and users of this specific language - are an invaluable source.

Unfortunately, there is only one scholarly journal article on the subject written in English by Yasmin Ibrahim (2009). A few articles were found on the cultural heritage of Iraq (Adams 2001, Bahrani 2003, Johnson *et al* 2020, Palumbo 2005) but they all speak of the collateral damage caused by the American and British invasion in 2003 and the destruction and loss of artifacts. No reference is made to the intangible aspects of culture overall, particularly in terms of sociolinguistic patterns. Ibrahim’s article remains the only one. Evidently, little, if any, effort has been made to record many of Iraq’s intangible cultural heritage in English. There is a considerable amount of scholarly research on Iraq’s ancient Mesopotamian history and archeological heritage, and on Iraq’s more recent political, ethnographic, and religious affairs (Ala’Aldeen 2019, Arosoaie 2015-16, Arosoaie 2015, Bashkin 2011, Bogdanos 2005, Cordesman 2018, Dalnero 2008, Jones *et al.* 2006, Kadri 2016, Khoury 2013, Kirmanj 2013, Pfaff 2020, Schipper 2005), but, sadly, very little on intangible culture, folk-practices, or sociolinguistics.

The motivation behind my fascination with this subject and my aspiration to compose a scholarly account



of it stems from the astonishingly limited coverage of this intriguing sociolinguistic trend within Iraqi culture. The cultural heritage of Iraq appears to be fading away as we struggle to recognize, articulate, and formalize its linguistic and cultural dimensions. Preserving written records is crucial before memories fade away and past generations vanish.

The primary aim of this article is to outline and thereby conserve a documentation of the Iraqi rhetoric associated with footwear. However, one may wonder, why focus on this particular aspect of Iraqi culture and not others? Some might perceive this study as unconventional and question its specificity. Hence, for those questioning the decision to explore this subject, I must clarify that my intention is not to cause offense but rather to acknowledge and honor a facet of my own culture and language. The Iraqi identity is intricate, shaped over millennia. While the shoe rhetoric does not define it or encompass its entirety, it does signify an intriguing element of Iraq's cultural and sociolinguistic heritage that has not received scholarly attention, hence deserving acknowledgment.

#### **4. Historical Background**

Iraq has a long-lived history with shoes. The 'shoe' is one of the social and literary manifestations of Iraqi life and the highest level of insult. The Iraqi would utter phrases like 'son of the shoe' (*ibn-el-qundara*), 'you and my shoe' (*inta w-qundartī*), or 'my shoe is more honorable than you' (*qundartī ashraf minnak* or *qundartī tsharfak*). To someone unfamiliar with Arab culture, this might seem peculiar, considering that feet and footwear may not universally hold negative associations in all contexts. These are culture-bound expressions and idioms that are generally metaphoric in nature and the meaning of which is, consequently, lost in literal translation. This is a reminder of Raymond William's words in his *Keywords* (1983) which confirm that two different worlds and two different cultures 'just don't speak the same language' (p. 12). Therefore, culture-bound expressions must be interpreted at a non-literal level.

Inevitably, understanding the culture serves the gateway to understanding the language. 'Culture' in this context is to be understood in line with William's (1983) second category of usage that was noted earlier. Metaphors, idioms and proverbs are common communication strategies that require shared cultural knowledge. Therefore, non-native speakers of Arabic generally, and of Iraqi vernacular specifically, would find the foot and footwear-related rhetoric difficult to understand at first, at least till the cultural context is given or similar communicative methods are noted in more familiar settings. Attempting to just translate the idioms proves to be a challenge (Ali and al-Rushaidi 2016).

In 2008, the Iraqi journalist Muntazar al-Zaidi removed his shoes and threw them at then US President George W. Bush during a joint press conference in Baghdad with then Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, crying out loud: 'This is a farewell kiss from the Iraqi people, you dog' and 'this is from the widows, the orphans and those killed in Iraq' (Aldroubi 2023). The intention behind Zaidi's wild gesticulation seems to have been two-fold. On one hand the shoe-throwing act meant to shame Bush and on the other to convey the anger against American presence in Iraq. It was an act of resentment and resistance against injustice



(Ibrahim 2009).<sup>1</sup> This is what Flusser (2014) would call ‘disruptive gesture,’ basically an ‘ethical phenomenon’ and a ‘motivated’ act, the driving force of which is pure frustration. Flusser says: ‘disturbance with intention is frustrated conservatism, destruction with intention is frustrated revolution’ (p. 59). Zaidi’s strike was not an act of evil nor was it revolutionary. The American presence in Iraq was seemingly perceived provocative which prompted resentment followed by a gesture to disturb the newly established alliance and the so-called “democratic” order. Zaidi was arrested and allegedly tortured following the incident. His only regret, to which he confessed later, was not having more shoes to throw at Bush (Shawkat *et al.* 2023, Nazeh 2023). Flusser (2014) says: ‘when disturbance and destruction occur intentionally, when they are “pragmatic,” their motive is impure and so not “pure evil.” And what is not pure evil is none at all but rather the frustrated search for freedom’ (p. 60).

## 5. Flying Objects: Tokens of Protest or Appreciation

‘The act of being hit with a shoe is perceived to be the worst form of insult in Middle Eastern culture’ (Ibrahim 2009, p. 219). Noteworthy, this practice does not seem too foreign to other eastern cultures, and Iraq is thus not unique with its culture of shoe-throwing and shoe-brandishing political discourse. Perhaps the most famous shoe incident in modern political history is that of Nikita Khrushchev, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, who brandished his shoe at, or allegedly banged it on, his delegate-desk in protest against a speech given by Philippine delegate Lorenzo Sumulong at the 902nd Plenary Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly in New York City on 12 October 1960 (Carol 2018).

Yasmin Ibrahim (2009, p. 213) explains that ‘protesting against political issues and politicians has in many circumstances been communicated through gestures.’ She also confirms that ‘throwing objects as a form of disapproval is embedded in our human and cultural consciousness; for example, Elizabethan audiences used to throw rotten food as an angry response to bad acting whilst good performances were rewarded with coins’ (p. 213-4). Moreover, ‘throwing objects is ... a form of communication in which the act of throwing and the object thrown can be symbolic and culturally significant’ (p. 214).

According to Fornäs (2012), symbols are ‘tools for collective identification’ and they ‘serve as clues to how communities are formed’ (p. 43). Fornäs continues to explain that meanings and identities are not confined solely to internal mental experiences within individuals. They consistently emerge and evolve through the mediation of tangible symbols or representations: whether in the form of words, images, sounds, or other outwardly perceptible indicators organized into diverse structures or creations such as artifacts, texts, works, genres, and discourses. The understanding of these processes can vary depending on the theoretical viewpoint, offering numerous potential terminologies. Therefore, meanings are not solely products of individual mental processes or subjectivity. Instead, they are formed through intersubjective

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<sup>1</sup> Absurdly, Demirbas (2009) reports that the shoemakers behind the shoe thrown at Bush rebranded that particular model as the ‘Bush shoe,’ witnessing a remarkable surge in sales following the incident.



communication among people within social contexts. In these settings, individuals collectively attribute meaning to diverse phenomena, encompassing objects, events, and practices. Functioning as instruments for signifying practices, these meaningful phenomena serve as signs. Signs, described as ‘expressions that convey a meaning’ according to Ricoeur (1960/1969, pp. 14-15), aim at something beyond themselves and symbolize that particular something. In addition to what has already been said earlier in the introduction, an approximation of the concept of ‘symbol’ is that (1) it can be roughly described as a sign that directs or represents something else through its significance, and (2) it is a specific category of sign characterized by a conventional connection between the symbol and its meaning, rather than a natural one. Therefore, a symbol represents a fundamental building block for creating significance by associating meaning with it within socially contextualized, interactive, intersubjective, and interpretative activities. Peirce (1940/1955) defines symbols as signs whose meanings stem from conventional interpretation originating from their utilization in social practices, rather than from any inherent natural law (pp. 102, 112). Furthermore, within the pragmatic and interactive realm of social psychology, Mead (1934) explores ‘significant symbols’ as gestures that generate meaning by their utilization in interpersonal interactions, consequently forming language (pp.45-46). At the heart of all cultural systems, signs are tangible representations that signify something (meaning) to specific individuals (interpretive community) within particular contexts. They serve as markers that, within specific settings organized by everyday practices, tend to reference or indicate something beyond their physical existence for certain individuals (Fornäs 2012, p. 45).<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, at the heart of cultural expression, people across the globe would throw various objects into the air or pelt them at people as a response to certain feelings evoked or reactions to events or festivities. These flying objects serve as symbols to convey a message. The message may be positive, one of welcoming, blessing, admiration and celebration. In this case the objects on offer would be grains of rice, colours, scented water, candies, confetti, money or flowers. The message may also be negative, one of protest, disaffection, anger or disappointment. Pelting eggs, pies, rotten food and even shoes would be amongst the most popular flying objects directed at individuals in this scenario (Ramaswamy 2015, Vinciguerra 2000). Amongst many distinguished individuals, Bill Gates, for instance, had a pie thrown at him in Brussels back in 1988 and Microsoft CEO, Steve Ballmer, had eggs thrown at him in 2008 in Budapest (Allen 2008, Clark 2009, New York Daily News 2016). Conversely, in Iraq, during times of protest, the object commonly thrown would invariably be a *shoe*, serving as a collective symbol and a widely accepted representation of profound anger and disrespect.

Interestingly, the Zaidi event mentioned earlier comes just four years after the Dubai-based Al-Arabiya satellite television channel had broadcast images across the Arab world of 47-year-old Iraqi Abu Tahsin striking a portrait of Saddam Hussein with his shoe, which was a sign of extreme disrespect (August 2008).

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<sup>2</sup> For more studies on symbols and symbolic meaning in political discourses, see Cohen 1974, De Saussure 1974, Eriksen *et. al.* 2013, Firth 1973, Turner 1975, Routledge 1997.



Earlier, following the war crimes committed during 1991 liberation of Kuwait, a floor mosaic of George W. Bush was placed at the front door to Rashid Hotel in Baghdad in order for visitors to step on it. This was an act of revenge (Asser 2008). The Zaidi event was an act of frustration and a call for liberation. Despite not being the first person resorting to the shoe, the question at hand is: has Muntazar al-Zaidi initiated a new cultural phenomenon that transcends the boundaries of Iraq and the Middle East, characterized by the act of expressing frustration through the hurling of a shoe?<sup>3</sup>

This attitude and language might be perceived as vulgar by certain individuals, and they have every right and reason to feel that way. However, it appears to be a common Iraqi characteristic devoid of social, class, or gender-related implications. For instance, if we were to imagine a hypothetical scenario where the Russian authors Chekhov (d. 1904) and Tolstoy (d. 1910) engaged in an intellectual disagreement while in each other's company, they might resort to expressing their disagreements through their writings rather than initiating a physical altercation by striking each other with shoes. However, in Iraq, such a disagreement would more likely result in an immediate shoe-throwing conflict between the two individuals. A great example is that of the renowned Iraqi poet Baland al-Haydari (d. 1996) and the Iraqi literary critic Najib al-Mani' (d. 1991) who started a "shoe battle" over a personal dispute (Murad 2011). Another instance involves the Iraqi poets Saadi Yousef (d. 2021), one of the most important contemporary poets in the Arab world, and Abdulkareem Kasid, who engaged in a dispute that culminated in a shoe-throwing altercation (R. al-Dhahir, personal conversation, London, 11 July 2023).

Shoe-throwing practice and shoe-related rhetoric in Iraqi culture is not necessarily always a symbol of political protest. Iraqis seem to have numerous reasons for using their shoes. For instance, looking back at the most recent politically steered events mentioned earlier into the history of Iraq, one does not fall short in finding situations where the *shoe* was used to insult the other.

## 6. Symbolism of Shoes

Undoubtedly, the shoe has its history and significance. I do not mean as a physical, tangible object, but as a symbol of worldly life, authority, power and domination, worthlessness, contempt, profanity, and disrespect. This somehow universal history indicates that Iraqis are not initiating a fresh sociolinguistic and cultural discourse, but instead, they are echoing past sentiments by metaphorically employing the shoe as a symbol of insignificance and disdain.

The shoe is mentioned in the Bible where it symbolizes the earthy in contrast with the holy. God's command

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<sup>3</sup> Following the Zaidi event, in Tehran dozens of people took to the streets in protest against George W. Bush waving their shoes in the air before turning the event into a shoe-throwing rally (Vennard 2008). Also in London, in January 2009 demonstrations against Israel's military offensive in Gaza, protesters hurled over 1000 pairs of shoes at the entrance to Downing Street (Haaretz 2009, McVeigh and Quinn 2009) somehow replicating the shoe-throwing incident by Zaidi in Iraq (Jamieson 2009). Likewise, in Cyprus, citizens protested against Israel near the Israeli embassy in Nicosia by hurling different items, including shoes. In Bosnia, Zaidi's shoe-throwing event sparked ideas among organizers to stage protests against government officials (Alarabiya News 2009, Dawn 2009). These organizers encouraged people to mark the New Year by symbolically warning government leaders, prompting them to throw shoes at the leaders (ABS CBN News 2009). Remarkably, based on this occurrence, a Bosnian website reportedly developed an online game where users could virtually toss shoes at Serb leader Milorad Dodik (ABS CBN News 2009).



to Moses in front of the burning bush was: 'Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground' (Ex. 3:2-5). Similarly, the Quran reads: 'O Musa, it is Me, your Lord, remove your shoes, you are in the sacred valley of Tuwa' (Q. 20:11-12). The Prophet Muhammad was heard saying to a man walking between the graves to respect the dead: 'O man, wearing the shoes! Woe to thee! Take off thy shoes' (Sunan Abi Dawud, 3230). Similarly, in Judeo-Christian context, 'as a matter of reverence, no one with his shoes on should set foot upon the hill in Jerusalem whereon the temple had stood in bygone days' (Nacht 1915, p. 2). 'Only with bare feet should one draw near to a place dedicated to God' (Ex. r. II, 13 cited Nacht 1915, p. 2).

There are also instances where shoes and feet symbolise domination. 'Put your feet upon the necks of these kings' (Josh. 10.24 cited Nacht 1915, p. 2) was the command of Joshua to his warriors to indicate victory. The shoe may also denote the right to possession. Nacht (1915, p. 3) explains that 'a purchase becomes legal when the seller takes off his shoes and hands it over to the buyer.' When the shoe is removed from a person, however, it indicates loss of authority of a member of his family (Ibid.). According to Hebrew customs, when a woman removes the man's shoe, it symbolizes the act of unfastening the connection that links her to him, thereby reclaiming her freedom (Crombie 1895, p. 266).

Additionally, in Hebrew customs, the shoe plays a role in a ritual associated with levirate marriage. Levirate marriage is an ancient practice that mandates the surviving brother of a deceased man to enter into a union with the childless widow of his brother. This practice aimed to ensure the continuation of the deceased brother's lineage by producing offspring. Towards the conclusion of the Deuteronomic passage concerning this law, there is an explanation of the actions a woman should take if her surviving brother-in-law (levir) refuses to marry her. It is written: "Then shall his brother's wife come unto him in the presence of the elders, and loose his shoe from off his foot, and spit in his face, and shall answer and say, "So shall it be done unto that man that will not build up his brother's house." And his name shall be called in Israel, The house of him that hath his shoe loosed' (Deuteronomy 25:9–10 cited Gaskill 2013, p. 134).

To strike a person with a shoe is a sign of disrespect and a token of subjugation. In the Psalms (60:8) God is quoted to have said: 'Over Edom I shall throw My shoe [in triumph].' Accordingly, during physical altercations, Arabs would often resort to using shoes or slippers as a means of striking. However, within Arab tribal/bedouin societies, individuals of higher esteem would opt to strike using the '*iqāl* - a black cord worn by men to secure the *ghutra* or *kaffiye* (headcloth) in place - rather than resorting to shoes or slippers.

'In disputes,' amongst the Arabs, 'the term shoe designates an insult in the highest degree' (Nacht 1915, p. 6). Without any bias based on gender, both women and men would employ the term to insult one another. 'My shoe upon your head' is a prevalent example and possibly the least severe among them.

Indeed, as a gesture of disdain toward someone, specific expressions such as 'sandal,' 'slipper,' 'shoe-lace,' 'shoe-sole,' and 'shoe' in general are used by both Arabs and Jews in certain linguistic expressions. 'In the language of the Bible,' apparently, 'the term shoe-string or shoe is also employed to express something



petty and of little value' (Nacht 1915, p. 5). 'To sell a person for shoes means to abandon him for a mere nothing' (p. 6). Nacht recalls a woman scorning a Rabbi 'telling him that her father's shoe was worthier than his entire family' (p. 8). Most certainly every Arab would confirm that similar shoe-related expressions are used in their linguistic communities. Hence, the term is never employed in a positive context. Being labeled as 'shoe' is perceived as a significant dishonor.

The shoe-throwing custom in wedding celebrations in Victorian England ironically signals a wish for 'good luck' to the married couple (Crombie 1895). Interestingly, in 19th century British weddings the bride is also hit with a shoe on her head by the groom as part of the ceremony (Crombie 1895, Tromp 2013). That symbolised transfer of power from the bride's father to the groom and a sign of the superiority of the groom over the bride (Wood 2015). 'In some parts of the East,' Wood relates, 'it was an early custom to carry a slipper before the newly-married couple as a token of the bride's subjection to her husband' (p. 16). He continues to explain that 'at a Jewish wedding ... the bridegroom struck the bride with his shoe as a sign of his authority and supremacy' (p. 17). Nestorian Christians were not too different from the Jews at observing similar wedding customs. 'On the wedding night,' Wood notes, 'the bridegroom gave the bride a kick, and commanded her to pull off his shoes, as a token of her submission to him' (p. 69). Marlene Tromp (2013, p. 39) argues that such gestures suggest 'a foundational violence in marriage' as they seem to 'suggest that if the bride followed social strictures and kept her place, the bridegroom might not feel compelled to resort to knocking her with his shoe.' How this act came to denote a wish for 'good luck' in 19th century England may be interpreted as 'everyone would be "lucky" if the bride passively played her part and the social order stayed intact' (ibid.).

Nonetheless, 'a woman who threatens to strike her husband with the shoe wants to emphasize her authority and independence' (Nacht 1915, p. 7). Nacht elucidates that in Russia a woman might retaliate against her offender by hitting them in the face with a shoe, sandal, or slipper (p. 8). This behavior is also commonly observed in the Arab world.

## **7. Calceology of Iraqi Shoes**

### **7.1. Overview**

We rarely hear of Calceology. It is a subject that is seldom discussed, and the term might not readily evoke the idea of a discipline dedicated to studying ancient shoes and exploring their historical significance within societal and evolutionary frameworks. However, this field is concerned with studying the technical elements linked to shoe production, as well as the restoration of antique footwear. For specialists, this science serves as a tool to delve into the shoe's past, encompassing its social, ritual, archaeological, and folkloric relevance, while also tracing the progress of its early industries and the natural materials used in their production. Calceology is recognized as the science that deciphers history through the forms of ancient shoes, dedicated to seeking and examining remnants of human civilization in their clothing, particularly shoes, soles, sandals, and boots, which serve as windows into human society and culture.



Emerging in the seventeenth century, calceology has been regarded as a specialized branch of archaeology, albeit a somewhat niche discipline, primarily focused on investigating ancient footwear as artifacts of antiquity and scrutinizing social patterns evident in their production, such as materials like animal hides, wood, fur, trees, bark, leaves, and fibers. Presently, it is perceived as a facet of visual precision, concentrating on the exploration and progression of human existence by studying shoes and their manufacturing processes.

Footwear has constituted a fundamental aspect of human culture throughout millennia. Spanning ancient eras to contemporary trends, the narrative of shoe history encapsulates a captivating journey that mirrors the evolution of human civilization. Similar to numerous contemporary facets of daily life that are commonly overlooked, footwear has an origin, and for Iraq, it all starts in Mesopotamia. Artifacts dating back to the Uruk Period (BCE 4100 - 2900), known as the Sumerian state, portray individuals adorned in embellished knee-length kilts or ankle-length skirts referred to as *kaunakes*. Evidence from cylinder seals and statues suggests their attire was complemented by hats, headbands, and jewelry. The artwork also indicates the presence of some type of footwear, presumably sandals (Mark 2023). Additionally, as indicated by an online blog discussing the 'history of sandals' and various other digital sources pertaining to Sumerian attire and trends, archaeological findings have brought to light a regal shoe characterized by an upturned toe, dating back to around 3000 BCE. Subsequently, similar footwear were donned by esteemed officials during formal ceremonies, leading to the widespread adoption of Sumerian shoe designs. These upturned shoes were crafted from dyed leather and often featured a raised heel or elevated soles (History of Sandals 2023, al-Şāliḥī 2018). During the Akkadian Period (BCE 2334 - 2218) the footwear consisted of sandals or boots (Mark 2023). As for the Babylonians (BCE c. 2000 - 1600), their distinctive clothing style was notably chronicled by Herodotus (BCE c. 484-425/413) who confirms the use of footwear (Waterfield 2008, 86 cited in Mark 2023):

As for their clothing, they wear a linen tunic which reaches down to their feet; on top of this they wear another tunic, made out of wool, and they put a white shawl around their shoulders. Their shoes are of a local design ...They wear their hair long and wrap a turban around their heads. They perfume their whole bodies. Every man has a signet-ring and a hand-carved staff, and every staff bears a design of some kind – an apple, a rose, a lily, an eagle, or something. It would be abnormal for any of them to have a staff which was not emblazoned with a device.

Garments for the upper class were crafted from linen, while those for the lower class were typically made from wool. The primary attire for men consisted of a hat, a plain tunic (with potential additional layers for those who could afford them), and sandals (Mark 2023). During the Kassite period (c. 1600–1200 BCE), the adoption of soft shoes originated from the inhabitants of mountainous regions bordering Iran, who governed Babylonia at that time. These initial shoes were uncomplicated leather wraparounds, resembling the fundamental design of a moccasin, secured on the foot with rawhide lacings (Britannica 2023, Hadid 2011). In the era of the Neo-Assyrian Period (BCE 912 - 612), particularly during and following the rule of



Sargon II (BCE 722 - 705), Assyrian soldiers donned boots along with leather breeches under a *kaunake* and a tunic beneath their armor. Alternatively, some individuals wore boots or shoes accompanied by cloth leggings beneath the kilt, often paired with a shirt or belted tunic at the waist. Upper-class women wore long tunics along with shoes or sandals and various styles of headdresses (Mark 2023).

## 7.2. Abū al-Qāsim al-Ṭānbūrī

Significantly, the calceology of Iraqi footwear, particularly from a folkloric perspective, can be traced back to a renowned narrative featuring Abū al-Qāsim al-Ṭānbūrī and his *mdās* (mules). Ṭānbūrī was a prosperous yet frugal merchant residing in Baghdad during the Abbasid era (750-1258). His mules, perhaps among the most celebrated in Arab history, notably transcend Iraqi borders. Ṭānbūrī possessed a worn-out pair that he adamantly wore despite his wealth, until persuaded by others to acquire a new set, given his financial capacity and the impracticality of wearing tattered footwear. The subsequent events unfold from this pivotal moment when he relinquished his old mules and obtained a new pair, leading him into significant trouble. Despite Ṭānbūrī's potential willingness to part with his mules, these creatures were unwilling to leave him and persistently found their way back to him repeatedly in an amusing and thrilling way (Anā al-Baḥar nd).

## 7.3. The Modern Iraqi Shoe

It is said that the *shoe* first appeared in modern Iraq in the 19th century to replace other existent footwear like the *mdās* (mules), *khufāf* (sing. *khuff*) (truc-moc), *yemenī* (particular slippers imported from Yemen) and the *in'āl* (slippers) for occasional wear (Al-Khayyun 2008, Al-Nadawī 2020). The initial shoe style, it seems, was the *qabaghli*, essentially a loafer, that is, a slip-on shoe lacking laces, ties, or buckles. Subsequently, a variety of footwear options emerged to adorn the feet of both Iraqi men and women. The list further below encompasses some of these variations.

The history of traditional footwear, as well as clothing generally, is incredibly diverse in Iraq and it varies according to gender, ethnicity, religion and social status. Noteworthy, beside the Arab Muslim majority (both Sunnis and Shia), numerous religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic minorities inhabit Iraq. These are Assyrian, Chaldean, Syriac, Turkmen, Armenian, Shabak, Sabeen-Mandaean, Kurd and Fayli Kurd, Zoroastrian, Yazidi, Christian (mainly Orthodox and Catholic, but also Protestant, Anglican and Latin-Dominican), and Jews (EUAA 2021, Taneja 2011). Each of these communities is identified by various boundary markers that individuals choose to display. Having said that, the topic of Iraqi fashion, including cultural and socio-religious symbols, is beyond the scope of the present study and is reserved for exploration in another paper.

In the context of this study, shoe fashion is relevant, and it is crucial to incorporate, at minimum, a simple glossary of the various types of footwear in Iraq:

- *Aḥmarī*, originating from Yemen, crafted from dyed camel skin, earning its name *aḥmarī*, signifying its



reddish hue. According to an online source, the *aḥmarī* is the same as the *yemenī* shoe mentioned further below. It says that the city-dwellers would call it *yemenī* and the bedouins would call it *aḥmarī* due to its red colour.

- *Bābūj*, the 'babouche' slippers or light-weight shoes typically worn in the Middle East. This style is similar to the *mdās* (mentioned below) and perhaps just another name for it. It is most likely a borrowed word from Turkish *papuç*, pronounced sometimes as *babuç* which is a type of shoes or slippers (Parlakpınar 2013).
- *Buṣṭāl*, 'combat boots.'
- *Būt* and *būtīn* for leather boots. Persian also has *būtīn* for leather boots, mostly 'combat boots,' but this is most likely a borrowed word from English 'boot.'
- *Chazma*, 'boots' generally, but also rubber *chazma* which is like the wellington boots or the CT safety boots. This is a borrowed word from Persian *chakme* for 'wellington boots.' The term *chazma* is also common in Egypt, where it is pronounced as *gazma*, for 'shoes' in general. The Egyptians would also use this term to insult and would say *ibn-el-gazma* 'son of the shoe.'
- *Gewah*, also called *klāsh* by the Kurds, is Kurdish woven cotton and white fabric slip-on shoes similar to the *opanci*.
- *In'āl* is a 'slipper' and one of the more common terms used to insult. There is also the *in'āl abu 'l-isbi'* (flip-flops).
- *Kāleh* is popular in the Syrian countryside but found its way to Iraq through the Kurdish community. It is made of rubber and looks similar to the *gewah* mentioned above. Iraqis would use *kāleh* too to insult and would say *ibn-el-kāleh*, 'son of the *kāleh*.'
- *Kawālīsh*, the overshoes or the galosh, like spats and gaiters.
- *Klāsh*, or the *gewah* as the Iraqi Arabs call it, is Kurdish woven cotton and white fabric slip-on shoes similar to the *opanci* as mentioned earlier. Crafted by hand, the *klāsh* requires approximately three days for the making of a single pair, consequently pricing at around \$50 per pair in today's market (Sky News Arabic 2023).
- *Lābjīn*, which is a Persian word for 'combat boots,' is used in Iraq for athletic shoes.
- *Mdās*, 'mule,' predominantly used among Muslim Shia religious figures. It is plausible that the *mdās* style footwear was borrowed from Iran, potentially elucidating its usage within the Shia clergy. The process of crushing the slipper while walking - an act that degrades the sole itself - led some to call this type of footwear *mdās* (i.e. trampling).
- *Qubqāb* is a wooden slipper specifically used in baths.



- *Qundara*, 'shoe' in general, borrowed from Turkish *kundura*, also pronounced in Turkish as *qondura*.
- *Shahhāṭa* and the *iskārbel* are women's flat shoes like the skimmers, pumps or espadrilles. In the Levant the *shahhāṭa* stands for slippers.
- *Yemenī* is a particular slipper or shoe imported from Yemen. The Iraqis use this term to insult and would say *alifyemenī 'alā rāsak* 'a thousand yemeni slippers on your head' or *ibn-el-yemenī* 'son of the yemeni slipper.' Some claim that this is an alternative name to the *aḥmarī* mentioned above. Turkish also has the word *yemenī* for a type of slippers (Parlakpınar 2013).

#### 7.4. Professions

The first shoe factory in Iraq was called *kāha-chī*. Over time, the term evolved to specifically refer to the occupation of a shoemaker. The *chī* suffix, which is used frequently in Iraqi Arabic, is, in fact, Turkish referring to a profession. *Kāhe*, on the other hand, is Persian for 'shoes.' Regrettably, in present-day Iraq, this expression is no longer acknowledged. If individuals were to inquire about its significance, they would likely appear perplexed and would mistakenly link the term to an Iraqi puff pastry named *kāhī*, assuming that *kāha-chī* refers to the one who bakes *kāhī* pastries (Al-Khaṭīb nd).

Terms representing the profession of a cobbler include *qundar-chī*, *ina'āl-chī*, or *raggā'*, which literally translates to 'he who patches the shoes,' that is, *yiraggi'*. Additionally, there is the *keshowān*, a person responsible for overseeing shoes at sacred shrines. The designated area where visitors leave their shoes while fulfilling their religious duties is known as *keshowāniyye*. This practice and the designated shoe area is specific to Shia shrines and has most likely been assimilated as a linguistic and cultural element from Iran. *Kesho* in Persian means 'shoe cabinet.' The Arabic suffix *iyya* is normally added to express a certain concept, in this case a 'place.' Consequently, *keshowan-iyya* becomes the 'place where the shoe-keeper sits.'

The term *qundara* is not originally Arabic as highlighted in the glossary above, but it is borrowed from Turkish *kundura* (Parlakpınar 2013). The Standard Arabic terms for footwear are *ḥidhā'* (pl. *aḥdhiya*) 'shoes', *ina'al* (pl. *nī'āl*) 'slippers', or *khuff* (pl. *khufāf* or *akhfāf*) 'truc-moc.' The Iraqi dialect has been notably shaped by foreign languages across its historical timeline. Turkish and Persian are perhaps the most recognised influencers although not the only ones. An exhaustive examination of foreign terms borrowed, adapted, and incorporated into the Iraqi dialect is undeniably essential.

Amidst the diverse demographics in Iraq and irrespective of the linguistic roots of specific expressions, the majority of Iraqis converge in their utilization of shoe-related metaphors for insults. Whether it's *qundara*, *in'āl*, *yemenī*, or *kāleh*, these terms hold a universal currency in conveying disparagement.

### 8. The Political Shoe

For the symbolic and practical aspects of the shoe to be fully realized, it had to venture into the realm of politics, seeking to assume the role it was meant to represent. Indeed, the shoe's integration into politics



wasn't challenging or intricate. Instead, its widespread usage in popular culture for insults and expressing anger facilitated its seamless and vibrant transition into the political arena. The shoe has been linked to societal frustration, both verbally and physically.

Historically the political significance of shoes has been long and eventful in Iraq. One of the most enduring and prevalent uses of the shoe-rhetoric in Iraq's political history is reflected in the well-known Iraqi chant *Nūrī Sa'īd-el-qundara w-Ṣāliḥ Jabur qīṭānha* (lit. 'Nuri Said is the shoe and Salih Jabur is its lace'), which could perhaps be interpreted as the English idiom 'caught between the devil and the dark blue sea.' The chant could also imply (which purportedly became apparent to the people of Iraq at that time) that Nuri Said held the true authority as the decision-maker, while Salih Jabur was merely a subordinate following orders. This chant emerged following the signing of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1948, also known as the Portsmouth Treaty, which faced widespread objections. Both Said and Jabur were influential political figures during the monarchy. Nuri Pasha al-Said (d. 1958), who served as Iraq's Prime Minister on fourteen occasions between the 1930s and 1950s, and Salih Jabur (d. 1957), the foreign affairs minister in Said's office, albeit the *de facto* Prime Minister at the time of the treaty signing (Al-Qashtini 2006 and 2015).<sup>4</sup> Nuri Said's phenomenal reaction to what he heard was to convey a message to the people asking them to honour *this shoe* so that their feet won't get hurt without it.

What many might not know, says the Iraqi journalist and satirist Khalid al-Qashtini (d. 2023), is that the history of modern Iraq, as an independent state, starts with a shoe. Allegedly, in early 1920s when a Hashemite monarchy was established under British protection and the Iraqi people presumed their independence, there was, as ludicrously narrated by Qashtini, a shoe-related incident that "granted" Iraq its independence (Murad 2011). Qashtini recounts an incident involving an English officer representing the British army at a court in Baghdad. The officer seated himself and placed his feet on a table, positioning his shoes towards the judge. When advised by the clerk to conduct himself appropriately by removing his shoes or placing his feet down, the officer declined, asserting that such behavior wasn't considered disrespectful in Britain. He further argued that Iraq was under British control and thus subject to British laws and customs. Consequently, the judge opted to postpone the case. This incident stirred significant uproar in the Iraqi press, with criticism directed at the false sense of independence brought about by then-King Faisal of Iraq. The country's sovereignty seemed to hinge on an officer's combat boots! The British media also, allegedly, covered the incident. Ultimately, the British resolved the matter by recalling the officer, sending him back to Britain, and replacing him with another officer who adhered to the court's decorum. Coincidentally, Iraq attained its independence with the involvement of a British soldier's boots.<sup>5</sup>

Many Iraqis continued to question the legitimacy of the newly-established monarchy. Qashtini relates that an official once came to the governor at the time, Sayed Qaradaghi (that is, Mustafa Qaradaghi the Governor

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<sup>4</sup> On the political dispute at some point between Said and Jabur see al-Sa'di 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Khaled al-Qashtini is renowned for his satirical approach in political discussions.



of Kirkuk (Northern Iraq) in the 1950s) enquiring about a pending case that he wanted to resolve. He said to the Governor: 'Do not forget, Your Honor, that I am one of the men who contributed to the founding of this state.' The Governor then extended his hand to remove his shoe and said: "Then prepare your head, because I have sworn an oath, when I see who this person is who worked to establish this state, I must hit him fifty times with my shoe on his head!" (Murad 2011).

Following the 2003 Iraq war, as Muqtada al-Sadr's prominence grew and the Sadrist Movement emerged, his followers would exclaim during moments of conflict with America: *in'āl-es-Sayyid yeswa Amrika w-mā-bīha* (lit. 'the slipper of the Sayyid is more valuable/honourable than America and all it contains'). The significance of the slipper here holds a dual connotation: it serves as an insult to America while simultaneously functioning as a form of praise directed towards Muqtada al-Sadr. Muqtada al-Sadr is an Iraqi Shia Muslim cleric, politician and leader of the Sadrist Movement and the Peace Companies militia.

Mahmoud Dawud al-Mashhadani, an Iraqi politician and former Speaker of the Iraqi Council of Representatives (in office between 2006-2008), said 'I shall strike with a shoe (*bi-'l-qundara*) any law that is incompatible with Islamic law' (Elam 2011). It is intriguing that someone of his stature, the Parliamentary Chairman at the time, possessing all the authority and parliamentary laws to resolve any problem, actually chose to address the issue by resorting to the use of a shoe!

In a somewhat strange situation, and what looked like 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' case, Muntazar al-Zaidi, the aforementioned Iraqi journalist and shoe-thrower at former US President George Bush, was exposed to a similar scene when an Iraqi immigrant journalist Sayf al-Khayyat threw al-Zaidi with the sole of his shoe in front of Arab and foreign journalists during a press conference in the French capital Paris in 2009 (Al-Iqtisādīya 2009).

Many other Iraqi parliamentarians and politicians engaged in instances where they exchanged shoes, both physically and through verbal insults, targeting their adversaries. They even resorted to using shoes as a means to influence the passing of legislation. Following a tense verbal confrontation between MP Aliya Nassif of the Al-Iraqiya Al-Hurra bloc and MP Salman Jumaili, the leader of the Iraqiya parliamentary bloc, over the state's fiscal budget for 2013, Nassif decided to strike Jumaili on the head with her shoe while they were both inside the Iraqi parliament. This incident was reported by *Asharq Al-Awsat* under the headline 'Shoe Attack on the Floor of Iraqi Parliament' (Mustafa 2013).

A former Iraqi MP, politician, and lawyer Faiq Al Sheikh Ali said in a live-streamed interview on Hayat Al-Sharq TV channel: *idhā ṭel'aw es-sunna min-'l-'Irāq, el-'Irāq ba'ad mā yeswa in'āl* (lit. 'should the Sunnis leave Iraq, Iraq will not be worth a slipper') (Hayat Al-Sharq 2020). Interestingly, Faiq Al-Sheikh Ali, in an attempt to shield himself from criticism, narrated a story about the fourth Rightly Guided Caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661), and his visit to Dhi Qar, a region in southern Iraq. Reports hold that Abd Allah ibn Abbas (d. 687), the Governor of Basra at that time and a prominent figure - known as Ibn Abbas - visited the Caliph Ali while he was repairing his torn slipper. Ali inquired of Ibn Abbas: *mā qīmat hādhā-'l-ina'āl?* 'What is the



value of this slipper?’ to which Ibn Abbas responded: ‘It is worth nothing.’ In reply, the Caliph affirmed: ‘By God, it is more beloved to me than your command’ (Nahj al-Balagha [online]). This event, and the symbolism of shoes discussed earlier, strongly suggest that modern Iraqis are not forging a new socio-political dialogue but rather echoing the sentiments of the past by using the slipper metaphorically as a symbol of worthlessness, profanity, and disrespect.

The political shoe returned again in 2023 in one of the meetings of the leaders of the Sunni parties in Baghdad. A dispute erupted between MP Salem Matar and Parliament Speaker Muhammad Al-Halbousi, and it ended with Matar telling Al-Halbousi *el-yom ahot-el-qundara b-ḥalgak*, ‘Today I shall put the shoe into your mouth’ (Shighidel 2023).

Looking outside of Iraq, the shoe has also proved to be a popular weapon used to assault an opponent. In 2006, the Egyptian Parliament observed a dispute between MPs Talat Al-Sadat and Ahmed Izz, culminating in the former verbally threatening to hit the latter with a shoe (Sam’ān 2006). In 2007, a comparable incident occurred in the Kuwaiti Parliament when MP Walid Al-Osaimi interrupted the speaking MP Ahmad Alsadoun, warning: ‘If you mention [me] again, I will put the shoe over your head’ (Dunyā Al-Waṭan 2007). In 2022 the Lebanese politician and journalist Wiam Wahhab said in an interview *ṣalāḥiyyāt kil-il-ṭawā’if w-ha-l-ṣirmaye* (*lit.* the powers of all the sects and this [my] shoe’) signifying ‘the sectarian powers hold no significance to me’ (Spot Shot 2022).

Following the Zaidi vs Bush shoe attack, the culture of fighting with shoes seems to have spread beyond the Arab world to North America, Europe, Australia, India, China, Iran, and Turkey. In 2009 New York, Steven Millies attempted to throw his shoe at the chief executive of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Sun Journal 2009). During the court proceedings, Attorney Julie Fry mentioned that Millies intended to make ‘a symbolic gesture’ which is regarded as an insult in certain regions across the globe. Sun Journal (2009) reports that this demonstration occurred during a hearing on transit and toll increases on 17 December, following an incident three days earlier when an Iraqi journalist threw both his shoes at then-President George W. Bush in Baghdad. Subsequently, in 2013, former U.S. diplomat Paul Bremer faced a shoe-throwing incident during a meeting conducted in the British Parliament, yet again evoking memories of the 2008 shoe-throwing incident aimed at George W. Bush (NBC News 2013). Mail Online (2013) reports on the incident with mocking headlines reading: ‘Shoe Wars II: Panic in the Commons as protestor hurls pair of size 8s at American diplomat in repeat of Bush attack.’ Perhaps the last noteworthy of such incidents, thus far, was during a 2011 conference held in Beirut in solidarity with the Bahraini people, an attendee assaulted Iraqi politician Ahmad Chalabi, striking him with a shoe (Dunyā Al-Waṭan 2011).

## 9. It is a Socio-Cultural Thing

Understanding idioms and expressions in a speech community requires shared cultural knowledge because they are generally metaphoric in nature, and must be interpreted at a non-literal level. As a physical object, the shoe, or the *qundara* (in Iraq), also known as *kundara* (in Palestine), *gazma* (in Egypt), *jūti* (in Gulf



countries), or *širmāye* (in Lebanon), serves as both a tool for self-defense and a weapon of widespread impact. Linguistically, the shoe is used symbolically to demean or to insult. Typically, the slipper or shoe is utilized to demean, hurl insults, and diminish someone's standing due to its symbolic association with the ground, signifying something low. Simultaneously, it serves as the link between the human body and all the dirt and filth on the ground. With that being mentioned, the shoe can also serve as a means of praising and honoring an individual. Expressions such as *qundartak 'alā rāsī* (lit. 'your shoe on my head') are intended to extol a person and signify that their desires or commands are highly regarded. To praise a person or place him in an incomparable position one would say *maḥḥad yoṣal-'l-qundartah* (lit. 'nobody can reach his shoe'). When praising someone at the expense of something lost one would say *fidwa-'l-qundartak* (lit. 'a ransom for your shoe'). The expression is intended to provide comfort and reassure the person that the situation isn't worth being troubled over. This is perhaps better translated to the English 'don't cry over spilt milk.'

When used in its plural form, *qanādir*, it can signify a face-threatening action. For instance, if someone is unexpectedly asked: 'What have you brought for us?' they might respond by saying, *qanādir!* ('shoes!')

Similarly, if asked about possessions and money, the response might be: *'indī qanādir* ('I have shoes'). This could potentially cause the person who posed these questions to lose face.

The association of footwear, spanning its historical and contemporary variations, with the social, cultural, and political fabric of Iraq is not a trivial matter. Instead, it holds significant weight both in its literal and metaphorical usage. The shoe maintains a distinct and conspicuous presence within the collective social consciousness, and its historical significance remains relevant in the current context. Folkloric idioms and culturally bound concepts and expressions that include feet or footwear are plentiful in Iraq. When Iraqis aim to insult someone, they might refer to their adversary as *qundara* ('shoe'). To intensify the insult, they might say *ibn-el-qundara* ('son of the shoe'). Combining both insults, they might say *qundara ibn-el-qundara* ('shoe son of the shoe'). For those who seem reluctant to use the entire shoe, they might opt to insult by using a part of a shoe or a slipper, saying *ibn ser-el-na'al* ('son of the shoe strap') or *ibn qīṭān-el-qundara* ('son of the shoe-lace').

For someone who consumes much alcohol the Iraqis would say: *hādhā yishrab el-'arag bi-'l-qanādir* (lit. 'he drinks arak in shoes'), which is better translated to the English 'he drinks like a fish.' The Iraqis would also say: *yejid Abū klāsh w-yākul Abū jazma* (lit. 'he works hard who wears the *klāsh* - the Kurdish woven fabric slip-on shoe - and the one with the leather boot (*jazma*) eats'), which is similar to what the American singer Travis Tritt said in his song *Lord Have Mercy on the Working Man*: 'Why's the rich man busy dancing, while the poor man pays the band?'

Certainly, when an Iraqi becomes upset with you, one of the ways they express their anger is by using phrases like: *mū agūm arig'ak bi-'l-qundara* (lit. 'I will strike you with the shoe'), *ī mū inta fad qundara* (lit. 'indeed, you are a shoe'), *lā yā ibn-'l-na'al* or *ibn-il-qundarah* (lit. 'son of the slipper'/'son of the shoe'). In an



ironic twist, fathers and grandfathers employ comparable expressions when irritated by their children or grandchildren, such as: *lā yā ibn-'l-yemenī*, that is, 'o you son of the yemeni,' referring to the slipper that was once imported from Yemen. When someone intends to belittle or mock another individual, they employ phrases such as: *'ād shlon in'āl* (lit. 'what a slipper').

Within the framework of patriarchal social relations, fathers are heard using derogatory language like: *ibn-* or *bint-'l-qundara* (son or daughter of the shoe) when addressing their children or even their wives. Nevertheless, fathers/husbands wouldn't anticipate being subjected to comparable insults in return. Conversely, the mother might, during moments of frustration and anger, direct insults towards her husband through phrases aimed at her children, like the above: *ibn* or *bint-'l-qundara*, implying that her husband is being likened to a shoe. This would evidently occur when the father/husband is not present.

Typically, the slipper can be readily and conveniently replaced owing to its inexpensive nature. Hence, when someone desires to demean or diminish their loved one, they might say: *abadlak mithel ay in'āl* (lit. 'I can replace you like any other slipper') implying that the person is of minimal worth and easily replaceable. If a wife is unhappy with her husband and decides to leave her home for her parents' house, she might say to her parents: *huwa w-qundartī* (lit. 'he and my shoe'), denoting his worthlessness. Women are also heard saying to each other in times of dispute: *ba'ad aṣīr angas min-el-qundara idhā aḥchī wayyāch* (lit. 'I will turn filthier than the shoe if I speak to you again').

To depict an arrogant individual, Iraqis would use the phrase *qundara 'atīga* (lit. 'an old shoe'). Uttering *qandartah* (with a *fathā* on the *qāf*) or *libasteh* (lit. 'I wore him [that is, like a shoe]') implies 'I disregarded him.'

In instances of heavy traffic akin to 'bumper-to-bumper traffic' or crowded governmental offices, Iraqis would convey the situation metaphorically with the phrase *ṣāyreh bi-'l-qanādir* (lit. 'it is happening with the shoes'). Iraqis would employ a similar metaphor to describe a scenario in which individuals line up to acquire a loaf of bread, purchase eggs, or obtain any scarce item that requires physical exertion to acquire.

It appears that social honours are also distributed on the basis of the shoe as one could say: *in'āleh* or *qundarteh tsharfak* (lit. 'his slipper / shoe would honour you') or *in'āleh / qundarteh ashraf minhom / minkom* (lit. 'his slipper / shoe is more honourable than them / you'). Notwithstanding, should emotional control be lacking, the *in'āl* (slipper) quickly jumps from the ground to strike the mouth of the speaker and emerges in a form of a pre-planned act. Arab mothers are the masters of such acts as they are commonly seen throwing slippers at their children in times of anger and frustration.

## 10. Concluding Remarks

The sociolinguistic study of footwear in Iraqi culture spans a rich tapestry, encompassing a wide array of historical anecdotes, societal perceptions, and behavioral nuances. From the symbolic use of shoes to insult or praise individuals, to the evolution of shoe fashion and its ties to social, cultural, and political facets,



footwear hold a significant place within Iraqi society. The roots of shoe-related expressions and their impact on communication, alongside the exploration of various shoe types and their historical significance, highlight the intricate nature of calceology, offering a window into the past and shedding light on cultural practices and societal structures.

It turns out that Iraqis have an interesting relationship with the shoe, one that is not necessarily understood or appreciated by others. Other than wearing the shoe, Iraqis may strike with it or use it as a swear-word. It is like a weapon of mass-destruction and one of the best tools for expression.

In the realm of political discussions, the use of shoe-related rhetoric transcends gender and social status. Both intellectuals and the general public, regardless of gender, utilize similar cultural expressions, demonstrating a willingness to wield the shoe physically as well as metaphorically during moments of unrest or rebellion.

Muntazar al-Zaidi might have started a trend of shoe-throwing or perhaps highlighted internationally what is locally a conventional option for expressing anger, disrespect and severe objection, but he is certainly not the first one to hurl his shoe in a political scene. Ali bin Abi Talib and much later Khrushchev may be considered the prototypes of such political expression.

The tradition of using footwear, be it shoes or slippers, as a means of expression, discipline, or retaliation in familial settings remains a prevalent aspect of Iraqi culture, reflecting the complexity and depth of shoe-related symbolism in everyday life. The culture of engaging in conflict through shoe-related gestures and rhetoric holds intriguing ideological dimensions within societies. It serves as a potent symbol of defiance, protest, or dissent, reflecting the populace's frustration or discontent with prevailing political, social, or cultural circumstances. This form of expression goes beyond mere footwear; it embodies a narrative of resistance, a powerful means of communication rooted deeply within the collective consciousness. The act of hurling or referencing shoes in moments of disagreement or upheaval represents an assertion of individual or collective voice against perceived injustices, power imbalances, or ideologies. It signifies a direct challenge to authority or a means to express solidarity with a cause. In essence, the ideological dimensions of the culture of fighting with shoes encapsulate the spirit of resistance, defiance, and a quest for change in diverse societal contexts.



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