CHILDREN’S RHYMES AND NATURE IN MEHRI, A MODERN SOUTH ARABIAN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

In many parts of the developed and developing world, traditional children’s rhymes are under threat. The disappearance of these traditional rhymes could impact children’s phonological development (Di Liberto et al., 2023, Harper, 2011), awareness of their natural environment, and their appreciation (and later composition) of poetry by older speakers. While rhymes in literate societies are often documented and can thus be retrieved, this is not the case for the Mahrah and other exclusively oral societies. In this paper, we examine traditional children’s rhymes in Mehri, an endangered Modern South Arabian language (MSAL), focusing on rhymes and riddles and the significance of their impending loss within al-Mahrah governorate in Yemen. We conclude by suggesting ways in which the Mehri community, in collaboration with native-speaker and non-native-speaker researchers, can revitalize this genre of poetry.

Keywords: Modern South Arabian, Mehri, children’s rhymes, the natural environment, phonological development

1. Introduction

Children’s rhymes are relatively under-researched within the documentation of MSAL. The field does have some work on rhymes. For

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example, Morris (2023) presents the importance of rhymes to reinforce the ability to remember names in MSAL; Hein (1909) includes a section on Mehri riddles collected by Müller in 1902; Liebhaber (2011) describes how Ḵāj Dāḵōn weaves riddles into his poetry; Morris & Di-Kišin (2021) include a section on children’s songs and games in Soqoṭri (another endangered MSAL spoken on the Socotra archipelago); and Gintsburg and Kogan (2021) compare lullabies in Soqoṭri with those in other cultures.

Expanding this body of research, we focus on children’s rhymes and riddles collected from Hawf, Ṣwayl and Qishn (Ḵāšan) within the eastern Yemeni governorate of al-Mahrah, making some comparison with rhymes collected from Central Dhofar in Oman. The rhymes examined here were collected as part of the Community Documentation of Biocultural Diversity in the Eastern Yemeni Province of al-Mahrah project funded by the ELDP (2017–2019). The rhymes were collected by Saeed al-Qumairi from his own recollection in the majority of rhymes given from Hawf, and from the recollections of his peers and their parents’ generation.2

Al-Mahrah, along with the neighbouring Dhofar governorate in Oman, has unique geographical and climatic features due in part to the monsoon season from June to September, features which are reflected in Mehri children’s rhymes. Given this prevalence, we focus on the role of the natural environment in children’s rhymes, and classify the majority of our children’s rhymes into ecological themes. In the discussion of each rhyme, we also consider the aspects of the rhymes that may facilitate phonological development, and note the incorporation of rhyme, metaphor, alliteration and personification, which may lay the foundation for the appreciation and composition of poetry in later life.

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2 Ethical consent was obtained from the University of Leeds in 2017 for the Community Documentation of Biocultural Diversity in the Eastern Yemeni Province of al-Mahrah project funded by the ELDP, form number SG0475.
Mehri children’s rhymes are typically between two and three lines long. Each line can often be divided into hemistichs. Traditionally, hemistichs are half-lines of verse, separated by caesuras denoted here with a double slash // (notably adult Mehri poetry commonly employs tristich patterns, (cf. Liebhaber, 2010)). Mehri children’s rhymes employ repetition, simple rhymes, humour, personification, parallelism and figurative language. From informal discussions with Mehri families in urban and non-urban environments in al-Mahrah, we understand that rhymes are no longer actively transmitted to children today. This contrasts with Mehri poetry created by adults, which continues to be recited in private and public gatherings and has gained considerable resurgence through YouTube, WhatsApp and other forms of digital and social media (Liebhaber, 2010). The loss of children’s rhymes and the loss of their associated natural and cultural vocabulary is not peculiar to this region or to the language. A survey of English children’s rhymes discussed in The Guardian in 2007 showed that 40% of parents aged 30 and under could not remember a nursery rhyme in full, compared to 27% of 55–64-year-old parents and 13% of parents over 65 (Lipsett, 2007); and in an article published in The Guardian in 2017, 28 children’s authors described the culling of 50 words related to nature from the Oxford Junior Dictionary and their replacement by words such as ‘analogue’, ‘blog’ and ‘chatroom’ as ‘shocking and poorly considered’ in view of today’s decline in outdoor play for children (Flood, 2015). English children’s rhymes and the vocabulary they use to describe nature have been substantially documented (particularly by Opie and Opie, 1951, Opie et al., 1955) and can be revitalized through community activities and a change in the way children are brought up. However, the loss of children’s rhymes in regions of the world that are home to endangered languages and cultures means a likely loss of vocabulary and traditional engagement with the natural world.

Cross-linguistically, rhymes play a significant role in promoting early phonological development (e.g., Harper, 2011, Di Liberto et al., 2023), associating words and phrases with meanings (Ara, 2009) and connecting with local culture and natural environment. Children’s rhymes are commonly characterized by being short with a simple melody, a catchy rhythm, being easily understood and often correlating with descriptions of nature (Duan and Xu, 2020). Rhyme, alliteration, rhythm and wordplay all contribute to a child’s phonological development.

Several factors have led to the loss of transmission of children’s rhymes in al-Mahrah region. The most significant of these, we believe, are recent urbanization, which removes children from the natural
environment in which they once played, and digital media, particularly smart phones, which increasingly occupy children here as they do elsewhere in the world. In addition, urbanization has removed many of the circumstances in which these rhymes were used. For example, some rhymes were used to encourage children to keep walking as they moved from one pasture to the next; some were work songs in the fields, but people no longer take children on these agricultural trips. We finally consider what has been lost through a rapid decline in the use of children’s rhymes and ask what can be done to revive both the rhymes and the associated language.

As with children’s rhymes in other languages, Mehri children’s rhymes have various purposes, including: entertainment; practicing pronunciation; teaching good behaviour; admonishing bad behaviour; encouraging physical activity; stimulating appreciation of nature; and expressing regret and sorrow.

2. Background

Nature is a significant theme in Mehri children’s rhymes. In the case of adult Mehri poetry, Liebhaber (2015) and al-Barami et al. (2023) show how Mehri (and Shehret) poets employ many tropes from nature in their poems, most significantly the mdî ‘sea breeze’ and the mountaintop. These tropes are frequently adopted as metaphors, with the beloved compared to the longed-for sea breeze, a tribe to the strength of the harsh desert wind, and as ‘a figurative rendering of the poet’s emotional and psychic state’ (al-Barami et al., 2023). Liebhaber describes the references to and representation of floods in the Mehri ōdî wa-krem krêm (‘I begin in the name of the Noble, the Generous’) genre as a conventional metaphor for indiscriminate and catastrophic violence, attributing the usage to pre-Islamic poetry where the flood retains deep mythic and ritual potency (Liebhaber, 2013). Mehri children’s rhymes also make extensive use of figurative language related to the natural world, allowing for indirect methods of encouragement, admonishment and warning.

The value of Mehri children’s rhymes lies in the fact that they teach children the names of animals, plants and aspects of the natural world (Morris, 2023). Through sound play and wordplay, they help children practice pronunciation and stimulate their imagination and creativity; through figurative language, parallelism, rhythm and rhyme, they help children appreciate the poetry of adults in later life.
3. Mehri Children’s Rhymes

The following section organizes Mehri children’s rhymes by theme. Each theme reflects elements of the ecosystem that were once highly valued, though the context in which they were important and the interactions of people with these elements may now be disappearing. We examine rhymes that deal with rain, fauna, flora, climate, weather and the sea. We consider fantastical elements and the absurd in section 3.6 and riddles in section 3.7.

3.1. Rain

The theme of rain dominates Mehri children’s rhymes. Through these rhymes, children learn that rain is welcome sometimes, an inconvenience at other times, and occasionally dangerous. In this section, we examine four rhymes. One about the last period of the monsoon, another encouraging the rains to come, a poem ironically praising the flood waters, and lastly a poem about swimming once the floods have subsided.

_Fara‘_

Fara‘ Fara‘ // l-ʿād taʿmōl wəṭōmah  
Fara‘, Fara‘, stop doing that!  
xōzək tōn lə-bīṯaḥ // wə-l-ʿayd  
You deny us Gladiolus corms //  
ğəšōmah  
and early sardines,  
wə-l-dējər nōjaḥ // wə-ġayhīm  
And cow peas that are ripe //  
nəghōmah  
and pods we can chew.

This children’s rhyme from Ḥawf is a mono-rhymed song where each line ends in -mah. This song references _fara‘_ which appears the final two weeks of the monsoon season. The astronomers in al-Mahrah divided each of the four seasons into seven parts, _njūm_ (lit. ‘star’), each of which has thirteen or fourteen days. The seven _njūm_ of the monsoon season are _dəfāt_, _baldah_, _sād hāwli_, _bāl maftīḳaḥ_, _bala‘_, _xabɛ_ and _fara‘_. While the monsoon is welcome, the continuous rain in the last part of the monsoon season, _fara‘_, is not. In the first line, the personified _Fara‘_ appears twice to emphasize the theme of the piece. This directly follows with an imperative sentence _l-ʿād taʿmōl wəṭōmah_ ‘stop doing that!’, addressed to _Fara‘_. The continuous rain during _fara‘_ prevents people from harvesting _bīṯaḥ_ ‘Gladiolus corms’ and _dējər_ ‘cow peas’, and prevents fishing for the early sardine, _ʿayd ğəšōmah_. This rhyme reminds us of the English rhyme ‘rain, rain go away // come again another day!’ which children used to chant to chase away the rain when the third author was young.
wō ṭəḥmət

wō ṭəḥmət // lsī lsī Oh, rain // rain, rain!
bōli3 bwōdi // kal bə-śarr The nomad people // all are sick.

This children’s rhyme from Šwayl expresses the importance of water in the region. It personifies rəḥmət ‘rain’, calling to it through one of the several Mehri vocatives, wō4. People would gather to pray ṣāt,5 the ‘rain prayer’, during periods of drought. On their way to the fields beyond the village, children would walk in front of the adults singing wō ṭəḥmət ‘Oh rain!’ In the first line, the imperative verb lsī lsī ‘rain, rain!’ is repeated to express urgency. In the second line, bə-śarr ‘sick’ describes the suffering of nomadic people without rain. Alliteration is seen in the repetition of the sibilants /s, ś/ and of labial /b/. The particle kal ‘all’ acts both as an emphatic marker and assists with the rhythm. This rhyme reminds us of ‘snow, snow faster // ally ally aster!’, which children in Yorkshire (and possibly elsewhere in northern England) used to chant when snow began to fall.

marḥab būk marḥab būk

marḥab būk // sayl bə-sayl You are welcome // flood upon flood,
marḥab būk // bə-ġayṭar nəxīl You are welcome // twister of palms,
marḥab būk // bə-jīzar ātōm You are welcome // slaughterer of irrigation channels,
marḥab būk // bə-hīdəm byūt You are welcome // destroyer of houses.

This rhyme was collected from Šwayl. By welcoming the personified destructive floods, the underlying aim is to ward off impending ill, a suggestion made by Sam Liebhaber (p.c. 2024) and confirmed by the first author. The phrase marḥab būk ‘you m.s. are welcome’ is repeated in the first hemistich of each line. Arabic words are occasionally incorporated into children’s rhymes, particularly where they help with rhythm, as in this case, or with rhyme. Thus, in the second hemistich of the first line here, Arabic sayl ‘flood’ is used in place of Mehri ḍhib. The sequence sayl bə-sayl lit. ‘flood upon-flood’ expresses the abundance of the floods. The preposition bə- is repeated in each hemistich, providing morpheme repetition and alliteration: in b-ūk ‘to you m.s.,’

3 Šwayl, Qishn and Dhofar, with few exceptions, lack /f/. Hawf, as we see in the first rhyme and in further rhymes below, maintains /f/ in most lexemes in which /f/ is an original root consonant.
5 ṣāt typically means secondary growth in MSAL, and the wish for secondary growth leads to ṣāt being interpreted here as a prayer for rain.
in *bə-sayl*, where it serves to express abundance, and in the last three lines forming prepositional phrases with *gayər* ‘twister’, *jīzər* ‘slaughterer’ and *hidəm* ‘destroyer’.

```plaintext
yā sūbah yā sūbah
yā sūbah yā sūbah
ḥəmoh də-hād le⁶
ḥəmoh də-bāl jōd
bāl jōd yəḥōm aṭə
```

Let’s go swimming!
The water doesn’t belong to anyone.
It belongs to God,⁷
God needs worship.

This rhyme from Ṣwayl describes a post-flood situation. Through the rhyme, we understand water as a common good. In an era of increased privatization and commodification, this rhyme carries important economic overtones asserting popular control over water access and water rights. The mimetic phrase *yā sūbah* ‘let’s go swimming’ is repeated, possibly emphasizing the children’s wish for others to join them, with the vocative particle *yā* acting as an invitation marker. In the second and third lines, the noun *ḥəmoh* ‘water’ is repeated to emphasize the theme. The rhyme exhibits alliteration through repetition of the pharyngeal fricative /ḥ/ in *sūbah* ‘swimming’ twice, *ḥəmoh* ‘water’ twice, *ḥād* ‘anyone’, *yəḥōm* ‘he needs/wants’ and a simple rhyme through the repetition of -ɛ at the end of the second and fourth lines. The second and third lines show parallelism with partial repetition in the possessive phrases *ḥəmoh də-hād le* lit. ‘water of-someone not’ and *ḥəmoh də-bāl jōd* lit. ‘water of-the-one.with.generosity [i.e. God]’. In the final line, *yəḥōm* ‘he needs/wants’ emphasizes the need to bless God for the rain.

### 3.2 Fauna

There are many Mehri children’s rhymes about domestic or wild animals that children from al-Mahrah may encounter or have once encountered. These rhymes frequently use diminutive nouns and, in common with the rhymes dealing with rain, typically employ personification and alliteration.

```plaintext
ā nəhmɛ̄nōt
ā nəhmɛ̄nōt // ənhīb harnayb
wə-kal də-hēh šīs // mģōrən yəsayb
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Oh, little eagle // hunt the desert hare!
And whoever is with you // will then roast [meat] on hot stones

⁶ Compare with Ḥawf lā.
⁷ Lit. the one with generosity; the master of generosity.
This rhyme was collected from Qishn. *Nəhmɛ̄nōt* ‘little eagle’, the diminutive of *nəhmīt* ‘eagle’, is personified here as the hunter, but also refers to a child, to whom the rhyme is addressed. Traditionally, the Mahrah hunted wild animals for food and rhymes such as this would teach children about hunting. Hares are swift: the cunning, speed, and height vantage of an eagle would greatly increase the hunter’s chance of success. Linguistically, the first line exhibits alliteration through reduplication of */h/* in *nəhmɛ̄nōt* ‘small eagle’, *ənhīb* ‘hunt’ and *harnayb* ‘[desert] hare’ and a simple rhyme through the repetition of */-ayb/* at the end of both lines. The verb *yəṣayb* ‘roast [*meat on hot stones*]’ at the end of line two is a reference to traditional *məṣbi* ‘meat roasted on stones’ (Johnstone, 1987).

\[\text{šī ʿālɛ̄jēn}\]
\[\text{šī ʿālɛ̄jēn // xzoh mən yəateh} \quad \text{I have a young male camel // who refuses to eat},\]
\[\quad \text{ssōfər händ // wə-mən məkkeh} \quad \text{He has travelled to India // and from Makkah.}\]

This rhyme was collected from Ḥawf. *ʿālɛ̄jēn* ‘young male camel’ is the diminutive of *ʿaylūj*. This rhyme serves to entice children to eat, with *ʿālɛ̄jēn* serving as a metaphor for the child, as young livestock frequently do in the region.

\[\text{kəl də-šāģōr}\]
\[\text{kəl də-šāģōr // kəwəb yətayweh} \quad \text{Whoever comes late // the wolf will eat him},\]
\[\quad \text{wə-təbrīn // təkōnah leh} \quad \text{Or a hyena // will bring him back [to his lair to eat].}\]

This rhyme was collected from Ṣwayl. Just as *šī ʿālājēn* serves to encourage the child to eat, so *kəl də-šāģōr* encourages children to keep going and warns of the consequences of not moving. These consequences are implied through the mention of two predatory animals: *kəwəb* ‘wolf’ and *təbrīn* ‘hyena’.

\[\text{kəl də-šāģōr}\] can be compared to the following, collected from Central Dhofar by Watson and Abdullah al-Mahri and included in Watson et al. (2020):

\[8\quad \text{In the dialect of Ṣwayl, verbs from the triliteral root } \sqrt[3]{\text{š}_\text{ɡ}_\text{r}} \text{ denote ‘to come late’, while verbs from the root } \sqrt[3]{\text{w}_\text{x}_\text{r}} \text{ are more common in other Mehri dialects. Ṣwayl also lacks the interdental fricatives of other Mehri dialects, such as those of Ḥawf, Qishn, al-Ghaydhah and Dhofar, thus Ṣwayl *təbrīn* corresponds to *təbrīn* in other dialects.}\]
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\textit{axxōṭər bīn axxōṭər}

Down with us, downwards // we have a male and a female kid

\textit{wə-ḥōṭər}

We slaughtered our male kid // and the female kid befriended us.

This rhyme would be chanted to encourage children to keep moving when the tribe went down from the mountains towards pasture. Young male goats would typically be slaughtered, as here, while young female goats would be kept in the household for milk. It is likely that the kid goats also act as metaphors for the children, as we see have already seen in the other livestock term, ‘ālɛ̄jēn ‘young male camel’, in šī ‘ālɛ̄jēn above. The end of the first hemistich and both second hemistichs end in -ōṭər, with repetition of the words axxōṭər and ḥōṭər. This rhyme differs from \textit{kal də-šāġōr} in that it lacks a warning and includes encouragement instead.

\textit{bər jəndōf ayḳayt}

Oh, son of one who bends [his neck] on the lagoon // raise your head, Like a bride // bedecked in all her jewellery.

Like a bride // bedecked in all her jewellery.

This rhyme from Qishn personifies \textit{bər jəndōf ayḳayt}, a long-necked water bird, possibly a flamingo (Miranda Morris, p.c.). When these birds arrive in al-Mahrah, they settle on the \textit{ayḳayt} ‘lagoon or salt-water pond’ with their long necks bent down. There is alliteration through repetition of the pharyngeal and laryngeal fricatives /h/ and /ḥ/ in \textit{ḥərehk} ‘your head’ and the alveolar /s/ in ārūs ‘like’, ārūs ‘bride’ and ḥərehk ‘bedecked in all her jewellery’. The second line also contains rhyming hemistichs, ending in -ūs. The preposition ārūs ‘like’ expresses a simile through which the migratory bird is compared to a human being. This rhyme would be chanted to a child who hung back, sulked or was sad, urging them to lift their head and be glad.

\textit{bər jəndōf ayḳayt}

\textit{haṣwər ḥərehk}

\textit{īs ārūs // bālīt ḥərehk}

\textit{ālɛ̄jēn ‘young male camel’, in šī ‘ālɛ̄jēn above.

\textit{šī ʿālɛ̄jēn}

\textit{bər jəndōf ayḳayt // haṣwər ḥərehk}

\textit{īs ārūs // bālīt ḥərehk}

\textit{ālɛ̄jēn ‘young male camel’, in šī ‘ālɛ̄jēn above.}

\textit{bər jəndōf ayḳayt // haṣwər ḥərehk}

\textit{īs ārūs // bālīt ḥərehk}

\textit{ālɛ̄jēn ‘young male camel’, in šī ‘ālɛ̄jēn above.}

\textit{bər jəndōf ayḳayt // haṣwər ḥərehk}

\textit{īs ārūs // bālīt ḥərehk}

\textit{ālɛ̄jēn ‘young male camel’, in šī ‘ālɛ̄jēn above.}

\textit{bər jəndōf ayḳayt // haṣwər ḥərehk}

\textit{īs ārūs // bālīt ḥərehk}

\textit{ālɛ̄jēn ‘young male camel’, in šī ‘ālɛ̄jēn above.}

9 Across the MSAL, \textit{rabb} means ‘[camel] to come to accept a tulchan, to be persuaded to let down milk without calf being present’. It cannot mean this here, as we are talking about a female kid.
3.3 Flora

There are many Mehri children’s rhymes about plants. The three rhymes we examine here include a work song and rhymes which admonish bad behaviour.

\[ \text{ā ġəśēr šawjəś} \]
\[ \text{ā ġəśēr šawjəś // sār ra’yūtən} \quad \text{Oh, weeds go away in the evening //} \]
\[ \text{wə-l-tḳā bə-şayja’ // ḥayjər wa’yūtən} \quad \text{And don’t stay at home //} \]
\[ \text{guarding the goods and chattels.} \]

This rhyme from Ḥawf involves the personification of ġəśēr ‘weeds’. During the monsoon season, women would take their children to agricultural plots to remove ġəśēr ‘weeds’ from between the crops. This rhyme would be chanted during the activity. The verb šawjəś denotes going in the early part of evening, a verb which, according to the first author, is rarely used by the younger generation today. The second hemistich in each line rhymes in the plural suffix -ūtən.

\[ \text{yətbōr xoh} \]
\[ \text{yətbōr xoh // də-ytayw dawm} \quad \text{Would that his mouth break //} \]
\[ \text{he who eats the dawm fruit,} \]
\[ \text{yətbōr xoh // də-yaḳərḥawm} \quad \text{Would that his mouth break //} \]
\[ \text{he who is crunching [it].} \]

This rhyme was collected from Ṣwayl. As with sayl in marḥab bůk marḥab bůk above, Arabic dawm, the fruit of the Ziziphus leucodermis tree (Miller and Morris, 1988), is used in place of Mehri jīrēm for the sake of the rhyme. The poem yətbōr xoh would be chanted by parents and repeated by the children during the harvesting of jīrēm, to persuade children not to eat the fruit during the harvest. Phrasal repetition is shown through the phrase yətbōr xoh ‘Would that his mouth break’ and each line rhymes in -awm. The verbs ytayw ‘he eats’ and yaḳərḥawm ‘he crunches’ are examples of different verbs of eating.

\[ \text{Sād hīs ṭwārēb} \]
\[ \text{Sād hīs ṭwārēb // ṭarb ḍēk ḍa-āsōr} \quad \text{Sād is like a little stick // a stick of} \]
\[ \text{Calotropis procera} \]
\[ \text{šādadk toh yaḳṣūś // wə-sbatsak} \quad \text{If you keep it, it crumbles to dust //} \]
\[ \text{beh yətbōr} \quad \text{if you hit with it, it breaks} \]

This rhyme from Ḥawf compares the branches of āsōr ~ Calotropis procera with an imaginary boy called Sād. Mehri rhymes frequently
invoke Sād and/or Saʿīd as stock names. *Calotropis procera* has been widely used in traditional medicine across al-Mahrah; however, its branches are fragile and too weak to be of any use. Thus, the rhyme compares an unhelpful person to the useless branches of ʿāśōr. In terms of lexical features, ṭwārēb ‘little stick’ in the first hemistich of the first line is the diminutive of ṭarb ‘stick’ in the second hemistich, showing root repetition. The last word of the second hemistich rhymes in -ōr.

### 3.4 Weather and climate

There are many Mehri children’s rhymes that relate to climate or weather other than rain. They exhibit personification, lexical repetition and alliteration.

ā ḥəbōri ṭayḥ ṭayḥ
ā ḥəbōri ṭayḥ ṭayḥ // wo-šəbdīti hərfūt // wo-l-ḥṭabk jənzəfūt
Oh, my cold you’re so strong // my liver’s shivering, And I’m without an indigo wrap //

This rhyme from Ḥawf personifies ḥəbōr ‘cold’. During the winter, people would suffer from the cold due to a lack of adequate clothing. Repetition of ṭayḥ ‘strong’ in line one emphasizes the strength of the cold. The conjunction wo- connects three consecutive clauses, drawing the audience in as if into a narrative. In the second line, two syntactically coordinated negative clauses provide an instance of parallelism. The last word on each line rhymes in -fūt.

The rhyme can be compared to the following, collected from Central Dhofar by Watson and Abdullah al-Mahri, and included in Watson et al. (2020):

ḥibrək mən ḥḥəbūr ḏə-Ḳāṭən
ḥibrək mən ḥḥəbūr ḏə-Ḳāṭən // wo-šəbdayti hərgəfūt // wo-kall ḏə-šiḥ sbiģət là // yəḥṭāb bə-gənzəfūt
I was so cold on the Qatan10 // that my liver shivered, And anyone without an indigo wrap // should fetch a trunk of wood.

The rhyme *ḥibrək mən ḥḥəbūr ḏə-Ḳāṭən* shares the line structure and rhyme with *ā ḥəbōri ṭayḥ ṭayḥ*, differing from the latter because it lacks both personification of the cold and parallelism in the second line.

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10 Reference to the Qatan plateau, renowned for its cold.
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wə-hōrīt

wə-hōrīt // tawwaš hīrət  Oh, full moon // your light is bright,  
tawwaš bə-sama' // wa-dirət  Your light is in the sky // and on  
earth.

This rhyme from Ţwayl describes the full moon as bright, lighting up both the sama’ ‘sky’, using the Arabic term in place of Mehri haytəm ‘sky’, and the dīrət ‘earth’. The brightness of the moon is emphasized through repetition of tawwaš ‘your f.s. light’. According to the first author, this rhyme used to be sung by girls at night.

yā Saʾīd wa-yā Sād

yā Saʾīd yā Sād // hōritkəm zəllūt  Oh, Saeed and Sād // your moon is  
eclipsed,  
yā Saʾīd yā Sād // haybitkəm bārūt  Oh, Saeed and Sād // your camel mare  
has gone off in the night.

This rhyme was collected from Ţwayl. By contrast with the rhyme wə-hōrīt, yā Saʾīd wa-yā Sād deals with the eclipse of the moon. As in Sād his ūwārēb, this rhyme uses stock names. During the eclipse, children would go outside and shout this and similar rhymes. The stock names yā Saʾīd wa-yā Sād are repeated in the first hemistich of both lines to encourage people to leave their houses. This rhyme has underlying religious connotations, allowing people to consider God’s creation. As the majority of Mehri people are camel herders, the camel plays a significant role in oral literature: in the second line, haybitkəm ‘your m.pl. camel mare’ is invoked to compare the moon with a camel, and the eclipse of the moon with the household’s worry of a camel wandering away at night: heavily pregnant camels have a tendency to wander off, increasing the risk of the new-born foal being snatched by a predator.

3.5 Sea

This section deals with children’s rhymes about the sea, common among the Mehri coastal communities. The first rhyme is chanted to encourage the fisherman to go further out to sea, the second is about bringing sardines home from the coast, the third expresses sorrow and loneliness when the child is not involved in the collection of dry sardines, and the fourth promises the child that a ship (bearing goods) will come.

11 In Ţwayl, the lateral emphatic /ṣ/ attested in other Mehri dialects is realized as an emphatic alveolar plosive /ṭ/.
This rhyme from Hawf would have been taught to children by their fishermen fathers. The rhyme includes lexical repetition of *zams* lit. ‘give it f.’, repeated to command the fisherman to go further out to sea.

**aw hāmi šī ‘ayd**

*aw hāmi šī ‘ayd*  
*aw hāmi šī ‘ayd, ēh*  
*‘aydi ʾār ʾamkyēt*  
*‘aydi ḳannit le*  
*ʾaydi śaxt le*  
*aw hāmi šī ʾayd, ēh*  
*aw hāmi šī ʾayd*  
*Oh, mother I have a sardine!*  
*My sardine is not big,*  
*My sardine is not small,*  
*My sardine is just right*  
*My sardine is not small, My sardine is not big, My sardine is just right*

This rhyme was collected in Ṣwayl. In the early part of ṣayrāb, the post-monsoon season, people fish for sardine. The preferred sardine is *‘ayd ġəšo mah*, a medium-sized sardine. According to traditional fishing practice, fishermen would distribute sardines to children to take back home. This rhyme describes a child taking their sardine home to their mother. In the first two lines, the invitation expression *aw hāmi* ‘oh, mother!’ is repeated. The particle *aw* functions to express urgent invitation. The phrase *šī ‘ayd* ‘I have a sardine’ is repeated twice, while the particle *ēh* bears an imperative function to attract the listener’s attention. In the last three lines, *‘aydi* ‘my sardine’ is repeated at the beginning of each line, and these lines exhibit parallelism with the frame: *‘ayd-i* (sardine-my) ADJECTIVE [NEG].

**ḥābūn yajhīm**

*ḥābūn yajhīm*  
*ḥābūn yajhīm*  
*ḥābūn yajhīm*  
*ḥābūn yajhīm*  
*ḥābūn yajhīm*  
*ḥābūn yajhīm*  
*People go in the morning // and go down to the coast [for sardines],*

*ḥābūn yajhīm*  
*ḥābūn yajhīm*  
*ḥābūn yajhīm*  
*ḥābūn yajhīm*  
*ḥābūn yajhīm*  
*ḥābūn yajhīm*  
*And I am a little stick // collected as firewood*

*yānafgōm bī // mān ḥāl hākayb*  
*They chuck me away // as soon as they return.*

This rhyme was collected both in Hawf and western Dhofar. The verb *yāsərəyb* ‘they m. go down to the coast to beg for fish’ is derived from

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12 *dams* and *šīrīt* are mentioned as (unidentified) shark types in Sima (2009).
13 Lit. ‘middling, medium-sized’.
14 In Hobyot, the verb means ‘to go down to the plain, to the coast, to cultivated areas, to beg for food and/or fish, as sardines’ (Miranda Morris, p.c.).
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the consonantal root √ṣrb, which it shares with the term for the post-
monsoon season, sayrab. During sayrab, livestock herders would go
down to the towns to collect dry sardines for themselves and their
livestock, leaving the children and older people safely behind. On being
left, the children and older people would sing this rhyme. Dry sardines
were traditionally used as livestock fodder during the hot, dry season
when little fresh fodder was available. Today, with people no longer
being hungry and the use of imported dry fodder, this practice is still
present, but considerably less common than in the past. In the second
and third lines, simile is used to describe the child as ṣwāreb ‘a little
stick’ that is maḥtayb ‘collected as firewood’ and put aside when the
sardine collectors return.

wəssɛ wəssɛ
wə-sāyət d-ābūd tənōka
fise

Go quickly, go!
And Ābūd’s ship
is coming quickly!

This rhyme from Ṣwayl contains a formulaic frame wəssɛ wəssɛ derived
from the root √sʿy ‘to have to go to work, to look for seasonal work’,
from which sāyət ‘ship’ is also derived. Traditionally, the Mahrah
would travel abroad or import goods by sea. During the monsoon
season, xarf, the sea would be ‘closed’; no ships could land or set sail
due to high winds. At this time, people would play with their chil-
dren by putting them on their feet, throwing them up in the air and
chanting this rhyme, letting them believe that sāyət d-ābūd ‘Abūd’s
ship’ is coming soon, with the unspoken promise of goods and loved
ones. This rhyme involves lexical repetition of wəssɛ ‘go quickly!’,
root repetition of √sʿy, alliteration through repetition of the sibilant
/s/ and a rhyme in the first and third lines ending with -se.

3.6 Fantastical rhymes

Children’s rhymes often include fantastical elements and exercises in
the absurd, piquing the listener’s interest and attention. Our first fan-
tastical rhyme is bōnək ḥāṣən wə-syəsk. This rhyme has an initiation
element followed by a response, elements which are present in some
adult Mehri poetry. In this case, both initiation and response begin
with bōnək ḥāṣən wə-syəsk.

bōnək ḥāṣən wə-syəsk
bōnək ḥāṣən wə-syəsk // ṣār msallat
wə-mxayṭ // on a bodkin and a thread,
I built a tower and laid its foundations //
This rhyme was collected from Hawf. The initiation typically has a different rhyme at the end of the second hemistich from the response: here the initiation rhymes in -auty, while the response rhymes in -ūt. In the initiation, the metaphors of bodkin and thread are invoked, with reference to the culturally all-important camel, here moving side-by-side along a thread. In the response, the poet invokes the ḥārbyōt ‘locust’ as the base to build three kinds of houses on its ḳaṭfīf ‘wing’. Some of these houses are built from ṭīn ‘clay’, others are ṣənawrōt ‘plastered with quicklime’, both traditional building materials, and others built from ḥədīd ‘iron’. The reference to the ‘tower’ is part of the exercise in absurdity. Lexical repetition is seen in the case of śəlēṯ ‘third’ in the last two lines and alliteration in the repeated use of sibilants (ṣ, s, ś) throughout the rhyme. The final two lines exhibit parallelism through repetition of the structure śəlēṯ mən-sēn NOUN lit. ‘third of them’.

The rhyme bōnək ḥāsən wə-syəsk can be compared to hōh rikaybi ār konmūt, collected from Central Dhofar by Watson and Abdullah al-Mahri:

hōh rikaybi ār konmūt

My mount is a louse // that neither tires nor dies

And flies on a single leg // until it passes the Seven Sisters

15 The stem is Ṣḥammāl. As geminate consonants are restricted to the onset or offset of stressed syllables in Mehri, gemination shifts here from the medial root consonant to the final root consonant.

16 From ḍə-ṭīn, with assimilation of /ḍ/ to /ṭ/.

17 Probably here what is intended is imported corrugated iron.

18 ḡdal ‘leg’ does otherwise not occur in the language. While the sister MSALS, Shehret, Baṭḥari and Hobyōt have words from the root ṣ̣gdīl to denote ‘leg’ (Miranda Morris, p.c.), Central Dhofari Mehri uses fēm, pl. fawm.
Here, an absurd comparison is made between a louse and an animal that can be ridden, *rikaybi* ‘my mount’, with fantastical power which protects against exhaustion or death, endowing it with the ability to pass by the stars of the Seven Sisters or Pleiades.

### 3.7 Riddles

This final section considers riddles. As Ḥājj Dākōn explains in Liebhaber (2011), wordplay riddles play an important role in Mehri culture and have significant instructional value. In the riddles provided in Hein (1909), a family is described using names of livestock and the aim is to guess which family is meant, thus teaching social relations from a young age. In the riddles we present here, children need to guess the names of a material culture item and stars in the sky. More generally, riddles test children’s knowledge and encourage creative thinking. Mehri riddles start with a formulaic challenge (the words of which differ according to dialect) and end with a figurative second single-clause or phrase line, introduced by *mən* in our riddles, that the child must interpret. Unlike the sections on rhymes above, the topic of the metaphor remains unmentioned in this section on riddles. In contrast to children’s rhymes, riddles are not easily understood and require considerable cultural and lexical knowledge to solve, which is provided below.

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yā ḥzayl lūk wə-yā mzayl lūk
yā ḥzayl lūk wə-yā mzayl lūk I challenge you to know this,
man ɖə-bərkōt bə-kazz?
man ɖə-bərkōt bə-kazz? About she that knelt in the hill?
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This and the following riddle were collected from Hawf. The first line of these riddles contains the formula *yā ḥzayl lūk wə ya-mzayl lūk* translated here as ‘I challenge you to know this’, but which holds no independent meaning. In the second line, the verbal phrase *bərkōt bə-kazz* ‘she knelt in the hill’ functions figuratively and the child must work out that *ɖə-bərkōt* ‘that knelt’ refers to a camel, with the verb *brōk* ‘to kneel’ used exclusively for camels. The answer to the riddle is *xīzmōt*, the ring that married women traditionally wore in their noses, which must be interpreted from the visual metaphor of a camel that kneels in the hill.

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19 The 26 Mehri riddles included in Hein (1909) collected from Qishn all begin with the challenge line *ḥizé ḥizé lūk, (mizé mizé lūk).*

20 The hill representing the nose and the shape of the kneeling camel the ring.
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yā ḥzayl lūk wa-yā mzayl lūk
yā ḥzayl lūk wa-yā mzayl lūk I challenge you to know this,
man šərxīmūt brək rījēm? About roast sorghum in a lid?

This riddle challenges the child to interpret ‘roast sorghum in a lid’ as stars in the sky. Thus, the lid functions as the sky, recalling the traditional Quranic assumption that heaven is a dome hovering above the earth, and roast sorghum as the stars. When we consider the same riddle in other dialects, the challenge line differs, as in the contemporary versions below from Ṣwayl and Qishn respectively. As we see below, there is lexical variation through məḳlūt rather than the Ḥawf šərxīmūt to denote ‘roast sorghum’ in both versions.

yā ḥəzēz lūk wa-yā mzēz lūk (Ṣwayl)
yā ḥəzēz lūk wa-yā mzēz lūk I challenge you to know this,
man məḳlūt bərk rījēm About roast sorghum in a lid?

ḥəzyōna lūk (Qishn)
ḥəzyōna lūk I challenge you to know this,
man məḳlūt bərk rījēm About roast sorghum in a lid?

4. Conclusion

This paper examined twenty-six Mehri children’s rhymes and riddles, the majority of which invoke aspects of the natural world. We have not considered nonsense rhymes or rhymes that accompany specific games, a subject for future work. Most rhymes examined here comprise two to four lines divided into hemistichs. None of the tristich-type poems that feature in adult Mehri poetry have been found in our children’s rhymes (cf. Liebhaber, 2010). Mehri children’s rhymes are shown to be rich in nature-based lexemes and employ lexical, morpheme and root repetition, parallelism, figurative language, personification and alliteration, factors that both assist with the child’s phonological development and provide a gateway to later adult poetry. The presence of riddles today and in the early 20th century, as given by Hein (1909), demonstrates the extraordinary stability and persistence of word art in al-Mahrah (Sam Liebhaber, p.c.).

What about the future? With increasing literacy and education in the national language of Arabic, one area to investigate is the schoolyard. As yet, we are unsure whether rhymes are transmitted in schools
or the extent to which traditional games continue to be played during school breaks (cf. al-Mahri et al., 2023, Finnegan, 2012). If research shows that Mehri rhymes and games continue to be vibrant in the schoolyard, there is indeed hope. If, however, traditional rhymes are no longer transmitted to children, if outdoor games which involved rhymes are no longer played, what will the future hold for the language, what will the future hold for Mehri poetry? Adult Mehri poetry continues to be vibrant today; however, how much of the vibrancy of today’s poetry is due to yesterday’s children engaging with the rich stock of children’s rhymes? In the case of a language with a strong literate history, documentation exists which could in future years be drawn upon. This is not the case for Mehri. We conclude with four suggestions, in the hope that they may be taken up. The suggestions are as follows:

1) Document and archive Mehri children’s rhymes recorded from groups of children and from adults within Endangered Language Archive (ELAR, 2024), either within the Community Documentation of Biocultural Diversity in the Eastern Yemeni province of al-Mabrah (al-Qumairi and Watson, 2018) or the Mehri archive linked to the Documentation and Ethnolinguistic Analysis of Modern South Arabian (DEAMSA) project funded by the Leverhulme Trust (RPG-2012-599) (Watson and Morris, 2016);
2) Build on the Mehri children’s e-books housed on the DEAMSA website and the printed children’s book by al-Mahri et al. (2023) by producing colourful e-books and printed material around children’s rhymes;
3) Host specific activities for children and their parents at the Mehri Center for Studies and Research in al-Ghaydhah, Yemen.
4) Re-introduce rhymes applied to the new circumstances that children are growing up in for example, while children may no longer migrate from pasture to pasture with their families, there is still a need for them to be taught perseverance.

Data availability statement

The Central Dhofar children’s rhymes described here have been archived with ELAR in the Mehri archive linked to the Documentation and Ethnolinguistic Analysis of Modern South Arabian project (Watson and Morris, 2016). The remainder of the rhymes will be archived in the Community Documentation of Biocultural Diversity in the Eastern Yemeni province of al-Mabrah (al-Qumairi and Watson,
2018) in the near future; meanwhile, they can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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