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A story at the periphery:
Documenting, standardizing and reviving Cypriot Arabic

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present the current sociolinguistic situation of the Cypriot Maronite community and report on recent efforts to revitalize its language, Cypriot Arabic or Sanna. Cypriot Arabic is an indigenous form of Arabic not to be confused with Lebanese, Egyptian or any other form of Arabic spoken by Arab immigrants who live in Cyprus. After a brief historical account, the paper focuses on the sociodemographic and sociolinguistic characteristics of the community, which has steadily declined ever since its establishment on the island of Cyprus in the 7th-8th century AD; it then turns briefly to the structural, functional and sociolinguistic impact that insularity and isolation from the rest of the Arabic speaking world as well as contact with Cypriot and Standard Greek have had on the language. Finally, the revitalization efforts undertaken since 2007 as well as recent political and social developments that (de)favour the process of revitalization are discussed.

1. **Introduction**

Maronite Arabs are one of the many Eastern Christian communities that developed in the Middle East, Africa, Asia Minor, the Balkans and other nearby areas over a number of centuries. They are identified as followers of Saint Maron, a Christian Syriac hermit who lived in the late 4th and early 5th centuries, and they retain the Catholic rite and a close connection to the Holy See. As a result of the Arab conquest of the Levant in the 7th century, a significant number of Maronite communities abandoned their native Aramaic varieties in favour of other varieties. Cypriot Maronite Arabs are medieval refugees who travelled to Cyprus in successive waves from the 7th to the 12th century in quest of a peaceful place to rebuild their lives (Hourani 1998). The last and largest immigration took place in the 12th century, in response to the economic advantages promised by the Lusignan kings of Cyprus. Unlike the other medieval communities that gradually deserted the island (Grivaud 2000), the Maronites remained and very soon were firmly rooted on the island and organized as a community.

Cypriot Maronite Arabs speak an Arabic vernacular that belongs to the group of "peripheral Arabic varieties" (Borg 2004; Roth 2006/2007), that is, varieties that were taken from the Arab realm and relocated in a non-Arabic speaking setting, where they were influenced by non-Semitic languages. The Arabic vernacular of the Maronites established in Cyprus remained in close contact with Greek –and more specifically with Cypriot Greek– for more than twelve centuries, and has developed in a way that is clearly different from other Arabic varieties of the Levant. It is therefore considered to be an indigenous Arabic variety unique to Cyprus and is, thus, named 'Cypriot Arabic' (henceforth CA). CA has recently been recognized by the Cypriot state as a minority language (5/11/2008) within the meaning of the *Charter for Regional and Minority Languages* of the Council of Europe. According to UNESCO's *Red Book of Endangered Languages,* Cypriot Arabic is a severely endangered language with very low ethnolinguistic vitality. This is not only because of the small size of the community--that counts approximately 5000 members--but mainly because intergenerational transmission has ceased and the language is no longer acquiring new speakers. The disruption of intergenerational transmission has seriously affected language preservation, especially since CA has no written tradition and has been only orally transmitted. The severely endangered character of CA was aggravated by the fact that after the Turkish invasion in 1974, most of its speakers were forced to leave their villages and

homes (where the use of CA had been somehow legitimised and protected) and were relocated in several settlements throughout the south of the island, where they were unable to recreate the network of close connections that favoured use of the vernacular.

The recognition of CA as an indigenous minority language was triggered by the decision of the Cypriot Parliament to ratify, in August 2002, the Council of Europe's *Charter for Regional and Minority Languages*,[1] a matter that had been pending since 1992 when Cyprus first signed the *Charter*, and the subsequent decision of the Cyprus government to recognize Western Armenian as a non-territorial minority language in August 2005. The Maronite community immediately reacted, and loudly protested the government's unilateral decision not to recognise CA as a minority language along Western Armenian. Eventually, however, for reasons explained below, the Cypriot government was forced to revise its initial position, and to proceed with the recognition of CA.

The first important reason concerned the creation of several Maronite non-governmental organisations that took it upon themselves: to convince the Cyprus government of the need to grant official recognition and protection to CA; to raise awareness of its historic and cultural value among the wider Cypriot society; and to foster pride amongst its own speakers. I will mention here only two organizations that specifically focused on language and culture: *Kermia Jtite*, created in 2005, and *Xki Fi Sanna*,[2] founded in 2006.

In order to draw attention to the precarious situation of CA, *Kermia Jtite* organized a conference on 9-10 November 2006 in Nicosia. In a video entitled *Language of Kormakitis point zero,*[3] produced on the occasion of this conference, CA speakers appeared to disagree over the future of the language, some arguing that it would gradually die out, following the fate of other minority languages that succumbed to the pressures of dominant languages, whilst others insisted that the language would persist despite adversities and hardship. *Xki Fi Sanna*, on the other hand, persistently and repeatedly asked that the language be officially recognized by the Cyprus government within the framework of the *Charter for Regional and Minority Languages* of the Council of Europe, and that it also be consistently protected to save it from demise and oblivion. In the next few years, *Xki Fi Sanna* was to become the main force behind reclamation of the language and a key player in the Ministry of Education and Culture (hereafter MEC) decision to protect and revive the language. In 2007, *Kermia Jtite* and *Xki Fi Sanna* jointly formulated and submitted to the MEC and to the Ministry of Interior (hereafter MI) an *Action Plan,* which stipulated a list of priorities deemed necessary to support the language (*Action Plan* 2007). In December 2007, *Xki Fi Sanna*, together with the Office of the Representative, the Archbishop of Maronites in Cyprus and several community organizations, also set up the platform *Sanna* with the aim to revitalize, document and codify CA. *Xki Fi Sanna* continued to actively promote and support the language even after official recognition was secured, taking on the challenge of setting up an immersion Summer Camp for Maronite children and teenagers (see below for more details), organizing training sessions for native speakers who wished to teach the language,

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[1] The *Charter* was signed by Cyprus on 12/11/1992, ratified on 26/08/2002 and entered into force on 01/12/2002.
[2] Literally 'Speak our language'.
[3] *Language of Kormakitis point zero* Part I https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODysXq1fS6Q and Part II https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2OWF51-PVM.

etc. In 2009, *Xki Fi Sanna* collaborated with the Sami community in Finland on a project whereby the Sami shared with the Maronites good practices in the area of language revitalisation and teaching (Bielenberg & Constantinou 2010).[4]

A second reason for the successful recognition of CA as a minority language was the Council of Europe's persistent inquiry into the situation of CA (*Initial Periodic Report* 2006: 9 and *passim*), and its insistence that the government of Cyprus officially recognize and support the language. Following these pressures, the government of Cyprus, through the MEC, called upon a group of academics from Cyprus and abroad to advise it on the appropriate course of action for language preservation. This Committee was invited to submit its recommendations at the conclusion of a joint MEC-MI conference held in November 2007, with the theme "Cypriot Maronite Arabic in a new era?", where both the Law Commissioner of Cyprus and a representative of the Directorate General of Legal Affairs of the Council of Europe were invited. Subsequently, in early January 2008, the Committee submitted a succinct report recommending: (a) the appointment of a team of experts who would study the language situation in situ and prepare a *Plan of Action* aimed at the reversal of the process of language shift; (b) the creation of an *Archive of Oral Tradition* with speech data from the community that would be used for a more thorough description of the language and for the production of teaching material; and (c) the encouragement and support for the Maronite community in all activities that would entail or foster the use of CA, including good practices in the area of language teaching. Finally, the Committee encouraged the Cypriot authorities "to support institutionally and assist financially" any initiative aimed at promoting CA and "to take action for the maintenance, reinforcement and transmission of CA within the Maronite community of Cyprus in every possible way" (*Conclusions and Recommendations,* 2008: 4).

As a result of the above initiatives, the government of Cyprus through its Council of Ministers decided to revise its attitude vis-à-vis CA. Following recommendations 1 and 3 in the Council of Europe's 2006 *Initial Report* (p. 22), i.e.
"1. [to] apply Part II protection to Cypriot Maronite Arabic as a regional or minority language in Cyprus within the meaning of the Charter and strengthen in particular the teaching of Cypriot Maronite Arabic at primary school level... 3. [to] adopt a structured policy for the protection and promotion of the Armenian and Cypriot Maronite Arabic languages"
it deposited a declaration for the recognition of CA as an indigenous minority language on 5 November 2008.[5]

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[4] *The SANNA Project: Empowering children and youth through language revival*, was financed by the EEA Financial mechanism and the Norwegian Financial Mechanism for the year 2008. The project provided, among other things, for the creation of a preschool and primary language nest and service center (*L-payt tel sanna* = 'the house of Sanna') to be offered in CA as well as for transferring experiences and best practices from the Sami community applicable to the Cypriot Maronite Community and its language.

[5] As a matter of fact, CA could have been recognized as a territorial or regional language, spoken as it was within a compact geographical area since at least the end of the nineteenth century, had the political events of 1974 not resulted in uprooting and dispersing its speakers. Language attrition that had marked CA since the beginning of the 20th century was unavoidably amplified by the geodemographic changes suffered by the members of the community becoming refugees in their own country.

Simultaneously, the Council of Ministers appointed a *Committee of experts for the protection and promotion of Cypriot Arabic,* which included academics, representative and eminent personalities of the Maronite community, several cultural organisations and agents of the Ministries involved, and whose mandate was to supervise all activities related to the revitalization of the language.

2. The sociolinguistics of the community

Cypriot Arabs –more commonly designated by their religious name 'Maronites (of Cyprus)'–, are an indigenised community that was established on the island of Cyprus as long ago as (at least) the 7th-8th century AD (Hourani 1998, 2009). The history of their establishment follows closely the various episodes of the Islamic conquests in the Middle East and was facilitated when Cyprus became a Frankish Kingdom under the Lusignan Royal House in late 12th and early 13th centuries.

Medieval chronicles and historical accounts report the existence, around 1224, of some 60 Maronite settlements, and describe Maronites as an organised and peaceful community (Hourani 1998). Some are reported to have been close to the Lusignan royal family because of their commercial and linguistic competences, but the bulk of the community were settled in rural areas that were primarily, but not exclusively, along the northern mountainous area of the Pentadaktylos Mountains. In the face of historical and religious adversities, their number rapidly decreased, so that by 1661 only ten settlements remained.[6] The reduction in Maronite settlements led to a decline in prosperity and influence to the degree that, when in 1596 the Reverend Jérôme Dandini, an envoy of Pope Clement VII, visited the island, he described the community as being in a piteous situation (Dandini 1656: 23 cited in Hourani 1998). He noted that persecution, exile and conversion to Islam as well as Hellenization were causing a reduction in the community and cultural attrition.[7]

As the number of Maronite villages progressively declined, the community became more compact geographically, and so by the end of the 19th century the remaining five villages, namely Aghia Marina, Kambili,[8] Asomatos, Karpasha and Kormakitis, were all situated in a rather contiguous area within a range of 50 kilometres northwest of the capital Lefkosia, thus forming a linguistic enclave within a surrounding Greek speaking and, nowadays, Turkish speaking area. Diachronically and unlike other minorities living on the island (e.g., the Armenian or Roma minorities), Cypriot Arabs remained localized and did not exhibit a high rate of migration (Varnava 2010, Baider & Karyolemou 2015).[9] Their main industries were agriculture and breeding. After 1974, however, they were forced to leave their villages because of the presence of the Turkish army, and they subsequently established themselves in the urban centres and surrounding areas in the south of the island,[10] where most of them still live today. Relocated, they switched from a rural to an

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[6] The historical sources reporting the number of villages can be found in Grivaud 2000: 57.

[7] Dandini reports the existence of nineteen Maronite villages; most of them have been identified in Andrekos Varnava 2002.

[8] Kambili was gradually repopulated by a Muslim or converted population.

[9] According to statistics provided by the Office of the Representative of the Maronite community, since the 1970s only approximately 600 people have immigrated abroad.

[10] All the inhabitants of Aghia Marina, Asomatos and Karpasha and most of the inhabitants of Kormakitis – with the exception of a few hundred people who decided to remain in place and to live under Turkish administration– moved to the south of the island.

urban lifestyle; family bonds and friendship networks were dismantled, mixed marriages increased,[11] and Maronite children were enrolled in Greek Cypriot schools. There were no longer any occasions to use the language in everyday encounters; they had to be created, organised and planned. Affected by the new socio-economic conditions of urban life, most abandoned their traditional professions and acquired new ones, thus moving up the socio-economic scale, following the more general trend of socio-economic mobility of the Greek Cypriot community (Ragkou 1983).

If demographic reduction and geographic dispersion affect language stability and can bring about language shift or loss (Karyolemou 2012; Gülle 2014, 2016), it is not at all surprising that CA, which has suffered both in recent times, is -- and has been for some time now-- in a worrisome position. As early as 1973, when Arlette Roth was conducting ethnolinguistic fieldwork in Kormakitis, one of the main problems she encountered when trying to describe the language was language shift (to Greek Cypriot) and the loss of native speakers (Roth 1975). She also remarked that semi-fluent speakers avoided using the language fearing ridicule, thus further contributing to its decline. In his 1985 account of CA, Alexander Borg noted that, with the exception of children of pre-school age, all other speakers were natively fluent in Cypriot Greek whatever their level of instruction, thus confirming that linguistic assimilation was already almost a fact. The language shift seems to be corroborated by the fact that none of the 3686 persons who reported a Maronite origin in the 2011 *Census of population* declared CA as their mother tongue, although the questionnaire allowed for such an answer.[12]

The size of the community, the still imprecise number of actual speakers and their unverified degree of linguistic competence raises the question of the status of the language within the Maronite community. The Maronites represent approximately 3686 people or 0.7% of the total population of Cyprus (2011 *Cyprus Census of Population*). The number of 5000 members given by the office of the Representative of the community is somewhat higher but it does not dramatically change the relation to the overall population. Still, not all Maronites consider language to be an essential part of who they are (see below). Many Maronites—especially those who were born in places other than Kormakitis-- argue that CA has never been their mother tongue. The time and historical circumstances of this abandonment remain to date unknown: some researchers underline the fact that many of the Maronites who settled in Cyprus came directly from areas that were part of the Byzantine Empire, and suggest that they might have been Hellenized prior to their arrival. On the other hand, such a complete assimilation is not plausible if we consider the difficult relations between the Maronites and the Byzantines, which in fact, point to a low degree of assimilation of the Maronites during the Byzantine era. In view of this hypothesis, some researchers suggest that the language be called 'Kormakitis Arabic' and not 'Cypriot Arabic' (see for instance Gülle 2014, 2016: 40). Kormakitis has always been the most populated and dynamic Maronite village, with a concentration of more than one-third of the total Maronite population; however, not all Kormakiotes are speakers of the language. And as there is no longer intergenerational language transmission, it is quite rare to find people under the age of 40 able to use the language fluently, much less natively. Although we do not yet have

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[11] According to Mavrides & Maranda (1999: 87), at the end of the century 80% of marriages in the community were mixed marriages.
[12] See also the *Fourth Periodic Report on the Charter for Regional and Minority Languages*. 15/01/2014. [MIN-LANG (2014) PR 1]

accurate data on language use, one may safely predict that language shift is a *fait accompli* for Maronites under age 40, an age that corresponds roughly to the displacement of the Maronite population in 1974. This massive and violent geo-demographic change can also explain, according to Gülle (2014, 2016), why the language shift occurred so abruptly, so completely, and with no intermediate stages: language competence went straight from native to terminal speakers. According to Gülle, the lack of semi-speakers also explains why CA exhibits scarcely any features typical in the speech of semi-speakers, such as hypercorrection, grammatical loss, reduction and simplification.

According to the cultural association *Hki Fi Sanna,* in 2007 there were 900 *excellent* or *very good* speakers of the language, but no native or second language speakers under the age of 25.[13] The 15th edition of the *Ethnologue* gives the number of 1300 speakers, whereas the *Euromosaic III* study, reporting on the regional and minority languages of the ten states that joined the European Union in 2004, estimates that there are 1000 speakers actively using the language (Karyolemou 2009, 2010). Clearly, the younger native CA speakers are also the last Maronites born in Kormakitis, where they spent part of their early childhood (Hadjidemetriou 2008, 2009). As the chain of transmission has been disrupted, it is more than likely that the next generation of Kormakiotes will not be able, even if willing, to speak the language, let alone transmit it to their own children. Demographic projections based on a rather optimistic account of the number of active speakers today reveal a gloomy scenario for CA: in a report released in 2007, *Xki Fi Sanna* confirmed the severely endangered status of CA and underlined that-- if nothing was done in the meanwhile to reverse this situation (Karyolemou 2009, 2010, 2012)-- by 2074 there would be only one speaker left. CA would, thus, be joining the 3500 or so languages that will have disappeared by the end of our century.

3. Cypriot Arabic: An Arabic variety at the periphery

Cypriot Arabic is also called *Sanna* (our language) or oftentimes 'arápika', from the Greek word for 'Arabic'. According to Borg (2004: 17), Arabic sources dating back to the 13th century report the existence of "... a characteristic Arabic usage associated with Cyprus". However, it is not clear if this usage refers to the Arabic variety of the Maronites newly established on the island, or to the way Arabic was used non-natively on the island, since, according to Father Jacobus de Verona who visited the island in ~1335, people living in Cyprus "understood quite well the Saracen [that is Arabic] and Frankish tongues but chiefly use Greek' (cited by Gobham 1908: 17).

In his *Description de toute l'isle de Chypre,* Etienne de Lusignan (1537-1590) recorded the multilingual character of the island, and noted the presence of a 'Maronite language' alongside other related varieties like Syriac. Thus it would be reasonable to assume that by the mid-fifteenth century the Arabic variety spoken by the Maronites had undergone important changes, which made it a clearly distinct variety. The transfer of CA from a core Arabic speaking environment had led to both structural (linguistic) and functional (sociolinguistic) consequences for the variety.

From a structural (linguistic) point of view, this relocation reduced the influence of literary Arabic and liberated the variety from normative constraints, including more recent constraints from other more prestigious Arabic varieties such as Lebanese or Egyptian. At

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[13] For more information about the estimated number of speakers according to various sources see Karyolemou 2010, 2012.

the same time it opened the way to influences from various non-Semitic languages, especially Greek, a typologically and genetically different language, and throughout its history the mother tongue of the majority of the island's population. Of course, CA is not a unique case of an Arabic variety transplanted to a European territory. Other varieties like Maltese[14] and several forms of Andalusian or Sicilian Arabic were also developed in European territories as a consequence of the Arab conquest of southern Europe, and were spoken roughly between the 9th and 15th centuries. CA is, however, the only Arabic variety to have been in contact with a Greek variety for so long. More fortunate than Andalusian or Sicilian Arabic, which are long extinct, but less fortunate than Maltese, an official and national language today, CA has, according to Borg (1985: 150) "one of the most evolved linguistic profiles yet described within the Arabic dialect area" (Borg 1985: 150). Its contact with Greek has been decisive for its modelling into a unique variety, one that can be found nowhere else. According to Borg (1985: 151), CA combines "a propensity towards linguistic conservatism implemented via retention of certain archaic structural features" and a "proneness to more intensive internal evolution, often in directions already latent in more centrally located vernaculars". These two seemingly antinomic tendencies could well represent general characteristics of all peripheral varieties of Arabic (Cohen 1973; Borg 1985; Roth 2006/7).

Peripheral varieties of Arabic are oral varieties that have evolved in places that fall outside the sphere of influence of (high varieties or literary) Arabic, in isolation and/or in contact with a typologically and/or genetically different language(s) (Roth 1996). In the definition of 'peripheral varieties' both social and linguistic parameters are taken into consideration. For instance, Borg (1985, 1994: 42-43, 2004: xviii and *passim*) enumerates a number of sociolinguistic factors that seem to facilitate the emergence of peripheral varieties of Arabic: (a) geographical and cultural isolation from Arab speaking areas; (b) a history of language contact that renders them practically unintelligible to speakers of other Arabic varieties; and (c) linguistic acculturation that leads to replacement of the traditional Arabic diglossia with a stable bi/multilingualism and a dominant non-Arabic language. In a more recent discussion of the notion of 'peripheral varieties', Roth (2006/7: 140) further analyses the sociolinguistic conditions of the emergence of peripheral varieties and enumerates six sociolinguistic factors that appear to be common to all the cases studied so far: ancient establishment on a foreign territory as a consequence of the expansion of Muslim populations between the 7-15 centuries; geographic distance from central varieties; considerable and long-lasting cultural disruption; absence of extensive contact with literary, standard or other prestigious/central forms of contemporary Arabic; almost exclusive oral usage; wide-ranging contact with various non-Semitic languages, widespread bilingualism and extensive restructuring of the variety.[15] Common to all the above definitions is an orally transmitted Arabic vernacular that was isolated from its kin varieties and cultural centers, and that acquired/ developed structural characteristics that alienated its speakers and estranged users of other core Arabic varieties.

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[14] Maltese is a form of Siculo-Arabic, which has survived and has been strongly influence by Romance languages.

[15] Peripheral varieties of Arabic exist also outside Europe, e.g., in Turkey, Iran, Nigeria, Chad, etc. For a discussion of the notion of 'peripheral Arabic varieties' and the criteria used by various researchers to define them, see Roth 2006/7. For the distinction between 'peripheral' (périphérique) and extra-peripheral (extrapériphérique) varieties of Arabic, see Cohen 1994.

Boustany's (1957) initial conjecture that CA is a form of Levantine Arabic, or, more precisely, a variety of Lebanese, has been proven wrong.[16] Borg (2004, 2006) argues that CA contains features of both the Arabic varieties of Greater Syria and of the Mesopotamian *qeltu* group of dialects, especially the Arabic dialect of Aleppo, and he places its area of provenance further east. He further posits that if CA exhibits features of both sets of dialects, this is possibly because it was separated long before the splitting of Northern Arabic into dialect subgroups (Borg 1985: 157 and *passim*, 2004: 24). Such a view is corroborated by the fact that the language retains several –mostly lexical and phonological– elements of Aramaic origin, which are also found in some Central Asian and Eastern Arabic varieties, a testimony to their common ancestry. Structural evidence from CA might, hence, also prove useful for a better understanding of the history of the evolution of other Arabic varieties and their mutual relationships. For instance, considering structural evidence, Eksell (1995) discusses the possibility that the Syrian and Iraqi dialects were influenced by a common Aramaic substratum and were perhaps more closely related in the past than they appear to be today.

From a functional (sociolinguistic) point of view, the transplantation of CA to a place where both the vernaculars and the officially supported varieties were unrelated to Arabic, in combination with the demographic shrinkage of the community and its relative isolation, led to a deprivation of power that transformed CA into a minority language alongside multiple dominant languages. Arlette Roth (1986, 2004) describes CA as a variety 'doublement minorée' (twice minoritized): vis-à-vis literary Arabic and other prestigious Arabic varieties on the one hand; vis-à-vis the Greek language, the prestigious language of ancient Greek civilization and culture and a dominant mother tongue for the majority of Cypriots, on the other hand. Psycholinguistic factors such as systematic comparison with classical Arabic, ideological pressures resulting from the Maronite clergy's efforts at Arabization of the community (Roth 2004: 62), as well as sociolinguistic phenomena such as code switching and spontaneous borrowing (Vassili 2010), morphological reduction and simplification (Borg 1985: 3) and syntactic calques, were the major factors that contributed to the devaluation of CA. As a result the language came to be regarded as a mixed, corrupted, imperfect way of speaking, and this assessment undoubtedly played an important role in its marginalisation and subsequent replacement. Roth (2006/7), however, considers contact phenomena as instances of indigenization—i.e., a process whereby a community acts to safeguard its vernacular in a potentially hostile sociolinguistic environment by adjusting its variety and language practices to those of the dominant society or language group. The concept of indigenization (or 'acclimatation' according to Calvet 1999, 2004) classifies phenomena such as lexical or structural borrowing as cases of 'accommodation' and 'mise en convergence' (Roth 2006/7) in an ecological sense, whereby vulnerable languages 'surrender' some of their structural properties in order to safeguard other, more important ones.

The functional allocation of CA and Greek has followed the usual pattern of a minority intra-group language vs a dominant out-group language. As CA gradually became limited to the elder generation, it began to be perceived as a language turned towards the past. The analysis of discourse practices clearly reveals the referential role of CA as the

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[16] This seems also to be the position of Newton who in his 1964 article on Cypriot Arabic systematically compares Cypriot Arabic to Lebanese.

language turned towards the past, since " ... dans le recueil d'anecdotes et de récits concernant la vie du village ou des souvenirs de jeunesse, le discours s'ancrait plus fermement dans le registre arabe" (Roth 1996: 118). In all other instances speakers' performances were replete with stereotypical expressions as a result of limited linguistic resources and a lack of creativity. Furthermore, in the situation of advanced language shift and severe acculturation, the aforementioned distinction between the in-group and the out-group codes was already blurred by less competent speakers continually shifting to Greek. In her contrastive approach to the effects of language contact, Roth (2000: 129) noted that the use of a Greek word in an utterance in Arabic "... peut faire basculer toute sa réalisation dans l'autre langue chez les locuteurs de compétence limitée". What Roth reports in the aforementioned passage from 1973 as a practice characteristic of speakers with limited competence in CA, is today true for even natively fluent speakers: during the documentation process undertaken since 2013 under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Culture, elderly native speakers needed to be constantly reminded to revert back to CA to talk to the interviewers, themselves native or near-native speakers of the variety.

4.   Revitalisation efforts

Since the beginning of the 21st century there has been a growing concern among the Maronite community over the relentless decline of the language. However, efforts for the protection of CA do not reflect the work of the community as a whole, but rather, are the work of a few people and organizations that became concerned about the situation of CA and saw in Cyprus accession to the European Union an opportunity to claim recognition and protection for their language. and by autumn 2007, all agents involved –the MEC, the MI, the community and its representatives as well as the Committee of Experts– were converging towards recognition of and support for CA. Revitalization efforts, however, have been difficult to undertake for a number of reasons, not least because of the political and financial developments prevailing in Cyprus which naturally affected the Maronite community as well.

The division of the island in 1974, which put the Maronite villages under Turkish Cypriot administration, created a major impediment to the implementation of revitalization actions, especially those *in situ*. Specifically, the government of Cyprus could neither fund nor undertake activities in support of the language (e.g., hiring or paying people to organize the necessary infrastructure, transport the materials for language classes, or provide food and beverages for the Summer camp, etc.) that might entail a direct or indirect recognition of the illegally occupied north. To avoid any misunderstanding regarding the Cypriot government's direct involvement in actions that were likely to take place in Kormakitis, a passage was included in the declaration of recognition of 5 November, 2007 that refused, responsibility for any such actions on the grounds that it could not exercise effective control over the occupied territory.[17] This clearly meant that the Cypriot government could not be held liable for the situation of CA in the occupied area nor for not implementing the provisions of the Charter applicable to CA, since this area was lying outside its control.

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[17] Declaration contained in a Note verbale from the Permanent Representation of Cyprus, dated 5 November 2008, registered at the Secretariat General on 12 November 2008 – Or. Engl.
https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-charter-regional-or-minority-languages/signatures-and-ratifications

To anyone unfamiliar with the political situation in Cyprus and with the intricacies of diplomacy in areas of conflict, this reticence may seem exaggerated or unfounded, or even the shallow pretext of a government trying to avoid its obligations to a minority community and its language. However, any form of acknowledgement of the military regime in the occupied area has been --and often still is-- a major issue not only in the political arena but also in the conscience of many Greek Cypriots. To take only one example: the decision of the Greek National Theatre and the Cyprus Theatre Organization to jointly stage (in 2015/2016) Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone* in the ancient Greek theatre of Salamis situated in the occupied area of Ammochostos was met with strong opposition and criticism from many Greek Cypriots and several political parties, who claimed that by asking permission of the Turkish Cypriot authorities to host the event, the Greek and Greek Cypriot organizers formally recognized the Turkish army's control over the occupied part of Cyprus.[18] Such reasoning and reaction make it extremely difficult to undertake any structured long-term action for the promotion of CA in Kormakitis presently. This is not to say that there are no actions aimed at promoting the language *in situ*: e.g., the above-mentioned Summer Immersion Camp financed by the MEC that takes place in Kormakitis every August. But the financial details of the organization are the responsibility of the Representative of the community, who receives the money directly from the MEC and disperses it as necessary.

The economic crisis that has affected Cyprus since 2011, on the other hand, has been also a major impediment to the implementation of a structured policy of revitalization, as was devised and formulated in the *Action Plan* prepared and submitted to the MEC by the academic members of the Committee of Experts in July 2010. The *Action Plan* suggested actions in the following three areas: (a) language documentation, (b) language teaching, and (c) raising awareness among speakers and fellow citizens of the existence of the Maronite community, and of the intrinsic values of CA as an indigenous language with a historical presence in Cyprus. But the financial crisis made it impossible for the government to make a significant financial commitment vis-à-vis the community, at least for the short term. As a compromise, the MEC proposed that the *Action Plan* be administered in 3- 5-month-long stages until completion. Each stage was to have its own budget, aims and expected outcomes, which would be agreed upon by the members of the Committee of Experts, with priority actions considered first.

Although there was some disagreement over the most urgent actions, it was finally agreed that, in view of the severely endangered state of the language, documentation was of the highest priority especially since the community wished to create an Archive of Oral Tradition. Thus, between September and December 2013, a research team comprised of independent researchers, members of the community and a university academic conducted 30 three-hour interviews with native speakers of CA. The interviewers themselves were young members of the community with a fairly good knowledge of the language. Each interview was conducted in several sessions according to a thematically wide protocol that was discussed and decided upon during several preparatory meetings that took place in July and August of the same year, in such a way as to include not only linguistic information but also information about the historical, social and economic life in the Maronite villages. The majority of the interviewees, 13 women and 17 men, were enclaved inhabitants of Kormakitis

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[18] *Cyprus Mail*, 14 September 2017. http://cyprus-mail.com/2016/09/14/antigone-staged-salamis/

–only five lived outside Kormakitis, most in the capital Nicosia. The speakers were selected according to their age and degree of competence in the language: they were all native speakers of CA, bilingual in CA and Greek, 70 to 100 years old. They were interviewed in their homes on a mutually agreed date. The interviews were subsequently analyzed thematically, and metadata on gender, age, profession, family situation and history of residence were recorded for each informant.[19]

Another action deemed a priority and carried out in the first stage concerned the standardization of writing. Like many other languages of oral tradition, CA did not have a commonly accepted writing system; however, it was occasionally written in a variety of ways using either the Roman or the Greek alphabet or both, according to personal preference and competence, and with very little consistency. In 2007, Professor Alexander Borg, a well-known CA scholar, proposed to the community an alphabetic writing system on the basis of the Roman alphabet with additions from the Greek alphabet and a few special characters. Although the reasons for the choice of an alphabetic writing (and not abjad) were nowhere explained, this was obviously dictated both by internal reasons, i.e., by the phonological/phonetic and morphological structure of CA, and by historical and ideological considerations which had to do with the prevalent religious and cultural affiliations of the community. In a meeting that took place on 10 November 2007, just after the Conference 'Cypriot Maronite Arabic in a new era?', community members who also sat on the Committee of Experts, (including the late Father Antonakis Frangiskos[20] who had been regularly writing CA with the Greek alphabet) agreed to Professor Borg's proposal for a writing system based on the Roman alphabet. This proposal was included in the text of the *Recommendations* submitted to the MEC in January 2008. The community also agreed to the use of the alphabet and on 30 December 2007 officially adopted it in a festive ceremony under the title *San catik, χtepe jtιte* (Old language, new alphabet).

However, despite some individual efforts, the new system was never implemented nor was it extensively taught or used. Its restricted use to the fact that it was never systematically employed; thus as its validity was not checked, there were no writing conventions. The absence of any sort of reference book (e.g. an orthographic guide, a handbook of writing conventions, etc.) made it impossible for the speakers to use it consistently, even if they wanted to. In other words, although the new writing system existed in theory, the speakers had scarce if any information on how to use it.[21] Implementation, as many studies have shown, is a crucial aspect of Language Policy and Planning and must be carefully planned in advance (Haugen 1983; Cooper 1989). Especially in cases that entail changes in speakers' language practices, it is important to have a convincing strategy explaining the advantages, benefits or value of the proposed changes. It is also important to have available the information, means and instruments which will assist speakers in making the changes effective and the process of adopting them as effortless and uncomplicated as possible. On the other hand, as most CA speakers today are perfectly bilingual, they tend to fulfill their everyday written communicative needs with Greek and feel no need to write in CA. Finally, several people deemed the use of the Roman alphabet inappropriate, and opted instead for

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[19] In subsequent phases, videos and photos were also kept for each interview carried out.
[20] We owe to Father Antonakis Frangiskou (1935-2014) a *Dictionary of the Arabic Dialect of Kormakitis* written in the Greek alphabet and published in 2000 [n.e.]
[21] An additional problem was that the letters of the alphabet were not given names.

the Greek alphabet, arguing that this was the 'correct choice' since Cypriot Maronites were from the beginning immersed in Greek culture and history.

In view of the above, the research team decided to: (a) make an assessment of the conformity of the alphabet by transcribing a number of interviews with native speakers in the alphabet; (b) give names to the letters of the alphabet in a consistent and accurate manner; (c) formulate a number of spelling rules with the input of speakers in order to standardize the writing; and (d) organize seminars informing native speakers of these orthographic conventions. These tasks were initiated during the first stage and completed during the second stage of the research project. At the same time, the problem of electronic writing, which required switching between Greek and English keyboards and inserting special characters apart, was resolved with the creation of a single keyboard comprising all the letters of the new alphabet.

5. Revitalisation and language teaching

A major factor that countered efforts to preserve CA and that hindered the revitalization process was the absence of demographic concentration of CA speakers after 1974, which had led to their uprooting and dispersal (see supra). This resulted in other factors that negatively affected CA's existence as a language family: exogamy, mainstream education, poor linguistic input, infrequent communication among members of the community and low self-awareness. It was not until 2002 --after many years of petitioning the Cyprus government-- that the community saw the establishment of a public primary school[22] for Maronite children and teachers: the school of Saint Maronas situated in the suburbs of Anthoupoli in the Nicosia district.[23] The school's establishment and operations are regulated by a series of decisions taken by the Council of Ministers between April 2000 and June 2002.[24] Although there are afternoon CA language classes, the mainstream curriculum includes neither CA language lessons nor community-specific classes despite years of Maronite authorities and cultural association requests for such classes. The need to improve Maronite children's "…access to education which genuinely reflects their specific needs" is also underlined in the 3rd ECRI Report on Cyprus adopted on 16 December 2005 (p. 28). Finally, in a *Report*[25] prepared on the request of the Maronite community, the Commissioner for Administration and for the Protection of Human Rights of Cyprus, E.

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[22] A pre-primary school for Maronite children by the name 'Saint Antonios' has existed since 1988. It is currently operating on the premises of the Saint Maronas primary school.

[23] Terra Santa (Nicosia) and Saint Mary (Limassol) are religious –pre-primary, primary and secondary on the one hand, primary and secondary on the other hand– schools usually referred to as 'Maronite ethnic schools'. This designation acknowledges the fact that an important part of their pupil population come from the Maronite community. The former is run by the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart, the latter by the Franciscan Friars of the Holy Land.

[24] Decisions nº 51.577, nº 51.578 and nº 51.557 of April 2000, nº 53.041 of January 2001 and nº 55.962 of June 2002.

[25] *Report of the Commissioner for Administration and for the Protection of Human Rights* on the request of the Maronite community in relation to the selection of staff and the management of the Primary school of Saint Maronas and the teaching of the Cypriot Maronite Arabic language. [in Greek] [A.K.P. 93/2005, Nicosia, 12/05/2009]. The recommendation in question is formulated on §23 of the report.

Nikolaou, recommended to the Ministry of Education and Culture to provide for the teaching of CA as part of the daily regular programme of the school, as soon as possible.

The establishment of the school is clearly a step forward, as it offers CA a space, albeit unofficial and partial. However, only families living in the immediate surroundings can benefit, as those Maronite children who live elsewhere cannot manage the daily commute to the school. On the other hand and according to public education regulations that are valid nationwide, since Saint Maronas is a public school, any children resident in the area can be enrolled in the school, regardless of ethnic origin: in fact, the most recent MEC statistics reveal that 50 of the 68 pupils currently enrolled in the school are of Maronite origin, while the remaining 18 are of Greek Cypriot or other ethnic/national background. And although there are special regulations stipulating afternoon classes in CA, a mixed ethnic pupil population complicates such an undertaking, since teaching in CA cannot be forced on non-Maronite children. A concurrent issue concerns teacher appointment regulations, which are based on a rotation system requiring teachers to change schools after maximum 4-5 years. Given that the number of teachers who are of Maronite origin and fluent in CA is constantly decreasing, even were special regulations to apply to Saint Maronas (e.g., a longer period of in-service teaching) it is unlikely that the pool of teachers would be large enough to permit rotation. For some years there has been a proposal to designate Saint Maronas a community school (Εθνικό σχολείο) on the model of the Armenian Nareg schools—i.e., financially supported by the Cypriot state but autonomous and free to apply their own language policy, appointment regulations and community specific curricula.[26] However, such a radical change implies a number of very tricky logistics and management issues that are difficult to deal with for the time being. Nevertheless, the MEC is currently collaborating with the school to integrate community-specific content into History, Geography and Religious instruction classes.

The initial *Action Plan* included teaching CA, and this was carefully designed and developed to include programmes appropriate for various different groups of speakers. This answered the aspirations of the community itself, who, saddened to see that CA was not spoken by the younger generations and not knowing how to resume language transmission inter-generationally, asked for plans for formal language instruction. A number of educational activities were introduced in response, most notably: a Linguistic Summer Camp inaugurated in August 2007; and a CA adult course organized within the framework of continuing/lifelong education programmes offered by the MEC yearly since October 2013.[27]

In summer 2007, *Hki Fi Sanna*, assisted by a linguist with extensive experience in the revitalization of American indigenous languages and with the financial aid of the MEC, set up in Kormakitis the first Summer Camp for children. The establishment of the Camp was made possible by two factors, one that relates to recent political events, the other to community cultural practices.

The first factor concerns the restricted freedom of movement imposed by the Turkish Cypriot authorities in control of the northern part of Cyprus. After 1974, the Turkish Cypriot

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[26] As long as they are approved by the Ministry of Education and Culture.
[27] Since October 2017 this course is delivered free of charge.

authorities forbade any crossing of the demarcation line –the 'green line' as it is called– between the occupied territories and the Republic of Cyprus. Although the Maronites were an exception to this prohibition, once those living in the south had crossed the Green line into the north, their movements were restricted. On the other hand, those Maronites who refused to abandon their homes in the north automatically fell under Turkish Cypriot administration and jurisdiction; at the same time, however, they were still citizens of the Republic of Cyprus, which provided for them as for all other enclaved, and as such were also subject to its laws.[28] This created an awkward situation: for instance, Maronites had to elect local authorities for their municipalities twice: once according to the Turkish Cypriot legislation and procedures, and once according to legislation and procedures in the Republic of Cyprus. As a result, there existed –and still exist– two local authorities, and Maronites living in the north are liable to both the Republic of Cyprus and the Turkish Cypriot authorities.

Other consequences were more painful: the Turkish Cypriot authorities opposed education for children of the Greek Cypriot community who remained enclaved with their parents, and this included Maronite children; as a result schools closed down. In Asomatos and Aghia Marina, the schools closed down shortly after the Turkish army moved in, Karpasia followed in 1988 and Kormakitis in 1999. Any Maronites who wished to continue their studies at a secondary level had to move to the Republic of Cyprus where they could enroll in any secondary education establishment of their choice, their tuition fees covered by the Republic of Cyprus. This often meant leaving behind parents and younger siblings, with visits limited to holiday periods and with special permission from the Turkish Cypriot authorities. Oftentimes, this meant that families had to split up, with the mother and the elder child(ren) moving to the Republic of Cyprus for continued education, the father and younger children remaining in their occupied village. In an effort to appease internal discontent and rising civil opposition (Anastasiou 2008), the Turkish authorities partially lifted these restrictions in April 2003, a year before Cyprus's accession to the European Union. Maronites were then allowed to visit their villages –or at least those villages that had not been turned into military bases– more regularly, and as a result they began to restore their homes, churches and other public places, and to rebuild roads and pavements. Many Maronites who had no professional or family ties in the Republic of Cyprus, gradually returned to Kormakitis, thus increasing the number of enclaved people: while in early 2000 there were only 78, by 2017 the number had increased to 230 (Loizides, Stefanovic & Elston-Alphas 2017). Others, living in the capital Nicosia –just 50 kilometers away from Kormakitis– were making the trip several times a week to visit elders and take care of their houses and property.

The second factor contributing to the success of the Summer Camp relates to the close ties Maronites have with their villages and homes and with their strong sense of community. Several researchers –including some from the community– support the view that one of the most important aspects of Maronite identity besides religion is 'land', i.e., the attachment

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[28] Greek Cypriots enclaved in their villages in the Turkish occupied area are entitled to a monthly government allowance. They also receive food items (cooking oil, baby food, fresh fruits and vegetables, etc.), cleaning products for personal hygiene and household needs, as well as propane gas for heating and cooking.

to a common homeland (Tsoutsouki 2009). The Maronites' notion of a homeland refers not only to their ancestral connection to Lebanon where they believe they originate from, but also to Cyprus, which has been their homeland for centuries. In recent years many researchers have pointed out that the traumatic loss experienced by Maronites as a result of the 1974 war may have impacted on the way they construct and project their identity. Considering how strongly they identify with their villages, Mavratsas (2003) sees a clear sign of their adherence to the ideology *I don't forget – I return* (Δεν ξεχνώ – Επιστροφή). This is an ideology forged by the Greek Cypriots in the aftermath of the island's division, a resolve to reclaim their rights over the lost homeland and to persist until the day all refugees are allowed to return freely and with no restrictions (Zetter 1994). This resolution creates an inalienable bond between the individual and his/her homeland that supersedes any other bond created before or after 1974: forty-three years after they were evicted from their villages, people are still referred to as 'refugees'; they declare their affiliation with villages in the occupied area, even if they have not ever been back over the past forty-three years. This ideology is also officially embraced: Greek Cypriots are registered according to their place of residence before the Turkish invasion; even children, who might have never visited the villages of their parents, are considered refugees. Examining the Maronite literary production in Greek, Chanatzia (2011)[29] notes the emergence of a new discourse on *Return* that favours a strong collective identification with the Cypriot homeland that is stronger than the Lebanese affiliation. As one speaker puts it: "We love Lebanon but we love Kormakitis more".[30] That the two affiliations may coexist is not at all odd, since affiliation with Lebanon is part of a mythological sphere whereas affiliation with Cyprus belongs to the sphere of reality and is part of recent experience (Baider & Karyolemou 2015).

And, in fact, Maronites, especially those from Kormakitis, ascribe to this ideology of return by visiting their villages as often as they can. Anyone traveling through Kormakitis in mid-August will be amazed to learn that the village has only 230 permanent residents; they will see more than 1000 people moving about, visiting their homes, going to the church, cultivating their fields or socializing with family and friends, and living there sometimes for the whole month of August. Gathering together is also a way to palliate the geographical and social distance enforced in 1974 and helps to reactivate family and friend networks.

Fewer restrictions on border crossing and a pattern of more or less lengthy visits to their villages are the two factors that created a fertile ground for the organization of the first Linguistic Camp for children in Kormakitis. This occurred in the summer of 2007, one year before the government of Cyprus officially recognized CA as a minority language. Although the Camp was quickly organized, and with scant financial resources, no teaching facilities or infrastructure, and little time to train the native speakers as teachers, it proved very successful, with over 90 children and adolescents aged 7-18 enrolled. For the community, this was a historical moment: it was the first time that the language was taught in its

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[29] Chanatzia, 2011. *The literary production in Greek of Cypriot Maronites* [in Greek]. Unpublished Master Dissertation, Department of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies. University of Cyprus.

[30] This is an extract from a video entitled "The third motherland" produced in 2011 by Costas Constantinou and George Skordis https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVKH7thX8vc.

traditional cradle. But, foremost, because after centuries of being downgraded and forbidden, CA was entering the very same space from where it had been regularly excluded: education. This fact had an important psycholinguistic effect on elder native speakers who, for the first time, realized that their language could be taught and that younger speakers might want to learn it: CA was not a moribund dialect that nobody cared about, but a language in its own right with potential speakers. Ultimately, learning CA was not the most important outcome of the summer camp; much more important was raising awareness about the intrinsic value of the language and enhancing its prestige in the eyes of its speakers. Thereafter the summer camp became an annual programme, and one that was eagerly anticipated by parents and children alike. Despite a number of problems that still exist, such as lack of teachers, poor infrastructure,[31] repeated classes, lack of facilities, etc., there are now teaching materials at levels A1 and A2. Moreover, the University of Cyprus holds regular seminars to train native speakers who want to serve as teachers in language teaching methodologies in the context of endangered languages and in the use of ICT tools for entrepreneurial learning (QR codes, Mentimeter, Spiral, etc.), and there are now internet facilities available in all classrooms. Nevertheless, this does not change the fact that CA lessons for a week or so in August every year cannot develop or sustain competence, and this creates some frustration among the community that has so enthusiastically embraced the revitalization efforts and is eager to see the language acquire new speakers.

On the other hand, the adult courses introduced in 2013 through the Ministry's life-long learning skills programme, are offered on a more regular basis, i.e., twice weekly from October through May. These classes are primarily designed for Maronites with very little or no knowledge of CA, but they are open to all, and occasionally non-Maronites enroll. There are also courses designed to 'reactivate' de-mobilized speakers, i.e., speakers who used to speak the language but no longer do. This category of speakers who "may regain or reacquire some partial active use of the language" are known as 'rememberers' (Grinevald and Bert 2011). Focusing on 'rememberers' offers the advantage of producing short-term results that can engender a positive psycholinguistic effect on the community as a whole: it is easier to re-activate former users of the language than to create new ones from scratch. Re-activating former users is a strategic aim of acquisition planning for CA, and has been relatively successful, as some former speakers have indeed reverted to the use of CA quite soon after taking the course, sometimes even using the new writing system in the social media. Overall, however, the process of regaining control of the language is not easy and occasionally tensions over correct usage arise among elderly speakers and rememberers-- clearly related to issues of symbolic power and control. Finally, the fact that adult courses have not had significant enrolment among the younger members of the community ultimately raises the question of the community commitment towards the language.

6. Conclusion

In the 2006 documentary prepared by *Kermia Jtite*, an elderly speaker fervently objecting to the idea of CA becoming extinct, concludes: "It will survive, if the village opens", directly pointing to the political situation of the Turkish army occupation as a major impediment to CA's survival. While forced demographic change and the dispersal of speakers can

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[31] Classes are still taking place in several places, including the church, some rooms in the archiepiscopal residence, etc.

negatively affect linguistic habits and language varieties of any kind, it will more severely affect languages that are already minoritized and weakened by such factors as reduction in speakers, orality, lack of standardization, contact with a majority/dominant language or languages, intergenerational language disruption, etc. The prospect of returning to their homes was brought to the foreground in July 2017, when the Turkish Cypriot authorities invited the Maronites to return to their villages, but under Turkish Cypriot administration. Despite the fact that, since 2000, there has being a constant return of mostly elderly or retired Maronites, especially from Kormakitis --which the RoC does not oppose (see supra)-- this announcement for a more massive movement has left the community perplexed. Caught between its desire to return and the need to express solidarity with its host community, the Greek Cypriots, who are themselves refugees and not allowed to regain access to their homes, the community has not yet given an official answer. And yet it is also clear that, due to the severe situation of CA, even were there to be a mass return this alone would not suffice to revive the language unless revitalization efforts were undertaken in situ in a sustainable and appropriate way.

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