

A SURVEY OF NUBIAN PLACE-NAMES

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Once again Nubian place-names are attracting considerable attention. A survey of Nubian place-names was conducted in the early 1960s, when the High Dam was constructed near Aswan. There are now plans to build a dam at Kajbâr further south along the Nile in the region of the Third Cataract in the Sudan. An interdisciplinary project supported by the University of Khartoum and the British Institute in Eastern Africa is now in progress. The project includes a survey of place-names as well as an examination of their potential as evidence for the reconstruction of history. This may therefore be an appropriate moment to raise several general questions about the study of place-names.

The following three questions are proposed as a basis for discussion.

- I. How should the place-names be written?
- II. How may they be interpreted?
- III. How should they be integrated into community life?

I. How should the place-names be written?

This topic was presented by Professor Sayyid Hamid Hurreiz in 1977 in a communication to the United Nations Economic and Social Council in Athens. Hurreiz asked how we could write place-names accurately. He cited examples of colloquial Arabic place-names which were not accurately indicated in the standard Arabic script. He then pointed out that the problem became acute when place-names originated in a language other than Arabic.

An Illustration: A town in the northern Nuba Mountains is pronounced in its local language as *Dele'*, with the final consonant *'* being pronounced approximately like the *ni* in the word 'onion'. On the Sudan Survey Department map (Arabic) Topo. No. 1163, corrected 1983, the name appears as *al-Dalanj* with the final consonants *nj* (*nûn* and *jîm*). And today the name is generally pronounced in the Sudan with a final *nj* [*ndj*] as in 'engine', a pronunciation possibly influenced by the Arabic spelling. The final consonants *nûn* and *jîm* are ambiguous. They not only represent the sequence of sounds *n + j* [*ndj*] as in 'engine'. But they may also represent sounds, normally alien to Standard Arabic, such as *'* as in 'onion'

or *ng* as in 'singer'. The English spelling as *Dilling* on older maps misleadingly suggests that the final sound of this name might be *ng* as in 'singer', which it is not. The Sudan Survey Department has corrected this on its English maps, e.g. *Ad Dalanj*, map (Arabic) Topo. No. 5 625 40, corrected 1983. But the problem remains

Writing Non-Arabic Place-names

How should non-Arabic place-names be written? How can the standard Arabic alphabet and the standard English (roman) alphabet be supported if there is a requirement for greater accuracy in revealing the pronunciation? There is probably little support for an adoption of special characters for general use, although that has already happened for the English-based writing systems of certain Sudanese languages. However, could a case be made for the wider dissemination of an Arabic-based phonetic alphabet in restricted situations? A phonetic spelling could appear alongside the standard spelling in a gazetteer when greater accuracy is required. What should the model be for such an Arabic-based phonetic alphabet? Can limited use be made of various *ĖAjamî* scripts such as *Farsi* and *Urdu*? Or even closer to home, should the model be those Arabic-based scripts which were developed many years ago for Sudanese languages by Professor Yusuf Al-Khalifa Abu Bakr and Dr. Khalil *ĖAsakir* and which have been refined in the

Modern technology supports the possibility of multiple solutions. Which combination of solutions will be appropriate with reference to a survey of Nile Nubian place-names? A factor which is beginning to have some relevance to this question is the growing awareness among the Nubian people of the existence of a Nubian writing system from the early middle ages.

The Old Nubian Language: Like English, the Old Nubian language seems to have been written from the 8th century AD. The alphabet owed a great deal to Coptic and Greek, but had certain characters of its own for *'*, *ng* and *w*. It flourished until the end of the 15th century. From the end of the 15th century to the end of the 19th century the art of writing the Nile Nubian language(s) disappeared and was forgotten. To borrow a phrase from the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen, there was a 400-year night. The dawn began to break at the

end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th with the revelation of Old Nubian writing by Adolf Erman, Heinrich Schüfer and Karl Schmidt.

Nubian scholars have been taking an increasing interest in their ancient writing system. In 1990 the late Dr. Mochtar Khalil published the first part of his *Wörterbuch der nubischen Sprache* using a modified version of the Old Nubian alphabet. In a communication to the Third Conference on Language in the Sudan at the Institute of African and Asian Studies of the University of Khartoum in December 1995, Mohamed Jalal Hashim and Mohamed El Hadi Hashim demonstrated their version for writing the modern Nubian language in Old Nubian letters and welcomed the use of this script by speakers of other languages. They undoubtedly would have proposed a spelling in Old Nubian characters for the place-name Dele' discussed above. They might have pointed out that a character already existed in Old Nubian for the sound ' and was therefore appropriate as a solution to this problem.

In line with multiple solutions, my suggestion for fieldwork is that place-names be recorded in more than one alphabet. Each has its own advantages. Vowel length, for instance, is often marked with particular accuracy in the Arabic script, since the distinction between long and short vowels is important in Arabic and people trained in writing Arabic have learned to mark that distinction carefully. It may also be argued that loanwords from Arabic which are frequently pronounced as in Arabic may best be represented by Arabic letters. On the other hand, the ideological support for the distinctive mediaeval Nubian alphabet may be a powerful consideration.

To what extent can multiple solutions coexist with the need for a standard solution in the national and international environment?

II. How should place-names be interpreted?

Place-names are a point of contact between human beings and their environment. They may reflect an economic system or a tradition of folklore. They may also be relics to be considered in the reconstruction of history..

Even though the wooden construction known as the *sâqiya*, Persian water-wheel or *éskalee*, has been generally abandoned in the past half-century, the old economic system is still widely attested in place-names. These place-names should be studied with a focus on the agricultural relationship of Nile Nubians with the river as described by Professor Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Salim (al-Sâqiya).

Folkloric traditions associated with places will be carefully recorded, even when they may

sometimes seem to be historically unattested. For example, in the community of Faras, just south of the Egyptian border, there was said to be once a great ruler known as Kikilâ', father of a hundred, grandfather of a thousand. Across the river there was an ancient Egyptian fort and a village, a centre of folk tales, as told in *Stories of Serra East* by the late diplomat and scholar Jamal Muhammad Ahmad. Place-names and associated folktales tell their own story of how people relate to their environment.

The possibility of transmission over more than three millennia seems to be confirmed by a comparison of certain modern names and the Pharaonic texts. Place-names cannot be neglected as a potential source of evidence for historical reconstruction.

An important contribution to the study of place-names throughout the whole area inhabited by speakers of Nubian languages along the Nile and to the west in Kordofân and Darfur was made by Engineer. Abbas Muhammad Kheir in his 1980 M.A. dissertation entitled *A Comparative Study of Place-names and Generic Terms in Nubian Languages*, submitted to the University of Khartoum (the Institute of African and Asian Studies).

Although the Mahas region around the Third Cataract region of the Nile is the initial focus for the survey of Nubian place-names now in progress, other regions will be examined as well. A key site for future investigation will be the important centre of iron-working, Jabal al-Harâza in the northern Kordofân. Jabal al-Harâza is known to have been the location of a now extinct Nubian language,

Another historical topic under investigation is an attempt to identify generic terms in the Meroitic language, which is now extinct, but which has been preserved in a number of obscure inscriptions. The heartland of ancient Meroitic speech is located near the Nile to the north of Khartoum, especially in the vicinity of the pyramids of Bajrawiyya. An examination of non-Arabic place-names associated with islands has been launched in that area. The unusual and 'algebraic' phonology assigned by scholars to the Meroitic language must be reassessed and, if possible, related to existing place-names. One might then be in a better position to identify Meroitic place-names in the Nubian areas further north.

III. How should place-names be integrated into community life?

Place-names are a lively topic. Members of the Nubian Club in Kalâkla near Khartoum, the Nâdi Tirhâqa [Taharqa], used to make a feature of place-names in their quizzes and word-games

designed to help people explore their past. Place-names provided a link between the older people and their homelands which they had been obliged to evacuate as a result of flooding.

The Kerma Centre: A living museum and links with local schools and community projects has now been envisaged south of the Third Cataract region. Plans for a cultural centre in Kerma village have already been launched by the Sudan. Kerma possesses archaeological monuments of the historical country of Cush already attested 4000 years ago. This history is

of great interest to the local inhabitants. The Kerma project comprises a museum, a library, a study centre and auditorium and even a hotel and shopping centre. What potential is there for using such a centre for the mutual benefit of scholars, local teachers and the local communities?

The procedure of collecting place-names establishes an involvement between scholars and respondents. How can this involvement be developed productively? Is there any continuing role for the investigator in the dynamics of the community?
