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MEMORANDUM ON THE SPELLING OF PLACE  
NAMES IN THE SUDAN

Paper presented by the Sudan

ATH.77-160

Memorandum  
on the Spelling of Place Names in the Sudan

1. The National Survey Department of the Sudan has recently begun the publication of a new set of detailed maps with the object of covering eventually the whole of the Sudan. This has presented the opportunity for a revision of the spellings of place names in the hope that some of the inadequacies of the traditional spellings could be overcome in time for a system consistently based on more scientific principles to be presented officially in the new maps.

2. The Sudan has one of the most complicated problems on earth in the spelling of place names. First, there are the well known problems which arise from the considerable difference between written Arabic and spoken colloquial Arabic. To what extent should a Romanized spelling of a place name represent the classical Arabic spelling and to what extent should it represent the actual pronunciation, e.g. should "house" be spelled bait (classical) or ḥayt (or some similar representation of the colloquial pronunciation)? To what extent should a Romanized spelling follow the international system adopted by libraries? Unfortunately, the international system makes extensive use of diacritics which (1) may be easily confused with geographical features on maps and (2) are likely to be omitted in every day use; the problems of Romanizing Arabic place names are familiar.

However, the greatest complexity facing the Sudan in the area of toponymy comes from the large number of non-Arabic languages within its borders. There are more than 100 non-Arabic languages in the Sudan with phonologies which are extremely divergent from Arabic. The set of conventions adopted for Arabic would not cover a large number of the sounds, e.g. peculiar to Dinka or Shilluk. Furthermore, perhaps most of the languages of the Sudan still lack an adequate system of orthography. For most of them there is not even a thorough phonological analysis on which an orthography should be based. This helps to define a clear priority for linguistic work in the Sudan, i.e. the establishment of an adequate orthography for the languages of the Sudan. This in turn will give us the system for representing place names accurately.

3. Of course, there are several different principles which guide us in selecting spellings for place names.

One may allow for exceptions to a general rule, when a place name is well established, e.g.

Omdurman

rather than

Umm Durman.

A second principle is to represent the name as accurately as possible according to the way it is usually pronounced. This may mean the selection of one pronunciation as "standard". Very often full and adequate information can only be conveyed by the use of special symbols, e.g. for musical tone or implosive consonants. Clearly there must be some compromise between the phonological reality and the orthographic convention for place names.

4. One solution would be a gazetteer which presents alternate versions of each name:

- (a) the conventional or "standard" form which is selected,
- (b) the form of the name which conveys full and adequate phonological data,
- (c) any alternate pronunciation or traditional spelling which seems significant enough to mention.


5. In order to implement a solution such as this one, it was decided to reconsider the basic techniques followed by the Survey Department in collecting place names.


- (a) Short courses in transcription were begun with the co-operation of the staff of the Institute of African and Asian Studies of the University of Khartoum.


- (b) A new data card was designed for use in the field.


6. The brief courses in transcription were conducted by Dr. Yūsuf al-Khalīfa Abū Bakr, Dr. Sayyid Hurreiz and Dr. Herman Bell. They concentrated on the following points:

- (a) The transcription of place names in areas of colloquial Arabic speech by use of an expanded Arabic alphabet:

e.g.  for ng ( b )

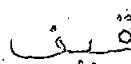
 for ch ( c )

and  for e





 for o

(following the recommendations of Dr. Khalīl 'Asakir and Dr. Yūsuf al-Khalīfa Abū Bakr).

- (b) Practice in the transcription of these same place names in a modified version of the international system for the romanization of classical Arabic,

e.g.  will be  
gef not qayf

Underlining of digraphs is also abandoned in favour of a system such as the following:

<u>Classical system</u>	<u>Modified System</u>
 <u>kh</u>	kh
(underlining dropped)	
 kh	k - h
(Dash introduced to maintain the distinction between  and  .)	

The advantage of the dash is that it appears much less frequently than the digraphs and would greatly reduce the number of extra symbols needed on the maps. Hence,


Khartūm, not Khartūm.

There still remains a considerable problem on how best to represent vowel length. Ideally, the conventions of Swahili should apply, e.g.

lengthened e would be represented as ee.

However, where the conventions of the English language are not off-set by some strong local tradition as in the case of Swahili, most Sudanese seeing a name spelled geef would pronounce it giif rather than ge:f. For the time being, therefore, the choice is in favour of the macron ( - ) to indicate length, i.e.

gef.

This is easy to grasp by Sudanese people, since it bears a resemblance to the Arabic symbol madda (  ) also used for indicating length. However, it will almost certainly be dropped in every day use with a consequent loss of information on pronunciation,

e.g. Khartum

for Khartoum

(a shift to be noted in the British press). The last word on this has not been said, and one wonders if there may not still be some virtue in the older spellings, e.g.

Khartoum.

- (c) practice in the transcription of non-Arabic names - both in Roman/phonetic characters and also in an expanded Arabic alphabet (using Persian/Urdu characters plus other innovations, where necessary). Considerable work in devising new symbols based on Arabic characters has been done over the years by Dr. Yusuf al-Khalifa Abū Bakr.

7. The new data card for fieldwork reflects the field experience of the Survey Department teams together with the training sessions referred to above. First, as a rule, it was decided to transcribe any name both in Arabic characters and in Roman characters. Very often the inadequacies of one transcription may be corrected by reference to the other. In practice, the Arabic script gives more accurate information on special Arabic features, such as the emphatic consonants. The Roman characters tend to give fuller information on vowels, even though field workers are trained to try to overcome the customary omission of vowel points when using the Arabic script. There is also room for further remarks, e.g. on the etymology of the place name when available or on the language in terms of which the etymology can be understood. In spite of the fact that such observations will be full of folk etymologies and incorrect interpretations, they will still provide evidence which can be used with caution for many valuable objectives. An etymology may ultimately give a clue to a more accurate spelling than the ones transcribed by the field worker, especially when a familiar generic term from a non-Arabic language is concerned, e.g. an Arabic-speaking field worker may fail to hear the distinction between (p) and (b) in the Shilluk designation of a hamlet "pac", recording it as \*bac, but a supervisor familiar with Shilluk can spot the potential error more readily if the suspect \*bac is glossed as "hamlet".

A special study of the most frequently recurring generic terms can then be made for each language, which will permit linguists to suggest a full phonological description of the most usual pronunciation of words such as "pac" with information on tone and vowel quality.

8. In conclusion, a number of recommendations can be made based on experience hitherto.

- (a) It would be useful for the Survey Department to have one or more of its staff trained in transcription.
- (b) Further co-operation between the Institute of African and Asian Studies and the Survey Department is desirable, since the Institute can initiate research on the phonological analysis of certain languages with which the Survey Department is particularly concerned. The Institute can encourage the development of more adequate orthographies with, as one of its major functions, the provision of a more adequate system for spelling place names.
- (c) Linguists in Sudanese universities such as Khartoum and, in the future, Juba may well consider the utility of research projects related to the requirements of the Survey Department, e.g. the list of generic geographical terms mentioned above.
- (d) Finally, the advantages can flow both ways. The universities can also find the fieldwork done by Survey Department personnel a rich source of data for more academic studies in folklore, ethnic history and toponymy.