REPORTS OF THE DIVISIONS

A Survey of Nubian Place-Names

Submitted by Herman Bell, Sudan

A Survey of Nubian Place-names
Herman Bell

Once again Nubian place-names are attracting considerable attention. As in the early 1960s when the High Dam was constructed near Aswan , there are now plans to build a dam at Kajbar further south along the Nile in the region of the Third Cataract. 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?
Additional questions from the participants would be welcome.

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. A full copy of his presentation is appended below to the present communication. Hurreiz asks how we can write place-names accurately. He cites examples of colloquial Arabic place-names which are not accurately indicated in the standard Arabic script. He then points out that the problem becomes acute when place-names originate in a language other than Arabic.

An Illustration

A town in the northern Nuba Mountains is pronounced in its local language as **Deleñ**, with the final consonant ñ [ɲ] being approximately like the ni in the word 'onion'. On the Sudan Survey Department map (Arabic) Topo. No. 1163, corrected 1983, the name appears as الدلنج with the final consonants *nūn* and *jīm* **nj** (نج). And today the name is generally pronounced in the Sudan with a final nj [ndʒ] as in 'engine', a pronunciation possibly influenced by the Arabic spelling.. The final consonants *nūn* and *jīm* (نج) are ambiguous. They not only represent the sequence of sounds n + j [ndʒ] as in 'engine'. But they may also represent sounds, normally alien to Standard Arabic, such as ñ [ɲ] as in 'onion' or ng [ŋ] as in 'singer'. The English spelling as **Dilling** on older maps misleadingly suggests that the final sound of this name might be

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ng [ŋ] 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. Ad Dalanj suggests the colloquial Arabic pronunciation with [ndʒ] widespread in the Sudan but it is still considerably different from the original pronunciation of Daŋeñ with [ɲ] in the local non-Arabic language.

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 be 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, e. g. the ŋ for ng in Colo (Dinka). 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 'Ajamī 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 'Asakir and which have been refined in the intervening years?

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, ϙ for ñ, ⳡ for ŋ and ⳣ for 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 Schäfer 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 Nobíin language in Old Nubian letters and welcomed the use of this script by speakers of other languages. They undoubtedly would have proposed the spelling ⲁⲉⲗⲉⳡ for the place-name **Deleñ** discussed above. They might have pointed out that a character ⳡ already existed in Old Nubian for the sound ñ and was therefore appropriate as a solution to this problem.

In line with multiple solutions, my suggestion 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?

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 *sāqiya*, 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-Sāqiya*).

Folkloric traditions associated with places will be carefully recorded, even when they may sometimes seem to be historically inaccurate. For example, in the community of Faras, just south of the Egyptian border, there was said to be once a great ruler known as Kikilaañ, 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 can no longer 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 Kordofan 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-Haraza in the northern Kordofan. Jabal al-Haraza 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.

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

Place-names are a lively topic. Members of the Nubian Club in Kalakla near Khartoum, the Nadi Tirhaqa [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. The 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?

APPENDIX

UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC
AND
SOCIAL COUNCIL

THIRD UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON THE
STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES
Athens, Greece
17 August - 7 September 1977
Item 8 (c) of the provisional agenda

PROBLEMS OF STANDARDIZATION IN A MULTILINGUAL NATION[*]

Paper presented by the Sudan

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ATH.77-159

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Problems of Standardization in a multilingual Nation

The language situation in the Sudan is very complex. There are about 136 languages in the Sudan. Out of this total number 128 are African languages. (1) These languages belong to different families of African languages. Some studies have indicated that all families of African languages are represented in the Sudan except the Khoisan of South Africa. (2) This gives the Sudan a very high degree of linguistic diversity, a matter which is reflected in a multiplicity of phonological features and variations. Out of the number of languages cited above at least 114 languages are native to the Sudan. The other languages have entered the Sudan at different periods - some of them very recently e.g. as late as the 1960s. In fact the language map of the Sudan is increasingly changing due to the political instability and the natural disasters such as drought and famine which afflict some of the neighbouring countries.

In order to understand the gravity of the problem of standardization of geographical names in a country like the Sudan, we must remember that settlements have emerged in different parts of the country. Such settlements have been given names in the local languages (114 in number) and possibly in some of the invading languages. These geographical names carry within them the diverse phonological features of the Sudanese languages. Accordingly, whoever is writing down these names must be able to distinguish and represent accurately the sounds that are inherent in such names. A matter like this requires a certain degree of linguistic sophistication, and/or familiarity with the language concerned. Thus the first (and, indeed, the major problem) facing the writing of geographical names hinges on the acute linguistic diversity.

There are also different problems of policy which are related to the question of linguistic diversity. Shall we produce maps in Arabic - the national language - or in English, the second principal language in the country and the language of wider international communication; or else shall we produce maps in the vernacular languages? It is clear that the third alternative (producing maps in the vernacular languages) has so far been ruled out. The Sudanese Survey Department has produced maps in both Arabic and English. This, however, produces the basic problem of how to reconcile the phonological systems of English and Arabic with the systems of local languages. It is clear that regardless of whether we produce maps in the vernacular languages or not, we cannot continue to ignore accommodating phonological features of vernacular geographical names into Arabic and English - the languages used in Sudanese maps.

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In the following lines we cite some of the major problems of representing and writing Nubian place names in Arabic script. Professor Herman Bell who has studied this problem writes the following about the census report for 1960. He states 'unfortunately its entries are in Arabic script without the vowel markings. Even had the markings been given, the disadvantages of recording names in the five vowel system of Nubian by means of the three vowel system of Arabic script are obvious".(3) There are also other problems associated with tone and with consonants that have no equivalent in Arabic.

Problems similar to those discussed above are not unique to Nubian. Different studies have indicated that several Sudanese languages have a five-vowel system (which includes e and o) in comparison with the three-vowel system of classical Arabic. Among such languages are Dinka, (4) Beja (5) and Fur. (6) These four languages (Nubian, Dinka, Beja and Fur) which use a five-vowel system are spoken in the northern, southern, eastern and western regions of the Sudan. A matter which indicates the spread and gravity of this problem.

If we look into the language map of the Sudan, we find that beside the vernacular languages which dominate in the north, south, east and west (and that are represented by the four languages mentioned above) colloquial Arabic dominates in the central parts. The problem of Sudanese colloquial Arabic in relation to classical Arabic is an extension of the question of the vernacular languages. For instance, if we choose the same linguistic aspect which we have discussed above - the vowel system - we find that the Sudanese vernacular languages have influenced Sudanese Arabic. They have extended their vowel system to Sudanese Arabic, and consequently Sudanese colloquial Arabic has a five-vowel system which is akin to the dominant Sudanese local languages rather than to the three vowel system of classical Arabic. Accordingly the problem of reconciling and accommodating diverse incongruent systems is still prevalent here.

The following place names are quoted from the topographic map no. 47 - 625 which uses the medium of the Arabic language. These names are written incorrectly and can be misleading because the map does not cater for the major phonological features (e.g. vowel system discussed above of Sudanese vernacular languages and colloquial Arabic).

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Name as written in Arabic map	Name written in correct phonetic transcription
(1) مــد قــول	Muhammad gol
(2) اكــوبــو	akobu
(3) بـــور	bor
(4) أم د و م	umm dom
(5) جـبـيـت	jabet
(6) در ديـب	durdeb
(7) قيـسـان	gesan
(8) ابو ديـلـق	abu dileg

The first four names in this list can be misinterpreted as Muhammad gul, akubu, bur and umm dum respectively. The remaining four names in the list (5 to 8) can also be misinterpreted as jabit, durdib, gisan and abu dilig respectively.

If we turn to English, the other language (beside Arabic) in which Sudanese maps are written, we also find a number of problems. Some of these problems are similar to the one discussed above. However, a number of problems are due to misinterpretation of Arabic and vernacular sounds by personnel whose mother tongue is English. In other words they are due to sounds heard incorrectly, and consequently represented incorrectly. Examples of such phenomenon are apparent in the writing of place names such as El Damer, El Fasher, Shendi which are written with (e) rather than (a) and (i). In this way the names cited above are written and read in a way which is so different from the way in which they are actually pronounced.

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In the following brief summary, we reiterate the major factors affecting standardization in the Sudan.

1. The acute linguistic diversity which aggravates the problem of standardization.

2. The divergent phonological systems between the local languages and Arabic (the national language) and English (the language of international communication).

3. Within the area of maps using Arabic language a special problem is caused by sticking rigidly to the writing system of classical Arabic.

4. In the field of English different orthographic systems have been used, e.g. the adoption of different writing by different missionaries in the southern region.

Proposals

While the problem of standardization of ways of writing down geographical names may be discussed at regional and international levels, there are various measures which have to be started at the national level taking into consideration the specificities of different nations. It is, nevertheless, evident that individual efforts of various countries need to be co-ordinated regionally and internationally. The following proposals are directed towards the situation in the Sudan. However, some of them may also be pertinent to other nations in the Third World.

(a) We need to create national awareness of the problem and try to explicate its various aspects. This short paper is seen as an attempt in this direction.

(b) On the professional plane, we need to train and develop a cadre of specialists who are competent to write geographical names accurately and on standardized basis. Phonetic training is an indispensable tool in this venture. (7)

(c) In the Sudan the problem of standardization of geographical names should be looked at within the broader problem of the lack of unified orthography. Geographical names constitute only one aspect of the problem. Personal names and names that designate the fauna and flora of the Sudan all suffer from this problem. In fact, in certain cases the complete written traditions of some local languages suffer from this problem. The problem – in its broader context – is reflected in maps, books, journals, dictionaries, newspapers, signs, ... etc. It is a national problem that needs a national solution based on regional and international experience.

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Notes

(1) Sayyid Hurreiz & Herman Bell, Directions in Sudanese Linguistics
and Folklore, Khartoum, K.U.P., 1975, pp. 159-162.

(2) R. Stevenson, "The Significance of the Sudan in Linguistic
Reasarch, Past, Present and Future" in Y.F. Hasan, ed.,
The Sudan in Africa, Khartoum K.U.P., 1971.

(3) Herman Bell, Place Names in the Belly of Stones Linguistic
Monograph Series, No. 5, Khartoum, Sudan Research Unit, 1970,
pp. 46-47.

(4) See P.A. Nebel, Dinka Grammar, Missioni Africane, 1968.

(5) E.M. Roper, Tu Bedewie, London, Steven Austin & Sons, n.d.

(6) A.C. Beaton, Fur Grammar, Linguistic Monograph Series, No. 1,
Khartoum Sudan Research Unit, 1968.

(7) Last year the Survey Department organized (in collaboration with
the Institute of African and Asian Studies) a seminar for its field
team. Training included introduction to the symbols of the
International Phonetic Association (IPA) and the writing down of
geographical names on phonological basis.