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**Eighth United Nations Conference on the
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National standardization: field collection of names

**African geographical names and the Arabic
writing system: investigating an obstacle
to standardization**

Submitted by the Sudan**

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** Prepared by Herman Bell, Consultant.

Summary

The Sudan faces the major task of representing African geographical names in the Arabic writing system. Although a standardized approach would be advantageous, there are competing traditions for applying Arabic characters to non-Arabic sounds. These traditions sometimes create confusion and pose an impediment to standardization.

The present investigation deals with applications of the existing Arabic alphabet, not with the controversial question of creating new Arabic characters. The point of departure for the investigation is a practical problem arising from a geographical name recently examined during fieldwork in Sudanese Nubia.

Four competing solutions are investigated for using Arabic characters to represent the sound /g/. It is written with the Arabic letters for /j/ in Egypt, for /q/ in the Sudan, for /gh/ in country names published by the United Nations, and occasionally as /g/ with an unambiguous character developed in the Farsi tradition. Multiple solutions for a wide range of other sounds are also briefly considered.

A standard approach to the application of the Arabic writing system to non-Arabic sounds would be most convenient. However, competing traditions are firmly established. In the Sudan it will be useful to define the local tradition with reference to ethnic and linguistic studies such as the 1996 *Encyclopedia of Tribes and Lineages* by Awn al-Sharif Qasim.
