

About the Origin of Some Sudanese Toponyms

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For citation: Gerasimov I. V. About the Origin of Some Sudanese Toponyms. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. Asian and African Studies*, 2024, vol. 16, issue 3, pp. 558–566.
<https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu13.2024.304>

The article is devoted to the analyses of several Sudanese toponyms and historical information about their origin, which until recently was transmitted orally. The study of the folklore material has shown that the toponyms of the Sudan reflect the ancient past of the country. They also show the multinational and multilingual nature of the country. Among them there are toponyms of Nubian and even earlier origin, the meaning of which is not always understood by the locals. The dominant language of the Sudan is Arabic and many toponyms are of Arabic origin. However, among the geographical names there are many words of non-Arabic origin that came from the languages of the peoples of Sudan like Fors, Beja, Nubians, etc. At the turn of the 19th–20th centuries, toponyms of Turkish, Greek and English origin appeared, that is explained by the presence of Turkish and British government officials and army officers and soldiers on the Sudanese territory. The presented material reflects the diversity of the origins of toponyms in Sudan. Geographical names allow us to trace certain stages of the country's history, starting from ancient times to the present day. Oral tradition has preserved and continues to preserve interesting historical data on the origin of settlements of different levels, hydronyms, etc., and poses new questions for researchers, allowing for a deeper understanding of the processes of migration, development, and exploration of new territories in the southern parts of the country by Sudanese from the north, the peculiarities of seasonal movements of nomadic tribes, and the economic system.

Keywords: toponyms of the Sudan, towns of the Sudan, geographical names, history of the Sudan.

The questions of the toponymy of the Oriental countries were repeatedly raised at the meetings and conferences by the Soviet/Russian Oriental studies. However, despite the importance of these issues for researchers and practitioners, the study of Middle Eastern toponymy, with all its diversity and richness of history, looks insufficient. If we analyze the published collections of articles and materials devoted to the Oriental toponyms, it is easy to see a small number of publications related to the Arab countries. Among the authors who spoke on the above-mentioned problems is the report by M. A. Korostovtsev “From the toponymy of modern Egypt” which deserves a special attention [1]. Unfortunately, the Middle Eastern issues are not discussed in the collection “Toponymy of the East. Studies and materials” [2].

Nevertheless, with the expansion of connections and ties with the Middle East region the questions about the origin and history of place names become very acute. In this regard, the Sudan is one of the least studied states.

The Sudanese State is located at the crossroads of two powerful cultural zones, the Arab-Muslim and the African. Its population is ethnically diverse. The people of this large Arab-African country use their own languages along with Arabic. Many names of valleys, hills, and islands on the Nile have a direct relation to the literary Arabic language and its dialectal forms. There is a very extensive array of toponyms referring to Nubian and some other languages. There are toponyms coming from the pre-Islamic period in the form of, probably, distorted ancient names transmitted by the Arabic language (Meroitic, Nubian, or even earlier). Moreover, there are toponyms that appeared as borrowings from the European languages.

Local people, in contact with the colonial English administration and garrison soldiers, borrowed the English toponyms and, after phonetic adaptation to the local language, put them into wide circulation. These toponyms are now on local geographical maps and have become an integral part of the Sudanese geographical landscape.

The origins of the names of settlements in the Sudan are known mainly from oral sources that have been passed down from generation to generation. According to these accounts, many toponyms were associated with particular Sudanese tribes.

This present article attempts to analyze the origin of a number of toponyms in Western Sudan (Kordofan), as well as localities in and around the Nile Valley, and the eastern parts of the country.

Jabal al-Finkir (جبل الفنكير) is a mountain located in the Dilling district of South Kordofan province. The British, who arrived in the country after 1899 and declared the Anglo-Egyptian joint rule of Sudan, called it “finger” because the mountain resembles the position of the fingers of the hand when they are pressed against each other. The Hawazma tribe heard this name and began to use it in everyday communication. Within two generations, the new toponym entered everyday life, and by the middle of the 20th century, this name was adopted and widely used, apparently supplanting the earlier one [3, p. 398].

Abu Safifa (ابو سفيفة) is a mountain located in Kadugli district, also in South Kordofan. This toponym can be translated as “the possessor of the shabrack”. The Hawazma people began to call it by this name because of the resemblance between the shape of the mountain and the mat of palm leaves spread on the back of a horse [3, p. 398].

The toponym for *Sharrkaila* (شركيلة) is associated with the following legend, which is widespread among the Hawazma clans. Since ancient times, there has been a spring of good and fresh water, near which nomads often stopped to give drink to their animals. This spring, like others in this desert area, was under the control of the Hawazma and Habbaniya tribes. One day, the Jumua tribes tried to hold that spring and deprive the above-mentioned tribes of their control over it. The Hawazma sent a message to the Jumua, warning of the dangers of such a move. The Jumua were given the following text: “Have you come to do harm the size of a *kaila*¹?” Despite the warning, the people of Jumua attacked, and eventually a battle took place between them and the tribes of Hawazma and Habbaniyya, who had allied with each other, and the invaders were defeated. The place retained the name *Sharrkaila* (شركيلة), and in time the definite article was lost. “Worse than trouble weighing a *kaila*” is the literal translation of this title. It can also be interpreted as “the reckoning for what happened was worse than a calamity weighing a *kaila*” [3, p. 398].

The valley and mountain that border the town of Abu Jabiha on the western side are called *Jali* (جالي). The toponym denoting these natural objects is associated with an inci-

¹ *Kaila* is a measure of bulk solids that equals 16.5 litres.

dent that happened to a native of the Hawazma from the Awlad Juma clan, whose name was Muhammad Jali Abu Umm Habis. This man, who was riding a horse, was crushed by an elephant. This happened in the Mulimm al-Qaur area. The Hawazma people were able to kill the elephant and bury Muhammad Jali at the foot of the mountain that rises above the valley. From that time on, people started calling the mountain *Mount Jali* and the valley *Jali Valley*.

The name of the area *al-Hammadi* (الحمادي) is related to the identity of a man called al-Hammadi. The Hawazma tribe also uses this name to refer to a kind of grass found there in abundance and serving as a favorite food for cows [3, p. 397].

El-Obeid is the name of the capital of Kordofan. The people of the Hawazma tribe pronounce it as *al-Libayd* (الليبيض). The reported origin of this name among the Hawazma is due to the fact that during the autumn period they always camped in the same area, since the time they settled in that part of Kordofan several centuries ago. Every day, a man would visit them, riding on his white donkey. And whenever they watched the rider approaching, they said: “The owner of the white (donkey. — I. G.) is on his way to you”. When the Hawazma people were going to stay in the area for the autumn, they would say: “This year we will spend the autumn wherever the owner of the white donkey is”. After some time, they abandoned the word owner altogether and began to say: “This year we will move to al-Libayd”, i. e., to the “white”. And since then and up to our time, this place has been known as *al-Libayd* or *al-Ubayd*. According to the Russian cartographic tradition, this city, the capital of Kordofan, is labeled as *El Obeid* [3, p. 396].

Among the Hawazma, there is a legend about the name given to the locality *Abu Jabiha* (ابو جبيهة). The Hawazma used to spend the summer season in the area known as Kulayib, located northwest of the present-day Abu Jabiha. One day, a bull named Abu Jabiha, because of a white spot on his forehead, got into a fight with other bulls, who drove him out of their herd. His owner was a man called Ali Tadiu, who belonged to the clan of Awlad Umm Jazia. The expelled bull traveled in the south-easterly direction until it reached a place known as Umm Himiyra in the vicinity of Jabal al-Umd. He grazed there for some time when suddenly a lion and a lioness appeared. The huge and strong lions attacked him. The bull began to run around a large cidr tree when suddenly the lion pounced on him and struck him on the shoulder blade. It was a terrible, death-dealing blow. Nevertheless, the bull was able to pierce the lion with his horn, dealing the same fatal blow that he himself had received. The blow came in the region of the heart. The lion left his opponent and headed in a south direction, suffering from the pain caused by the blow. Blood poured from his wound, and the lioness followed him. Meanwhile, the bull wandered towards the pastures, where herds of cows and bulls were grazing. He traveled with a limp, and the place where the lion had struck his blow was bleeding and sore. When the herd saw how strangely the bull was moving, some of the animals went towards him to find out the reason for this strange behavior. They saw the marks of the lion's blow on the animal's shoulder blade. From the wound, blood was more and more pouring out. The young men of the Hawazma followed his blood-stained tracks on their horses and reached the place where the fatal fight had taken place. They saw the traces of the struggle that had taken place between the animals. Then they followed the trail further until they found the lion dead at the foot of a mountain, quite far from the place of their fight. From then on, they began to call this mountain “the mountain of the lion” *Jabal ad-dud* (جبل الدود) (the Hawazma tribes refer to the lion by the word *dud*, unlike, for example, the Kanana tribes,

who call it *asad*, as is common in literary Arabic). They named the place where the fight between the lion and the bull took place *Abu Jabiha* in honor of the bull [3, pp. 396–397].

Many toponyms in the Sudan are of ancient origin, and their meaning is mostly lost or poorly understood. During a visit to Dongola and Karima in November 2014, the author was able to see that the Sudanese from the capital could not explain the origin of some toponyms in the Karima area and had to confer with local residents on this matter. Despite joint efforts and discussions, the meaning of some place names was not explained.

Some toponyms of the Sudan are connected with the great river of Africa — the Nile river. The hydronym Nile itself has a very vague explanation and, according to M. A. Korostovtsev, is not derived from the Egyptian language. According to the version of V. Vichihla, cited in M. A. Korostovtsev's material, "Greeks in Lower Egypt encountered the Libyans, in whose language *lil* meant 'water'. The transition *lil* > *nil* is phonetically quite possible" [1, p. 101]. On this basis, we can assume that this name existed in ancient times and came together with the Libyan tribes.

Many villages, settlements, and towns located on this river are associated with toponyms of Nubian origin.

On the White Nile, south to the famous reservoir at Jabal Awlia', is the town of *al-Kawwa*. Once in the 17th–18th centuries, this settlement was called *Alays* اليس, and it repeatedly appears in Ibn Daifallah's work "Tabaqat" [4, pp. 96, 203, 334–345]. Presumably, this ancient name was of Meroitic origin. Later, the Nubians, who developed and settled these regions and came from the north, were the inhabitants of the settlement of *al-Kawwa*, located on the Nile. These people were the Danagla Nubians. It was they who gave the new settlement the name of their hometown. Speaking about the etymology of the word *Kawwa*, we should take into account that in the Danagla language, the word *كوي* *Kawi* with the ovation *damma* at *kāf* and *i* at *wāw* means "a bend of the river" [5, p. 12]. The old *al-Kawwa* was located on the bend of the river, and the site of the modern *al-Kawwa* was also on the river bend. It is possible that the similarity of the relief was the reason for the transfer of the name.

There are other versions of the origin of *al-Kawwa*. Abd al-Halim Sabbar is a proponent of the idea of the ancient Egyptian origin of this toponym [6]. At-Tidjani Amir believes that the name came from one of the words of the Shilluk tribe, which lived on the banks of the White Nile several centuries ago, raiding up to Khartoum [7, p. 104].

The question of the origin of Sudanese toponyms has been addressed by different researchers at different times. A special role in the study of toponyms of Nubian origin belongs to H. Bell. In his works and in private conversations, including with the author of this article, he repeatedly raised the issue of the crucial role of the Nubians in the creation of names for settlements all along the Nile in Sudan and specifically analyzed some of them [8, p. 733]. He was also actively interested in possible borrowings from the Slavic language of the Bosnians in the formation of toponyms in Sudan, taking into account that their units were part of the Egyptian army in 1821 and their garrisons were located on the banks of the Nile.

One of the researchers of the etymology of a significant number of Nubian toponyms is the Sudanese philologist and historian Sabir Abdin Ahmad [9]. His study also examines a similar situation where localities have the same name, although they are located in different parts of Sudan. This is the case of the localities of *Karkuj* (كركوج). One of them is on the upper reaches of the Blue Nile, the second — on an island west of *Taybat al-Sheikh*

Abd al-Baqi, and the third near Soba, a suburb of the Sudanese capital Khartoum. This is the place where a battle took place between the Funj, the rulers of the Sultanate of Sennar, which emerged in 1504, and the Abdallab, an alliance of tribes that called themselves Arab. Before this event, Abdallab and the Funj had jointly destroyed the last stronghold of Christianity, the state of Alwa, but the ensuing power struggle led to a military conflict. In the decisive battle of Karkuj, the Abdallab were defeated and subsequently took a subordinate position in the state, ceding power to the Funj. Sabir Abidin Ahmad distinguishes two syllables in the toponym Karkuj: *Kar*, which means “house” in Nubian, and *Kuj*, which can be translated as “horse”. Combining these words, we get “the house of the horse”. This explanation looks all the more reliable because it is known from historical sources that riders of the Hamaj ethno-social group with their horses during the period of the Sultanate of Sennar were located in this very area. The remaining toponyms also refer to places where horses were actively used.

The name of the village of *Kutranj* (كترنج), located on the Blue Nile near Karkuj, is also of interest for the formation of Sudanese toponymy. This town came down in history for its mosque, which, according to the oral tradition, was the first mosque built in the Sudan to combine prayer and the teaching of sciences. From this point of view, it could be considered the first religious educational institution in Sudan [10, p. 18]. The past of this town dates back to the Christian period, when the rulers of the area were *Anaj* people, who probably called their town *qutr anaj* قطر عنج ‘the place of the *Anaj* people’. According to another version, *Kutranj* consists of two words, *ku*tr and *ranj*, where the first word means “side, place” and the second is the proper name of the local ruler. Archaeological observations made in this village indicate the presence of ancient ruins, which need to be thoroughly investigated. While the first part of the toponym *ku*tr is a subject to various debates, the second part of the toponym is generally agreed to be an *anaj* — ethnonym, indicating an ancient local people who apparently formed the nucleus of the Christian state in the Nile Valley in the period before Islamisation.

The toponym *Islanj*, which refers to a small island on the Nile within the boundaries of Khartoum, was formed in a similar way. The Nubian words *issi*, meaning “water”, and *anaj*, meaning “people, inhabitants”, are the basis of this name. It is probable that a settlement on this island existed in the Christian period, and the name was already in circulation. For the first time in a Sudanese written monument, this toponym appears in Ibn Daifallah’s work “*Tabaqat*” in fragments referring to two Sufi mentors, father and son Hamad al-Najid al-Audabi al-Jumu’i and Abd al-Wahab b. faqih Hamad al-Najid al-Jumu’i [4, pp. 153–154, 289–290].

The city of Sennar is one of the most prominent Sudanese cities of the late medieval and modern periods. It can also be regarded as an old Nubian settlement with a name of Nubian origin. *Issi* in the Nubian language means “water”. *Issi-n-ar* may be translated as “obstacle to water”. The travelers who have been there at different times have drawn attention to the peculiar topography of the bottom and the current in the place where the town was located².

Some of the Nile islands have become well known. This is entirely true of the island of *Tuti*, located within the Sudanese capital. The history of the settlement of this island is hardly described in detail in the Sudanese historical scholarship; it is filled with histori-

² At present, the town exists not far from the former site. A large dam has been built close to the old Sennar.

cal events and is connected with the activities of certain famous people in the Sudan. It is believed that the first people to settle this island were from the Nubian Mahas tribe³. About the origin of the toponym Tuti, basically all researchers agree that it is Nubian. The word *ti* means “island” in the Nubian language Danagla, as well as in the Coptic language. There are several examples of names of islands on the Nile with Nubian origin: *Salmarti* and *Narnarti*.

The first syllable *tu* in the toponym Tuti has no direct translation from Nubian Mahas. However, *tunti* means “a cow spinning the wheel of the sakiya”. There is also a possibility that the toponym *Tuti* derives from the name of the month *tut* (August — September, the time when the Nile level rises). The modern inhabitants of Tuti tend to speak about the very ancient origin of their island and cite the legend that it was here that Prophet Musa met Prophet Khidr.

Not only the names of cities and smaller settlements are of interest. Important for understanding the formation of the entire toponymic system are the names of individual districts of large Sudanese cities, in particular Omdurman⁴.

Om Badi (*Ombada*) is a neighborhood in Omdurman that now has hardly the largest concentration of inhabitants. *Badi* is a name of Nubian origin, and it probably refers to a specific person. Among the rulers of the Sultanate of the Funj people in Sudan, several rulers bore this name.

There are other neighborhoods and quarters in Omdurman, the names of which may have Nubian origins. In the northern part of Omdurman are the neighborhoods of *al-Sarurab* and *al-Jarrafa*, and in the south, *Banat*. It is likely that the names are derived from Arabic, but the population is predominantly migrants with Nubian roots. The island of *Islanj*, like the mentioned Tuti within the Sudanese capital, is composed of the two Nubian words *issi*, meaning “water”, and *anj*, meaning “people, inhabitants”.

Turning from neighborhoods to districts and streets in Omdurman, we note the following: Omdurman is home to the famous Karor Street that connects the neighborhood of Ombada with Suq Libya (Libyan Market). This word translates from the Nubian language as “shouting” or “screaming”. However, it is more likely that the origin of the name of this street is linked to the word *karor*, a word actively used in Sudanese colloquial language: “junk, trinkets, unnecessary things”. In the past, it was used to sell cheap consumer goods.

The quarter of *al-Maurida*, one of the most famous in Omdurman (a football team that played in the top tier of the local championship was even named in its honor) is of native Arab origin.

As is rightly believed in Sudan, “villages are repositories of history, and without them, it is impossible to understand who we are and what our past was like” [11, p.13]. The names of villages in Sudan sometimes overlap and may refer to different parts of the country. The name of the native village of the famous Sudanese historian al-Tayyib Muhammad al-Tayyib is illustrative. It is called *Muqrin* (المقرن) and is located at the confluence of two rivers, the Nile and the Atbara. It should be stipulated that in Sudan, *Muqrin* is also found in the capital city of Khartoum. It is a famous place to visit for tourists, as it is there that one can see the joining of the waters of the White and Blue Nile. Another point on the map

³ There is a possibility, that somewhat earlier, the island was also inhabited by natives of the Fatihab clan of the Arab Jumuiya tribe.

⁴ Omdurman is one part of the triple capital of Khartoum. Alongside it, the city consists of Khartoum and North Khartoum under the common name of Khartoum.

with the same name is located at the confluence of the Blue Nile and the Dinder River. The *Muqrin* at the confluence of the Atbara and the Nile was called *al-Kanisa* (translated as “church”) or *Khurtum al-Kanisa*, which can be translated as “the confluence of the rivers at the church” by the people living there. At-Tayyib Muhammad at-Tayyib explains this name by saying that a church was built at the confluence in ancient times, and there was an observation tower next to it that overlooked the river.

As mentioned earlier, there are also toponyms of English origin in Sudan. In addition to the above-mentioned mountain, there is a major city on the Red Sea coast called Port Sudan, founded by the British. There are also toponyms of Greek origin. In particular, Abu Ruf, one of the neighborhoods adjacent to the west bank of the Nile in Omdurman, is worth mentioning. It was once a slave market place and a wharf to receive the goods of Greek businessmen from the Averof family. Over time, the name became fixed in the language and took the Arabic version of *Abu Ruf*. This neighborhood still exists today [12, p. 595]. The port city on the White Nile, *Kosti*, also has Greek roots. It is a very young city and is also named after a Greek businessman who had his factories here [13].

In eastern Sudan, some toponyms are derived from the language of the ancient Beja nomads.

Summarizing some of the results, we would like to note that the presented material reflects the diversity of the origins of toponyms in Sudan. Geographical names allow us to trace certain stages of the country’s history, starting from ancient times to the present day. Oral tradition has preserved and continues to preserve interesting historical data on the origin of settlements of different levels, hydronyms, etc., and poses new questions for researchers, allowing for a deeper understanding of the processes of migration, development, and exploration of new territories in the southern parts of the country by Sudanese from the north, the peculiarities of seasonal movements of nomadic tribes, and the economic system.

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Received: December 5, 2023

Accepted: May 27, 2024

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О происхождении некоторых суданских топонимов

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Для цитирования: *Gerasimov I. V.* About the Origin of Some Sudanese Toponyms // Вестник Санкт-Петербургского университета. Востоковедение и африканистика. 2024. Т. 16. Вып. 3. С. 558–566. <https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu13.2024.304>

В статье рассматриваются отдельные суданские топонимы и исторические сведения об их происхождении, которые до недавнего времени передавались в устной форме. Изучение фольклорного материала показало, что топонимы Судана отражают древнее прошлое страны. Среди них попадаются слова нубийского и более раннего происхождения, смысл которых не всегда понятен местным жителям. В них также просматривается многонациональный и многоязычный характер страны. Доминирующим языком Судана является арабский, и множество топонимов имеют арабское происхождение, однако среди географических названий встречаются и неарабские слова, пришедшие из некоторых языков народов Судана: форов, беджа, нубийцев и др. На рубеже XIX–XX вв. появляются топонимы, имеющие турецкое и английское происхождение, что объясняется массовым присутствием представителей турецкой и британской власти и армии на суданской территории. Топонимы Судана представляют пеструю картину и могут служить хорошим эмпирическим материалом для воссоздания истории отдельных регионов страны, населенных пунктов, различных географических объектов. Представленный материал отражает разнообразие происхождения топонимов в Судане. Географические названия позволяют проследить отдельные этапы истории страны, с глубокой древности до наших дней. Устная традиция сберегла и продолжает сохранять интересные исторические сведения о происхождении населенных пунктов разного уровня, гидронимов и т. п. и ставит перед исследователями новые вопросы, позволяющие глубже понять происходившие процессы миграции, развития и освоения

суданцами с севера новых территорий в южных частях страны, особенности сезонных перемещений кочевых племен и их хозяйственный уклад.

Ключевые слова: Судан, топонимы Судана, города Судана, географические названия, история Судана.

Статья поступила в редакцию 5 декабря 2023 г.,
рекомендована к печати 27 мая 2024 г.

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