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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON LANGUAGE CONTACT BETWEEN EGYPTIAN AND THE LANGUAGES OF DARFUR AND CHAD

With the discovery of Egyptian routes leading west from Dakhla Oasis (the so-called ‘Abu Ballas’ trail) and the inscription of Montuhotep II at Gebel Uweinat, serious attention is now being paid to links between Egypt and the ancient cultures of the Central Sahara, more succinctly in the Fezzan, Tibesti, and Ennedi and Darfur regions. While the majority of this research is archaeological or even epigraphic (the Montuhotep II inscription at Uweinat being the primary exemplar) in scope, there is also the possibility that ancient links between Egyptians and Saharan cultures are still to be presently found in the form of Sprachkontakt and the modern lexicons of Saharan languages. That is contemporary Saharan languages might well preserve some relic Egyptian loanwords, as might Egyptian contain loans from Saharan languages. A recent article by Thomas Schneider regarding the foreign connections of Egyptian cosmography and the Libyan Desert has proposed the occurrence of Teda lexical items in the Egyptian text of the *Amduat*.¹ Teda is a language spoken in the Northern Sahara, and along with Daza comprises the Tebu (or Tubu) language family spoken in Northern Chad, Southern Libya, Eastern Niger and also historically the Gebel Uweinat of Southwestern Egypt.² The idea of Ancient Egyptian loanwords in languages of this part of the Sahara is not particularly new in itself. In his 1862 *Central Afrikanischer Vokabularien*, Heinrich Barth proposed a number of etymologies and morphological similarities between Ancient Egyptian and Saharan languages as diverse as Maba, Teda, and Songhai.³ While Barth’s comparisons could not be considered rigorous by modern linguistic standards (not to mention phonologically impossible), and were clearly derived from the then scholarly zeitgeist in early *Afrikanistik* of

finding ‘advanced’ Egyptian influences everywhere in Africa, the idea of such language contact between the Nile Valley and languages of Chad and Darfur has only been haphazardly revisited. Given the new research emphasis on pharaonic contacts with the Libyan (Western) Desert and identification of trade routes leading both west of Egypt and Nubia, there is a small but growing archaeological precedent for some sort of contact between Egyptians and the west in the Pharaonic period.

Ancient Egyptian loanwords, well known in languages of historical Nubia (Northern Sudan) such as Meroitic, Old Nubian, and Beja, are extremely rare in languages west and southwest of Egypt in the Sahara. As these languages are not recorded in writing, evidence of Sprachkontakt is only ascertainable by analysis of the modern lexicon. Despite this methodological impediment, Ancient Egyptian loans are still identifiable in some modern African lexicons. Rilly has found an instance of the month name ‘Thoth’ in the Nyima language of Kordofan (West-Central Sudan), probably loaned through an intermediary language such as Meroitic, Old Nubian or other now-extinct branch of North Eastern Sudanic.⁴ The Egyptian word *bnr* ‘date(palm)’ (Late Egyptian *t3 bni*) was loaned into various Berber languages as *te-bayne*, with the Late Egyptian feminine definite article.⁵ This word for datepalm even spread to the Chad basin in Hausa *dābīnò* and Kanuri *dībīnò*, but here it is almost certain that these are loans from Berber into Chad rather than directly from Egyptian.⁶

1 Schneider 2010. I am indebted to Angelika Jakobi for helpful comments on this paper.

2 It would seem that even in the early 19th Century the Teda nomads of Kufra would occasionally herd their flocks in Gebel Uweinat, see Noguera et. al 2007.

3 Barth 1862.

4 Rilly 2010: 188-189. Rilly was able to identify a number of plausible loanwords between Old Nubian and languages and Kordofan Nubian, some of which ultimately stemmed from Egyptian.

5 Kossmann 2013: 57; Kossmann 2002: 248-249. The Egyptian word for ‘palm-fibre’ *šni-bnr.t* (Copt. *ϣNBNNĖ*) also seems to have been loaned into Berber languages as **a-sfan*.

6 Kossmann 2005: 69. Lukas 1953: 187, in his lexicon of Tubu, registers the words *timbi*, *dimbi*, and *tinni* with the meaning of ‘Date(palm)’ which might also belong to this loanword, although the loss of the final nasal would need to be explained through a metathesis and/or elision.



Apart from these loanwords there is relatively little in the way of evidence of Sprachkontakt between Darfur, Chad, and Egypt dating to phases of the Egyptian language from Old Egyptian to Coptic (c. 3100BCE-800CE). Schneider's loanwords from the *Amduat* are, for the moment, the only proposals for Sprachkontakt in the region. These loanwords originate from Teda or Daza, languages spoken in northern and central Chad and southern Libya.⁷

duro bu bu 'very big snake > Eg. ʕpp */drbb/

fʷódi-yezze-u 'waterway of the sun' > Eg. *wrnz* */wdnz/

The difficulties with reconstructing Ancient Egyptian phonology in addition to the large diachronic gap between hypothetical ancient forms of these words and the contemporary forms given in modern Teda dictionaries mean that these loanwords must be treated with a degree of caution. Schneider can explain Egyptian ayin (ʕ) for a foreign /d/ through a well-established but still debated argument that earlier Egyptian ayin could correspond to /d/ and only later shifted to /ʕ/.⁸ Egyptian *w* for a foreign /f/ was explained through the labial character of Teda *f* – the word is attested as *fwed*. Egyptian *r* for a foreign /d/ is encountered in a few contexts, for instance New Kingdom ʕpr for Semitic ʕbd 'servant'. If these loanwords are considered to be true data for contact between Teda/Daza and Egyptian, then it follows that it would be worth investigating other lexical items in the Teda language to test this hypothesis, and to see if any Egyptian loanwords arrived in Teda. A search of lexicons in the region yielded some possible Egyptian loanwords in local languages.

The first is from the Egyptian word *dh.ty* 'lead, tin'. The word's meaning is generally given in lexicons as 'lead', but in some contexts could also clearly also refer to metallic 'tin',⁹ and therefore might have designated a number of similar lustrous metals. The phonology of the word, according to the well-known sound laws established in the diachronic phases of Egyptian, underwent several changes, from Old and Middle Egyptian *dh.ty* to Late Egyptian *dh.ty* (*d*

> *d*) and then by Demotic *th.ty*, and later Coptic forms such as **ⲧⲁⲛⲧ** (Sahidic) or **ⲧⲁⲐ** (Sahidic), **ⲧⲁⲛⲛ** (Bohairic), **ⲧⲉⲛⲧ** (Fayumic).¹⁰ At the stage of Late Egyptian and onwards, this word would have thus been pronounced something like */tVht(V)/. This Egyptian word might be recognised in the following words in languages of Chad and Darfur:¹¹

Teda *tuta* 'Blei'

The same loan is also recorded in Maba:¹²
tutu 'tin'

tuuta(i)k 'lead'

The lack of a pharyngeal phoneme /h/ in the Teda or Maba is not a problem, as this phoneme does not occur in any Nilo-Saharan language. The final *-k* on the Maba word for 'lead' might be explained through a morphological suffix in Maba or another proximal Nilo-Saharan tongue. This research was only able to consult a small number of dictionaries in an area with great linguistically complexity. Furthermore, it may be noted that some of the lexicons consulted (for example Fur, Daza, Bidiya, Kanuri) did not register any word for 'lead' or 'tin', thus making it difficult to discern if this word had a wider distribution than this preliminary assessment would propose. In several cases, the only registered word for lead in local languages was derivatives of the more recent Arabic loan *roṣaṣ* (cf. Lukas's Tubu *arsas*).

Judging from the phonology of the forms, it seems likely that this word for 'lead' and 'tin' would have arrived to these languages after the palatal fronting of *d* to *d̪* and *t*, and thus the loan theoretically dates from any period later than the Middle Kingdom and more likely Late Egyptian or later. This set of Egyptian loanwords in Teda and Maba therefore represent an ancient episode of language contact between Egyptians and speakers of languages in Darfur and Chad. It cannot be precluded that the words passed into these languages through an intermediary language on the Nile Valley such as Meroitic or Old Nubian, but we have no definite trace of these loans in these languages. It might well be that the loans passed through the Abu Ballas trail along with Egyptian or local traders. While it is impossible to know the distribution of Maba and Teda languages in antiquity, it may well be that these languages occupied this region

7 Schneider 2010: 9-11. Cooper 2012:4 also proposed relating the toponym *Ysm/Imz* to a Teda word *emeri/eneri/emi* 'wadi, highland, mountain'.

8 Peust 1999: 101-102; Satzinger 1999: 141-151; Kammerzell 1998: 26.

9 Following the lexical conclusions of Janssen 1975: 442-443 and Harris 1961: 67-68. Harris importantly notes the common confusion, at least lexicographically, between lead and tin in cultures of antiquity.

10 For the various orthographies of this word, see Wb. 5, 605-606; Harris 1961: 67-68; Černý 1976: 206; Westendorf 1965/1977: 260.

11 Lukas 1953: 186.

12 Edgar 1991: 107.



of Northwest Sudan, Northern Chad, and Southern Libya, making them the likely recipients of Egypt's western trans-Saharan trade routes.

A model for contact between these groups, inhabiting the region between Darfur, Tibesti, and Gebel Uweinat can be made on a variety of evidence. The most direct route between Ancient Egyptians and this region would have been the Abu Ballas trail, linking the Egyptian centre at Dakhla to the Gebel Uweinat and probably some region beyond in Ennedi and Darfur.¹³ In later periods, the Roman fortresses in southern Kharga may also have facilitated trade with caravans leading from Darfur and the Fezzan.¹⁴ In addition to this, the discovery of fortresses west of Upper Nubia and Dongola reach, at Gala Abu Ahmed and Gala el-Sheikh along the Wadi Howar demonstrate the existence of a route leading west to Darfur from the Third Cataract and Dongola Reach. The earliest occupation of these forts is in the Napatan period, but the routes leading west of here may have been in operation for some time before the establishment of these structures. Quoting the report of a mid-19th Century Tunisian Sheikh, Hofmann cited the possibility of a Meroitic city in Wadai on the Sudan-Chad border, although this report must be treated with some skepticism.¹⁵ Arkell reported a discovery of a Christian centre at Ain Farah in northern Darfur, but subsequent investigations have shown that this cultural identification was mistaken and that the remains likely date to the Islamic period of the Tunjur Sultanate.¹⁶

More relevantly, this data of lexical loans relating to metallurgy feeds into a much larger argument and hypothesis on the diffusion of iron-working and metallurgical technologies from Sudan further west into Darfur and the Sahelian corridor.¹⁷ Blakely has shown that the diffusion of iron working to west and sub-Saharan Africa is unlikely to have occurred through this Darfur corridor,¹⁸ but this conclusion in itself does not necessarily invalidate the idea that tin, lead and other metallurgical terminology may have arrived with trade items and technologies exported from the Nile Valley, thus entering local lexicons. Another thing to be considered is that 'tin' and 'lead' might belong to a much older phase of metallurgi-

cal diffusion than iron-working. Indeed, McDonald, while rejecting widespread diffusion between the Nile Valley and further Africa, has proposed the presence of a contact zone between Nubia and the Chad basin, based on shared stylistic similarities in rock art and ceramic decorative traditions.¹⁹

There is great difficulty, of course, in proposing the ancient linguistic identity of groups of the Western Desert and Central Sahara in Egyptian texts. Apart from Berber, no 'Saharan' language has yet been confidently identified in Egyptian documents. The *Tmhw* and *Tḥnw* Libyans (and later *Rbw* 'Libyans') of Egyptian texts are generally considered to be proto-Berber speakers, but there is no strong evidence for this connection until the New Kingdom.²⁰ The identity of any pre-Egyptian indigenous inhabitants of Kharga and Dakhla oases is as yet unknown as there are too few loanwords or foreign names in which to begin an inquiry.²¹ Two placenames recorded in Old Kingdom letters from Balat in Dakhla Oasis, *Kdst* and *Mskt* may refer to a language spoken outside the Oases by an indigenous group, although what precise language these words originate from must remain a mystery.²² As it stands the field of inquiry on the identity of an ancient 'Oasian language' (the linguistic correlate of the Bashendi and Sheikh Muftah archaeological cultures) should be widened to include not only proto-Berber, but also forms of Nilo-Saharan or even a branch of Proto-Egyptian.

19 McDonald 2003: 103-104.

20 For discussion, see Colin 2006 and El-Sayed 2011: 17-21. Schneider 2003: 175 and Breyer 2014:199-202 also quote Berber words in foreign onomastica in Egyptian records from the Middle Kingdom and later. Kossmann 2011 and Kossmann 2013: 57 doubts the commonly quoted argument of Behrens that there was an ancient connection between Berber and Old Nubian as well as the supposed Berber etymologies of the dog names of King Antef.

21 El-Sayed 2011 identifies a few words of possible Oasis origin (Kharga and Dakhla) such as *Tgʒi* (102, god-name) *Bhks* (158, placename) *Bt* (161, dog name), *sš* (307 plant material) *sšrt* (311, mineral). A demonstrable 'Libyan' presence is well-known in the oases in the Third Intermediate Period, which are generally given to be Berber speakers, see Hubschmann 2010.

22 Pantalacci 2013. *Kdst* is reminiscent of a common Semitic root *qdš* 'sacred', but a Semitic etymology would seem very unlikely in this geographic setting. There is an Egyptian placename *Mskt* (a jenseitstopoi) in the Books of the Afterlife which is explainable from an Egyptian root *sk* 'to cut' or *skʒ* 'be high' (Wb. 4, 302-303) with an m-prefix of place, although one should entertain the notion that the placename may very well have nothing to do with the Egyptian and be a rendering of a foreign word. Berber geographic terminology has a word *mesak* meaning 'plateau' or 'hard ground' (see Le Quellec, 2011: 232-233) but it is unclear if it ultimately stems from an Arabic root.

13 See now the extensive monograph of Förster 2015 and arguments made in Cooper 2012.

14 Tallet et al. 2012: 75-92.

15 Hofmann 1972: 14-18.

16 Edwards 2004: 271-272 and Mohamed 1986: 203, 221. For a general discussion on the lack of linkages between Darfur, Nubia, and Egypt, see McGregor 2001:132-137, 140.

17 Allard-Huard & Huard 1985.

18 Blakely 2006: 61.



In matters of prehistoric language contact, Ehret has proposed the existence of at least six Nilo-Saharan loanwords in Old Egyptian:²³

bdt ‘bed (of gourds) < Proto-Sahelian *bud ‘edible gourd’

s3 ‘cattle byre’ < Proto-Sahelian *sar ‘enclosure’

mrw ‘bull’ < Proto-Trans-Sahelian *maawr ‘ox’

pg3 ‘trough’ < Proto-Saharo-Sahelian *pooKur ‘wooden vessel’

ds ‘jar’ < Proto-Sudanic *Dəs ‘waterpot (?)’

t3 ‘kind of beer’ < Proto-Sahelian *Ter ‘fermented grain’

There are a number of pragmatic and lexical issues with their status as loanwords in Egyptian. As many of these words originated from Ehret’s ‘Proto-Sahelian’, it is possible that the words were spoken in a period when Afroasiatic (and therefore Egyptian) were in contact with Nilo-Saharan in earlier Neolithic phases of the Wet-Sahara, meaning that they cannot be used as evidence of language contact between the Central Sahara and the Nile Valley in historical periods as they date back before the break up of Afroasiatic and Sahelian languages. Furthermore, some of the loanwords themselves have good inner Egyptian or Afroasiatic etymologies. The word for ‘gourd’ *bdt* is actually first Old Egyptian *bnd.t* which goes back to an Afroasiatic root **bng* present in diverse languages like Guanche and Hausa.²⁴ The word *s3* for cattle-pyre is a very late (Ptolemaic) shortening of *s3-pr*.²⁵ Egyptian *mr.w* ‘bull’ is cognate with a root **mr* ‘cattle’ present in a great number of Afroasiatic languages.²⁶ Likewise, *ds* ‘jar’ has a number of good cognates in Chadic and Semitic. Ehret’s *pg3* is probably a reference to the Berlin Wörterbuch’s *pg3* ‘bowl’ which clearly originates from the Egyptian verb *pg3* ‘to open’. The majority of these examples cannot be considered good evidence for any contact between Egyptians and Nilo-Saharan speakers, although one should not altogether dismiss loanwords of this nature as belonging to a Neolithic phase of contact. This would leave Schneider’s loanwords, *Wrnz* and *3pp* as well as Teda and Maba *tu(u)*

ta as the only identifiable evidence of Sprachkontakt between Ancient Egyptian and languages of Darfur and Chad. This evidence thus suggests an ancient phase of trans-Saharan contact which is yet to be confirmed in archaeological or historical evidence. In lieu of fieldwork in the region of the Western Desert, Fezzan, Tibesti, and Ennedi, this linguistic evidence represents a small and tantalizing glimpse of a new frontier for ancient Egyptian foreign contacts and also the possibility of trans-Saharan trade across the Western Deserts.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Berührungspunkte zwischen dem pharaonischen Ägypten und den antiken Kulturen der Zentral-Sahara (Tschad, Süd-Libyen, Darfur) wurden bisher zwar in der Forschung hypothetisch angenommen, jedoch noch nicht mit fundierten Beweisen belegt. Nach diesen antiken interkulturellen Kontakten wird in der Regel in archäologischem Material, in Ähnlichkeiten zwischen den verschiedenen dekorativen Traditionen und sogar in epigraphischen Anhaltspunkten geforscht. Bisher wurde die Methode des ‚Sprachkontaktes‘ nicht angewandt, um einen Kontakt zwischen den antiken Kulturen dieser Regionen nachzuweisen. Dieser Artikel präsentiert einige neue ägyptische Lehnworte in Sprachen der Sahara, die sich auf die Metallverarbeitung jener lokalen Kulturen beziehen und eine bisher unerforschte Phase des interkulturellen Handelns und Kontaktes zwischen Ägypten und den Teda- und Maba-Völkern in Darfur und Tschad dokumentieren.

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23 Ehret 2011: 162-163. The orthographic conventions follow Ehret’s transcription.

24 Takács 2001: 243-244.

25 Gardiner 1947: 97.

26 Takács 2008, 393-394.



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