

Egyptian loanwords in the Nuba Mountain languages

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1 Introduction

Egypt's proximity to Sudan has favored contacts between the two populations from the beginning of the Pharaonic period. Thus, commercial relations developed quickly in this area, facilitated by the richness of the Sudanese subsoil in gold. This ore was of particular importance for the Egyptian powers, who used it to run their civil and religious administrations, develop infrastructure and finance their military apparatus. These growing needs led the Egyptian kings to colonize the southern lands to manage these mineral resources, first during the Middle Kingdom (c. 2033 – c. 1780 BC), as far as the second cataract, in the region called Wawat (*wꜣwꜣt*), and then during the New Kingdom (c. 1500 – c. 1050 BC), in its entirety from Aswan and the first cataract to Kurgus, between the 4th and 5th cataracts, in the region called Kush (*Kꜣš*)¹. This presence, over such long periods of time, allowed the Egyptian culture and language to spread and take root in these territories. However, the furthest border of the Egyptian territory in Sudan is to be placed in the Kurgus region, as mentioned above, which is some 900 kilometers away from Kordofan and the Nuba Mountains. In these conditions, how and why would Egyptian words have become so integrated into the different languages of the Nuba Mountains?

It should be remembered that throughout the history of ancient Egypt, the pharaohs made numerous contacts with their more or less distant neighbours, whether through trade or in a bellicose manner through wars of expansion or defense.

Thus, among these peoples, we can mention the Libyans in the West, the peoples of the various Semitic kingdoms of the Near East (Canaanite, Hittite, etc.) and the Greeks and the Romans, coming from the North, who settled and took control of the Egyptian territory during later periods. These contacts led to the

¹ Egyptians designated as Kush what is called Upper Nubia, between the second cataract and Kurgus. Later on, this denomination was extended to the whole region described here.

creation of numerous ways and means of exchange between these different populations. Whether commercial, demographic or even military, these relationships led to interactions between populations. To the south of the Egyptian Empire lies Nubia. The Egyptian influence over the territory can be seen first of all in the famous pyramids of Meroe, Nuri and Kurru, the pyramidal shape of these tombs being borrowed from the tombs of the Egyptians (or, more precisely, from the tombs of the officials of the Egyptian administration who were buried in Nubia, like those in Soleb and Tumbus). We can also mention the representations that can be found outside the pyramids, on some pylons, where the King is depicted, as the Egyptian kings were, killing their various enemies and crushing them underfoot. Inside the pyramids, we can also find representations influenced by Egyptian tomb decorations, such as pictures showing, in several registers, processions of people presenting food and treasures to the ruler, or representations of funeral processions showing the king accompanied by the gods on his way to the afterlife.

Languages do not escape cultural influences, so that we can still find today words derived or borrowed from Ancient Egyptian, in geographical areas where Egyptians never travelled, and where the Egyptian language was unknown. In western Europe, for example, traces of this journey can be found. We can cite words like *paper* (*papier* in French), which comes from Latin *papyrus*, borrowed from Greek *παπυρος*, itself inherited from the Egyptian *p3 pr-ʕ* (pronounced [papyro] in late Egyptian), meaning ‘the one of Pharaoh’. This expression reflects the monopolistic nature of papyrus production. Since Egyptian society was based on strong and plentiful administration, the royal power wanted to control its supply. Similarly, *gum* (*gomme* in French), has followed the same path, from Latin *gummi*, coming through Greek *κομμι* from Egyptian *qmj.t* (pronounced [kemi]) ‘gum’.

A land as close to Egypt as Sudan is no exception. There are therefore loanwords from Egyptian in languages of the Nuba Mountains. We will focus on these borrowings in Nyimang and Afitti, two closely related Nilo-Saharan languages from the Nuba Mountains, forming the Nyima group.

2 The Egyptian loanwords

2.1 The Nyimang calendar, a typical example of the course of loans

The first loans we are going to analyze are some months of the Nyimang calendar. The apparent path of these words through different languages will make it possible to outline a standard journey in order to better understand the other borrowings that we will see later.

The first imported month is the first month of the year: $\dot{\chi}\dot{\delta}\dot{\chi}\dot{\delta}$ (in Ama, the main Nyimang dialect) or $\dot{\chi}\dot{\delta}\dot{\delta}\dot{o}g$ (in Mandal, the other Nyimang dialect). This first month comes from the Egyptian word *Thot*. It is the first month of the Egyptian year and marks the beginning of the flood of the Nile (called the *Akhet* season). It is named after the god Thot who, among his attributions, is the reckoner of time and seasons (Posener 1963: 301). The Egyptian word *Thot* was passed into Coptic: *t^hoout* (Vycichl 1984: 58). It was borrowed into medieval Christian Nubian, which uses the first Egyptian form, *t^hot^h*, and finally was imported into the Nyimang language. The transformation to $\dot{\chi}\dot{\delta}\dot{\chi}\dot{\delta}$ is quite obvious with the addition of a final /o/. For $\dot{\chi}\dot{\delta}\dot{\delta}\dot{o}g$, the second /t/ devoiced to /d/. The added ending /g/ is unclear. It might be the trace of a Nubian accusative marker (-ga or -ge).

The second month of the calendar is also imported from Egyptian, but only in Nyimang Ama: it is called *bibilá*. It comes from the Ptolemaic Egyptian month *Paophi*. In classical Ancient Egyptian, it was called *p3 n jpt* ('that of Opet', the name of Karnak, formerly Thebes). It is the second month of the Egyptian year, the second month of the Nile flood period. This month refers to the procession of the festival of Opet, where the sacred bark of Amun goes up the Nile from the temple of Karnak to that of Luxor. In the same way as the first month, the Egyptian word passed into Coptic without major transformation: *paope* (Vycichl 1984: 161). In Sahidic, with some variations in other dialects, it became *paop^hi* (Bohairic), *paape*, *poope* (Sahidic variation), *pawpi* (Bohairic), *paapi* (Fayyumic) and was then adopted into Old Nubian as *p^haWp^hi* (/babi/) (Rilly 2010: 189). Here, the /p/ became regularly /b/ and the final /e/ shifted to /i/. The last borrowing is thus from Old Nubian into Nyimang, where it became *bibilá*. There is a vowel-copying in the first syllable from /a/ to /i/ and the unexplained addition of a final syllable *lá*. Arabic is close to the Old Nubian pronunciation, with *baba*.

The fourth month of the calendar is also imported from Egyptian. Nyimang Ama *kwifî* is originally borrowed from the Ptolemaic Egyptian month *Choiak*, originally *k3 hr k3* (from the name of the bull Apis), the fourth month of the Egyptian calendar and the last month of the flood period. From Ptolemaic, the transfer to Old Nubian was through Coptic *koiahk* (Vycichl 1984: 74), identical to Ptolemaic. Old Nubian transforms Coptic into *khoiak* (/guiak/), with the voicing of the initial /k/ into a /g/ resulting in a change in pronunciation. To arrive at *kwifî*, the initial /g/ devoices back to a /k/, as in Egyptian and Coptic. With this devoicing, *khoi* (/gwi/) then becomes /kwi/. This interpretation is subject to reservations, particularly regarding the second syllable of the Nyimang word, which does not seem to be etymologically related to its Egyptian root. This name can also be found in Aramaic (*kyħk*) and in Egyptian Arabic (*kiyahk*).

The Nyimang words *bwí* (Ama) and *bùgè* (Mandal) correspond to the month of *Pakhons* (*p3 n hnsw* ‘that of Khons’), the ninth month of the year and the first month of the harvest period (called *Shemu*). It refers to the full moon of the month, associated with the god Khons. The Egyptian word, before reaching Nyimang, first passed through the Coptic *pahons* (Vycichl 1984: 167). The /x/ has been transformed into /g/, both being velar sounds. This word is still used in Dongolawi Nubian to designate the summer season and became *fagoon* in Nobiin. From Coptic, *pahons* was borrowed by Old Nubian to become *pahon*. Thus, when it was transferred into Nyimang Mandal, the /a/ was replaced with a /u/ and the ending *on* became *e*. For Ama, Rilly tells us that *bwí* originally had a /g/, but it became silent (Rilly 2010: 189). Thus, the Ama form would result from the loss of /g/ and the addition of the final vowel /i/. This month is also found in Arabic: *bašans*.

These different examples show us quite similar paths: a word of Ancient Egyptian origin passed into the different Coptic dialects. From there it was borrowed into the Nile Nubian languages and finally settled in the Kordofan Nubian languages. Despite some slight differences, the following loanwords have taken this same route.

2.2 Other examples of loans

The first loan is not a month. It is found in the Nyimang and Afitti dialects and concerns the word for ‘sword’. In Afitti this word is *siddi*. In Nyimang, it is *šibiđi*. They both have an Egyptian root: they come from the Egyptian *sf̄t*, bearing several meanings, all related to the field of butchery or slaughtering: ‘to slaughter or make a sacrifice’ (since the Old Kingdom, between *c.* 2700 and *c.* 2200 BC), a ‘butcher’ (since the Middle Kingdom), a ‘sacrifice’ (since the eighteenth dynasty, between *c.* 1550 and *c.* 1300 BC), etc. *sf̄t* derived to *sf̄t* which means a ‘knife’, and later came to mean a ‘sword’ around the eighteenth dynasty. Since the Middle Kingdom, the final /t/ was no longer pronounced in the Egyptian language. Thus, the pronunciation of the word should sound like [sɛ:fɛ], or something close to it, as we can imagine from the Coptic *seefè* (Vycichl 1984: 204). From this point on, the word was also borrowed in the Arabic term *sayf* ‘sword’. The two loanwords in the Nyima languages show a rather similar course. From Egyptian, the root passed into the Nile languages and then into Kordofan Nubian (also called Ajang), and was eventually imported into Afitti and Nyimang. Thus, Egyptian *sf̄t* became **sibidi* in early Nile Nubian and later *siwid* in Kenuzi-Dongolawi. The Egyptian /f/ became first /b/, then /w/, and a final /d/, which was originally a singulative marker in Nile Nubian, was added. These changes were then imported into Kordofan Nubian and then into Afitti and Nyimang in two different forms:

- In Afitti, the central /i/ of the original Early Nubian *sibidi fell off and the resulting cluster *bd* assimilated to *dd*, resulting in *síddi*.
- In Nyimang, the term remained closer to the original Early Nubian word, *fibiḏi*.

In the two Nyima languages, the word for ‘sword’ is imported, just like in the other Nubian dialects of Kordofan: *sibit* (in Dair), *siibde* (in Kadaro), *sibit* (in Ghulfan) or *fibid* (in Dilling). All these words have the same root, from the Nubian languages of the Nile, into which it came from Egyptian. This is not a coincidence because the sword was not a common weapon in this region, the spear being the more ancient and usual weapon. Thus, the weapon was imported alongside its name.

Since the integration of the loanword into the Nile Nubian languages, the ending *-di* appears (*sibidi), notably in Nyimang and Afitti (*síddi* or *fibiḏi*). This is the singulative marker. Further details will be added below.

Another word is also affected by this suffix: it is the word for the ‘date palm tree fruit’. It comes from the Egyptian *bnj*, which can be found in Coptic (Vycichl 1984: 29) as *beni* (Bohairic) or *bnne* (Sahidic). The Coptic word was then borrowed into Old Nubian: *pentí* (Browne 1996: 148), *pet(t)I* (Browne 1996: 150). We observe in these two loanwords, like for ‘sword’, an added suffix *-ti* marking the singular. The initial /b/ devoiced into /p/. In *pet(t)I*, the /n/ in *ben* assimilated with the second /t/ of *pet(t)I*.

From this point on, the Old Nubian words spread all around the region, reaching many Nubian languages.

In Central Sudan, Dongolawi *bént(i)* (Armbuster 1965: 234) has kept the Egyptian and Coptic initial /b/. The same phenomenon occurs in Nubian, *pentí* and *pet(t)I* becoming *benti* (Hofmann & Vorbichler 1983: 72), while they become *betti* (von Massenbach 1962: 177) in Kenuzi (Reinisch 1972: 20). The Old Nubian *apenti* form is derived into Nobiin as *fenti* (Khalil 1996: 114). The initial /a/ fell off and the remaining initial /p/ (= /b/) became /f/ due to fricatisation in the initial position, which is systematic in Nobiin.

Regarding the Kordofan languages, several points regarding the date palm fruit can be underlined.

First, we can observe direct loans from northern languages. The result of these borrowings is then close to the Egyptian, Coptic or Old Nubian words, despite some little changes: *fēnde* (Rilly, p.c.) in Nyimang Ama, *fēnda* (Rilly, p.c.) in Afitti, *fēndí* (Jakobi ms.) in Dair and *hēntí* in Dilling (Kauczor 1920: 21, 49) and Kudur. The *-tí* ending found in Dilling and Kudur, and the *-de*, *-da*, *-dí* ending

in Nyimang Ama, Afitti and Dair are inherited from the Old Nubian morpheme, where it marks the singulative. The Kordofan languages kept this addition. In Dilling, the singulative is completed by an *-nɗu* form (rendered *hentindur*, more details below). This *-ti* is devoiced to /d/ in Nyimang, Afitti and Dair. This kind of suffix is regularly found in imported words. As seen earlier, it is found in the word for ‘sword’ in some Kordofanian languages. These two words, ‘sword’ and ‘date’, are imported from Ancient Egyptian, where the system is based on the singular-plural pattern. In this case, the noun is unmarked when it represents a single item and the plural is expressed by a suffix (in this case, the morpheme *.w*). Then, when entering the Nile Nubian languages, which use a singulative and collective marking in their number marking system, it had to be adapted, adding the singulative *-tí* marker. This adaptation is not restricted to Egyptian borrowings but is also found in the translational equivalent for ‘horse’, which is imported² from the Meroitic *mre-ke³ (Rilly 2010: 431): *mòrɗù*, *marɗù*, *marɗi* (Nyimang), *mɔrɗà* (Afitti), *múrtí* (Nobiin), etc. These three words, for ‘sword’, ‘date’ and ‘horse’, are all imported from other languages. Indeed, the date palm tree is a cultivated product: the fertilisation, pollination and therefore the reproduction of the species is difficult, requiring human intervention. Thus, the date palm tree had to be brought in, in some way, to be exploited in Sudan. This is visible in the Midob language. The word for dried dates, an export product, is borrowed from Nile Nubian, itself derived from Egyptian: *péendí* (Rilly 2010: 403). In contrast, the word for fresh dates, less conducive to export, is borrowed from the Arabic: *tùmmùr* or *tòmmòr*. This word could have been borrowed later, with the arrival of Arabic-speaking populations.

A second suffix is also added in some languages using these northern borrowings. The suffix *-nɗu* (diminutive suffix) or *-túnɗu* is common in Ajang languages. Then, the word for ‘date’ becomes *éñéñtúnɗú* in Ghulfan-Morung, in Ghulfan-Kurgul *éñéñtúnú*, in Kururu *éñéñù*, in Kadaru *éñdínɗú* and *enɗenɗu*, in Dabatna *éñéñɗú*, and in Debri *enɗonu*. In some of these dialects, /d/ is deleted after /n/ (Jakobi ms.: 121). Considering that Ghulfan-Morung and Ghulfan-Kurgul add a genitive marker *n* (Jakobi ms.: 121) between the Egyptian root and the *-túnɗu* suffix, the original root in these languages must be rendered as *enɗe* or *éñdí*, much closer to the Egyptian than expected.

The removal of /d/ after /n/ is applied in different ways depending on the language. In Ghulfan-Kurgul, it is applied completely, in the entire word, unlike in Ghulfan-Morung, where the suffix keeps its original form. As in Ghulfan-Morung, Dabatna and Kururu preserve the suffix. In Debri, the root remains intact, while the /d/ in the *-nɗu* suffix is deleted. In two of these languages, we

² Coming from Mediterranean areas for military reasons.

³ The latter may already have had this singular marker with the final *-ke*.

find the suffix *-tundu*. This suffix, like in many African languages, mean ‘the child’ (Walker 2018: 52, 68), the fruits being referred to as the trees’ children.

Another word may also have come from Ancient Egyptian. It is the word for ‘shield’, *dr* or *dur* in Nyimang, *târ* in Afitti. It may come from the Egyptian *qrʿw* (*kilau or *kulau). According to Hoch (1994: 298 f.), the Egyptian word might come from Ugaritic or a related Semitic language. In the Semitic languages, the word which means ‘shield’ is *qilʿa*. The later was also used to designate the shield bearer, along with *qallaʿu*. One or the other would have been adopted into the Egyptian language as a result of the conflicts with the Hittite Empire during the nineteenth dynasty (Erman & Grapow 1971: 59). This term is found in Hebrew as *kelaʿ* (which means the ‘sling, curtain, interleaving, door, tent, cell, sail, fishing net, braid’) and in Arabic as *kilʿ* (which means the ‘sail’). The use of the term changes, but its meaning remains relatively close to what the shield meant. We can still find the notion of protection, here visual. The new definitions have also kept the link with weaving (valid for the description of fabrics), the first shields being designed with an interlacing of reed mats. Like the sword, *qrʿw* has different meanings: it can designate the object, the shield, or the person who held it, the shield bearer. After Egyptian, the word would pass through Meroitic and Proto-Nubian *kar (which retains only the first syllable). The initial /k/ became regularly /t/ in Afitti and less regularly /d/ in Nyimang. In Coptic, the same phenomenon occurs: the word for ‘shield’ is only composed of the first syllable of the Egyptian word, *qal* (Vycichl 1984: 337), the /r/ turning into /l/. However, it is not known whether this word definitely passed from Egyptian into Nyimang. It could only be a chance resemblance.

3 Conclusion

We have seen that transfers between Egyptian and Nyimang or Afitti can still be observed today. These borrowings were made indirectly, through one or more other languages, notably the Nile languages. If there are so many loans through Coptic, it is because the former and the latter have the same religion, that is, Monophysite Christianity. However, the origin of these transfers is rather unclear. Two hypotheses can be proposed:

- The first would attribute these imports to populations from Kordofan who, after having been enlisted in the armies of the medieval Nile Nubian kingdoms, would have returned home and spread certain words. Thus, examples such as ‘sword’ and ‘shield’ (if the latter does indeed come from Egyptian) would attest to borrowings from the military environment. The borrowing of the names for certain months may also support this hypothesis because of the discipline and the accuracy the army needed to coordinate itself and act.

- The other hypothesis proposes, in contrast, the presence of settlements of the Kingdom of Makuria in Kordofan during the Middle Ages until the fifteenth or sixteenth century. Thus, the permanent contact between the two populations would have led to borrowings from the Nile Nubian languages into the languages of Kordofan, as attested by numerous Nyimang and Affiti words that have not been cited here because they do not have Egyptian roots, but are of Nubian origin. The Kingdom of Makuria is a good candidate for this diffusion because many of its roots go back to ancient Dongolawi or Old Nubian and are found in all the languages of Kordofan. This powerful kingdom could thus have extended southwards, before the dispersion of the Kordofan populations by the Arab tribes in the seventeenth century.

These two assumptions can work in parallel, one not excluding the other.

However, the lack of archaeological evidence does not allow us to confirm or deny this hypothesis, as the conflicts undermining the region do not allow the permanent establishment of archaeological missions on site.

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At the Begrawiya Pyramids (Meroë West)
(photo: Gertrud Schneider-Blum, February 2010)