

REMARKS ON SOME EURAFRICAN AND PERSIAN LOAN-WORDS
IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES

Hans G. Mukarovsky

Language reflects the human past in various ways. Evidence from Proto-Indo-European, Proto-Teutonic and Proto-Slavonic served for conclusions concerning the state of civilization and the environment of early Europeans. Loanwords also provided evidence, as did toponymy. In African linguistics the possibilities of research of that kind are far from being well exploited. Let us investigate a few African etymologies, and start with the most ancient documented African language: Egyptian.

1. An African animal foreign to Europe which became familiar under its Greek name, is the *hippopotamus*. This name was taken over as such by the Romance languages and English, but produced loan-translations in other Teutonic languages such as German *Flusspferd* or *Nilpferd*, Dutch *rivierpaard* or *nijlpaard*, Danish *flodhest* etc. Obviously the Greek had become acquainted with that animal on the Nile river in Ancient Egypt, but why, for heaven's sake, did they give it such a queer name calling it "horse"? True, it is a quadruped mammal, but this is nearly all in regard to similarity. The answer to the question herewith raised is, however, simple. It is not the animals which resemble each other, but their names; the Old Egyptian one being $\text{ḥ } b$, or $\text{ḥ } ^{\text{D}} b$, and documented in this form since the early times of the pyramid texts. As the vocalization of Old Egyptian is unknown, we have to assume that the name of the animal in question sounded very similarly to that of Greek *hippos* "horse" in pronunciation, so that *potamos* "river" was added to it to mark the difference. Certainly the meaning remained quite clear to the people who knew the animal or were told about it by their neighbours, in spite of the fact that itself had nothing to do with a horse, and for others who had borrowed the term no problems arose because they

used quite different terms for "horse" just as English does. Only by loan-translations made by people of more distant regions the fact was obscured that Europeans had also taken over an African name of an African animal which they had come to know in Africa.

2. A more sophisticated case is that of the Latin word *desertum* which also had passed into many European languages, such as English *desert*. At first sight it seems to be only the regular past participle of the verb *deser-ere* "to leave, abandon", but caveat: the said noun appears in the Latin literature only in the 3rd century A.C. and moreover in the patristic literature which to a large part originated from Egypt and North Africa. Yet the Old Egyptian name of the desert is *d š r.t*, again an old word the signification of which is "the red one", probably with allusion to the predominating colour of the soil.

Proposing this etymology I have met objections from an Egyptologist as well as from a Latinist colleague. The former objected that *d š r.t* has become *troš* in Coptic known only two centuries later. I do not think that this gives conclusive counter-evidence, because the Ancient Egyptian language was still read and written at the time of the Fathers of the Church, whatever the popular language was. The Latinist pointed to the occurrence of phrases like *loca deserta* in earlier Latin literature. Admitting this I maintain that the meaning of *desert* is in fact not closely linked with that of the verbal stem *deser-ere* which can be analyzed as denoting a movement *dē seriē*, so-to-say "go out from a row" or "leave the rank; leave one's place" (sometimes with a connotation of committing an offence to a duty of remaining there, which is strongly expressed by the intensive form strengthened by the affix *-t-*, as in English *deserter*). But the desert, where the first monks choose to dwell, is hardly just a meeting place of *deserters* and *drop-outs*. Perhaps the Old Egyptian term seemed to reveal to them some deeper sense, and the meaning of *d š r.t* passed into Latin, disguising its African origin under a Latin skin.

Yet the Latin language was spoken in Northern Africa at least since the fall of Carthage in 146 B.C. until the invasion of the Arabs in the 7th century A.C., i.e. for more than 800 years which is about as long as Arabic was spoken in Spain. Given

the cultural importance of Latin it would indeed be bewildering, if it would not have exerted a considerable, far-reaching influence on African languages beyond the zones of North African Berber where it has been already studied. Here we choose Fula, a language which is spread today from Southern Mauretania across the Sudan unto areas in the vicinity of the Nile. Let us mention that Fulbe traditions claim a North African origin of their forefathers. If this is true, it would help to explain easily possible contacts with Romans or Latin-speaking North Africans. According to F.W. Taylor (1921, 1953:IX) [*Ukbatu*] o *yotti ha Malle be himbe mako, kambe bo be lenyol diga le Rumingko'en*. Ukbatu's people "were one of the Rum tribes". More precisely *Ruminko* is the Soninke plural of *Ruminke* which denotes the inhabitant of a place or a territory. Perhaps also *leny-ol* does not recall Latin *linea* (French *lignée*, Spanish *linaje*) "lineage" by sheer accident. Other probable borrowings seem to corroborate this:

3. *minyiraa-do, minyiraa-wo* "younger brother or sister" to a certain extent recalls Latin *minor*. Analyzing this stem we have to disregard its extension by the derivative affix *-iraa-* typical of kinship terms. The simple word-stem is used with the series of singular possessive pronouns such as *miny-am, miny-a, miny.ii-ko* "my, thy, his or her younger brother or sister". In Latin the ending *-or* characterizes the masculine and feminine genders of the comparative adjective the neuter of which is *min-us*, with the superlative *min-imus* and related to the verbal stem *min.u-ere* "to lessen"; a positive degree of the adjective stem is lacking. One cannot but admit the full correspondence of the Fula and Latin word-stems in form and meaning except for the palatalization of *n > ny* which can be explained by the influence of the vowel *i* preceding it. As for the semantic field its sense is general in Latin, while restricted to the kinship term in Fula which might have borrowed it. As for Serer, the language closest to Fula, it has a verbal stem *miny* which means "to last very long, to take long time". Whether this may have to do with the above Fula term remains obscure. This raises the question whether all this is merely accidental. This may be so, but I do not think it is.

4. Analyzing the term for the opposite concept we find that

mawniraa-do, *mawniraa-wo* "elder brother or sister" has some similarities. Its word-stem is likewise extended by the kinship affix *-iraa-*, and occurs without it when linked with the singular possessive pronouns as *mawn-am*, *mawn.ii-ko* "my or her elder brother or sister". This stem seems to be identical with the verbal stem *mawn-a* "be big", "be (or grow) elder", while the adjectival stem appears in a threefold shape:

mak- before the noun class suffixes *-ka*, *-ki*, *-ko*, *-kal*, *-kol*, *-kon* or *-koy* and *-kuŋ*;

maŋ- before the noun class suffixes *-ŋga*, *-ŋge*, *-ŋgii*, *-ŋgo*, *-ŋgu*, *-ŋgal*, *-ŋgel*, *-ŋgol*, and *-ŋgum*;

maw- in all other cases.

It is, therefore, an oversimplification to say that "big" (or "old") is *maw-* in Fula, as it happens sometimes. Contrary to that it follows from the above quotations that the original second consonant of that root is fully assimilated to a following velar phoneme, but becomes *-w-* before dentals and labials. Therefrom it can be concluded that the basic phoneme was a velar one such as *g*, *gh*, *k*, or *x*.

Turning to the closely related languages Serer and Wolof we find the verbal stem Serer *maag* or *maak* "be old, adult" and Wolof *maag* "become or be great, or old" and the nouns Serer *o maag* ox- "elder brother, older person" and Wolof *mag b-* "elder brother, sister or cousin" but as well "adult, old, great, important person". Morphologically as well as in meaning these latter stems correspond well to Fula *maw-do* derived from the "adjectival stem" not extended by *-n-*.

Comparing the Fula word-stem enlarged by *-n-* *mawn-* to Serer we find another verbal stem *maagin* "to be old, adult, have the age of" which also serves as a base for other derivative forms just as in Fula, such as the causatives: Fula *mawn-in-a* "enlarge, magnify", Serer *maagn-and* "make greater, exalt".

Another example give terms where the basic stem is extended by different suffixes in both languages, such as the intensive verbal suffix in Fula, but combined with suffixes of reflexive kind: Fula *mawn-it-aa-re* "pride" corresponds to Serer *a maagn-and-ax al-*.

Inner evidence from Fula and comparative evidence from Fula and Serer both show that the basic form of the verbal stem common

to Fula-Serer has been *maag(i)n-/magn-* which - by another sheer coincidence (?) - corresponds to Latin *magn-us, magn-a, magn-um*. Let us add, that the comparative and superlative forms of this adjective are formed without a third consonant *-n-* as *mai-or, mai-us* (from **mag-ior*; compare *maggiore* in Italian derived from a popular Latin form), and *maximus* (= *mak-simus*). In a way Fula *mawnitaare* recalls even Latin *magnitūdo* "greatness" which again may be coincidental because of the Latin abstract suffix *-tūdo* as in *habitūdo, fortitūdo* etc.

Let me underline that the existence of the common root in the three Senegalian languages Fula, Serer and Wolof does not preclude that the forefathers of the present speakers could have borrowed it. To give another example of this kind Fula *asa, wasa* pl. *ɲgasa* "to dig", Serer *gas* pl. *ɲgas* "to dig" and the verb noun *a kas al-* "action of digging" and Wolof *gas, gaas* or *gos* "to dig" and the noun *ɲgass l-* "ditch" which corresponds to Fula *gas-ol* are all loans from Berber, where e.g. all main three Moroccan idioms, i.e. Tashilhit, Tamazight and Tarifiyt share in verb *ghaz* "to dig" with the habitative form *qqaz*. The Senegalian languages which lack a voiced sibilant phoneme, have replaced Berber *z* by *s*, and the initial sound of the Fula verb shows clearly the present-day reflexes of an original **gh* reconstructed by A. Klingenheben for Proto-Fula. So it is obvious that Fula, Serer and Wolof also share in common borrowings.

Let us cite finally the dialectal variants *mawni-yo: minyi-'o* found in some Niger and Burkina dialects of Fula and oppose them to their Latin counterparts *maior* - for a hypothetic vulgar **magnior* - and *minor* and realize that they might be real old loan-words from Latin, although we cannot ascertain it yet at the present state of our knowledge.

5. Fula *togoo-re* which means "gown" in Western Fulfulde dialects of Burkina Faso and Western Niger, but "short shirt, tunic" in Masina and in Eastern Fulfulde of Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon, formally recalls Latin *toga*. In their recent handbook of Fulfulde H. Jungraithmayr and Al-Amin Abu-Manga (1989:316) translate it by "garment, dress etc." and consider it a Hausa loanword in Fulfulde as spoken in Nigeria. G.P. Bargery's dictionary (1934:975) in fact lists *tagùwaa* "a loose-fitting

shirt with circular neck-hole", which is *taggo* in Sokoto Hausa. Contrary to this P. Newman's dictionary (1977:115) has *taguwàa* "any kind of man's fitted gown, knee-length or longer, with long sleeves and round neck". It is to be noted that A.I. Sow (1971:144) lists separately both Fula *togoo-re* "gown" and *togoo-re* "tunic". Whether both expressions have been taken over by Fula from Hausa is, in my opinion, an open question. For comparison we have the case of a Mande loan-word which passed into Fula and Hausa likewise. The Mande expression for a namesake person e.g. Bambara *tɔkɔma*, Soninke *toxora* was taken over by Fula as *tokara*, by Hausa as *tàkwàraa*. In Mande the word is derived from Bambara *tɔgɔ*, Soninke *toxo* "name" which shows that Hausa stem vowels are secondary.

6. I have dealt with probable Latin loan-words in Hausa already 10 years ago, and shall not repeat materials already available, but let us take a few examples for methodological purposes. Thus Hausa *takardaa* "paper, letter" goes back to Greek *chartēs* through Latin *charta* which was borrowed by Berber, e.g. Tuareg as *t kard* "sheet of paper". Thus the stem was extended in Berber by prefixed "nominal mark" *tə-*. It is, therefore, a Berber loan-word of Latin origin in Hausa, while the Greek term was borrowed by Arabic directly as *qartas* "sheet of paper" with final *s*, the noun *khariita* "map" being a more recent loan from a Romance language.

7. A different case is Hausa *mataakalaa* "flight of steps, stairway" which at the first sight is hardly discernible as a loan from Latin through Berber, the more, as there exist *mataakii* "step, stair", a noun of place formed from the verb *taakàa* "step on, tread on" which is borrowed from Arabic *tàkk-a* "tread upon". Yet no verbal base **taakalaa* exists, or was derived from the former verb-stem by an extension *-al* of unknown function. We may, therefore, conclude that the prefix marking nouns of place was added by sheer analogy, and recognize in the remaining word-stem a loan-word from Berber which, e.g. in Moroccan Tashilhayt is *taskala* "ladder" borrowed from Latin *scala* "stair". In Hausa, owing to tendency to avoid consonant clusters *-s-* was dropped and the preceding vowel lengthened instead, Berber *ta-skala* becoming *taakala* which was assimilated to the canonical

shape by adding the prefix *ma-* and lengthening the ending *-ta*.

8. A curious case is Hausa *màaduguu* "headman, leader of a caravan". First, the putative prefix *màa-* is low-toned, but this is not the case in derivative nouns such as *maaduganci* "work of a caravan leader" or *maadugaaɗiyaa* "experiencing great difficulty in accomplishing a task" (Bargery 1934:741). Disregarding again this putative prefix, a stem **-duguu* remains which, while meaningless in Hausa, corresponds fairly to the Latin root *dūc-ere*, and in *dux*, *dūc-is* "leader".

9. Turning back to Fula we regard *asamaan* "sky, heavens" which also occurs in Serer *asamaan fana* "sky, firmament" and Wolof *asaman s-* of same meaning. Some authors have considered this to be a loan-word from Arabic *as-samā'u*, and passed over the inconvenient final *-n* which has no function as a suffix in Fula, nor elsewhere in Senegalian. Theoretically it could represent the Arabic nunation with the notion of indefiniteness, but this is excluded by the use of the definite article *al-* which would have been assimilated to the initial *s-*. But as no Arabic noun can use the definite article *al-* and the nunation together, it follows that this cannot be the source of our loan. Certainly Fula uses *asama* "heaven" derived from Arabic aside of *asamaan* in rare cases, but these two terms cannot be identical. I have pointed to this already in 1958, when I compared Fula (and Wolof) *asaman* to *akaman*, *atyaman*, *ataman* "heaven", the Supreme Being" documented in the extinct language of the Canary Islands.

There is, however, still another possibility. Not in Arabic, but in Persian *asamaan* means "heaven, sky", but this is in fact an Indo-European word derived from a Proto-Indo-European **akaman* with the characteristic shift of IE **k > s* in Iranian, where it developed that special meaning, perhaps in analogy with the similar Arabic word which became known with the coming of the Islam.

On the other hand an identical term *asaman* is also found in West Africa far away from the Senegalian languages area, that is in Akan in the coast area of Ghana, its meaning being "realm of the dead, world of the spirits" - a fact which is hardly accidental, but remains mysterious for the moment.

So we wonder whether the term *asamaan* might have been

brought to the Western Sudan not by the Arabs, but by Persian-speaking people, and in pre-Islamic times too?

10. There is another case of a word of Persian origin borrowed by Fula which leaves us guessing. Unlike most other African languages which were in contact with Arabic and Islam since long time, Fula has not borrowed the Arabic term *kitāb-un* "book", but uses *defte-re*. Although this word can be found in an Arabic lexicon as *daftar-un* "register, account-book, writing-book" it is of Persian origin. Now why, after all, should the forefathers of the Fulbe borrowed just this term, and preferred it to *kitāb-un*, if they had not known it earlier? In other words they likely had been in contact with another civilization which used the art of writing and possessed books. Fula needed not to borrow a new term when the Arabs came, because it already possessed one.

It is time to refer to the Fulbe tradition as told in the manuscript handed over to H. Clapperton by Sultan Mohammed Bello at the former's visit to Sokoto in 1824. Here we read: "*Nahe an Barbara ist die Provinz Towrooth und eben so Futa: sie sind gross und bewohnt von ihrem eigenen Volke und den Sarankaly, oder Persern*" (translation by G.A. Salame 1827:662ff.). In the appendix to the diary of the second travel of Capt. Clapperton in the interior of Africa (in German 1830:435) we are told: [...] *das Volk towrood ... ward muhammedanisch ... dadurch wurden sie instand gesetzt, zu fechten und die Juden und Sarankali (Perser) zu unterwerfen*". The term *Sarankali* is no doubt Soninke and generally used in its more modern form *Sarakholle* to call the Soninke-speaking people. But it does not mean simply "white people" as one may read sometimes. The Soninke lexicon published by D.N.A.F.L.A. at Bamako in 1979 (p. 65) gives *saaran-e* "parent" and lists e.g. *saaran-baane* "brother or sister of the same father and the same mother", *baane* meaning "one". We may conclude from this that the original meaning of *saaranqulle* was "people descended from (one) white parent", *xulle* meaning "white", an interpretation quite consistent with the above tradition.

African tradition, in this case even one from a written source, offers a new challenge to explorers of African history.

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