

Geographical Names and Cultural History: Critical Interpretation of the Evidence in Nubia

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The focus of this study is upon toponymy and its application to the linguistic and cultural history of Nubia. New applications of toponymic evidence are emphasised.

Toponymy resembles linguistic geography which may display historically significant patterns on the map, such as the Rhenish Fan [der Rheinische Fächer]. Toponymic mapping reveals similar patterns such as the distribution of the element meaning 'place' (ikki in the Maḥas and irki further north). Mapping toponymic variation on a massive scale facilitates new insights into the linguistic and cultural history of Nubia.

The evidence of geographical names has often been abused by not being subjected to strict criteria of assessment. It is argued that the repetition of toponymic patterns can itself provide one such criterion.

Documentary evidence on the survival of geographical names has been skilfully examined by scholars such as Sir Alan Gardiner [Ancient Egyptian Onomastica] and Karl-Heinz Priese. One of Priese's examples encouraged M. J. Hashim and the present author to provide a step by step description of plausible sound changes which could link the historic name Gem-Aten of the fourteenth century B.C. with the modern Kówwa [conventionally 'Kawa'] opposite Dongola al-Urdi [Bell & Hashim, 'Does Aten Live On in Kawa (Kówwa)?' Sudan & Nubia]. This investigation was facilitated by recent work of Claude Rilly who had been searching for a more accurate understanding of the phonology of Meroitic.

The present study considers toponymic evidence from the Nile, Kordofan and Darfur, including Haraza Nubian and Birgid. Historians recoil from imaginative interpretations of geographical names, but It is argued here that 'folk toponymy' and 'critical toponymy' are both important. Critical toponymy is important for historical reconstruction. Folk toponymy may reveal ideology. In the cultural revival after traumatic resettlements ideology has become a fact of Nubian history.