

Nubian kinship terms

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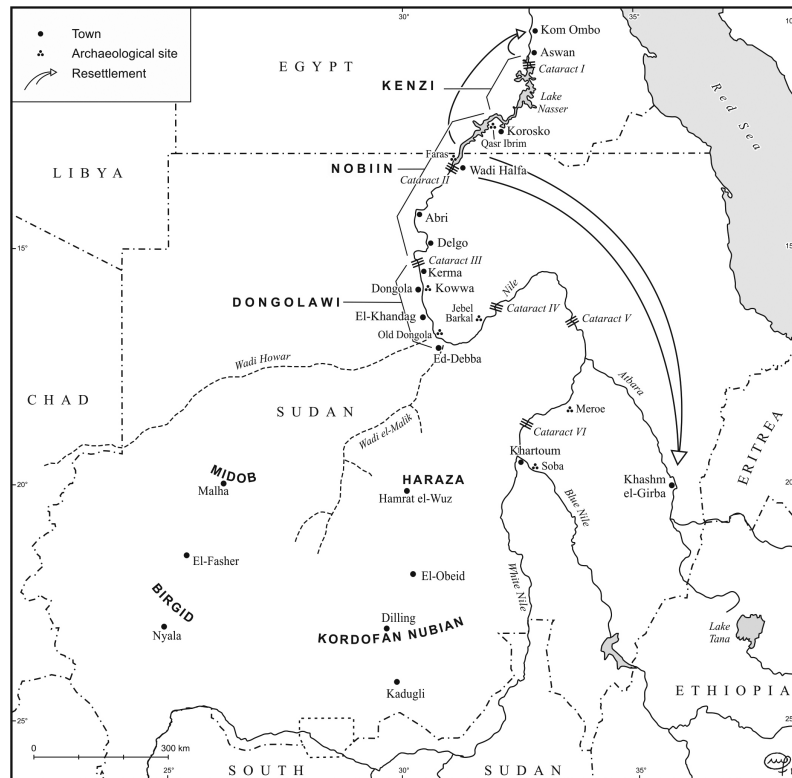
1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with Nubian kinship terms, including terms for consanguineal relations, i.e. blood relations such as ‘father’s sister’ and ‘sister’s son’ and terms for affinal relations, i.e. relations by marriage such as ‘father-in-law’.

There are two functions for kinship terms: they can be used as terms of reference and as terms of address. Often the term of reference differs from the term of address. A Nubian example is the Kenzi reference term *-baab* ‘father’ (always connected with a possessive prefix) and the term of address *baboo* ‘daddy’ or *abo* ‘father’, ‘God Father’ (Massenbach 1933: 120). The distinction between terms of reference and terms of address is often ignored. In this paper, all the kinship terms presented are terms of reference.

Kinship terms can be regarded as labels for concepts of specific social relations. Presently, the on-going Arabization of the Nubian languages and cultures in Sudan changes the concept of the originally matrilineal kinship system to a patrilineal one. The formerly important social role of mother’s relatives, especially the importance of mother’s brothers and sister’s sons — the latter being considered as heirs of a deceased person’s property — diminishes in favour of father’s relatives, especially of father’s brothers and their sons. It is high time, therefore, to pay attention to and document the Nubian kinship terms before they are replaced by Arabic terms.

As can be seen on the map, the Nubian languages are scattered over a vast area comprising western Sudan and the Nile valley of northern Sudan and southern Egypt.

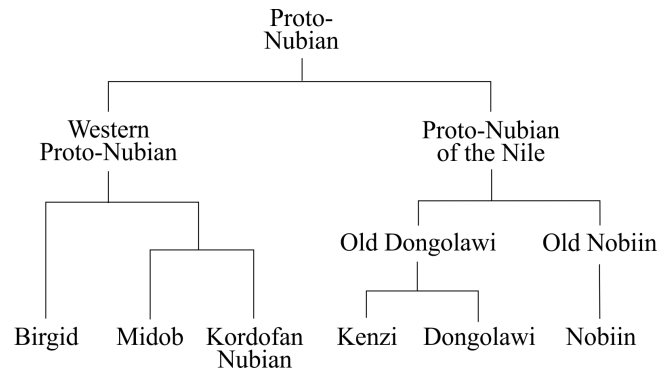


Map. Geographical distribution of the Nubian languages

The Nubian language family includes Midob and the nearly extinct Birgid language of eastern Darfur, Kordofan Nubian of the Nuba Mountains, the extinct Haraza language of north-eastern Kordofan, and languages of the Nile valley, i.e. Kenzi, Dongolawi, Nobiiin, and their medieval predecessors Old Nobiiin and Old Dongolawi. Due to the many lexical and grammatical similarities, it is assumed that the Nubian languages are genetically related, i.e. that they are the descendants of a common ancestor language. This hypothetical ancestor language is called Proto-Nubian (PN).

Based on a detailed comparison of 200 lexical items and the establishment of regular sound correspondences between the Nubian languages, Claude Rilly (2010) in his masterly study corroborates the hypothesis of the close genetic affiliation of the Nubian languages. According to Rilly, the Nubian family tree is divided in a western and an eastern branch, the western branch comprising Midob, Birgid, and the Kordofan Nubian languages, the eastern branch comprising the Nile Nubian languages.

Figure. Nubian family tree (adapted from Rilly 2010: 401)



The present paper is based on data drawn from my own field notes and from other sources. During recent fieldwork in Sudan¹ I collected kinship terms of two Kordofan Nubian languages, Kaakmbee spoken on the western fringe of the Kordofan Nubian language continuum, and Uncunwee spoken in the southern part of that continuum. Moreover, I had the opportunity to record kinship terms of Dongolawi and the Kaargedí dialect of Midob. In addition, I have drawn kinship terms from published sources, such as Kenzi terms from Massenbach (1933 and 1962), Dongolawi terms from Armbruster (1965), Birgid terms from MacMichael (1918) and Thelwall (1977), Midob terms from Thelwall (1983) and Werner (1993), Nobiin terms from Lepsius (1880), Werner (1987) and Khalil (1996). Old Nubian terms are quoted from Browne's dictionary (1996). In two languages, Old Nubian and Birgid, very few kinship terms are documented. For this reason there are often gaps in the sets of cognates presented below.

This is not the first historical-comparative study of Nubian kinship terms. Rilly's detailed comparison of the north-eastern Sudanic languages (2010: 420-529) includes thirteen reconstructed Proto-Nubian kinship terms: **too-di*, pl. **too-ju* 'child/son', **bes(-an)* 'younger brother', **wer-i* 'brother, friend', **as* 'daughter', **baab(-Vn)* 'father', **as-ti* 'grandchild', **awa* 'grandmother', **ogiji ~ ogoji* 'husband', **éen* 'mother', **kege-di* 'sister', **ɲar* 'son', **il-di* 'woman/wife'.

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This paper proposes six further reconstructable kinship terms which have not been considered in Rilly's comparative study. Applying the comparative method, the reconstructions are based on sets of cognates with similar meaning and regular sound correspondences.

2. Morphological characteristics

Kinship terms are relational terms designating the biological and/or social relations between two or more persons. 'Father' designates the relationship between a child and his/her father. 'Husband' is a term for the social and legal relationship between a woman and her male partner in marriage. Relatives are often conceived of as inalienable possession, therefore kinship terms are often obligatorily combined with possessive morphemes.

In Nobiin, for instance, a possessive morpheme usually follows the head noun, e.g. *irk úun* 'our village', literally 'village our', but with kinship terms, the possessive morpheme is prefixed to the head noun, e.g. *úun-éssí* 'our sister'. Kinship terms with possessive prefixes are attested in the other Nubian languages as well. In MacMichael's Birgid wordlist (1918), for example, several kinship terms begin with *in-* which is a possessive prefix composed of the person marker *i-* (presumably referring to the 1st person singular or plural) and the genitive marker *-n*, e.g. *in-difoon* 'my/our mother's brother', *in-intoon* 'my/our sibling'.

In Birgid, the Kordofan Nubian languages and Midob, in addition to the possessive prefix, there is a special suffix marking kinship terms and a few other terms expressing close social relationship, e.g. 'friend' and 'master'. I shall refer to this morpheme as "relationship suffix", a term adopted from Kauczor who called it *Korrelationsendung* in his grammar of the Dilling language (1920). In Uncunwee, this ending is realized as *-aŋ*, as attested in *íntàŋ* 'brother', 'sister', *átàŋ* 'grandchild', *ídàŋ* 'husband's mother or father'. In Kaakmbee, the relationship suffix is often deleted in the singular forms but present in the plural forms. It is attested with a final velar or palatal nasal, e.g. *fâg*, pl. *fâg-âŋ* 'father', *âŋ*, pl. *âŋ-âŋ* 'father's sister', *át*, pl. *ât-âŋ* 'grandchild'.

In the Birgid wordlists of MacMichael (1918) and Thelwall (1977), the relationship suffix is variously recorded as *-oon*, *-on*, *-an*, *-am*, *-n*, as shown in *indif-oon* 'mother's brother', *inint-oon* 'brother, sister', *enn-on* 'mother', *uuzi-am-baab-an* 'husband' (literally 'children's father'), *inwu-n* 'grandfather'.

The presence of the relationship suffix is blurred in Midob by the regular loss of PN syllable-final nasals, as attested in *ée* < **een* 'mother', *èejí* < **kemsí*

‘four’, *ǎǎdí* < **endee* ‘Pennisetum’ (Jakobi 2006). However, it is assumed that the Midob suffix *-a* is a cognate of the relationship suffix in Birgid and Kordofan Nubian, e.g. *ǎn-á* ‘father’s sister’, *ǎb-à* (Kaargedi dialect), *ǎw-à* (Örrti dialect) ‘grandmother’, *tǎj-á* ‘mother’s brother’. The phonological and semantic similarities between the relationship suffixes in the western Nubian languages suggest that they are reconstructable as the Proto-Western-Nubian suffix **-VN*, where the vowel *V* is realized as *o* and *a* in Birgid, and as *a* in Kordofan Nubian and Midob. The nasal *N* is realized as *n*, *ɲ*, *ŋ* in Birgid and Kordofan Nubian but in Midob it is lost.

3. Comparison of kinship terms

Each of the comparative series below is arranged in the same way. The first line provides the gloss. This is followed by the abbreviation PN (Proto-Nubian) and then by the reconstructed item marked by an asterisk. The following lines present cognate lexical items from the individual Nubian languages in which the kinship term in question is attested. A kinship term attested in at least one language of the eastern and western branch is considered to be a reconstructible item of the Proto-Nubian lexicon.

(1) ‘father’s sister’: PN **aqn*-

Nobiin	W. <i>-ǎn</i> ; MK <i>aqn</i>
Uncunwee	<i>-ǎn-áŋ</i> , pl. <i>-ǎnǎŋ</i>
Kaakmbee	<i>-áŋ</i> , pl. <i>-ǎn-áŋ</i>
Midob	I. <i>ǎn-ì</i> , W. <i>ǎn-á</i>

The reconstruction of PN **aqn* ‘father’s sister’ is simple because the vowel *a* and the root-final nasal *n* have been retained in Nobiin *-ǎn*, Uncunwee *-ǎn-áŋ*, Kaakmbee *-áŋ*, and Midob *ǎn-ì*, as attested in the Kaargedi dialect, and *ǎn-á*, as in the Örrti dialect. In Uncunwee, the root is extended by the relationship suffix *-aŋ*. In Kaakmbee, this suffix is only attested in the plural form. In Midob the relationship suffix *-a* appears in *ǎn-á*.

There are no reflexes of **aqn* known for Old Nubian or Birgid. Kenzi-Dongolawi has replaced the reflex of **aqn* by a descriptive term derived from the genitive construction *-baab-n-essi* or *-baab-n-issi* ‘father’s sister’.

(2) ‘grandfather’: PN **uw*

Nobiin	MK <i>u(i)</i> ; W. <i>-ùu</i> , L. <i>uuw</i> , <i>uuwi</i>
Ke-Do	Mb. <i>-uu</i> , Do. <i>-ùw</i>
Birgid	<i>inwun</i> ‘ancestor’
Midob	I. <i>ǎbbà</i> ; W. <i>ùbbàr</i>

The reconstruction of PN **uw* ‘grandfather’ is based on Nobiin *-ùu*, Kenzi-Dongolawi *-uu* or *-ùw*. The Birgid reflex of **uw* is hidden in the item *inwun* which is extended by the possessive prefix *in-* and the relationship suffix *-n*. The root *wu-* appears to be a metathesized reflex of **uw*. The Midob items *àbbà* (Kaargedí dialect) or *ùbbàr* (Örrti dialect) are considered to be compounds to be parsed as *àb-bà* and *ùb-bàr*, respectively. The first parts *àb-* and *ùb-* are assumed to be reflexes of **uw*. This assumption is corroborated by the correspondence of non-initial **w* being reflected by *b* in the Kaargedí dialect and *w* in the Örrti dialect, as attested in **aaw* ‘grandmother’, which is reflected as *àbà* in Kaargedí and *àwà* in Örrti, the final *-à* being considered a reflex of the relationship suffix. Due to anticipatory assimilation of the following labial stop *b* of *-ba* and *-bar*, the distinction between *b* and *w* is neutralized. The second component of *àb-bà* and *ùb-bàr*, however, has not yet been identified.

Reflexes of **uw* are missing in Kordofan Nubian. Instead, these languages employ *ab-* extended by the relationship suffix **-VN*. The root *ab-* is a reflex of PN **aaw* ‘grandmother’ having acquired the wider meaning of ‘ancestor’. The qualifying term ‘man’ or ‘woman’ is added in order to distinguish ‘grandfather’ from ‘grandmother’. Thus the Uncunwee term for ‘grandfather’ is *āb-áj kùrtù*, literally ‘ancestor man’. The corresponding Kaakmbee term is *ágāt*, a compound in which the two lexical items have closely fused.

(3) in-law’: PN **od*

Old Nubian	OTT- ‘father-in-law’?
Nobiin	W. <i>òttì</i> ‘son-in-law’; MK <i>ottì</i>
Ke-Do	Mb. <i>-ood</i> , CA <i>-od</i> ; Do. <i>-òd</i> ‘male in-law’
Uncunwee	<i>wādáj</i> , pl. <i>wādâj</i> ‘wife’s parent’
Kaakmbee	<i>wād</i> , pl. <i>wādâj</i>
Midob	<i>oddi</i> ‘son-in-law’, ‘daughter-in-law’

Obvious reflexes of PN **od* ‘in-law’ are found in Nile Nubian and Midob. In Dongolawi, **od* has been retained, as shown by the slightly varying items *-ood*, *-od* and the low tone item *-òd*. Old Nubian OTT- (i.e. OTT1)² and Nobiin *òttì* are composed of the root *od-* plus *-ti* suffix, the root-final voiced *d*

² In Browne’s *Old Nubian dictionary* suffixes and clitics are marked by a preceding hyphen. This is common practice in linguistics. However, all other entries are followed by a hyphen misleadingly suggesting the presence of a morpheme boundary, as in the case of OTT- which should be OTT1 ‘father-in-law’. The final *-T1* is a suffix which is also attested in other Nubian languages. The hyphen is also misleadingly attached to the word-final segment, as seen in $\Gamma\text{-}$ ‘mother’s brother’ and $\tilde{\alpha}\text{FO}\lambda\text{-}$ ‘father-in-law’.

having adopted the feature [-voiced] from the following *t*. Midob *oddi* attests for the opposite direction of assimilation, the feature [+voice] of the root-final *d* having been assimilated to the following *-ti* suffix.

It is assumed that Uncunwee *wādāŋ* pl. *wādâŋ* and Kaakmbee *wād*, pl. *wādâŋ* are cognates of the Midob and Nile Nubian items. The vowel correspondence of Kordofan Nubian *wa* versus Midob *o* is attested in a set of cognates reflecting Proto-Nubian **kos-* designating ‘meat’. Uncunwee *kwàjè* and Kaakmbee *kwàj* correspond to Midob *òsòŋí* which has lost initial **k* and is to be parsed as *òs-òŋí*. In the Nile Nubian cognate *kusu*, however, the expected *o* has been changed to *u* under the influence of following *u*: **kosu* > *kusu*.

The singular and plural forms of Uncunwee, *wādāŋ* and *wādâŋ*, are extended by the relationship suffix *-aŋ*. The corresponding Kaakmbee suffix *-aŋ* is deleted in the singular form *wād* but retained in the plural *wādâŋ*.

As for the semantics of these kinship terms it may be noted that the Nile Nubian items specifically designate male in-laws while the Kordofan Nubian and Midob items do not exhibit such a semantic restriction.

(4) ‘in-law’: PN not reconstructable, PEN **agool*

Old Nubian	𐎠𐎢𐎠𐎡- ‘father-in-law’?
Nobiin	W. -àagóo; L. <i>agoor</i> , <i>agoo</i> , <i>ago</i>
Ke-Do	Mb. Do. - <i>ago</i> , Ke. - <i>ogo</i> , Do. -àgó ‘female in-law’
	L. Do. <i>ogoo</i> , <i>agoo</i> ; CA - <i>ogo</i> ‘mother-in-law’

There is another set of cognates designating ‘in-law’. It is attested in the Nile Nubian languages only. The reconstruction of Proto-Eastern-Nubian **agool* is based on Old Nubian 𐎠𐎢𐎠𐎡, several slightly varying Nobiin items, -àagóo, *agoor*, *agoo*, *ago*, and Kenzi-Dongolawi items ranging from -*ago*, -*ogo*, -àgó, *agoo*, to *ogoo*. The Old Nubian letter 𐎢 representing a velar nasal *ŋ* poses a problem because a non-initial **ŋ* is usually retained. So we would expect Old Nubian *ŋ* to correspond to nasals in the other Nubian languages, as attested in Proto-Nubian **dung-* reflected by Nobiin *dúŋgí*, Kenzi-Dongolawi *dungur*, Uncunwee *túndù*, Kaakmbee *túnd*, Midob *túŋŋúr*. In the present set of cognates, however, the Old Nubian velar nasal corresponds to a velar stop in the Nile Nubian languages. This is why the reconstruction of non-initial **g* is proposed. In non-initial position, PN **g* is usually retained in Old Nubian, as attested in three sets of cognates designating ‘mouth’, ‘fire’ and ‘sit down’ (Rilly 2010: 223).

The reconstruction of final **l* is based on Old Nubian 𐎠𐎢𐎠𐎡 assuming that **l* has undergone a weakening process **l* > *r* > \emptyset , as attested by Nobiin *agoor* and the remaining items where final **l* is lost. The first vowel is

reconstructed as *a assuming that it has shifted to o in some of the Kenzi-Dongolawi items due to anticipatory assimilation to the second vowel *o.

At least for Dongolawi there is some evidence of a semantic opposition between *agool and *od. Male in-laws appear to be designated by a reflex of *od and female in-laws by a reflex of *agool.

(5) ‘mother’s brother’: PN not reconstructable, EPN *gii, WPN *tij-

Old Nubian	Γl-
Nobiin	W. -gīi; MK gii
Ke-Do	Mb. -gi, -gii, Do. -gí
Birgid	MM <i>indifoon</i>
Uncunwee	-tj̄àŋ, pl. -tj̄áŋ
Kaakmbee	tj̄, pl. tj̄
Midob	I. tízi; W. tíjá

There are two distinct sets of cognates designating ‘mother’s brother’. Old Nubian Γl-, Nobiin -gīi, and Kenzi-Dongolawi -gi, -gii, -gí are the basis for the reconstruction of Proto-Eastern-Nubian *gii.

The reconstruction of Proto-Western-Nubian *tij- is based on Birgid *in-dif-oon*, Uncunwee *tj̄-àŋ*, Kaakmbee *tj̄*, and Midob *tíz-ì* and *tíj-á*. The initial *t is retained in all items except for Birgid. The expected reflex of initial *t would be Birgid *t*. However, as Birgid *in-dif-oon* has a possessive prefix *in-*, the [voiced] feature of the nasal causes *t* to be realized as *d*. The root vowel *i is retained in all reflexes. The root-final palatal *j is retained in Uncunwee *tj̄-àŋ*, Kaakmbee *tj̄*, and in the Midob-Örri item *tíj-á*; it shifts to a voiceless alveo-palatal fricative *ʃ* in Birgid *indifoon* and to a voiced alveolar fricative *z* in the Midob-Kaargedí item *tízi*. These consonant correspondences are at least partly paralleled in the term for ‘milk’: Birgid *esí, ese, effi*, Uncunwee *tj̄*, and Kaakmbee *ééj*. The geminate *cc* in Midob *iccídí*, however, does not attest the expected *j*, presumably because it has changed, due to the assimilation of the palatal *j* to the initial consonant of the suffix *-gidi*, that is *jg > cc.

Except for Midob *tíz-ì*, all items provide evidence of the relationship suffix realized in Birgid as *-oon*, in Uncunwee as *-àŋ*, and in Midob as *-á*. Though deleted in Kaakmbee *tj̄*, the falling tone is a trace of the original high-low sequence also attested on Uncunwee *tj̄-àŋ*.

(6) ‘sister’s son or daughter’: PN not reconstructable, PWN *ked

Uncunwee	-kēd-áŋ, pl. kēn-àŋ
Kaakmbee	kèd, pl. kēn
Midob	I. édédí, W. édédí, Th. édèdì

In the Western Nubian languages there is a series of cognates which allow for the reconstruction of Proto-Western-Nubian **ked* ‘sister’s son or daughter’. The loss of the initial **k* in the Midob items *édédî*, *édédí*, *édèdì* is regular, as attested by Midob *àl-* ‘eat’ which corresponds to Uncunwee *kél-* and Kaakmbee *kàl-*. The Midob root *éd-* is extended by a suffix which appears to be a variant of *-ti*, as also attested on **as-ti* > *ás-ídî* ‘grandchild’.

The alternation of root-final *d* and *n* in Uncunwee *-kēd-áŋ*, pl. *kèn-âŋ* and Kaakmbee *kèd*, pl. *kěŋ* can only partly be explained. It is assumed that the change *d* > *n* is triggered by anticipating the nasal of the relationship marker *-*VN*. Although this suffix is absent in the Kaakmbee items (see *tīj*, pl. *tīj* ‘mother’s brother’), it is assumed that it was there before and that its nasal has left a trace on the root-final consonant. Evidence of this process is also provided by Kaakmbee *ām*, pl. *ām-âŋ* ‘grandmother’ originating in Proto-Kordofan-Nubian **ab-aŋ* ‘grandparent’. However, it is not yet clear why the shift *d* > *n* is restricted to the plural forms of Uncunwee and Kaakmbee, although the relationship suffix is (or was) present in the singular form, too.

In the Nile Nubian languages, ‘sister’s son or daughter’ is expressed by a genitive construction. Nobiin has *-essi-n tood* ‘sister’s son’ and *-essi-n as* ‘sister’s daughter’, Dongolawi has *-ssod* or *àssóod* ‘sister’s son’ and *-èssimbùrú* ‘daughter’. The Dongolawi compounds *-ssod* and *àssóod* are so closely fused that the genitive *-n* appears to have been deleted. The close fusion of morphemes originating in a genitive construction is also attested by Kenzi-Dongolawi *-anna* < **een-ŋa(r)* ‘brother’, literally ‘mother’s son’.

4. Conclusions

This paper shows that another six PN kinship terms may be reconstructed in addition to the thirteen kinship terms reconstructed by Rilly (2010). Three of the terms, **aŋ* ‘father’s sister’, **uuw* ‘grandfather’, and **od* ‘in-law’ have reflexes in both the western and eastern branch of the Nubian language family, hence they can be reconstructed for Proto-Nubian. The remaining four terms, however, have a restricted distribution. While reflexes of **ked* ‘sister’s son or daughter’ and **tij* ‘mother’s brother’ occur in the western branch, **gii* ‘mother’s brother’ and **agool* occur in the eastern branch only.

This paper has not addressed anthropological issues related to the kinship systems of the various Nubian speaking groups. A comparison of their past and present kinship systems and the study of the assumed impact of the Arab kinship system may be a fruitful direction for further research. Such research should make proper use of the available anthropological literature and

gather new data in the field, combining linguistic (semantic and historical) and anthropological methods.

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