

Old Nubian — Black African Language of Most Ancient Attestation

By Helmut Satzinger

1. Nubian Languages.

Nubian is a dialect cluster, or a cluster of closely related languages. Nubian idioms were spoken in the Nile Valley between the 1st and the 3rd cataract (the greatest part of them has been displaced in the 1960s because of the flooding of their land), in the Kordofan mountains and in the Dar Fur Region.

The Nubian language areas suffered great losses in the past 125 years: In the Mahdist Wars many villagers were dispersed, if not killed in the fights; Nubian was replaced by Arabic as vernacular language in many places, especially in the South of the present Nubian-speaking area.

After 1900, the Aswân Dam was built; the farmers of Lower Nubia lost their fields and therefore their economic basis. Many migrated to the towns in the north, in particular to Cairo. In the early 1960s the High Dam was erected south of Aswân, Lake Nasser (in Nubia: "Lake Nubia") began to flood anything that remained from the Nubian lands in Egypt as well as in Northern Sudan. The Nubians had to settle elsewhere: the Egyptians mostly near Kôm Ombo, north of Aswân; the Sudanese (the "Halfâwis", from the district of Wâdi Halfa) near Khash el-Girba on the 'Atbara River, near the Ethiopian border.

Presently, dam projects (Merowe, Kajbar) cause severest irritation and opposition in the Sudanese Nile Valley.

The 1980s brought particular disaster to the languages of many Sudanese peoples: the First Civil War 1965-72; 1983/1984 a horrid famine, with nearly 100,000 Darfûris left dead; the Second Civil War, 1983 to present, and in particular the Darfur Conflict,¹ from

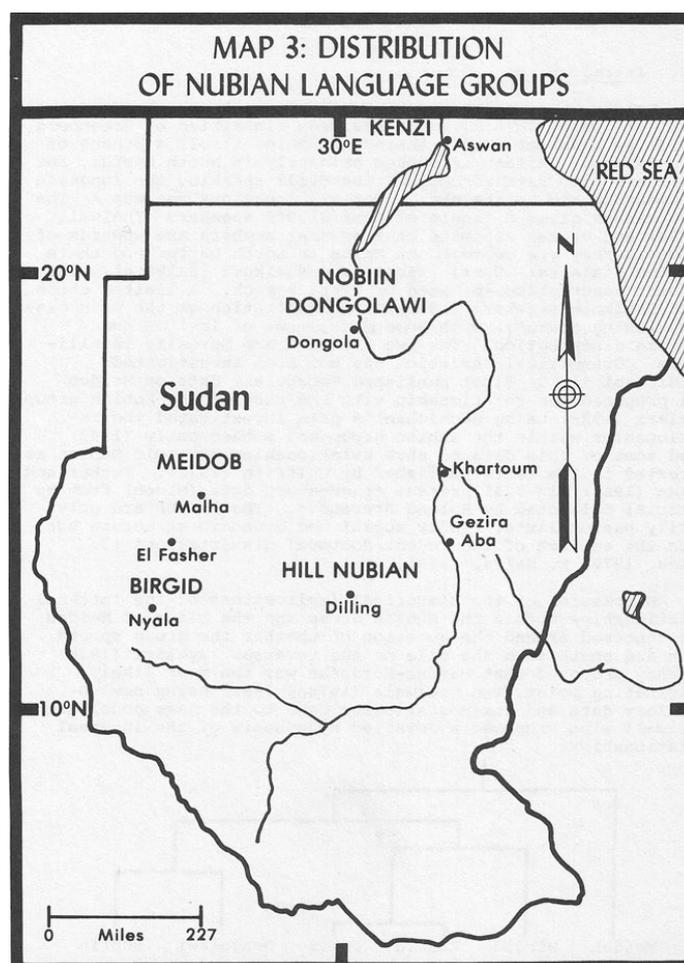
¹ "The conventional point indicated to be the start of the conflict in Darfur was 26 February 2003, when a group calling itself the Darfur Liberation Front (DLF) publically claimed credit for an attack on Golo, the headquarters of Jebel Marra District. However, by this time a full-scale conflict was already raging in Darfur as rebels attacked police stations, army outposts and military convoys and the government was engaged in a massive air and land assault on the rebel stronghold in the Marrah Mountains. The rebels' first military action had been a successful attack on an army garrison on the mountain on 25 February 2002 and the Sudanese government had been aware of a unified rebel movement since an attack on the Golo police station in June 2002. Chroniclers Julie Flint and Alex de Waal state that the beginning of the rebellion is better dated to 21 July 2001, when a group of Zaghawa and Fur met in Abu

2001/2002/2003 onwards. It is hard to tell what is the present situation of all those tiny groups of speakers of various languages (Nilo-Saharan and Kordofanian) in the area: extinction, displacement, enslaving, decimation.

The pre-war situation was like this:

Hill Nubian

- Ghulfân: 16,000 speakers (1984 R. C. Stevenson). Northern Sudan, Kordofan, in two hill ranges 25 to 30 miles south of Dilling: Ghulfan Kurgul and Ghulfan Morung.
- Kadaru: 12,360 speakers (2000 “WCD”). Northern Sudan, Kordofan Province, Nuba mountains, Kadaru Hills between Dilling and Delami.
- Dilling: 5,295 speakers (1984 R. C. Stevenson). Northern Sudan, Southern Kordofan, town of Dilling and surrounding hills, including Kudr.



Gamra and swore oaths on the Quran to work together to defeat the government-sponsored attacks on their villages.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darfur_conflict)

(From Robin Thelwall, “Meidob Nubian: Phonology, Grammatical Notes and Basic Vocabulary,” *Nilo-Saharan Language Studies* 13, 1983, 97–113, esp. 98.)

- Dâir: 1,000 speakers (1978 “GR”). Northern Sudan, west and south parts of Jebel Dair, Kordofan.
- El-Hugeirât: 200 speakers (2000 Brenzinger). Northern Sudan, West Kordofan on El Hugeirat Hills.
- Karko: 12,986 speakers (1984 R. C. Stevenson). Northern Sudan, Kordofan, in Karko Hills 20 miles west of Dilling, including Dulman. May also be spoken on Abu Jinik to the west (1,000) and El Tabaq southwest of Katla (800).
- Wâli: 487 speakers (1977 Voegelin and Voegelin). Northern Sudan, in the Wali Hills, Kordofan, south of Karko Hills.
- Midob: 50,000 speakers (1993 R. Werner). Northern Sudan, Dâr Fûr Province, Jebel Midob, and settled communities in Omdurman and Gezira Aba. The center is Malha.
- Birgid: extinct. Northern Sudan, north Dâr Fûr, north and east of Daju and Baygo, east of Jebel Marra between Jebel Harayt and the Rizaykat (Arab) country. Also north of Nyala. A few in north Kordofan south of El Obeid.

Valley Nubian — The situation before the 1960s:

- Kenzi or Kenûzi (in Arabic Kunûzi): From Aswân to Wâdi el-Sebû‘ (north of Egyptian Nubia)
- Nobiin, a new term to comprise
 - Fadicca, Fiyadikka in the South of Egyptian Nubia
 - Mahâs (Mahâsi) in the North of Sudanese Nubia, near 2nd Cataract
- Dongolâwi (in Arabic Dunqulâwi), south of Mahâsi, Dongola area

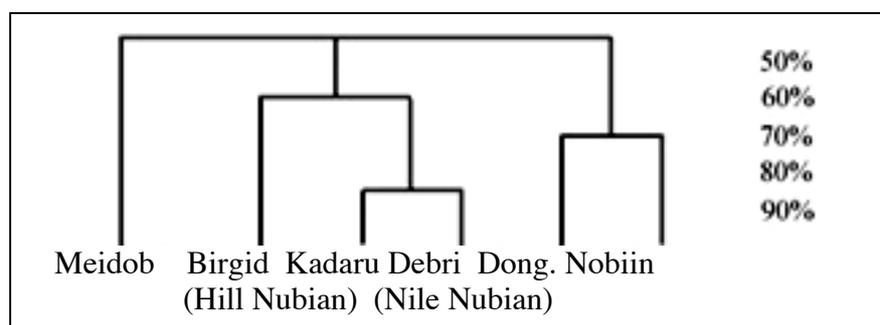
Note that Dongolâwi and Kenûzi are, though separated by some 200 km, nearly identical; they are closely related dialects. The name Kenûzi (Kunûzi) or Kenzi (Kanzi) is derived from the Arabic epithet *kanz al-dawla*, lit. “treasure of the Empire”. Two historical figures are connected with this honorific title in the realm of Nubia. In 1004 A.D. the Caliph al-Hakim bestowed this title upon the leader of a group of Rabî‘a Arabs for certain merits. Consequently, the tribe was then called *Banū Kanz* “sons of Kanz”. They had migrated to

Egypt, eventually penetrating into the Eastern Desert region east of the Nile around Aswan before being forced to withdraw south to al-Marîs after being defeated by the Ayyubids in 1174. The Banū Kanz eventually also conquered much of northern Makuria (the Dongola area). By intermarriage with Nubian women they eventually took on the Nubian language.

This is, however, no cogent explanation for the fact that the Kenûz Nubians use the southern idiom, Dongolâwi, rather than the northern one, Nobiin or Fadicca. So perhaps the name Kenûz derives from the second person named Kanz al-Dawla. He was the nephew of Kudanbes, one of the last kings of Makuria, and he was a muslim: nothing is known about his father; but on account of his name and his religion he may have been one of the Banū Kanz. He reigned twice over Makuria. If the Kenûz of Egyptian Nubia derive their name from him it must be assumed that he eventually had to leave Makuria and to evade northward with his troops or tribesmen.

Note that the linguistic data are unequivocal: Dongolâwi and Kenûzi cannot have separated before more than thousand years or so; otherwise, their similarity could not be explained. Even when we have no historical data whatsoever, we must accept the lesson that linguistics teaches us.

So far the geographical distribution. The linguistic classification is different, and it is controversial. A current view is that the genetic classification of all Nubian idioms, Hill and Valley, is something like the following (after Robin Thelwall).



(Indicating the percentage of common vocabulary.)

Other linguistic analyses led to an assumption that the two Nile Nubian idioms do not belong to the same slot. This is this alternative classification (Ethnologue²):

N u b i a n					
Northern	Central			Western	
Nobiin	†Birgid (Dâr Fûr)	Kenûzi-Dongolâwi	Hill Nubian (Kordofan)		Midob (Dâr Fûr)
			Kadaru-Ghulfan	Unclassified	
Old Nubian Nobiin Lexical similarity 67% with Kenûzi- Dongolâwi.	Lexical similarity 60% with Kadaru; 51% with Midob (closest).	Dongolâwi Lexical similarity 67% with Nobiin, 56% with Debri (=Dilling). Kenûzi	Ghulfân Kadaru Lexical similarity 93% with Dilling, 92% to 87% with Debri, 60% with Birgid.	Dilling Lexical similarity 94% with Debri (<i>sic</i>), 93% with Kadaru. Dâir El-Hugeirât Karko Wâli	Lexical similarity 51% with Birgid (closest).

This would mean that Dongolâwi and Kenûzi are closer to (nearly) extinct Birgid of Dâr Fûr, and to various idioms of Kordofan, than to Old Nubian, and its descendent Nobiin, at least in terms of genealogy; this being obscured by the fact that both dialect clusters were bordering to each other for a long period (at least 2000 years ?) and strongly influenced each other, particularly in respect to lexicon.

Nubian is part of the Eastern Sudanic branch of the Nilo-Saharan Phylum.

M. Ruhlen:³

3 Nilo-Saharan

I Songhai (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger)

II Saharan Kanuri, Kanembu; Tubu (Niger, Chad, Nigeria, Sudan)

III Maban (mainly Chad)

² http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=sd.

³ Merritt Ruhlen, A Guide to the World's Languages. Edward Arnold, London – Melbourne – Auckland 1987. Paperback Edition 1991.

IV Fur (Chad, Sudan)

V Eastern Sudanic

A Eastern

1 **Nubian:** (Sudan, Egypt)

Western: Midob

Central: Birgid, Debri, Dongolawi [+ Kunûzi]

Northern: Mahas [+Fadidja=Nobiin], [† O l d N u b i a n]

2 Surmic: ... Mursi (Sudan, Ethiopia)

3 Nara (formerly Barya; Eritrea)

4 Eastern Jebel: ... (Sudan)

B Western

C Nilotic

1 Western

a.i Shilluk, ...; b.i Nuer; b.ii Dinka

2 Eastern Maasai; Turkana, ...

3 Southern Kalenjin, ...

VI Central Sudanic Kresh; Bongo; Bagirmi; Logbara; Mangbetu ... (mainly Dem. Rep. Congo, Central African Rep., Uganda, Sudan,)

VII Berta (Ethiopia)

VIII Kunama (Eritrea)

IX Komuz (Ethiopia, Sudan)

The genetic relationship has only limited practical bearing. It is true, Nilo-Saharan languages are basically of the same structural type: basic word order #subject — object — verb#, genitival nouns preceding, postpositions; no noun classes (exception: W. Nilotic), but numerous case forms; etc.

In the lexicon, however, there do not seem to be great resemblances. One may compare the lower numbers in various Nubian idioms and in some other NS languages at zompist.com.⁴

2. Old Nubian

Old Nubian, the ancestor language of modern Nobiin, is known from manuscripts from Southern Lower Nubia from. ca. the 8th to 15th century A.D. It is written in an alphabet that is derived from the Greek, with additions of signs of the Coptic alphabet that are of Demotic origin (**š, f, h**), an adapted Coptic sign (**j**), and of Meroitic signs (**ŋ, ɲ, w**).

Nubian has two rows of stops, viz. voiced and voiceless, and a row of voiceless fricatives, at four bases of articulation, viz. labial, alveolar, palatal, and velar (there are no velar fricatives, though). The tonal system of Modern Nubian was discovered only some time ago: similar features may also be assumed for Old Nubian. In Old Nubian initial **n-** was realised as **ŋ-**. Word-final **-r** is realised as **-l**. Consonant assimilation plays an important role.

⁴ <http://www.zompist.com/nilo.htm#nilo>.

Basic word-order: subject — object — verb; genitive — referent; noun — attribute.

Noun morphology: an absolute state in **-a** (predicate, address, etc.); cases: subject (of main clauses): **-i**; object: **-k**, absolute state **-ka**; genitive: **-n** (also subject of part clauses), absolute state **-na**. Plural mainly in **-gu** (absolute **-ague**, subject case **-gul**, object case **-guk(a)**, genitive **-gun(a)**). Numerous postpositions, simple and composite.

Personal pronoun: inclusive and exclusive forms of 1st pron. plur. are distinguished. From the basic form, accusative (object pronoun) and genitive (possessive pronoun) are derived:

	Basic	Object (basic + -k(a))	Possessive (basic + -n(a))
1s	ai	aik(a)	an(na)
2s	ir	ikk(a)	in(na)
3s	tar	takk(a)	tan(na)
1pi	er	ekk(a)	en(na)
1pe	u	uk(a)	un(na)
2p	ur	uk(ka)	un(na)
3p	ter	tek(ka)	ten(na)

Verb:

There is an unconjugated form (the *gerund* or *verbid*) in ***-r**, realised as **-(i)l** before consonant and in the final position, absolute state **-ra** (*predicative*). The conjugated forms are the *subjunctive*, and the *indicative* (i.e., the absolute state of the subjunctive). Tenses are distinguished by modifications of the verbal base which might derive from auxiliary verbs.

The gerund, an unconjugated form that is not predicative, corresponds to both an infinitive and an active participle of European languages, like the English *-ing* form: **dollil** “wishing” = (1) *optare*, (2) *optans*; **dollol** “having wished”, etc.

	Gerund	Predicative
Present:	dolli-l (*doll-r)	dolli-r-a
Preterite I:	doll-o-l (*doll-a-r)	doll-a-r-a
Preterite II:	dolli-si-l (*doll-s-r)	dolli-si-r-a
Future:	doll-adi-l (*doll-ar/d-r)	doll-ar-r-a

The personal endings of the verb are:

1s	-i	1p	-u
2s	-n	2p	-u

3s **-n**3p **-an**

Adding the personal endings to a gerund yields the subjunctive forms (*that* clause, relative clause, etc.); raising these form to the predicative state yields the indicativ forms.

Subjunctive

Indicative (= subjunctive + **-a**)

Present:

1s **dolli-r-i****dolli-r-e** (-e < i+a)2/3s **dolli-n** (-n < -r+n)**dolli-n-a** (-n- < -r+n-)1/2p **dolli-r-u****dolli-r-o** (-o < -u+a)3p **dolli-r-an****dolli-r-an-a**

Preterite I:

1s **doll-a-ri****doll-a-re** (-e < i+a)2/3s **doll-o-n** / **-a-n** (-n- < -r+n-)**doll-o-n-a** / **-a-n-a** (-n- < -r+n-)1/2p **doll-a-r-u****doll-a-r-o** (-o < -u+a)3p **doll-a-r-an****doll-a-r-an**

Preterite II:

1s **dolli-s-i** (-s- < -r+s-)**dolli-s-e** (-s- < -r+s-, -e < i+a)2/3s **dolli-si-n** (-s- < -r+s-)**dolli-si-n-a** (-s- < -r+s-)1/2p **dolli-s-u** (-s < -r+s)**dolli-s-o** (-s- < -r+s-, -o < u+a)3p **dolli-s-an** (-s < -r+s)**dolli-s-an-a** (-s < -r+s)

Future:

1s **doll-ar-r-i****doll-ar-r-e** (-e < i+a)2/3s **doll-an** (-an < -ar+n)**doll-ann-a** (-ann- < -ar+n-)1/2p **doll-ar-r-u****doll-ar-r-o** (-o < u+a)3p **doll-ar-r-an****doll-ar-r-an-a**

The scheme of these conjugated forms, which are all based on the gerund, is this:

Gerund				
STEM (doll-)	TENSE MARKER	-(i)r	PERS.	(ABSOLUTE)

There exist, however, also conjugations that are not part of the tense system sketched above, such as the "affirmative" (formerly called "admirative" by Browne): 1st and 3rd persons only; "I surely want!". It displays assimilation of the gerund morpheme **-r-** to the following auxiliary **-m-**.

STEM (doll-)	-(i)r	-ms- (AUX.)	PERS.	ABSOLUTE
	Present	Future		
1s	dollimme	dolladimme		
3s	dollimma	dolladimma		
1p	dollimmo	dolladimmo		
3p	dollimmana	dolladimmana		

A characteristic feature of the Nubian verbal construction is the expression of negation, passive voice, action modes (*aktionsarten*) and other grammatical and semantic categories by concatenation of verbs. Typically, all verbs except the last appear in the form of the adjunctive (AJBC), a form ending in **-a**, whereas the last verb displays the conjugation morphemes.

eit-a₁ **wel₂ ...** **weri-ldō₃** **ak-a₄ —** **thalas-u₅** **watto₆-k-a**
 man.ABS one ... mountain.on sit.AJNC sea.ATTR whole.OBJ.ABS

gill-a₇ **ḡik-kik₈ k-a (= ḡil-kir-k-a)...**
 consider.AJNC see.come.OBJ.ABS ...

"a₂ man₁ ... who, sitting₄ on a mountain₃, considering₇ the whole₆ sea₅, beholds₈ it".

Other verbs have become grammaticalised as markers of action mode or aspect. **ak-** "to sit" — marker of habitual action; **ar-** "to seize" — causative marker, as in **dapp-ir-** "to destroy" (**dapp-** "to perish"); **aḡ-** "to become" — **juntuḡ** - "to become pregnant" (**junt-** "pregnant").

Negation is expressed through the auxiliary verb **-men-** "not to be": **ag-ende unn-a-ra men-na...** "is unable to give birth" (**ag-** for **ak-**, marker of habitual action; **-ende**, negative postposition; **unn-** "to give birth"); **seuatt-k-on kon-men-na...** "and (**-on**) did not (**men-**) have (**kon-**) an heir (**seuatt-**)".

Passive is expressed by **-tak-** "to be covered" (?): **on-taki-l**, absol. **on-tak-ra**, "beloved" .

tan **ail-l+a** **mayk.ar.isn+a**
 his/her/its heart-in-ABS be afflicted-INCOH-PERF-ABS

And when she spoke about this thing, she became afflicted in her heart.

TΔN ΔΟΓλΔ ΔΟΥΔΡΔ ΜΩΔΝΓΟΥΚΚΕΤΔΛΛΕΙΟΝ
tan **ηog-la** **du.ar+a** **miššan.gu(l)-k-ketal-le-yon**
 his/her/its house-in-ABS dwell-HABIT-ABS all-PLUR-OBJ-also-is-and

ΜΕΙΡΔΓΟΥΕ̄λω̄ ΕΙCCΔΝΔ·
mir+a.gu+e-lō **eis.san+a**
 barren-PLUR+ABS-THET be-PRES.3P-ABS

And also all who were in her house were barren:

ΜΕΔΔΟΥΝ̄ ΤΔΕΙΓΟΥλ· ΤΟΥΕΙΓΟΥλ· ΔΟΥΤΡΔΠΙΓΟΥλω̄ ΚΙΕ̄Κ̄λω̄·
medjun.in **tay.gu+l** **tuy.gu+l** **dutrap.igu(+l)-lō** **kiiskil-lō**
 servant-GEN girl-PLUR-SUBJ cow-PLUR-SUBJ chicken-PLUR-SUBJ-in(= to) descent(?)-in
 the servant-girls, the cows, down to the fowls.

ABS = absolute state

ADDR = marker of address

AJNC = adjunct

ATTR = attribute marker

GEN = genitive marker

HABIT = marker of habitual action or verb

INCOH = marker of inchoative action or verb

NEG = negation marker

OBJ = object marker

PASS = passive marker

PAST = marker of past 1

PERF = marker of past 2

PLUR = plural marker

POLY = marker of verb with pluralic object

PRES = marker of present

SUBJ = subject marker

THET = thetic element

TOP = topicaliser

Recent works on Old Nubian

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