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Toponomastics of Eritrea¹ in the Light of Arabic Geographical Atlases Part I. Generalities

Summary

Eritrea as a part of the Arab World is an unclear idea and it is of interest therefore to study its presentation as a cultural-geographical entity with its toponymic coverage by Arabic publications. The scarcity and difficult availability of the local cartographic products and other publications documenting the state-of-the-art of Arabic toponyms in the country, directs research towards external sources, in this case foreign school atlases in Arabic. This study surveys all Eritrean toponyms found in the collection of 48 such atlases and attempts at finding the rules of Arabicizing the names, the use of verbal roots and word structure patterns, both original Arabic ones as well as those spontaneously created for this occasional purpose, and underlines the low degree of standardization occurring in observed procedures.

Keywords: Eritrea, Arab World, Arabic language, toponomastics, geographical names, verbal roots and word structure in Arabicized names, standardization

Maps are as useful as they are problematic. They not only represent spaces in a particular way but also shape the way people interact with those spaces².

Maps do not only describe existing reality, they create new reality. The most important factors in modern times are states and nations. But they are not objective realities, they are invented stories, entities that exist only in our own imagination.³

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² <http://www.ottomanhistorypodcast.com/search/label/Maps#sthash.1JYGGbum.dpuf>

³ Kaplan 2012.

Analogically, a similar effect is exerted by words. Words compose names and in the human perception an unnamed entity is like a non-existent. Awareness, or consciousness, can only function with the help of the language, because the language is an instrument that helps to look at the world and interpret the experience.⁴ The language can articulate everything what is of vital necessity for a community which possesses it.⁵ Names are a part of the language. They describe the world around us and allow us to create a comprehensive picture of the surrounding cultural reality and to find ourselves in it. Names affirm community's identity which is their cultural heritage, names help to distinguish sameness from otherness.⁶

We shall try to find out how maps and their linguistic contents – names of places or toponyms – produce the image of the African state and nation selected for the purpose of this research, and if – and how – that image corresponds to the communication necessity of those who use them. It is a research based entirely on external sources – small scale maps produced outside Eritrea, with full understanding that changing the source base for locally produced publications, or even more than that – direct field research – might dramatically influence the final effects of the undertaking.⁷

1. Eritrea, Arabic language and Arab World

1.1. Historical background

Eritrea is a republic located in the Horn of Africa, a sovereign state since 1993. For centuries the territories that constitute Eritrea of today used to be a part of a wide geographical and cultural expanse named Al-Ḥabaš⁸ or Al-Ḥabaša^t by the Arabs.⁹ That name in either of the two habitual forms was not well defined and encompassed a conglomerate of most diversified contiguous areas and people of mixed stock, speaking various languages and professing different religions – like in many other regions in Africa.¹⁰ The names Al-Ḥabaš or Al-Ḥabaša^t should not be automatically identified with Ethiopia (or Abyssinia) as such – this modern country is the biggest but not the only one in the region. Others include today Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia and, historically, parts of Sudan. The religions of local importance are mainly two: Christianity (introduced officially in Aksumite Empire in AD 330) and Islam which started spreading over the

⁴ Freely adapted from Titus Lucretius Carus, *De rerum natura*.

⁵ After José Ortega y Gasset.

⁶ Rzetelska-Feleszko 2006, Jordan et al. (eds.) 2009, Choo (ed.) 2015.

⁷ Ormeling 1985.

⁸ For the Arabic-to-Latin transliteration will be used the system established by ISO (International Standardization Organization).

⁹ Ullendorf 1965b, Ullendorf and Trimmingham 1971, Gebremedhim et al. (eds.) 2008.

¹⁰ Piłaszewicz and Rzewuski 2004.

area soon after the Muḥammad's Hiġra¹ from Mecca to Medina in the 7th century.¹¹ As the prominent British historian Richard Pankhurst wrote, the region

constituted a galaxy of states and polities, each moving in its own orbit, but significantly affecting, and affected by, the other entities in the constellation. Each ruler kept a watchful eye on his neighbors but would often exchange gifts and courtesies with them unless actually at war. Dynastic marriages were made whenever practicable, though these only occasionally crossed barriers of religion. Commerce, on the other hand, made little distinction between faith, and trade routes linked traditionalist, Christian and Muslim localities. Ethnic and linguistic communities remained largely distinct, but there was much cross-fertilization of cultures. This was true not only off the Ethiopian highlands and the Red Sea coastlands, but also further south along the Somali-Oromo frontier where later nineteenth century travelers reported the existence of bilingual trading communities.¹²

The North-Eastern borderlands of Al-Ḥabaša¹, the Red Sea coastlands, are precisely what is called Eritrea today.¹³ The country, atomized politically, passed through centuries of fierce struggles between the Christian and Muslim polities, intermingled with long periods of peaceful cooperation between the two communities. Then came the Turkish Ottoman dominance (eyalet of Ḥabeš/Habeş)¹⁴ which was replaced by Egyptians and then by Italians. It were the Italians who in 1890 vested the country they had shaped and colonized with its modern name, Eritrea (Colonia Eritrea), in remembrance of the ancient name of the Red Sea, Erythra Thalassa in Greek or Mare Erythraeum in Latin.¹⁵ During World War II, disastrous for the Italian colonial presence in Africa, the British organized a protectorate there. In 1953 Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia, which subsequently annexed it against the will of the population. The Eritrean Liberation Front was formed in 1960 and led the war for independence. After a referendum in 1993 a *de facto* state since 1991 gained its *de jure* independence in 1993.



The official emblem of Eritrea with its official name in three working languages¹⁶

¹¹ Actually, first Muslims in Ethiopia were refugees from Mecca at the court of Negus, 15 years before the Hiġra¹; see Trimmingham 1952; Cuoq 1981.

¹² Pankhurst 1997.

¹³ Pankhurst 1997; Biger 2005.

¹⁴ Longrigg 1945; Ullendorf 1956b; Birken 1976.

¹⁵ Vota (ed.) 1938; Ullendorf 1965b; Bereketeab 2000; Biger 2005.

¹⁶ By SanchoPanzaXXI – Own work, GFDL, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=10519856>.

1.2. Eritrean society and Arabic culture

Eritrea is a multiethnic, multilingual and multireligious country. The population splits almost equally into Christian (50%) and Muslim (48%) communities.¹⁷ The *official* languages of the country were initially declared Tigrinya and Modern Standard Arabic. At present, the two alongside English are *working* languages while other seven are recognized as *national* languages. Arabic and Tigrinya are Semitic languages, other local languages belong to the Cushitic family. Tigrinya is a mother tongue of ca. 55% of the population while the Arabic-speaking minority (with Arabic as a mother tongue) is below 5%.

Native speakers of Arabic are mostly nomadic and semi-nomadic beduin tribes of Ar-Rašā`ida^t and some fractions of Banū `Āmir in North-West of the country, whose ethnic territories extend far into the neighboring Sudan. For the majority of population Arabic is not a mother tongue but the living role of Arabic is much higher than just that, mainly thanks to its position as a language of Islamic religion and education. It is widespread in many coastal centers of the country as *lingua franca*, an effective tool of intercultural communication.¹⁸ This is due to long lasting relations with Eritrea's close neighbor beyond the sea, the Arabian Peninsula, specially the province of Al-Ḥiğāz in present Saudi Arabia, abode of the two holiest places of the Muslim World, Mecca and Medina. Other factors are permanent contacts with religious teaching centers in Yemen, the well developed maritime trade in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, and widely practiced intermarriages with Arabs, mostly from Yemen.¹⁹ Migrants from the Arabian Peninsula and their mixed families are as a rule more than monolingual.²⁰ Strong Arabic and Islamic cultural influence in the country makes it a common thing to use Arabic, either vernacular or vehicular, in many spheres of societal life in the country. Arabic writings play important role in upkeeping old historical traditions among the local population.²¹ Naturally, this applies mainly – although not exclusively²² – to the Muslim population which is of the most heterogenous complexity (9 languages!) and which venerates the exceptionally high prestige of Arabic. Arabic functions withing a coherent system where languages, religions and cultures coexist, intermix and on many occasions enrich each other.²³ The impact of Arabic on other local languages is significant²⁴ and there can be observed a gradual though slow process of replacing local languages, used by the

¹⁷ According to US Department of State, 2011. However, statistics on that subject are contradictory and debatable; Pew Research Center estimates (in 2009) 60% Christians and 36% Muslims. Some statistics (Āsá 1999) say Muslims compose 70% of the Eritrean population, which seems highly exaggerated.

¹⁸ Gebremedhim et al. (eds.) 2008, Pawlak (ed.) 2009.

¹⁹ Lunde et al. (eds.) 2004; Starkey (ed.) 2005; Gori 2006; Miran 2009; Blue et al. (eds.) 2009; Agius et al. (eds.) 2012; Miran 2012.

²⁰ Morin 2012.

²¹ Miran and O'Fahey 2003.

²² Pawlak (ed.) 2009.

²³ Bausi et al. (eds.) 2015.

²⁴ Brzuski 1983; Leslau 1990.

Muslims, by Arabic.²⁵ Muslims of the Horn of Africa are usually called Ġabart by Ethiopians and this is what underlayed the family name of the famous Egyptian historian Al-Ġabartī (1756–1825).²⁶

It is noteworthy at the same time that the region did not develop its own variety of spoken Arabic and the usual means of oral communication is the Red Sea/Yemeni vernacular.²⁷

1.2. Is Eritrea a part of the Arab World?

This paper dwells on a presumption that Eritrea – following one inclusive definition (see below) – is an Arab country and is therefore a part of the Arab World. That is why we would like to know how it was and is being perceived and looked upon from the perspective of modern Arabic geographical atlases – first, from the angle of political geography and then, as regards ensuing toponomastics.

The first question to resolve in this context is what is an Arab country and what is the Arab World.²⁸ Definitions of the Arab World depend on the viewpoints of those who formulate them; they may be subjective and contradictory.

There are several ideas about the Arab World. One of them includes a whole group of member countries of the League of Arab States (Ġamʿiyya^t ad-Duwal al-ʿArabiyya^t). Eritrea is not one of them, just an observer country.

Another notion of the Arab World would suggest countries in which the majority of population speak Arabic as the mother tongue. It is not the case of Eritrea, neither. However – it should not be forgotten that the Arab League includes countries in which peoples speaking Arabic as the first language are no more than a tiny minority. It is Djibouti, also Somalia and the Comoro Islands. The population in those countries is Muslim and Arabic speaking élites (but not monolingual) are traditionally bound with the Arab World, but the presence of Arabs (that is persons speaking Arabic as a mother tongue) in their ethnic composition is very low, rather symbolical.²⁹

There may be still another definition, a strictly formal but inclusive one, indicating any country in which Arabic is the official language, or one of its official languages (in case of a linguistic plurality). As such it is an Arab country and by the same a part of the Arab World. The official position of Arabic in a country is motivated either by its ethnic composition, or its specific history and its strong cultural adherence to and self-identification with the Arabic speaking community at large. These factors usually reflected in nominating Arabic to the formal position of an official language – including Eritrea in this case.

²⁵ Longrigg 1965b.

²⁶ Ullendorf 1965a.

²⁷ Morin 2012.

²⁸ Zagórski 2014a.

²⁹ Similar situation was once characteristic for Zanzibar, but violent political transformation radically changed the linguistic setting in favor of Swahili.

It may seem paradoxical at the first look, even more so that Eritrea will be placed in one group with such countries like Chad and Israel, neither of which is a member state of the Arab League. All three countries have Arabic as one of the official languages. Both Chad and Israel have significant local Arabic-speaking populations, roughly 35% and 20% respectively, much higher than Eritrea (below 5%).

It is not the aim of this paper to develop on domestic interethnic relations or their possible international implications. Linguistic situations are often connected with turbulent political events in the Arab countries but these remain outside our scope of interest.³⁰ The goal is just to observe how Eritrea is perceived from outside by the core countries of the Arab World. Why not from inside, see below.

The extent of the Arab World is changing in time and it may be reasonably expected that more countries will apply one day for the membership of the Arab League. It is therefore of importance to observe the socio-cultural attitude of other Arabic countries towards those fringe or border areas of the Arab World, as reflected in the educational publications, namely school geographical atlases.

The study of toponomastics of Eritrea from the point of view of the Arabic language is of special importance. If we consider it to be an Arab country, as explained above, then we should know how it is positioned among other countries of the same linguistic identity. Whatever the problems we find in the assessment of the Arabness of Eritrea, the question is not comparable to, let us say, Sweden, Canada or Poland whose geographical names also appear in Arabic atlases, transcribed or transliterated, with more or less success, into Arabic characters and sounds.³¹ Much closer analogy will be found in the study of another fringe area of Arabic language use, the Central Sudanic Africa (specially Chad).³² A coherent block of 26 countries speaking Arabic, Eritrea included, face a common challenge of geographical names standardization necessitated by international communication and intercultural exchange; certainly there is yet a long way to achieving that aim.³³

2. Source material

When starting a research into the Arabic toponomastics of Eritrea the first question is: *How it is in Arabic?* The answer seems simple: *Take a map in Arabic and see.* Easier to have said than done.

Publications in Arabic from Eritrea, either geographical or cartographical, are scarce and difficult to obtain. There are no official lists of geographical names of Eritrea available in either of the *working languages* or *national languages*. The easiest available material are popular all-Arabic geographical atlases, published in different times and places.

³⁰ Niedziela 2012, Zagórski 2014a.

³¹ Zagórski 2014b.

³² Zagórski 2013a, Zagórski 2016.

³³ UNGEGN 2007; Zagórski 2011.

The source of information for our analysis is therefore a collection of 48 Arabic geographical atlases, preserved in the library of Ibn Khaldun Institute. They take origin from various Arab countries and were published, with one exception dating from 1933, in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of this century – 1965–2016. All titles, numbered chronologically from A 1 to A 48, are detailed in the attached bibliography. Even if it is not a fully comprehensive collection from all Arab countries, still it is well representative of the style of presenting geographical facts in that kind of publications.

The picture drawn from those atlases is – presumably – something that educational institutions of the concerned countries would like to offer for the perception, comprehension and memory among their users, school and university students, to imbibe in their minds as a specific geographical horizon and to associate it psychologically with linguistic situations.

Maps of Eritrea in the atlases are of small dimensions and on scales not larger than 1:9 000 000. In result, the number of toponyms is generally low. On the other hand, variable ways of selecting the features to be named on maps, which give impression of a high degree of fortuity, create a slightly wider array of toponyms. All of them have entered our cumulative corpus. Many of them are mentioned in just one or two sources, very few are repeated in several atlases.

The searched maps are also helpful in gaining knowledge on how the Arab World sees Eritrea in political geography.

3. Eritrea and the Arab World in the atlases

The study of the Arab World (Al-‘Ālam al-‘Arabī), or the Arab Homeland (Al-Waṭan al-‘Arabī), reveals a diversity of treatment as far as the position of Eritrea is concerned. If the *heartland* of the Arab World is graphically unchangeable, the fringe areas and borderlands of that vast collective entity change from one atlas to another. In many cases the atlases have at least one map titled Al-Waṭan al-‘Arabī or Al-‘Ālam al-‘Arabī; sometimes it is only a simple form or a contour line on the cover or inside the atlas. And here it is what we find as far as Eritrea is concerned.

Eritrea’s sovereignty is only 23 years old. Atlases listed in the bibliography were published either before 1993 (A 1–A 24) or after it (A 25–A 48).

A1 (1933) shows Eritrea in its present form, without a name, as a separate political entity. It was an Italian colony at that time. Other atlases from before independence present diversified opinions on the political status of Eritrea. A 8, A 14, A 15, A 17, A21, A23 and A 26 include Eritrea fully within the territory of Ethiopia. A 18, A 19 and A 20 present Eritrea as an independent state. A 7, A 9, A 10, A 13 and A 16 present mixed ideas: on some maps Eritrea is a separate state, on some others it is a part of Ethiopia.

It should be observed that some maps in those atlases show Eritrea as something different from the main Ethiopian territory, with a dividing line between the two, like if it was a sort of an autonomous region. Also these administrative-political indications may differ from one map to another within the same publication.

After 1993 the presentation changes rapidly. A 25 and A 28–A 48 all show Eritrea as an independent country. However, A 26 (1999) and A 27 (2001), six years and eight years after Eritrea's independence, respectively, still show it as an integral part of Ethiopia.

Ten atlases from before Eritrea's independence include information about what is the Arab World, usually in the form of a graphic block. Five of them, A 10, A 15, A 18, A 19 and A 20, included Eritrea in the number of Arab countries, five others: A 11, A 12, A 13, A 14 and A 16, did not support this idea.

Four atlases showing the Arab World and published after the independence, A 31, A 32, A 43 and A 45, include Eritrea in the Arab World. Atlases A 26, A 28 and A 35 only indicate countries which belong to the League of the Arab States which does not include Eritrea. Atlas A 48 shows Eritrea as one of the Arab countries forming the Arab Homeland – Al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī – on just one map (p. 34), but keeps it outside the Arab Homeland on other twelve maps. Other atlases do not present the extent of the Arab World.

To sum up, a strong hesitation may be observed as far as the place of Eritrea within the fold of the Arab countries is concerned. The overall picture is not decisive.

4. *Substratum*-originated Arabic toponymy

Before we come to the study of Arabic Eritrean toponymy, let us examine the situation in the core Arab World. The spread of Arabic political domination in three continents, Asia, Africa and Europe, from the 7th c. on, led to dramatic changes – proliferation of Arabic language and toponymy over vast areas that had never been Arabic before.³⁴ Geographical names were carried on by human waves from the Arabian Peninsula and transplanted in new regions. New names in Arabic were coined following current needs of the changing population. These two categories formed an *adstratum* toponymic layer (or a *superstructure*). Some local names were translated into Arabic and retained as such. The old names, constituting a *substratum*, were also massively adapted to characteristic rules of Arabic in their phonetic form and word (noun) building patterns.³⁵ Noun patterns based on triradical (triliteral) verbal roots (occasionally also bi-, quadri- and quintiradical ones) are the most significant characteristics of the word building (morphological) procedures in all Semitic languages.

Words appropriated by Arabic from other languages are adapted, as much as possible, to the same morphological system, often giving occasion to artificial shaping of new patterns and coining new roots.

Arabic script, one of the Semitic ones, is consonantal and avoids noting down short vowels (except in special circumstances). Reading is normally possible thanks to a very formal and logic word structure based on simple sequence of basic types of syllables:

³⁴ Zagórski 1974 (2008).

³⁵ Fox 2003.

cvc (=c*vv*) or *cv*. Even where short vowels are not written, they can be comparatively easily reconstructed during the process of reading.

However, where there is a previously unknown foreign word noted down with Arabic consonants, its pronunciation always remains obscure and the reader is practically helpless. One cannot read it unless that particular word is already known from another context. The remedy may be noting down all vowels as long (with the use of weak consonants, like *wāw* و and *yā* ي, as well as *alif* ا), which often happens, or adjusting a foreign word into the syllabic structure of Arabic, what may lead to creation of new noun patterns.

New patterns appear and constitute a common element in toponymy, although do not necessarily extend their functional presence and become productive beyond that limited sphere of toponymic usage. Such process, spontaneous, very dynamic and changeable in time, had led already to the creation of a whole layer of toponyms that are considered unseparable from the all-Arabic historical and cultural tradition.

There are below some randomly selected well known toponym samples from various Arab countries, with extracted noun patterns and roots. All of them are *adaptations* (phonetic and graphic adjustments) from pre-Arabic *substratum* (Berber, old-Egyptian, Aramaic, Punic etc.), and their etymology should not be searched in Arabic language basing on the standard analysis of verbal roots (this may occasionally lead to creating *folk etymologies*). As it is customary, letters **f ' l** represent a standard triradical (triliteral/triconsonantal) verbal stem. Roots marked with an asterisk are nonproductive in other fields. Those which are identical with productive ones, are such in effect of a mere coincidence – it does not mean the names which contain them were really built from the Arab roots. All toponyms may produce derivative adjectives (*nisba'*), but without reference to their roots which are mostly meaningless in Arabic, devoid of any semantic value.

ادرار Adrār,	pattern: af [*] ā ^c (← af [*] āl),	root: d r r ;
الأردن Al-Urdunn,	pattern: (al-)uf [*] ull,	root: r d n ;
ازمور Azammūr,	pattern: afa [*] ūl,	root: z m r ;
بغداد Baġdād,	pattern: fa [*] lāl,	root: *b ġ d ;
تونس Tūnis,	pattern: fū [*] il,	root: *t n s ;
دمشق Dimašq,	pattern: fī [*] lal,	root: *d m š q ;
دمنهور Damanhūr,	pattern: fa [*] allūl,	root: *d m n h r ;
سيبلة Subayṭila ^t ,	pattern: fu [*] aylila ^t ,	root: *s b ṭ l ;
سكيدة Sukaykida ^t ,	pattern: fu [*] ay ^l ila ^t ,	root: *s k d ;
طنجة Ṭanġa ^t ,	pattern: fa [*] la ^t ,	root: *ṭ n ġ ;
كسلا Kasalā,	pattern: fa [*] alā,	root: k s l ;
مراكش Marrākuš,	pattern: maffā [*] ul,	root: *r k š .

There are adapted names which modify their shape in changing circumstances, like the following one:

قرطاجنة Qartāġanna ^t ,	pattern: fa [*] lālalla ^t ,	root: *q r ṭ ġ n .
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This name, originally adapted in Arabic more than 1,000 years ago from Punic (through Latin) and extensively attested in historical sources, due to cultural pressure in a colonial context changed shape into a simplified version:

قرطاج Qartāğ (← French: Carthage) pattern: fa`lāl, root: *q r ṭ ġ.

There are also names which – according to available historical records – underwent a process of gradual superficial Arabicisation, like تازا Tāzā → تازة Tāza[†]. Situations and ways of Arabicisation are multiple.

These empirical models, drawn from living toponymy and not based on theoretical morphological principles, were added by common usage to the earlier existing sets of original noun patterns. Similar ones were absorbed by Arabic and have remained in the language forever, some had a short life story.

Toponyms related to Eritrea, extracted from the above mentioned atlases and arranged alphabetically in their respective categories (classified by feature subject), will undergo structural analysis in the same manner as those few samples cited above.

(to be completed)

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³⁶ To be used with Part I and Part II of the article.

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