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Two East African Toponyms: A Case Study in Intercultural Transmission of Knowledge

Abstract

Toponyms of the East African coast present a recorded illustration of the multicultural environment of the Indian Ocean in its western part. A number of historical locations have been identified on the basis of modern or archaeological evidence corresponding to place names found in the written sources ranging from Antiquity to the contemporary era. From the Horn of Africa to the Swahili coast to Mozambique, the East African coast has been marked by a certain geographical stability of urban centres and port locations. Some of the modern cities still carry the names first recorded in the 10th century C.E., while some medieval toponyms may be correlated to locations first listed in ancient Greek sources.

The present paper will examine two examples from the extensive toponymical record for the East African coast. The major cultural traditions related to the place names and their recorded history in the written sources of the past centuries are generally known. Medieval Arabic sources provide the bulk of written information about the region in the pre-Portuguese era. The paper acknowledges some differences between the evidence of academic Islamic geography and the information provided by Arab travellers and navigators. The sources reveal a degree of stability in the inventory of the recorded place names despite the historical changes on the coast. Analysis reveals a complex picture of historical and language-based patterns of knowledge transmission in the trans-cultural oceanic environment.

Keywords: East Africa history, Indian Ocean history, historical geography, environmental history, onomastics

The East African coast presents a unique geographical and cultural environment that has imprinted Africa's history in various and complex ways. Geographically, the coastal line here is as little divided as the other coastal contours of the continent. The long north-south stretch that begins at the tip of the Horn of Africa trends from northeast to southwest; south of the Somali peninsula it has limited east-west variation and few large islands until the Comoros (at about 12^o S., where the Mozambique Channel begins). The same coastline faces the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean, which covers roughly 30 parallels of latitude and varies in its east-west extent over from 30 to 50 meridians of longitude. This paper offers a discussion of two historical locations on the coast and the toponyms related to them over time, marking two out of many East African termini of Indian Ocean sailing routes. We aim to embrace the whole coast known prior to the Portuguese circumnavigation of Africa by focusing on examples purposely selected from the northern and southern ends of the coast: they may be identified as Juba, in modern Somalia and Sofala, in Mozambique.

Many studies of the coast address connections between the coast and the interior of Africa¹. However, the record of coastal locations over centuries, and even millennia, has been the product of contacts with the outside world, and to it we must address our inquiry. The earliest extant sources describing East Africa and providing names of coastal locations belong to the late Antiquity. The very earliest is the anonymous *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* (the current dating varies between A.D. 40 and 70)² which describes the trade on the Indian Ocean in the early imperial Roman period. This itinerary guide for merchants in the western part of the Indian Ocean is superseded by sections of Claudius Ptolemy's *Geography* (circa 150)³. The phrasing of passages in Book IV, Chapter VII reflects

¹ See, for example, "The Swahili Coast and the Interior," chapter 2 in Pearson 1998.

² For the most recent English translation see Casson 1989. For dating see Casson, *ibid.*, esp. pp. 6-7; for a somewhat different view see Mathew 1975.

³ For the purposes of this article, I used the English translation by E.L. Stevenson. Criticism has been voiced in regard to the scientific merits of this transla-

some changes in coastal political arrangements and the development of coastal market towns that had happened since the *Periplus*, but the main focus in Ptolemy's work is on distances and geographical coordinates of locations.

Both the texts have been thoroughly examined by historians. A few places mentioned in the two sources are the same; a few more may possibly refer to the same locations. Ptolemy's data, in abridged and rearranged form, were transmitted in medieval Arabic sources. Among them are mentions of several places on the Somali peninsula. Only one place name on the whole coast has been traced through three stages – from Antiquity to the Islamic Middle Ages to contemporary usage. This is the Greek Opone – the Arabic *Khāfūn*, or Ras Hafun, at the north-eastern extreme of the Horn. Out of the remaining list of place names for Eastern Africa, one or two others have been traced from the Greek to the early Arabic geographical sources, and several physical features have been tied to the coast's contour and relief (most particularly, Cape Guardafui). It is easier to establish connections between later medieval Arabic records and a few larger contemporary centres (e.g. Merka, Brava, Mogadishu). Many place names, however, whether in Greek or Arabic sources, do not easily lend themselves to firm identification with geographical features, archaeological sites⁴, or between the two lists. Below, some place names preserved in Greek and Arabic texts are discussed not only as evidence of local onomastics, but also for the significance of these findings to the treatment of the early written sources.

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We begin with a summary of coastal features listed by the *Periplus* along the northern coast of the Horn past the Bab el-Mandeb Strait:

[...] the Arabian Gulf [Red Sea – M.T.] trends eastward and at Avalites is at its narrowest. After about 4000 stades on an

tion, but I have found it adequate for the cited passages. See *Geography of Claudius Ptolemy* 1932. The new authoritative, but partial translation is Berggren, Jones 2000.

⁴ For an archeological overview of the coast described in the *Periplus*, see Horton 1990.

eastward heading along the same coast, come the rest of the ports of trade of the Barbaroi, those called "far-side", lying in a row and offering, by way of anchorages and roadsteads, suitable mooring when the occasion calls. After Avalitês, about an 800-stade sail distant, comes another, better, port of trade called Malaô... From Malaô it is two runs to the port of trade of Mundu... From Mundu, with the course heading eastward, similarly after two, perhaps three, runs near [? a promontory] lies Mosyllon on a beach with a poor harbor... Beyond Mosyllon, after a two-run voyage come the so-called Neiloptolemaiu, Tapatêgê, a small laurel grove, Cape Elephas,... it has a river called Elephas and a large laurel grove called Akannai, the one place that produces most "far-side" incense, of fine quality to boot. ([Geography] 7-11; Casson 1989: 55, 57).

The Gulf of Avalitês is the Gulf of Aden. The "far-side" ports, among which is included also Opônê (more on that below), were the African ports east of the Bab el-Mandeb ([Geography]: 115). I omit discussion of unidentified toponyms that do not recur in later sources. The same part of the coast in Ptolemy is reduced to a terse table of geographical coordinates ([Geography]: 107):

	<u>Long.</u>	<u>Lat.</u>
After the strait in the Red Sea		
Dire town in the promontory	74 ⁰ 30'	11 ⁰
Then in Avalites Bay		
Avalites market place	74 ⁰	8 ⁰ 25'
Malao market place	75 ⁰	6 ⁰ 30'
Mondu market place	78 ⁰	7 ⁰
Mosylum promontory and market place	79 ⁰	9 ⁰
Cobe market place	80 ⁰	8 ⁰
Elephas mountains	81 ⁰	7 ⁰ 30'
Acanna market place	82 ⁰	7 ⁰

Although it has been alternately suggested that Avalitês was Zeila on the Somali-Djibouti border, Assab in Eritrea or a village in

the Tadjoura Bay ([Geography]: 115-117), it is clear from the narrative that its location is near the Bab al-Mandab strait. The remarkable feature of this list of place names is that, despite the coordinates, not one toponym has been reliably identified with an urban site. While the overlapping of the two Greek sources is considerable, only one name, the *Acanna* of Ptolemy, in the Greek version the same *Akannai* (Ἀκαννᾶι) as in the *Periplus* (transcribed in Latin also as *Acanne*), is found in the extant early Arabic recensions of the *Geography*⁵. These Arabic versions of the 9th-10th centuries change both the coordinates⁶ and the name, citing "the city of Qanānā on the sea"⁷:

	<u>Long.</u>	<u>Lat.</u>
al-Khwarizmi (table)	72 ⁰ 30'	2 ⁰ 45'
al-Khwarizmi (text)	72 ⁰ 30'	2 ⁰ 20'
Suhrab (table)	73 ⁰ 30'	3 ⁰ 45'
Suhrab (text)	72 ⁰ 30'	2 ⁰ 20'

Ptolemaic toponyms do not last long in Arab geography. Few of them ever appear outside the tables of geographical coordinates, and even fewer continue to appear in later works, influenced by updated measurements and travel information⁸. The name "Qanānā" never again appears in Arabic sources, but we were able to find a modern solution to the ancient puzzle.

The puzzle is both geographical and linguistic. Unfortunately, we know that we cannot rely on the Arabic source numerical data because the Arabic letter numerals, as preserved, do not accurately transmit Greek astronomical coordinates⁹. Is there a

⁵ For an overview of overall Ptolemaic influence on early Islamic cartography see chapter 4 "The Beginnings of a Cartographic Tradition" by Gerald R. Tibbets in Harley, Woodward 1992, esp. pp. 97-100.

⁶ For a discussion of some causes for these changes see Tolmacheva 1991.

⁷ Compiled by the author from Kubbel', Matveev 1960: 271, 279, 301, 305. These versions are much shorter than Ptolemy's book and contain much non-Ptolemaic information.

⁸ Regarding this phenomenon see, for example Tolmacheva 1996.

⁹ For discussion of Ptolemaic coordinates in Arabic geography see Tolmacheva 1991: 132.

connection between the Greek *Akanna* and the Arabic *Qanana*? Even beyond the easily observable phonetical similarity, it has been suggested by Hubert Daunicht (1968, 1: 220) that this last toponym is a distortion of the transcription *Aqanāyī for Ἀκανναί. The particular pattern of phonetical change from "Akanna," with a double middle consonant, to "Qanānā", with long vowels after each *n*, carefully signed by the use of the Arabic letter *alif*. If that is so, we are dealing with consequences of careless, rather than careful copying. As becomes apparent below, the form *Qanānā* is both a plausible variant and a guide to solution. The solution, as often happens, has been there for a long time. One of the early scientifically trained explorers of the East African coast, the French naval captain Charles Guillain left an extensive collection of data recorded during, and in connection with, an Indian Ocean voyage of 1846-48 (Guillain 1-3 1856). In his extensive records of local settlements, customs, and vocabulary along the coast from Somali to Madagascar and Mauritius, Guillain – to my knowledge, the earliest western author to do so – specifically noted that the Somali name for the Juba River is Ganāné (Guillain 3: 384). The same name is also applied to an area along the river, alternatively called Lock (Guillain 3: 43). Guillain records the full name of the river as Ouébi-Ganāné and provides the local etymology: “Son nom de Ganāné signifie division, et lui a été donné, sans doute, parce qu'en certain point de son cours il se bifurque. On le nomme aussi Giouéna; les Arabes seuls l'appellent Djoub, et les Souahéli Voumbo” (Guillain 2: 178). This information is later confirmed and augmented in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*'s edition of 1911:

JUBA, or JUB, a river of East Africa, exceeding 1000 m. in length, rising on the S.E. border of the Abyssinian highlands and flowing S. across the Galla and Somali countries to the sea. It is formed by the junction of three streams, all having their source in the mountain range N.E. of Lake Rudolf which is the water-parting between the Nile basin and the rivers flowing to the Indian Ocean.

Of the three headstreams, the Web, the Ganale and the Daua, the Ganale (or *Ganana* – my italics, M.T.) is the central river

and the true upper course of the Juba. It has two chief branches, the Black and the Great Ganale¹⁰.

The toponym *Juwa* first appears in Arabic Geography in the *Geography* of al-Idrisi (d. 1165), where it is placed in the Fifth Section of the First Climate (Kubbel', Matveev 1965: 301). Later variants include the forms *Jubb* and *Jubba*. The earliest European to record his visit to the Jubba area is the Jesuit Jeronimo Lobo (1624). The lower Juba was explored in 1865 in a steamer by Baron Karl von der Decken, but he was murdered by Somali at Bardera, and the river system remained otherwise almost unknown to the West until after 1890. The river and city at its estuary are both given the same name in medieval Arabic sources. The nearest contemporary city is Kismayo in Somalia. In the commentary to the *Three Unknown Sailing Instructions of Ahmad ibn Majid*, T.A. Shumovsky identifies the "Jubb country" (*Bilād Jubb*) as "the area of Mogadisho" (Shumovskii 1957: 124) but the capital of Somalia is located 328 miles (528 km) northeast of the river Jubb estuary. Therefore the connection between the similarly named river and city firmly indicates the region of Kismayu (the latter place name does not appear in pre-modern sources). In addition, the location is identified by Arab geographers as an area near the border between the Land of Zanj (to the south) and the land of Barbara (to the north). Barbara is the ethnonym commonly applied in Arabic sources to Somalis. Jubb continues to appear in 13th-century sources, when Mogadisho (*Maqdashaw*) makes its first appearance in the geographical dictionary of Yaqut (d. 1229). The fact that first Yaqut and then Ibn al-Mujawir (d. 1291) each include both Jubb and Maqdashaw in their books as two distinct cities (Kubbel', Matveev 1985: 257, 265) affirms the clear distinction between them in the geographical knowledge of that era.

The following is a brief summary of observations we may derive from this case study of a toponym at the northern terminus of the East African coast. (1) The information cited above confirms the

¹⁰ http://www.theodora.com/encyclopedia/j/juba_river.html, accessed on 23 April 2014.

accuracy of the ancient Greek sources by discovering a connection between the Greek transcription of the local place name and the modern river name in the Somali language. (2) The analysis of early Arabic data confirms accuracy of the Arabic transcription of the Greek spelling of a local name. This gives hope for broader extrapolation to other examples of Greco-Arabic transmission of information in onomastics. (3) Ancient Greek place names for East African emporia are not to be found in the later Arabic sources on Africa; some of those that may be tentatively identified are eventually replaced with emerging contemporary place name inventory. (4) Sources appear to support the particular identification of a historical site located in the river estuary of an Indian Ocean region easily reached from the Red Sea. (5) This isolated case study spans a period of almost two thousand years and involves at least four different languages, not counting those added in the period of modern West European exploration: Greek, Arabic, Swahili, and Somali. (6) Based on the reviewed linguo-geographical information, we may assume a relative stability of ethnic boundaries for coastal Northeast Africa for the recorded period, as observed by the non-indigenous visitors to the region.

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Sofala presents a significantly different case as a toponym, and not just because of its location in Southeast Africa. Firmly attached to a city site in central Mozambique ever since the Portuguese first saw it in 1501, the place name “Sofala” began its existence in Arab geography as the name of a country. The earliest sources belong to the first half of the 10th century C.E., when Sofala appears in the *Wonders of India* and in al-Mas’udi’s *Golden Meadows* (Kubbel’, Matveev 1960: 379). At this time Sofala is a country beyond the Land of Zanj, that is of black East Africans whose country’s northern border lay at Juwa or Jubb (above). Located at an often but vaguely determined distance from Zanj to the south, this is a somewhat mysterious place, not yet Islamized, and not on the regular sailing routes. Besides the usual *Sufāla*, there are variant names *Sufālat al-Zanj* (Sofala of the Zanj), *Sufālat al-dhahab* (Sofala of Gold) and

Sufālat al-tibr (Sofala of Gold Dust)¹¹. The gold of Monomotapa, in addition to ivory and slaves, fed Sofala's trade and fascination of the authors, whether medieval or early-modern. However, the secrecy surrounding the trade also resulted in a shortage of precise information, so until the publication of Portuguese narratives very few hard data were made available to the pre-modern reader either about the country or the cities in it. One stable feature of the Arabic records of Sofala containing geographical information is the perception that this is the southernmost part of Africa reachable on the Indian Ocean. Here are some examples of how the coastline is arranged¹² in narratives or even maps by the authors of the 10th-15th centuries (north-south):

Al-Mas`udi (d. 965), al-Idrisi (d. 1165), Ibn al-Wardi (d. 1348):

Land of the Barbara (Somali) – Land of the Zanj – Sofala –
WaqWaq

Ibn Sa`id al-Maghribi (d. 1286):

Land of the Barbara – Land of the Zanj – Sofala

Al-Dimashqi (d. 1327):

Land of the Barbara, Zanjabar, Sofala, Daghuta

The Land of Sofala is populated by these authors with cities, as many as five in al-Idrisi, none of which bear the name of Sofala – even though it is common in that tradition to identify the major city of an area by the name of the country, and indeed Yaqut and Qazwini call Sofala a city in the land of Zanj (Tolmacheva 1969: 278). Al-Biruni (d. c. 1050) is the first to provide its astronomical coordinates: 10° S. and 55° E.; these figures are later misreported by Abu 'l-Fida' (d. 1331). Idrisi's northern boundary of Sofala is in the southern part of Section Seven of the First Climate, with the rest occupying Sections Eight and Nine. The "first" (that is, northernmost) city in Sofala is *Batīna*, while the major city of Sofala, or of the area even further south, is called *Sayūna*. Ibn Sa`id al-Maghribi provides these

¹¹ See more on Sofala descriptions in Arabic sources in Tolmacheva 1979.

¹² For greater detail see Tolmacheva 1969, esp. pp. 270-278.

locations with (false) coordinates, placing Batina at the latitude of 2⁰ 30' South and the longitude of 87⁰ East, and Sayuna at the same latitude, but at 99 degrees East. There is no such confusion in the sailing instructions of Ahmad ibn Majid (d. c. 1500), the celebrated navigator of the Indian Ocean and author of the *Sufāliyya* poem, detailing for the pilot the monsoon route from southern India to Mozambique and the Comoros¹³. But the data are not compatible. Ibn Majid uses “star coordinates” common among the pilots of the Indian Ocean whose orientation needs were supported by the celestial stability of tropical constellations visible during monsoon sailing seasons. He leads his student navigator toward Mogadisho, with possible stopovers at Merka and Brava (Barawa), and then the coastal route is open to him from Jubb “to the very end of Sofala” (Shumovskii 1957: 22ff).

The most remarkable aspect of the Sofala of classical Arabic geographers is the lack of stable location for this country, despite the seeming (but misleading) precision of Ibn Sa`id's coordinates. Yes, it is the southernmost part of Eastern Africa: we are firmly told by al-Biruni that “ships do not reach beyond: Sofalat al-Zanj” and that “after Sofalat al-Zanj the sea reaches the western Ocean Sea” (Kubbel', Matveev 1960: 114). Therefore, there is no room further south for the even more mysterious WaqWaq¹⁴ or the recently invented Daghuta. But where is the northern border? The southernmost “Zanj” city of al-Mas`udi is Mombasa (*Manbasa*); from there to the cities in Sofala is a distance of up to 300 miles, which takes us approximately to Kilwa. Various orthographic forms of this name begin to appear in the sources of the early 13th century. Al-Biruni's coordinates place the city of Sofala close to the location of Kilwa – approximately at 9 degrees South and 39.5 degrees East. The great Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta visited Kilwa in 1331, when it was no longer part of Sofala: it was now a Muslim city

¹³For the facsimile of the Arabic MS and Russian translation, see Shumovsky 1957. For English and French translation see Khuri 1983 and Jouannes 2001.

¹⁴For WaqWaq see Tolmacheva 1987/1988 and Tolmacheva 2003.

whose the ruler conducted jihad against the “infidel Zanj” (Defrémery, Sanguinetti 1877: 193). It is about this time that Kilwa had gained control of the gold trade from further south. According to Ibn Battuta, the land of Sofala was at a distance of two-weeks’ travel from Kilwa. Computation of astronomical orienteers provided by Ahmad ibn Majid (six *isba*’ by the Great Bear) places Sofala approximately between 16^o and 20^o S (Tolmacheva 1969: 278), while the historical Sofala was discovered by the Portuguese approximately at 20° South and 35° East. By the late 17th century, Dapper places Sofala on the coast between the estuaries of the Zambezi and the Limpopo (Dapper 1686: 394), modern coordinates 18°34’14”S 36°28’13”E and 25°10’S 33°35’E, respectively¹⁵.

This case study follows the history of the toponym Sofala, recorded in Arabic sources from the 10th century and gradually, though not always accurately, attributed greater cartographic elaboration and precision. The Arabic word *sufāla* literally means “lowlands” and is usually interpreted as “lands further south.” Such interpretation agrees with the destination at the farthest (southern) end of the winter (NE) monsoon route. It does not support the visual association with the Western map or compass, where North is up and South down, because in Islamic cartography it is south that is usually up (as the magnetic compass needle in fact points south). With the shift of the toponym location further away and, inevitably, southward, it is also tempting to speculate if the historical use of *sufāla* may not apply to the continental shelf now known as the Sofala Bank. The bank lies off the coast of Mozambique and stretches approximately 950 km north from Beira (near the historical city of Nueva Sofala)¹⁶.

The second case thus presents a more consistent linguo-cultural example than the first: for the pre-modern period we deal exclusively with Arabic sources and an Arabic word. Our

¹⁵<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zambezi> and

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Limpopo_River, accessed on 23 April 2014.

¹⁶http://operations.ifad.org/web/ifad/operations/country/project/tags/mozambique/1184/project_overview, accessed on 23 April 2014.

observations are inevitably quite different in the case of this term: (1) the same place name is identified by earlier medieval authors as applicable to (usually) country or (rarely) city. (2) The gradual shift from a more northerly location (south of Mombasa) to a more remote one (south of Kilwa) marks the expansion of the Land of Zanj toward a more remote boundary, pushing the unknown Sofala farther away. (3) The southern reaches of the monsoon remained permanent over centuries; it was the extent of knowledge, of information and sailing skills that changed, gained, and allowed expanded contacts in southern Africa. (4) Cabinet geographers relying on copied manuscript sources confuse the cartographic picture of southeast Africa; while Ibn Battuta has no formal geographical knowledge, he only tells us what he knows, hears and observes, and therefore his information is reliable. (5) Ahmad ibn Majid's professional knowledge, gained by extensive navigational practice, reflects the knowledge of places as destinations and routes to those termini. Sailing from Calicut to Sofala or the Comoros and from Sofala or Madagascar to the Swahili coast are at the centre of his instructions, more important to him than land areas we seek to discover behind toponyms. (6) The *Sufāliyya* poem contains a considerable number of coastal toponyms south of Mogadisho from African languages, mostly Bantu. Significantly, these place names do not duplicate the onomastic vocabulary of the "academic" Arabic sources, but rather add to it.

Based on the limited analysis of the two case studies we can make certain general conclusions regarding intercultural transmission of geographical and onomastic knowledge. (1) The very existence of the records discussed above is evidence of interaction between different cultures and of transmission of information communicated from local to "foreign" languages. (2) Transmission of pre-modern place names to modern usage has been documented via Greek, Arabic, Swahili, and Portuguese languages. (3) Ancient Greek records prove reliable even in multi-stage transmission; toponyms from the Greek sources may be found both in Arabic transcription and, in a few cases, translation. (4) African toponyms are often recognizable in Arabic transcription and, in rare cases, may be

recognizable in Greek transcription. (5) Toponyms with cultural or evaluative content, such as “Zanj” and “Sofala” over time may change their geographical application and cultural or informational emphasis. Their geographical range may expand or contract or the location may shift, while cultural implications may change in the positive/negative aspect depending on the amount of information available or the content of that information (historical, religious, and economic data).

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