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From Nobiin to Rutana: The Role of Arabization In Creating Sudanese Language Ideologies

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Library Use Statement

What drew you to the resources you used? (Please write a minimum of 100 words)

I already had an interview with my father that I was using as an oral history through which I was to explore language standardization and ideologies in northern Sudan, so I was looking for a lot of sources that spanned different eras in Sudan in order to reflect the different languages and processes of language erasure that were happening during different years. This led me to the library and using its archives as my main resource in order to access older anthropological research. Being able to access different books, articles, journals and research papers helped me understand language in Sudan through a historical, cultural and even a western lens as well.

How did you find the material? (Please write a minimum of 100 words)

I had in mind some very important basic keywords that would lead me to research and research testimonies. I looked up keywords such as “Sudan language” “language standardization” (in order to read about how language standardization worked in other places), “Rutana” (to read anthropological perspectives on Rutana”, “arabization” (in order to research the history of arabization in Sudan and what led to it), and “language revitalization” (so that I may understand how the efforts that my father saw related to professional efforts and contemporary linguistic thought.

Did faculty, librarians, classmates, or others help you on your journey, and if so, who and how? (Please write a minimum of 100 words)

My professor, Sonya Rao, helped me. She showed me how to look up the prominence of languages by accessing linguistic and anthropological databases. At the beginning of every lecture, she showed us how to go about the Library website, accessing Jstor, google scholar and other research databases and engines, and required that everyone use the Inter Library Loan for two of their sources.

In creating your project, how did you determine what materials were most suitable? (Please write a minimum of 100 words)

As an anthropologist, accessing peer reviewed journals and articles are vital to all my research papers. I knew that I wanted ethnographies from Sudan, which were easy to find on AAA website, Jstor, google scholar or AnthroSource. As I planned out my paper and pinpointed the different arguments I wanted to make, I relied on my father’s oral history as well to give me clues as for where to search. A lot of my research was almost like fact-checking. I would use a memory or an anecdote that my father told me, such as punishments for speaking a specific dialogue, think about

that conceptually (aka through the lens of language death) and then use that as a keyword in my research. This led me to a lot of books and articles that gave me exactly what I needed to support my paper and make my research concise.

What strategies did you employ as you searched collections or gathered data? (Please write a minimum of 100 words)

Using keywords in my online searches, checking out books, famous anthropologists that worked in Sudan or with language revitalization efforts, asking my professor about resources that can relate to my research, checking books on the library databases, using the InterLibraryLoan system to get information from books that I could not access online. Even simple Google searches let me know which materials I needed to access that I had not yet, especially when it came to deciding which sources to request over the ILL. I mostly wanted primary sources and used books and JSTOR for that.

How did you winnow and refine the resources you found into a meaningful bibliography to support your work? (Please write a minimum of 100 words)

Sonya also asked us to provide annotated bibliographies, which helped me tremendously in weeding out the sources that were weaker for my research paper and got me to become more concise and specific about what I was focusing on and taking from each source. It kept me organized and was helpful during re-writes so that I didn't constantly have to revisit sources. Other than that, I read the abstracts and many pages of each source. If I found a range of pages or even just a paragraph that I wanted to cite, I read around it as well to make sure I understood the context and to be comfortable in using my sources well when applied to my research!

Ruba El Melik

Anthropology 33

Professor Sonya Rao

8 September 2016

From Nobiin to Rutana:
The Role of Arabization in Creating Sudanese Language Ideologies

In current Sudan, the many languages that are regularly spoken vary widely across the country. Although the national language is Arabic and most people in the main cities speak it, the farther out of the city you stretch out, the more “broken” the Arabic becomes, and the more people are increasingly comfortable with their indigenous tribal languages than with Arabic. These tribal dialects have some of the richest histories- my tribe’s dialect was descended from ancient Nubian languages and has since been slightly mixed with Arabic as a result of Arab conquests- and yet, the number of speakers has sharply fallen after my father’s generation. I chose to interview my father because, as a native speaker of both his tribal language, Rutana, and Arabic, he belongs to a generation in which Rutana still had some importance but which watched that relevance quickly disappear as the years passed and the political and social scenes shifted. One obvious reason for the lower number of current speakers is that none of the following generations have grown up in the villages where their parents grew up (as most of the parents emigrated to cities or out of the country), and therefore could not have just acquired the language naturally. This, however, could be an aesthetic claim for the dying of these dialects; in the villages of Sudan, the languages are alive and well. But for how long? A closer look at studying and understanding the social and political atmosphere that my father grew up in sheds light on a story about a new dictatorial regime fighting to ‘Arabize’ Sudan; that is, capitalizing on its

Muslim majority to make it look more like an Arab country and doing less and less to help preserve indigenous languages and even indigenous history. Hearing once a casual remark from my father about how kids were ‘whipped’ at schools if their teachers heard them speaking Rutana and not Arabic, I was immediately interested in obtaining his oral history. My hopes were that I can not only learn more about the village that I come from and what it was like for him while he was growing up, but also about how the political atmosphere at the time contributed to the Sudan I belong to today: one that makes little attempt as a nation state to maintain its African history, one that is carelessly throwing away its own cultural currency in favor of a standardized language and an adopted religious history. My father’s experiences with Rutana and his beliefs about it being a dialect instead of a language are reflective of the both the language ideologies that spread in the wake of the arabization of Sudan, and the consequent ethnic identity crisis of the Sudanese people.

My father grew up on the small island of Binna (part of a larger area named Dongola), located in the middle of the River Nile in northern Sudan, in the late fifties and sixties, about six hours worth of ground travel from the capital, Khartoum, and four from the Egyptian border. In my conversation with him, I asked him about the languages he speaks and his background with each one. He described his acquiring of Rutana as precisely that- an acquisition. “No, no I didn’t learn it,” he said in the response to my asking about who taught him it. “I just knew it; I picked it up on the street. It is my mother tongue.” I was amused by this description because it accurately reflects how linguists describe the language learning process: it’s an acquisition, not a learning, or something one is taught. Expanding on my question, my father informed me that he was taught Arabic in school around the first grade, but he had started learning it earlier because it was

spoken at home- a rarity for the other families around him. My paternal grandfather was sort of like a town leader, or a mayor (*Omda*, in Arabic) so he was more well traveled than the other villagers and knew the benefits of Arabic: it was spoken in the metropolitan areas of Sudan and all the city folk, and therefore, the big jobs, required that one have a solid grasp on Arabic.

Therefore, my father and his siblings spoke to my grandfather only in Arabic. He did not classify Rutana as a language, but a dialect, although he did say that it should be deemed an official language by the government, which I will explain in further detail. For a second language he learned English around the fifth grade, also in school, and has a great grasp on the language as he has been speaking it regularly as a banker for the past forty years. As for Arabic and Rutana, he speaks both pretty frequently: Arabic quite regularly, as he lives in Khartoum, Sudan, where it is the national language, and Rutana less frequently, spoken only with his siblings and extended family members, and on the occasions that he does meet someone that also belongs to his tribe.

How is Rutana even defined, though? Upon asking my father whether he thought of it as a language or a dialect, he provided a conflicted answer. “It should be an official language, but I would describe it as a dialect. Rutana is the official language of the Nubians. Nowadays, there's a movement to make it a real language; it isn't a written language but there should be an alphabet. There's a movement for it to be taught in schools.” To him, Rutana is as real as any other language, but it can't truly be a language until it has an alphabet- something that makes it more “official.” This language ideology, or a “kind of cultural assumption or belief that speakers hold about their own language” (Handman, 2009, p.635), that makes my father hesitate to call Rutana a language can be credited to the Sudanese government's attempts at standardizing Arabic and eradicating all other languages by deeming them “useless.” For a villager like my dad, where

Arabic was taught in school by actual force (“We were whipped if the teachers heard us speaking Rutana. We had to speak Arabic to each other all the time, even though we all knew Rutana better at first.”), Rutana quickly became not as “official” or “useful” as Arabic, especially since Arabic was the best tool in his toolbox when it came to moving to other cities in Sudan where everyone spoke Arabic. The famous quote by Max Weinreich, “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy” applies here. With an entire nation state standardizing one language and simultaneously neglecting its tribal dialects, all the other languages of Sudan could not be classified as anything but dialects in the face of Arabic and its so called “army and navy.”

Despite the conflation of written language with spoken language being a strongly held language ideology, I did not dismiss it as my father was right about the fact that people were trying to give Rutana a written form. Upon doing some research, it was found that there are actually three proposed orthographies for Rutana under current deliberation. (Hashim, 2004, p.14) However, is this a necessary step in ‘turning’ Rutana from a dialect to a language, so to speak? In short, the answer is no. Rutana, an Arabic word imposed on all indigenous tribal languages, no matter how different they are, means “dialect” in Arabic. It is often thought of as derogatory, although probably by academics only, as every indigenous language speaking person in Northern Sudan refers to their language as ‘Rutana.’ (Simpson, 2008, p.61-63) My father’s Rutana, of the people of Dongola, is actually a real language named Nobiin. Although Nobiin has been extensively studied and has had its linguistic roots mapped out pretty heavily, beyond the knowledge that it is a Nubian language, very few speakers actually know all of this. The fact that the speakers of the language not only believe that it is a dialect of Arabic (or an ‘unofficial’ language at best) but also are unaware of what Rutana is called in its own language makes

apparent the depth of the language ideologies that have spread in the wake of Sudanese Arabization attempts. (Bechhaus-Gerst, 2011, p.230)

A paper published by the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in 1955, around the time my father were born, states very high hopes for the continuation of the use of Rutana. In one of the paragraphs, it is stated that “even the womenfolk of such a notable figure as the *Omda* were unable to converse in Arabic. There is no question but that Nubian remains the language of the home.” (Shinnie, 1956, p.100) However, my father’s recount of the languages he spoke at home, specifically with his grandfather, the *Omda* of Dongola, contradict this. Peter and Margaret Shinnie go on to express their belief about the uses and future of Rutana, or Nubian, as they refer to it: “We doubt whether Nubian will easily die out, or that it is disparaged. We have always found the Nubians proud of their language even though unaware of its long history, and tenaciously holding on to it even when living among Arabic-speakers. The Nubian servants of Khartoum, although many of them are fully literate in Arabic, prefer to speak to each other in their native tongue.” (Shinnie, 1956, p.100) Although my father’s personal experiences and expressions align with these statements, one has to question whether or not the will of a people is enough to keep a language from dying out, if these people stop using it upon leaving the villages and only speak it to those who already know it, rather than teach it to the future generations. Whether or not Rutana is dying could be an arguable point and an aesthetic claim, but its stagnation and lack of growth is fact: myself, my siblings, cousins, and all the other Dongolawi youth that have grown up outside of Dongola that do not speak Rutana are proof of this.

So why is Rutana, or Nobiin, currently threatened and not as popular and thriving as Hillelston predicted it would be? One must look towards the social and political forces that have

driven such a degradation in language use: standardizing Arabic. “It is widely believed that a language gives way to another as a result of some greater political force.” (Blair and Fredeen, 1995, p.28) The standardization of languages that occurs in nation states occurs for a wide variety of reasons: legitimization of the nation state as one entity, an attempt at creating a homogenous people that would identify with each other and the state, or following a model of other closely related states to identify with that group, among other things. (Hassanpour, 1989, p.7) The experiences of Sudanese youth growing up in the second half of the twentieth century are reflective of the latter. My father said “the government didn’t neglect these languages. It destroyed them.” What does it mean for a language to be truly dying- how do we differentiate aesthetic judgements of what we may think are dying languages from actual truth, and what does mean to have a direct hand in the deterioration of a language? I believed that standardizing a language is necessary for a very large country like Sudan in which there is a lot of internal migration, driven by education opportunities and job prospects. However, in explaining his experiences of moving from village to city, my father said, “There were no similarities between Binna and the two cities- Port Sudan and Khartoum- in which I studied high school and university... There was a culture shock, there were complications because I couldn’t say anything I wanted to for fear of being misinterpreted- the people around me were from different cultures. They were like aliens to me.” Standardizing the Arabic language at the time meant that every Sudanese person that had learned a tribal language first and an Arabic language second, even if Arabic was learned within the critical age, was operating at a more superficial level of understanding and communication. My father was basically saying that if a person was speaking to him in Rutana, he could not misinterpret what that person meant because he knows they come

from the same place and therefore fundamentally share similar mindsets. In Arabic, the intent was unclear. In a way, making everyone speak Arabic had only brought out the heterogeneity of the Sudanese people. It only worked to bring out everyone's differences even more. Oftentimes, these differences were conflicting. This issue is a theme that has survived generations and stays with the people of Sudan until today: how does one reconcile the differences within the Sudanese identity?

In the opening paragraph of this paper, I mentioned that the farther one got away from the cities in Sudan, the more "broken the Arabic would get." I wondered aloud during the interview why villagers didn't have very proper Arabic if a lot of them were acquiring it in formal educational settings. My father responded, saying "We have an accent. There are sounds in Arabic not in Rutana so we actually couldn't say them. What you hear as broken is because we are basically speaking Arabic with a Rutana accent." Rutana would therefore be running interference with their second language, causing them to have an Arabic accent! In "*Did the Shukriya speak Rutana?*", Hillelston confirms this: "The Bedairiya of Kordofan who still spoke Rutana at the outbreak of the Mahdiya, speak Arabic only, but they betray their origin in their articulation of ain and haa, for which they substitute hamza and ha." (Hillelston, 1919, p.154-156) We can see from this quote a glimpse not only into the disuse of Rutana within that tribe but also into how the language falls into that disuse: the morphology goes first, while the phonetics are a little stickier and harder to get rid of. Furthermore, we can see a lopsided adaptation by the people to both Arabic and Nobiin, and linguistic manifestations of what it looks like having both languages be in use (like having an Arabic accent, or "broken Arabic, etc).

Uncomfortable linguistic imbalances between tribal languages and Arabic are not difficult to catch, and the parallels of that in national and ethnic identities is even more apparent and obvious. In “*Sudan: A Nation In Turbulent Search of Itself*,” Francis M Deng aptly describes this identity crisis:

Sudan has been intermittently at war with itself since independence on June 1, 1956, with only ten years of precarious peace between 1972 and 1983. At the heart of the conflict is a crisis of national identity. Those who have been in control of the country define themselves as Arabs and also Muslims, and identify more with the Middle East than with black Africa, though they are essentially Arab-Africans. Their physical features are similar to other African groups in the region, and their cultures and even Islamic practices are an amalgam of Arab and Islamic culture with indigenous belief systems and cultures. The outcome of Sudan’s struggles is difficult to predict. (Deng, 2006, p.156)

Observing the potential eradication of indigenous tribal languages in light of this information therefore provides an explanation for that whipping of non-Arabic-speaking schoolboys: it's all an effort for a movement towards a more cohesive and homogenous country. Although an increasingly educated Sudanese youth is only becoming more angered over the loss of indigenous language, witnessing the decreased numbers of Rutana speakers makes one wonder about its future. If the standardization of Arabic can be attributed to the Arabization of Sudan, then the Arabization of Sudan cannot be explored without looking at the reasons behind it as well that have made it such a powerful force behind literally almost all aspects of modern Sudanese identity. Arabization in Sudan, in its simplest form, can be studied best through the lens of religion, specifically Islam. (O’Mahoney, 2007, p.10) In the early twentieth century, Sudan was, while still conservative in values that stressed family and propriety, closer to a secular country than it was to a religious one. The motivations behind this are simple: an urgent desire to unify a massive and diverse country. O’Mahoney writes:

“Previous attempts to define Sudanese nationalism and what it is to be Sudanese have resulted in a protracted conflict which has destabilized the state. The state has seen two civil wars since independence with just eleven years of peace in the last fifty years. Both civil wars are characterized as being between

the Muslim North and the Christian/Animist South, though this characterization fails to encapsulate the complexity of identity in Sudan and the resulting ethnic and religious conflict among and within the groups which make up the state.” (O’Mahoney, 2007, p.13)

With the rise of the Islamist regimes and governments that occurred, Northern Sudan’s values were entirely changed, other parts remained the same or changed in different ways. My father remembers a time when there were parties, bars and cinemas in Sudan; these days, all three have been banned. Soon afterwards came the nationalization of Arabic and discouragement of indigenous languages in the mainstream, and after that, a generation faced with a country halfway through the process of erasing the parts of Sudanese identity that they did not like. Thus, modern Sudanese youth are stuck facing a dilemma: do they try to learn their dying languages and save them? Do they try to learn what is still remembered and documented of their histories and learn them? A large population of the educated Sudanese generations would answer affirmatively to these questions. However, much like the indigenous language speakers that do not even know the real name of their languages, most of the Sudanese population is not aware that they even have a choice about being Arab, or that it is an implanted identity, not a real one. For many, with their religion comes their identity: a lot of Muslims all around North Africa and South West Asia (also known as the Middle East) speak Arabic and identify as Arab, and therefore they feel that they should too. To them history is just that- history: looking towards the future is key, and that future is Arab in identity.

In *Arab Identity and Ideology in Sudan: The Politics of Language, Ethnicity, and Race*, Sharkey comments on the success of these political and social motivations (Arabization here is referred to in its Arabic form, ‘*ta’rib*.’) “As a long-unfolding cultural process, *ta’rib* in Sudan has been remarkably successful, particularly in its linguistic guise.” (Sharkey, 2008, p.23) Although

quick, ta'rib wasn't immediate. Exploring Sudanese history and language shifts as close as seventy years ago in Dongola shows a beginning of an identity change: people spoke Nobiin and were indigenously Sudanese, and therefore some of them resisted identifying as "Arab," identifying as "Sudanese" instead. This happened for other tribes all across Sudan as well. Spaulding explores and confirms this concept with the Shaiqis, or people of the Shawaiqa tribe: "During the nineteenth century some Shaiqi individuals still preferred to regard themselves not as the descendants of immigrant Arabs, but as members of an ancient and autochthonous Sudanese community. This viewpoint, probably that of a minority at the time it was recorded and totally unacceptable today.." (Spaulding, 1990, p.286) Today, the terms "Arab" and "Sudanese" are not at all mutually exclusive.

Despite burgeoning attempts to preserve the languages of tribal Sudan by teaching them in schools and trying to re-instigate its inter-generational spread and inheritance, revitalizing and saving rutanas long term will require a social movement strong enough to match the opposing political powers that want to keep Sudan Arab, Muslim and Middle Eastern. Due to the political force of arabization and standardizing Arabic, the Sudanese political party in power has made enormous strides in not only creating a mainstream culture surrounding Arabic and the Arab world, but they have also attempted to eradicate a lot of Sudanese languages by discouraging their acquisition and tricking their speakers into believing harmful language ideologies that de-legitimise their indigeneity. For my father, and our tribe in Dongola, the manifestations of this are clear: new generations that don't speak Nobiin, and older generations that speak it less and less as they grow up, having reduced it to a dialect that is not very useful beyond familial and interpersonal relationships.

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