Niger: Origins of the Word
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NOTES ET DOCUMENTS

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NIGRITIA : NIGERIA

While it is clear that there should be some common denominator for the names of an African territory that appear to derive from a common root it does not appear possible to find this common denominator. Thus “Nigritia” is defined according to the Century Dictionary of 1904 as “a region in central Africa, nearly equivalent to Sudan, and the home of the most pronounced types of the Negro race; ...” In Ogilby's Africa (London, 1670) a map shows a region called Nigritarum south of the Sahara to stretch from the Atlantic to the Nile. So that one suspects that Nigritia is but a latinising of the Arabic word Sudan which means the land of the Blacks. Ptolemy makes no mention of Nigritia but his discourse on the rivers of Africa may throw light on the origin of the word Niger.

Murray (1817, p. 381) remarks:

"Westwards from the Nile he (Ptolemy) describes the vast range of Libya Interior watered by the great rivers Gir and Niger. It has been generally understood, that this tract comprised the modern Nigritia; that the Niger was the great river so well known in Europe under this name, though it is not designated so in any part of Africa; and that the Gir is the river of Bournau ... We may add that the name Gir is native in this part of Africa, and is applied to a river of Sigilmessa."

This tract would not encompass the realms of the Negroes and could not thus refer to the area known to-day as Nigeria which includes much of the courses of the Niger and the Benue rivers.

NIGERIA

The name “Nigeria” first appeared in print, according to Dr. Meek (1960, I, 1), on 8 January, 1897: “It was the title of an article in our leading newspaper, written by Miss Flora Shaw, who at that time ‘did the colonies for The Times’ as Cecil Rhodes expressed it.” The Oxford English Dictionary has 1908 as its date for “Nigerian” but Cole (1862, p. 170) writes: “This is the general mode in which the Nigerians make known their loses.” Here one realises that words Nigeria and Nigerian derive from the name Niger.
What then is the origin of the word *Niger*? Because it flows through the land of the Negroes which for the Arabs was the Sudan, *Niger* was at first erroneously derived from the Latin world *niger* meaning black.

**GIR**

The stem *Gir* is part of the word *Niger* and Crone (1937, p. 135), editing the voyages of Ca’ da Mosto, has some remarks on the two main river systems of the Sahara. He writes:

“Ptolemy’s geography of the interior of northern Africa is characterised by two hydrographical systems, one formed by the Chelonidas Paludes and the river Gir with an independent Nuba Palus, the other and more westerly, by the river Nigir, the Libyae Palus and the Nigritis Palus. These are said to flow ‘in the middle of the land.’ It is improbable that either represent the Niger-Senegal or Gambia, as Barros supposed. Dr. John Ball has agreed that the Chelonidas Paludes are to be identified with the Kufara depression, and the Gir with a wadi to the west. Colonel Tilho thinks that the former was the lowland north and east of lake Chad. The Nigir was probably one of the wadis on the south eastern slopes of the Atlas mountains, and some have identified it with the Wadi Gir.”

With this uncertainty as to what river the Niger is, one may point out that the derivation of the names of two of Africa’s greatest rivers, the Niger and the Nile are tentatively unknown.

**VARIOUS ETYMOLOGIES FOR NIGER**

Latham has supplied information which gives a plausible derivation to the word *Niger*. Discussing African philology, he writes (1855, p. 94):

“I have little doubt about not only *Gurma, Gurmake, Gurem* being the same words, but also about their all being the same as Kaure (Kouri). And this I hold to be the same as *Goburi* in Hawsa, also the same as *Cumbri* in Yoruba. None of these names seem to be native, but on the contrary foreign to the population who bear them, and indigenous only to the languages with which they are in contact. Now at all, or nearly all the points where we get a name of this kind, there is the contact of a Mahometan and a non-Mahometan population. Hence the suggested derivation is, that the word is Kaffre, a Giour, under certain West-African—Fula, Hawsa, or Yoruba—forms. That it has, however, in some cases been adopted by the natives themselves, I by no means deny. Even words as much altered as *Yoruba* and *Yaouri* may be in the same category—the conditions under which this view is reasonable being that they be originally other than native, and that they appear where Mahometanism and Paganism either now come in contact, or have once done so... A great part of the valley of the Niger between Yacouri and the district visited by Park seems to be what we may call Kouri—such being the generic name suggested for this class, not only on the strength of the Kouri vocabulary of Mrs. Kilham, but on account of the diffusion over its different divisions of the root *g-r*. It is certainly a class wherein the Mahometan influence is at a minimum.”

Latham sees in the tribal names of West Africa based on the root *g-r* or *k-r* a nickname based on Muslim influence and derivable from the Arabic word *kafir* for infidel. If these tribal names arose as the result of Muslim influence the root *g-r* or *k-r* cannot be invoked for the origin of *g-r* in Niger because this name was in use long before the dawn of Islam. Latham himself is doubtful.
for he points out that tribal names based on this root occur in regions of least Islamic influence. Latham suggests as an alternative to the Arabic word kaffir, the Persian word giaour. Now the Oxford English Dictionary gives:

"Giaour, forms gower, gaure, gawar, ghour, goure, giaur, jaour, dgiahour, ghiaour, jour, yaoor, giaour. Pers. . . . gour, gor. Pronounced by the Turks gyour. . . . A term of reproach applied by the Turks to non-Muslims, especially Christians."

Though Yaouri, a form found above, is the name of a tribe and could be traced to this Persian root I am not prepared to derive the name Yoruba from it. This Persian root $g-r$ is clearly applicable to strangers, foreigners and such like, e.g. infidels, kaffirs and one wonders whether Bargery (1934, p. 367) is correct in attributing an Arabic origin to the Hausa word garibi meaning strange, or a stranger.

This $g-r$, $k-r$ root appears in the names of the tribes inhabiting the regions of the valley of the Niger roughly in the area covered to-day by what are known as the Songhai languages, and in the names of tribes contiguous with these Songhai and to the South. So often does the root $g-r$ occur among these languages that Westermann and Bryan (1952, p. 55) list them as the Gur languages. Concerning the Songhai languages these two authors (p. 47) write: "Songhai is unrelated to any other known language or language group."

A possible explanation for this unrelatedness may be found in the traditional history of this area. This tradition, recorded by Lady Lugard, will be given presently. Among these Songhai one of the names for their languages is, according to Westermann and Bryan (p. 46) "Koira kine (speech of the country) . . ." where kine means speech, talk, and one is presented with this $k-r$ root again. These authors also remark that these Songhai are "also known as Habe and as Kuria." They (p. 61) also point out that "the name Habe . . . is used by the Fulani to denote people other than Fulani, Arabs, or Berber . . ." In other words Habe is a portmanteau word similar to kafer and to giaour. What then of the synonym Kuria, is it likewise a nickname?

An examination of other tribal names raises the suspicion that $k-r$ or $g-r$ in a tribal name is a nickname, thus Westermann and Bryan (p. 31) state that the Mande are called Wankore by the Arabs and Wangara by the Hausa. Can tradition offer any answer to the question what is the meaning of the $g-r$, $k-r$ root found in Niger? Lady Lugard (1905, p. 94) writes:

"Among the peoples ruled by Ghana in the Arab period, one of the most important was known by the name Ungura, Wangara, or Wankore, of whom many were Fulani. The Wangara, at a later date, migrated eastward into the Hausa States. This people claimed on their part to have descended from the Persians. When, at a later period, they moved eastward from Ghana to Hausaland, the province which they founded was called indifferently Wangara or Ungara. It is, therefore, interesting to find that in the Ramayana, the Indian epic, a Rajah of Ungar is mentioned among those who paid tribute to the famous Desaratha. Commentators who were in no way concerned with African history, have agreed that Ungar must have been a province of Persia on the northern frontier of India. We get, therefore, somewhere about the time of Moses a spot in Persia whence the Wangara may have originated. The fact that Persian influence extended at a very early period to the Black countries of Africa is also attested by the ruins of Persepolis, where amongst the bas-reliefs

I have elsewhere dealt with the origin of this name. See Jeffreys, M.D.W., "Braima alias Abraham: A Study in Diffusion", Folklore, Vol. 70. March, 1959. PP. 323-333.
believed to have been carved in commemoration of the glories of Cyrus and his immediate successors, there is one which shows the king in the act of receiving tribute from the ambassadors of subject nations, and amongst them there is a negro . . . Cambyses, son of Cyrus, conquered Egypt in 527 B.C., and his army perished in marching into Ethiopia. There is nothing impossible in the supposition that fragments of that defeated army may have remained and settled in the Sudan."

Such a theory would explain the Songhai claim that they are of Persian origin: that their language is unrelated to any other African languages. Such a theory would provide the time interval for the Niger to be known to Ptolemy. But the derivation of *Niger* from *ni*=water or river and from *ger*, or *gir* from *giaour* meaning foreigner, infidel, presents difficulties. While the name, the river of the Ger, is plausible, the derivation that links the Persian root *ger* with a Negro root *ni* cannot be accepted. If on the other hand *ni* can be shown to be an Indo-European stem meaning river or water then *ni* + *ger* as "the river of the infidels" would be an acceptable derivation.

Dr. Meek has recently essayed an origin for the word *Niger* and while I agree with him that the name *Niger* does not derive from the Latin, his alternative derivation suggesting that the name means "water-water" in two different languages, though ingenious, poses some difficulties. Duplication is certainly a common linguistic device for emphasis or augmentation and "water-water" might be interpreted as the "great water" were it not for the fact that duplication can only operate within a language and not across linguistic frontiers.

On Dr. Meek's reckoning the name for the Niger would be equivalent, by an analogy drawn from the Indo-Germanic languages, to the name *Hydro-aqua* for a river. There is of course the case of Lake Nyassa. Both parts of this name mean "water" and the whole means "Water-water" in two different languages. But if the form of the word *Niger* were a similar case, one would expect that one part of the word should be in the language of the historians such as Ptolemy. On the grounds that *ni* and *ger* are words for water in two different languages, the derivation should be suspect.

Cooley has something to say about the name for the river *Niger* which may throw some light on Dr. Meek's discussion of the derivation of the name *Benue* for the Niger's largest tributary. Cooley points out that *ba* may mean river or it may mean great. Thus he (1841, p. 89) writes: "Laing joins the statements of his precursors to his own information, and says (Travels, p. 327), that the Niger is known by the synonymous appellations of Baba and Joli Ba—Large River. Ba Bá certainly signifies Great River, the substantive *Ba*, a river, preceding the adjective *Bá*, 'great' according to the general rule of the Mandingo language. Thus in Ba-fing, black river; Ba-koe, white river, Ba-woolima, red river; the word *Ba* a river, has precedence; but when joined with a substantive, as in Kuara-ba, the river of the Kuara it follows."

On this reasoning the name *Benue* would thus mean the nue-river whatever *nue* meant.

If as Dr. Meek argues *nu*=water then the name *Benue* means "water-water" in two different languages and parallels Dr. Meek's possible derivation that *Niger* = "water-water". I must say that such a derivation is unacceptable.

Furthermore, in the river names *Niger, Benue, Nile* there appears the combination with *ni* or *nu*. In the names *Niger* and *Benue* this combination is said to stand for "water-water", what then does it stand for in *Nile*? If *ni* in *Nile* does not mean 'water', is not the derivation attributed to *ni* and *nu* in *Niger* and *Benue* also suspect?
It is open to consider whether the *ni* in *Niger* is not *nu* = water, but stands for something else. Here the name *Benue* for the other great river of Nigeria may provide a clue to the problem. Now in the name *Benue*, *nu* is undoubtedly "water", and one meaning given to the name is "mother of waters", where the root *be* would stand for "mother". In the name *Niger* one has *ni* + water. Now widely spread in West Africa is the root *NNE, NNI, NNA*, meaning "mother". If the *ni* in *Niger* is the root for "mother", then in one group of languages one has *Niger* = "mother of waters", while in another group of languages one has *Benue* = "mother of waters": or to put it more simply, *Niger* = *Benue* = "mother of waters". It could then follow that *ni* in *Nile* might mean "mother"—or does it?

Dr. Meek's article is an expansion of his view on the origin of the name *Benue* expressed in his book *Tribal Studies in Northern Nigeria*. There he points out that Barth had been told that *Benue* = "mother of waters". Dr. Meek states that the difficulty of accepting this derivation is that "the dependent genitive follows the noun so that 'mother of waters' would be *nuwo* (da) *mbe* and not *mbe* da *nuwo*." Nevertheless, this explanation has the advantage that it was one which the locals gave to Barth, it was not a hypothesis on the part of Barth. The same grammatical difficulty might apply in accepting *Niger* = "mother of waters", with the added complication that the derivation is not enunciated by a local. However, the suggested derivation of the name *Niger* as "mother of waters" has more substance than the suggested derivation of *Niger* = "water-water" = *Hydro-aqua*, with the words coming from two different languages. If however *ni* in *Nile* means neither 'water' nor 'mother', are there any grounds for looking for roots common to the names *Niger, Benue, and Nile*?

The appearance of the *ni* or *nu* in *Niger, Benue* and also in *Nile* suggests that the derivation of the name *Niger* is still to seek. The meaning of those names may, of course, be found in various local languages, but it may be found in a more widespread root which would account for all three names. I should like to see the coincidence either established or explained.

**Nile and Niger derivations**

Broderick and Morton (1922, 112, 113) write:

"The hieroglyphic names for the river of Egypt are . . . *Hapi*, 'he who overspreadeth', an undoubted reference to the inundation and . . . *Nu*, a name it has in common with the sky, signifying 'lifted up' . . . *Uka*, a word expressing 'rushing forth, leaping', another allusion to the inundation. *Akba ura*, lit. 'the great weeping', a recognised name for the overflowing of the Nile . . . The Nile is also called *Kam-ura*, the 'great expender', in the *Book of the Dead*, Cap. 64."

None of these names is of any use in elucidating the derivation of the names Nile or Niger, although they precede chronologically the use of the word Nile. Rendel Harris (1930, 12) writes: ". . . no one knows the origin of the name of the Nile which the Greeks called *Neilos*,¹ and in which they were followed by the rest of the world; . . ." According to Purchas (1629, V, 267) the river Nile "was first called Oceanus, then Egyptus, and after that Nilus, and Triton . . . Nilus is by Ovid called *Aduena*, for his forreine springs . . ." However, more modern writers have other views on the early names for the Nile. Thus Garstin and Cana (1929, XVI, 451) state that:

¹. First used by Hesiodus, *circa* 800 B.C.
“the early Egyptians called this river (the Nile) by a name which was probably pronounced Hapy. This survived as a religious designation down to the fall of paganism. The ‘great river’ was also a frequent name for the main stream, and this became the usual name of the Nile in late times as Ierû and continued in use among the Copts. In the Bible the Nile is regularly named Yêôr from the contemporary Egyptian Yor, ‘river’. The origin of the Greek and Roman name Neôos Nilus, is quite unknown. Νιλος in the Odyssey is the name of the Nile (masc.) as well as the country (fem.). The Arabs preserved the classical name of the Nile in the proper name En-Nîl . . . or Nil-Misr . . . the Nile of Misr (Egypt). . . . The modern Egyptians commonly call the river El-Bahr, ‘the sea’, a term also applied to the largest rivers, and the inundation ‘the Nile’, En-Nîl; they also call the river Bahr-en-Nîl ‘the river Nile’.”

In attempting to find the etymology of the word Nile Rendei Harris (1930, 13) speculates on the origin of the term nail in the names that appear in Kent for intermittent springs. In his efforts to equate nail and Nile he writes:

“So we may say that there is in one direction a rapprochement between Nail (Nagel) and Nile. Then we look in the other direction, and ask whether the Greek form Neîlos may not have lost an intervocalic g just as Nagel did in becoming Nail. When we made that suggestion which gives us Neîgelos instead of Neîlos, we see the river Niger looking out at us from the upper waters of the Nile, and we remember that from the earliest times the Nile and the Niger were believed to be branches of the same stream, or derived from the very same lake. If so, then there is a probability that in prehistoric philology, one could equate Neî(g)el and Niger.”

Especially could this equation be achieved in Hausaland where, as Bargery (1934, XXV) remarks: “r at Kano for l elsewhere.”

The earliest European reference to the greatest river of west Africa is by Valentim Fernandes who in 1506, according to de Cenival and Monod (1938, p. 84) said: “Timbuctu is a town of large size, situated on the river Ennyll.” However the name Ennyll was also applied by Fernandes to another river in this region. “This province of Lodea is separated from the province of Gune by the river Çanaga, called the river Ennyl by the Moors and the Negroes; . . .” (p. 69). Attention is drawn to the spelling Çanaga(r) for the modern spelling of Senegal.

A similar type of name for the present Niger was recorded nearly three hundred years later. Thus in the Proceedings of the Association for promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa (179, p. 329) one reads:

“It may be proper to observe that the Africans have two names for this river; that is, Neel il Abeed, or River of the Negrose and Neel il Kibeer, or the Great River; they also term the Nile (that is the Egyptian River) Neel Shem: so that the term Neel, from whence our Nile, is nothing more than the appellation of River; like Ganges, or Sinde.”

Rendei Harris discusses the different names by which the river of Egypt was called and declares that its earliest name is unknown but that the early name of Hapi came about as a result in a change in religion in Egypt. Early Egyptian
sun-worship centred round Ra and under Ra the river carried one name and when
the worship of Ra was supplanted by the worship of Osiris the name of the river
was changed. Concerning this change in worship Rendel Harris (p. 41, 42)
needlessly, but interestingly, speculates as follows:

"Suppose we say that inter alia Ra lost the supremacy of the Nile. It was
his no longer, it became the Hapi (the Aphis-bull) of Osiris and so closely was the
Nile become a function of Osiris that a compound deity was evolved called
Osiris-Hapi or Oserapis. Let us suppose that the Bull had once been in the
care of Ra, instead of being consigned to the Serapeum at Memphis. His name
might have been Neg-Ra, the bull of Ra. If the change of name means anything,
it means that the Nile originally was thought to be the gift of Ra rather than of
Osiris. The ancient name remained among the people after it had passed into
desuetude among the priests and educated laity . . . ."

One could continue Rendel Harris's speculations by noting that in ancient
Egypt according to Budge (1911, p. 288) /r/ and /l/ are interchangeable so that
Ra could also be La. Hence for Rendel Harris Negra = Niger and Negla = Nile
by elision of the /g/.

**The Etymology of Nile and Niger**

Rendel Harris, in spite of his speculations, was close to discovering the
etymology of these names. There was a Semitic invasion of ancient Egypt
when, circa 1675 B.C. according to Hrozny (1952, p. 111) the Hyksos or Semitic
invaders occupied Egypt for over a century and that the use of the term Nile
as a name for the river of Egypt dates back to this Semitic invasion. The word
Nile is of Semitic etymology. Thus Broderick and Morton (1922, p. 122, 108)
write: "Nile, Neilos, Nilus, Nil, the name of the river of Egypt. It is almost
unnecessary to remark that these names are none of them Egyptian . . . Nahar
or Nahal. A Semitic word signifying 'river', and by Brugsch it is thought to
be the origin of the word Nile." Brown (1906, pp. 625-636) states that P. de
Lagarde is also of this opinion for he considers that the name Nile derives from
the Semitic word ne'el, meaning a river. Ne'el is kindled with the Hebrew
words nahar and naghal meaning river.

I accept this derivation for the name Nile meaning, in Semitic, just "river".
Eastern Whites, drawn largely from Asia minor and hence belonging to the
Semitic group of languages, had penetrated extensive regions of western Africa.
For instance the diaspora sent Jews westwards and by 800 A.D. Arabs had
reached the Atlantic coasts in the regions of the Senegal river. It would be
unreasonable to expect no repercussions on locality names as a result of this
"white" invasion. If now it is agreed that the sound [h] in nahar or in nahal
can also be represented by the sound [gh] then one realises how close Rendel
Harris came to solving the etymologies of the names Nile and Niger when he
wrote: "... when we made the suggestions which gave us Negelos instead of
Ne-ilos, we see the river Niger looking out at us from the upper waters of the
Nile, and we remember that from the earliest times the Nile and the Niger were
believed to be branches of the same stream . . . ." More than the Niger looks at
us from the waters of the Nile. An early name for the Senegal river was Ce-
naga(r)! Thus from nahal I derive the name Nile and from the dialectal
variant naghar I derive the names Niger and Senegal.

These two rivers were long regarded as one river and so would share a common
name, hence the similarity in the roots Se-negal and Niger. There is a river in
the Cameroon, the Sanaga, but I regard the name as a coincidence and not
derivable from the Semitic naghāl.

However there is just a possibility that the name of this river, Sanaga, may
derive from a Semitic source. Sir Harry Johnston (1922, II, p. 414) in a foot-
note to the word *Nasala*, for a "whiteman" wrote:

"It is interesting to find this Arab term derived actually from Nazareth,
Nazarene, and applied in the Middle Ages by Arabs to Christian Europeans,
carried by the Fula raiders so far into the depths of forested Africa as the little
territory of Bati or Bacenga on the Middle Sanaga river in the Cameroons."

Hence, with the evidence of Arab influence in this region as evinced by the
name *Nasala*, for "whiteman" there is the possibility that the name *Sanaga*
also owes its origin to the Semitic stem naghār meaning "The River".

Though it is true that Lander in 1830 proved conclusively that the Niger
emptied itself into the Bight of Biafra, yet, before Lander was born, Arabs had
been telling Europeans on the coast that the Niger debouched into what is now
known as the Bight of Biafra. (See M. D. W. Jeffreys, "Arab knowledge of the

What now of the Benue? Migeod (1927, p. 23) put forward the following
etymology. He wrote: "Doctor Bronnum of the Sudan United Mission states
the proper pronunciation of 'Benue' in Bachama is: 'Gibinwei': Gibin=Big; Wei=Death, i.e. 'The Big Death'."

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