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***IBN KHALDUN'S HISTORY
AS A SOURCE BOOK OF MAGHREBIAN TOPONYMY***

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Colonial heritage in the toponymy of North-West Africa

Colonial heritage in the toponymy of Maghreb is reflected in everyday use of geographical names that are not compatible with historical past, linguistic reality and tradition of the region. Distorted names slipped into everyday usage and into publications in various ways.

Investigation of the Maghrebian toponymy, based on Arabic historical sources, is therefore of tremendous practical value from the point of view of modern cartography and standardization of geographical names.

It is a widespread opinion with which we should agree that the Arabic language of the medieval historians and geographers reflected the pronunciation of local Berber toponyms but imperfectly (in consequence we find some Berber names that were more appropriately noted in Ancient sources); but a real disaster in this respect took place during the colonial period.

In the 19th c. and at the beginning of the 20th c. French administrators produced maps of subdued territories of Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauretania. The maps contained toponymic information collected unprofessionally.

There were published, certainly, some rules and regulations destined to make order in the procedures, but the rules themselves produced disorder as they were internally contradictory.

From one side they required application of French orthography for the registration of names that would allow approximative reading of local names, as correct and close to local practice as possible, and leaving opportunity for easy application in print (that is using normal set of French fonts). It was added, however, that toponyms should be noted down according to information collected orally and (underlining by BRZ) according to transcription of toponyms derived from written sources, and with a following clarification: "chaque lettre arabe est représentée par une lettre française unique, prononcée séparément et gardant sa valeur propre, quelle que soit sa place à l'intérieur du mot". That was already impossible.

The basic dilemma results from the multilingual social reality of Northern Africa: should we accept names as they are pronounced locally or names written in standard Arabic? One precludes the other.

There is in Northern Africa a variety of spoken (but not written) local dialects that are quite different from each other, and all of them are even more distinct from written Arabic (Modern Standard Arabic - MSA), both in phonetics and in morphology.

Furthermore, gathering the names would require high level of linguistic competence. More often than not it was executed by occasionally appointed persons who had no necessary knowledge of local cultural conditions, easily falling into traps of attractive popular etymologies supplied by local interlocutors, informers and interpreters¹. Geodesians and cartographers did not know Arabic language adequately (not even to the degree of making distinction between standard language and dialects or among various dialects themselves), neither Berber language (or languages, to be exact). They were not instructed in onomastics and not prepared for transcription procedures.

We have no information available if ever there was produced any toponymic documentation written down with original Arabic letters and if such names constituted basis for French transcription².

¹ Popular etymology is the practice of explaining names originating from foreign languages or from archaic, incomprehensible forms of one's own language, with the help of words of the user's contemporary language. From the linguistic point of view it is totally wrong, but in the sphere of social psychology it is an important element of mythical reality that helps to attach the inhabitants to the land and creates communion between old local traditions and contemporary identity of the dwellers.

² During 132 years of colonial presence in the Maghreb the French administration did not achieve anything similar to renown geographical dictionary of the Ottoman Empire by C. Mostras. William Mac Guckin de Slane and Charles Gabeau published in 1868 the first part of the Arabic-French dictionary that was expected to standardize the orthography of the names in Algeria; it contains only personal names; but the second part that was to include geographical names, was never published. According to oral information received recently in informal way, there exists a documentation of Algerian geographical names noted down in Arabic, which was prepared jointly by experts of the Institut Géographique National and

Individual perception, subjective imagination and personal preferences of the enqueteers who were foreign to the country, resulted in voluntaristic transcription of Maghrebian geographical names in French and introducing them into maps. The effect is that such names do not easily undergo reasonable linguistic analysis and at the same time often seem incomprehensible to local population.

With the passing years those barbarisms became firmly fixed in the official use of French administration and gradually swept into the daily speech of local uneducated people, isolated from proper linguistic models. The same happened with the local terminology in agriculture, geology, botany etc.

Orientalists frequently put in doubt official sources and openly criticized their inexactness. Low quality of those sources did not allow for taking them into consideration in serious scientific research in the fields of terminology and onomastics³. Similar opinions were also expressed by eminent geographers⁴.

Present state of available documentation

It is far from satisfactory. Maps in the official standard Arabic language are either difficult to obtain or do not exist. Even if they do, they seldom mark vowels in names and leave a reader in ambiguity, allowing him all sorts of guess work. Maps often use forms retranscribed from foreign languages. Official lists of standardized Arabic names do not exist.

appropriate Algerian authorities. However, the documentation is filed as classified and, to the best of present knowledge, nobody takes use of it.

³ Carlo A. Nallino called that simply in 1894: "la nonchalance qui malheureusement a produit tant de méprises et de confusion dans la nomenclature géographique". Gustave Mercier commented on it in 1924: "la transcription en français des noms indigènes y laisse fort à désirer. Il était, à vrai dire, difficile qu'il en fut autrement. Nos officiers, excellents géodèses et topographes, ne sont pas des linguistes spécialisés, et, en l'absence de guides compétents, quels renseignements peuvent-ils trouver dans le pays? Les noms berbères, quelquefois déformés par des intermédiaires arabes, deviendront méconnaissables après la transcription fantaisiste dictée par une oreille mal instruite". H.P.J. Renaud and Georges S. Colin wrote almost the same in 1934: "Pour les mots que nous n'avons pas pu vérifier nous-mêmes, nous nous sommes fiés davantage à ceux recueillis par des linguistes, bien au courant des dialectes et parlars marocains, qu'aux termes glanés par des techniciens de passage, généralement mal préparés à l'interrogatoire des indigènes par leur connaissance trop superficielle de la langue du pays... Il serait facile de donner des exemples des confusions qui se produisent dans ces conditions, comme cela s'est passé pour les relevés des toponymes nord-africains par les cartographes. L'imprimerie y ajoute ses "coquilles" et les vocabulaires s'enrichissent d'erreurs qui, si l'on peut dire, se codifient, et, reproduites dans d'autres ouvrages, deviennent définitives. Les noms... sont, pour la plupart, incompréhensibles". Lionel Galand commented on that again in 1954: "la carte de reconnaissance au 1/100.000... les toponymes y sont sérieusement malmenés. L'imperfection de nos cartes à cet égard a été plusieurs fois soulignée" and he also quoted other authors with similar opinion..

⁴ Augustin Bernard, for example, wrote already in 1901: " Les noms de lieux ont en général une grande fixité et sont souvent les témoignages d'un passé très ancien, à moins qu'on ne s'attache systématiquement à imposer à un pays toute une nomenclature artificielle, comme on le fait actuellement en Algérie... Fréquemment un mot arabe est accolé à un mot berbère dont il n'est que la traduction".

And then the history turned around. New maps written in Arabic were prepared on the basis of the French maps. The authors and the editors did not cope with the problem and prepared Arab geographical names through direct retranscription from Latin letters in ways that were a matter of chance, and without bothering about verification of the original orthography or meaning.

As early as 100 years ago, an Italian orientalist, Carlo A. Nallino, alarmed the public opinion showing the irregularities and apparent absurdities that were introduced onto the maps; also Francesco Bèguinot warned against the dangers of such a voluntaristic approach to the toponyms. The situation in this respect has not improved since their articles.

The problem is of present actuality insofar as the above mentioned practice perpetuates until today in the Arab editorial world for example in cartography and in the field of school manuals. It results in introducing into public circulation of mistaken names and widespread among the wide circles of receivers (readers and listeners) a mistaken, incongruent image of the Arab world. It can be even more easily observed when we compare popular representations (like in school wall maps and atlases) of an Arab country, that are produced in another Arab country. Since the original source materials are difficult to find or unobtainable on the international markets, Arab editors take benefit of most easily found publications in English or French and retranslate geographical names into Arabic the best they can, often distorting them even further or simply inventing names whose original forms are unknown to them.

But, even maps of a given country produced in the same country at present, are problematic. In 1984 Mohammed El Fasi very critically characterized maps of Morocco⁵ and likewise in 1985 Évelyne Ben Jaafar described mistakes on the maps of Tunisia⁶.

Distorted modern toponyms sweep further and further, as far as the medieval works that are supposed to reflect the reality of the past ages. The flagrant example is the modern Moroccan edition of the Arab text of *Al-Muqaddima*, a 600-years old outstanding work on geography and human sciences by Ibn Khaldun, a North African author. The modern editor silently and without explanation introduces corrections into the old text and changes the vocalisation (vowel signs that decide on the spelling of an Arab word) of Maghrebian toponyms, adjusting them to the pronunciation of contemporary French maps.

⁵ "The corruptions of certain names, however, still remain in common usage".

⁶ "Les cartes topographiques elles-mêmes censées receler toute la science, échappent d'autant moins à ce désordre, qu'aux incertitudes du toponyme arabe se sont surajoutées les fantaisies de la transcription française... Le toponyme a été jusqu'à présent considéré comme un phénomène secondaire par une cartographie coupée de tout contact universitaire et beaucoup trop subordonnée aux travaux antérieurs".

Another example is a modern Arabic translation of a French translation of an Italian original of the *Description of Africa* by Johannes Leo Africanus (Muhammad al-Wazzan al-Fasi) from the 16th c. The original author was careful enough in his writing of the Maghrebian geographical names in Latin alphabet and well reflected their structure and vowels that were close to the standards of literary Arabic (vowels are main distinctive characteristics that make difference between words in standard Arabic and their equivalents in various dialects). The translators, in disagreement with the author, did every possible to adjust the geographical names to their modern French versions.

In both cases we can observe a deeply ahistorical practice of extending modern distorted name forms back in time. That leads to a new situation that modern readers of Arabic classical works from the Middle Ages, in history and geography, both in the Arab World and outside it, receive not original texts but only those currently deformed through voluntaristic editorial practice.

Need for historical studies

The solution consists in going back to historical records. Works by old Arab historians and geographers contain a wealth of Arab geographical names from various epochs. The practical question is to identify, localize, systematize and compare them with the present geographical setting.

Historical documentation of toponymic and cartographic character will certainly help to improve the described situation, at least partially, only if it is systematically elaborated and well commented upon as to its geographical value, and based on a wide range of traditional written works of the Arabs. It should be made easily available in a form of toponomastic dictionaries with full vocalisation of names and accompanied with maps.

Question of distorted geographical names

The question of distorted geographical names is not a new one in the Arab world. As early as in the 11th c. Al-Bakri, a geographer, has noticed numerous mistakes in geographical names from the Arab Peninsula, referred to in historical context in works that were copied from one another and relating events from the early history of Islam. Careless authors skip vowels and others try to restore them but do it incorrectly; consonants similar in shape which only differ by diacritical points, are mistaken by careless copyists etc. Therefore he decided to compile a dictionary comprising geographical names whose spelling create difficulty. It remains a precious source of information until today. In the 13th c. Yaqut al-

Hamawi wrote another dictionary in four thick volumes, titled *Mu'jam al-buldan - Dictionary of countries*, containing a wealth of toponyms with geographical descriptions of named objects. Every name that constitutes a separate entry in the dictionary is fully vocalised (given all necessary vowels), and furthermore its vocalic structure is described in words so as to avoid possible mistakes while copying the book. The author refrained from the traditional arrangement of words in Arabic dictionaries according to the consonant roots of words and arranged all names alphabetically. He explained that: "all words in the text are unique (individual) names; most of them are non-Arabic ('*ajamiyya*) and spontaneous (improvised - *murtajala*) and because of that they can not undergo the procedure of etymologization (*la masagh li-l-ishtiqaq fi-ha*)⁷. Another work by Yaqut al-Hamawi was dictionary of homonymic geographical names. In the 15th c. a similar but newer dictionary was compiled by Al-Himyari. It should be noted that the Maghrebian names are not very numerous neither in the two dictionaries by Yaqut, nor in the other one by Al-Himyari. Arab authors also compiled several other geographical dictionaries, mostly of regional importance, but until our times no dictionary specially devoted to Maghrebian geographical names has been discovered in collections of Arabic manuscripts worldwide.

In this situation the wealth of Maghrebian toponyms contained in historical sources is of particular importance and cannot be replaced. The procedure of extracting toponyms and related geographical information from literary sources can yield unprecedented knowledge of regions and times for which no other descriptive sources are available. The best example is the corpus of old Arabian poetry from which modern researchers draw toponyms and information that shed new light on geography and culture of pre-Islamic Arabia, or a rare collection of South Ossetian toponyms gathered from various written sources, including travel reports.

The history by Ibn Khaldun, the longest known text on geography and history of the Maghreb, is the best of all works, a book that occupies a special place among sources of North African toponymy.

Ibn Khaldun's history

Abd ar-Rahman Ibn Khaldun (born in Tunis in 1332, deceased in Cairo in 1406), was an outstanding Arab thinker, philosopher and jurist, a man of letters and

⁷ It is interesting to know that at the beginning of the 20th c. an Egyptian author Al-Khanji published a 2-volumes geographical dictionary being a direct continuation, an up-dating and a supplement to Yaqut's *Mu'jam al-buldan*, in which he referred to the latter as if it were published just a few years earlier. It does not perhaps add much to our knowledge of things; however, as such it constitutes a proof of how durable is the mediaeval scientific and literary traditions so as to attract - over a span of many centuries - the attention of both the authors and the readers in modern times.

a statesman. His ancestors came from Hadramawt in South-Eastern Arabia to Southern Andalusia in the 8th c., but in the 13th c. the Reconquista pushed them out of the native Sevilla and thus the family came and settled in the city of Tunis. That is where he was born and received education. He led an adventurous and diversified life, good and bad fortune tried and trained his talents and abilities. He worked as a judge, a state secretary and a diplomat in foreign missions. But above all he cherished knowledge and gathered information which he extensively used both in his official, public life and in his historical work.

In a self-exile in a desert small locality of Tawaghzawt (Fr.: Taourzaout, in present Central Algeria), in a forteresse named Qal'at Ibn Salama, during 4 years (1375-78) he penned an extensive, exemplary work on Islamic history titled *Kitab al-'ibar...*, that is *A Book of Warning...* (the full original title is much longer). The book starts with a detailed autobiography, then a theoretical introduction covering the whole of a huge volume and comprising inspiring, deep analysis of human societies, that granted him universal fame (the famous *Al-Muqaddima* or *Prolegomena*, which appeared 200 years before Montesquieu), passing through the Ancient history, the mission of the Prophet Muhammad, and presents all Islamic history until his times. The most original and precious part of his work is the last one, devoted entirely to North-West Africa, on which Ibn Khaldun had unequalled knowledge drawn from personal living experience and unsurpassed sources of information.

In 1382 Ibn Khaldun travelled to the Middle East and settled in Cairo where he died. Until nearly his last days he worked on his book, making corrections and additions.

Ibn Khaldun's connection with geography, well founded, reflects in his method of presenting history that takes into account direct relationship between physical environment and social space. It is put forward *explicite* at the beginning of each part of his book, devoted to various peoples and times.

The author first describes in detail lands occupied by a given nation as well as geographical distribution of its component parts (tribes), putting them in order according to the sides of the world. The territory belonging to a given tribe or nation becomes a distinctive characteristic of that human group. Furthermore, while relating historical events, Ibn Khaldun carefully locates them in space.

However, we must observe that a schematic map of the world, the only one to illustrate the history of Ibn Khaldun, and directly based on Al-Idrisi's map of the world (a Maghrebian geographer of the 11th c.), gives but a very general idea of the Maghreb - a schematic and undetailed outline of the region with a few

geographical names. From the first sight it may be assumed that this extremely modest map, illustrating the general description of the world as found in *Al-Muqaddima*, is out of proportion with the author's true knowledge of the Maghrebian geography. There is no information available if any of the existing manuscripts of Ibn Khaldun's work was ever accompanied by separate, better maps, illustrative of various parts of the world and specially the Maghreb.

How it happened that Ibn Khaldun did not complete his book with such an important element enhancing informative value of written history? He knew the geographical work by Al-Idrisi very well, we find traces of it in *Kitab al-'ibar...*. It is not improbable that a copy he used was with maps - after all, one of them was copied in his own manuscript. Why did not he copy (desireably improved with correction and additions of his own) the existing, rich in contents map of the Maghreb by Al-Idrisi?

That question will probably remain unsolved but it corroborates with the opinions of some historians of cartography, like Robert V. Tooley, saying that "Arab contribution to cartography was disappointing... In spite of their inherited and acquired knowledge and the undoubted ability of their savants, the Arabs did not acquire the technical ability to reproduce graphically their accumulated facts, and consequently did not make any serious attempt to correct the postulates of the earlier Greek geographers". A similar opinion belongs to Ahmet T. Karamustafa, who says with apparent regret: "...the geographical knowledge of Muslims as attested by the rich geographical literature preserved, especially in Arabic and Persian, was certainly impressive, but it was only rarely presented in graphic form". The problem requires further research based of factual evidence, that is material maps, either already found or to be found in various catalogued and uncatalogued collections around the world.

And the reconstruction of Maghreb map as known to Ibn Khaldun in the 14th c. now definitely remains as a challenge facing contemporary researchers, historians, linguists and geographers alike.

Dictionary of Maghrebian toponyms

Among all intellectual products of North-West Africa Ibn Khaldun's work seems to be the most opulent source of toponymic information. It contains ca. 1000 toponyms depicting objects of various kinds: settlements, regions, physical features, waters etc. dispersed over vast expanses. It may be assumed that no object of any historical importance in Maghreb is missing from Khaldun's work (verification of a contrary hythesis would require a comparison of the corpus of

names from Ibn Khaldun's work with all names cited in other sources as well as an analysis of their relative historical importance).

We therefore propose to extract Maghrebian toponyms from his critically edited work and analyse them. A dictionary of Maghrebian geographical names with vowels will be built and it will give authoritative evidence for many names that are nowadays distorted.

Subsequent additions of toponyms extracted from works by other Arab authors from the Middle Ages will add to the treasury of geographical names based on original sources and will eventually help, at least partially, to solve the question of standardization.

While comparing the toponymy cited in Ibn Khaldun's history with the present geographical image of Maghreb, we can distinguish:

- a) names that still exist today and refer to existing objects;
- b) names that are partially changed but can still be recognized as referring to the same object as in the past;
- c) names forgotten or totally changed but recognizable as referring to objects that can still be identified and localized;
- d) names (sometimes of unclear orthography and spelling) referring to objects whose localization, and occasionally even the nature, are unclear. As to some of them certain presumptions or hypotheses may possibly be proposed.

Systematic comparison of categories of names and objects and their arrangement in space will allow for restoration of the historical-geographical picture of the Maghreb as known to Ibn Khaldun, in a form in which he decided to pass it on to next generations.

Statistical proportions between numbers of citations of individual toponyms will help to restore the geographical horizon characteristic for the author of the book. Thus it will become possible to select a group of toponyms most frequently cited, that is most important as spatial *points de repère* of historical events; it will also help to point out the geographical area on which the work of Ibn Khaldun is centered, that is which is described in most detail and where we find the highest density of cited toponyms (with a special reserve concerning the areas whose role in history is strongly influenced by particular, objective, bio-physical conditions).

The final effect of this part of analysis will be a set of historical-geographical maps of the Maghreb.

Every geographical name will be, according to actual information available, standardized according to procedures used earlier by Yaqut al-Hamawi in literary Arabic. The proposed study will be based on a book created in the literary Arabic language, therefore the grammar rules of that language will play decisive role in standardization of names, and not contemporary Maghrebian dialects neither distorted names appearing on French maps.

Further perspective

The geographical and historical approach does not preclude also another option, a different style of looking at these names. We should not forget that it is a most heterogenic toponymic corpus, a rich bouquet in which we can distinguish colours of all consecutive linguistic strata, overlaying or intermixing over the ages. That phenomenon does not make the task of orthographic standardization any easier.

The variety of names' origin would also provoke undertaking historical-ethymological investigation of those names, research into their primary meanings. It will constitute, together with structural analysis of the names, a subject of a separate elaboration.