

DESCRIPTION

0. Introduction

0.1. The name

"Midob" is the name given to a language spoken in Northern Darfur, Sudan, and the speakers of it. The Midob themselves call their language *tidn aal* 'language of the Tid'. The singular form is *tiddi* 'a Midob person'. For reasons of simplicity and clarity we shall continue to use the term Midob, which has become the established ethnonym both in the Sudan and the outside scholarly community. It is also accepted by the Midob themselves as the name that outsiders, as well as they themselves when speaking Arabic, give to them. We shall call both the language and the speakers thereof Midob, pl. Midob.

The common spelling "Meidob", which was first used by MacMichael (1918), and then many after him, seems to be a reflection of his attempt to express in English writing the length of the vowel /i/ (in a possible analogy to words like 'seize' etc.). In Sudan-Arabic usage an alternative spelling and pronunciation "Mayduub" has come into existence, which seems to me to be the effect of a retransportation of the common English spelling "Meidob" into Arabic writing. This pronunciation, however, has no real phonological basis in the way that the neighbouring tribes refer to the Midob people or they to themselves and must therefore be considered artificial. The origin of the term 'Midob' is obscure, although Midob tribesmen mentioned in conversation that it goes back to an ancestor of the Midob called Ahmad al Adoob. Whether this etymology is acceptable and by what process this purported ancestor's name would lead to the term Midob, is not clear to me.

0.2. The location of the Midob

The Midob are a group of speakers of a Nubian language in a non-Nubian environment. Their natural habitat, the Midob hills, rising out of a monotonous landscape, lie about five hundred miles west of the confluence of the Blue and White Nile (for this and the following cf. Thelwall 1984). The hills and surrounding planes, especially to the south and east, which make up what is called Dar Midob, comprise an area of 240000 square miles. The town of Malha serves as the administrative center for the Midob region. To the north stretches the vast uninhabited desert, which is the roaming ground for the Midob and other tribes to pasture their animals after the rains, when the jizzu-vegetation grows. A traditional caravan route leads through this area northwards, where it splits to reach Libya or Egypt respectively. The immediate neighbours of the Midob are the Berti to the south-west, the Zaghawa to the west and various arabized nomadic tribes such as the Kababish to the east. A small group of the Midob have settled on the northern fringes of the Tagabo hills, which lie 80 miles to the southwest, where their closest neighbours are the sedentary Berti. At the present time we find the Midob not only in their natural habitat in Darfur, but also in other locations. This is due to historic events and processes. The two areas where larger groups of Midob speakers are found, are 1. The Three Cities (Omdurman, Khartoum, Khartoum North) and 2. Jezirat Aba, an island in the White Nile about 280 kilometers south of Khartoum. There a group of Midob moved during the time of the Mahdiyya to work as Ansar (helpers) for the Mahdi and his sect, whereas the Midob who moved to the capital did so mainly for economic or educational reasons. A new influx of Midob and other Darfurians reached the capital during the years of severe drought in the mid 1980ies.

0.3. The Midob tribe

A tradition, related by Henderson (1963), states that the Midob tribe trace their descent to Dongola. This must be rejected for the Midob tribe as a whole, but might apply to small groups who may have migrated west from the Dongola region following the breakdown of the Christian kingdoms. An "eastern" genealogy is very much en vogue with Sudanese tribes, as it connects them with the historic centers of power, Christian Nubia in the middle ages, Mecca and the Arabian peninsula in Islamic times, and must therefore be regarded with considerable caution. Nonetheless what must be rejected for the Midob group as a whole may very well be true for a small group, who may or may not have come to power after their arrival in the Midob area.

Generally speaking, we must assume that the Midob have lived in their present habitat for a long time, at least for 2000 years (see also below 0.5. 'The place of Midob in Greater Nubian'). The population of the Midob was given as 21,727 in the Census of the Republic of the Sudan, Vol. III, 1956 as quoted by Thelwall 1971, 46-55. Today's estimate would be twice or three times that number, so that we can tentatively fix the Midob population around 50000 speakers (Thelwall 1984 gives 45000). The Midob are pastoralists. In addition to their goats and sheep they breed camels, which for them is one of the traditional sources of income. They sell the camels in markets both in the Sudan, in Libya and Egypt. Their semi-nomadic lifestyle is described in Hales 1978. Contacts with neighbouring tribes have historically not always been friendly. Mutual raiding seems to have been common until recently (cf. Thelwall 1984).

0.4. Dialects and Subgroups of the Midob

Thelwall (1983) describes Midob as comprised of two dialects: Urrti (Örrti) and Shalkota. A third subsection, the Torti, fewer in number, can be subsumed under the Shalkota for linguistic purposes. Another name for the Shalkota seems to be Kaageddi. My research has confirmed the dialectal differentiation between Örrti on the one and Shalkota-Torti on the other hand. Both Thelwall and I have concentrated on the Örrti dialect. Differences are noticeable mostly in vocabulary and sound distribution, but do by no means impede mutual intelligibility.

The Midob are said to be divided into 13 matrilineal clans with their various totemic animals or insects. These 13 matrilineal clans are found with all the three sections of the Midob (Örrti, Shalkota, Torti). A matrilineal system of succession (which is now competing with a patrilineal Islamic one) also points to a relationship with the Nile Nubians, as the neighbouring groups in Darfur know nothing of the like. The social and economic make-up of the Midob has been investigated and described in two unpublished doctoral theses, which I have been unable to obtain (J. Hales, 1978, E. Hales 1979).

0.5. The place of Midob in Greater Nubian

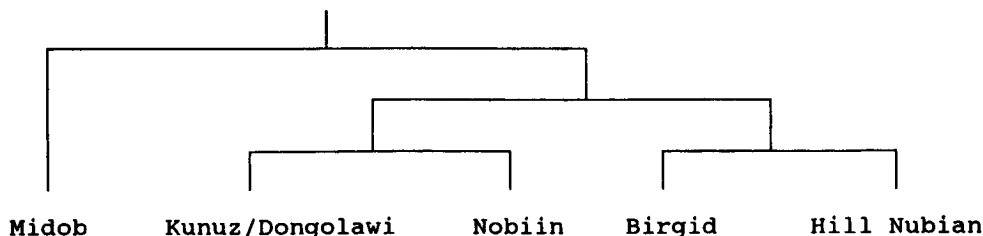
Midob is a Nubian language, i.e. its nearest linguistic relatives are the other Nubian languages such as Kunuz/Dongolawi, Nobiin, Jebel Haraza and the various Nubian languages of Kordofan (Hill Nubian in the Nuba mountains). The Nubian languages form a sub-branch of Eastern Sudanic, which in turn is classified as a branch of Nilo-Saharan. The internal cohesion within the Nubian language group is comparatively high. Shared vocabulary ranges between 40 and 70 percent (cf. Thelwall 1982).

The Midob seem to have migrated from a common Nubian homeland to their present habitat. This common Nubian homeland can be thought of as situated somewhere in Northern Kordofan/Southern Darfur. Herzog in contrast held that the Midob are the descendants of Nile Nubians who migrated in historic times from the Christian kingdoms of Nubia along to the Nile to the Midob hills (Herzog 1957: 42-49) (see above 0.3). This theory, however, does not fit the linguistic facts

very well, as most of Herzog's reasonings about the movements of the different Nubian groups must now be rejected as ill-perceived. Marianne Bechhaust-Gerst in her M.A. thesis, elaborating on the suggestions of earlier scholars, very clearly showed that the Nile is not the original home of the Nile Nubians, much less that of the Nubians in Darfur or Kordofan (Bechhaus-Gerst 1985).

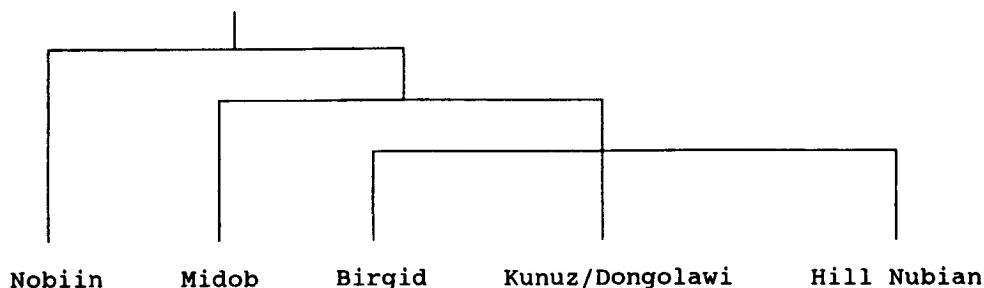
Thelwall (1978) tried to place the different Nubian languages in a tree diagram based on group average analysis of a 100 item list. There he gave the following hypothetical model:

Midob split from the rest of Nubian first, then in a second split the Nile Nubian languages split from both Birgid and Hill Nubian. Thus we come to the following tree diagram:



The same subclassification is repeated in Thelwall and Schadeberg 1983. (Note: Haraza is not included in this diagram, cf. Bell 1973).

Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst in a recent study (1989) threw doubt on the model suggested by Thelwall. She instead suggested on the basis of a combination of historical and linguistic evidence that Nobiin split off first from the rest of Nubian, then Midob, and then finally Birgid and Kunuz/Dongola from Hill Nubian (1989: 28-29). Her tree diagram goes as follows:



She went on to propose a whole new nomenclature for the classification of the Nubian group:

1. Northern Nubian (= Nobiin)
2. West/Central Nubian
 - 2.1. Western Nubian (= Meidob) (sic!)
 - 2.2. Central Nubian
 - 2.2.1 Birgid
 - 2.2.2 Kenuz/Dongolawi
 - 2.2.3 Hill Nubian

(Bechhaus-Gerst 1989: 29)

This stimulating new classification seems to have a high degree of plausibility, though I am not sure that we are yet at a point where we can once and for all settle the problem of internal Nubian classification. Another problematic point is that the language of Jebel Haraza is not included in this diagram (cf. Bell 1975: 33-34, who tentatively tries to describe the place of Haraza: 'Haraza is a distinct Nubian language and not merely a dialect of one of the other known Nubian languages. Many items...conform particularly closely to Birgid..., but there are others whose closest cognates are in Nile Nubian...and even Midob... Both linguistically and geographically, Haraza seems to stand somewhere in the midst of the Nubian family of languages...') In the present study I am not concerned with the problem of internal Nubian classification, but will rather concentrate on the documentation of Midob with the hope that that in turn will throw further light on the Nubian question as a whole.

0.6. The history of research on the Midob language

Whereas the Nile Nubian languages had been known to European scholars, if not from the time of the work of the Italian Franciscan monk Arcangelo Carradori (17th century, cf. Hofman 1983), then at least since the early 19th century through the journals and books published by travellers such as John Lewis Burckhardt (cf. Werner 1989: 72) and scholars such as Lepsius, Reinisch, Almkvist and others (for a historical sketch of the research into Nile Nubian cf. Werner 1987: 6ff), Midob had been unknown to Western scholars as late as the beginning of this century. Kordofan (Hill) Nubian on the other hand had already been mentioned and partially documented in the early decades of the 19th century (cf. Jakobi 1988 for a general overview of the early documentation of Nubian languages). This state of affairs is largely due to the remoteness of the Midob area. MacMichael in 1912 first published a limited vocabulary of Midob in his 'Notes on the Zaghawa and the People of Gebel Midób, Anglo-Egyptian Sudan'. In the second part he provided the reader with a list of about 180 lexemes and a number of short sentences. His article tried to give a general introduction to the Midob people, their geographic location, their subdivisions, their history and customs. Apart from a few phonological remarks he did not do much more than list the lexical items he had collected from Midob men coming to trade or look for work in Kordofan. In his first article he did not yet recognize the linguistic relationship of Midob with the other Nubian languages. Rather, he seems to have thought of a relationship with the Zaghawa: 'On the other hand, the word "Tiddi" at once suggests the Tedá (Tibbu), who to a large extent include the Zagháwa; the Zagháwa language appears to resemble that of Midób...' (1912: 335). Thus, although MacMichael recorded traditions that link the Midob with the Nile Nubians, he rejected them as spurious (at least as far as the whole tribe is concerned).

It was, in fact, Westermann, who first recognized the Nubian character of Midob. In reporting and commenting on MacMichael's article, Westermann clearly stated: 'Es kann aber kein Zweifel darüber bestehen, daß die Sprache ein Dialekt des Nubischen ist' (But there can be no doubt that the language is a dialect of Nubian) (1912/13: 249). He went on to prove that conclusion by a number of morphological and phonological equations and juxtaposed about 50 Midob lexemes with their Nile Nubian counterparts. In particular Westermann stressed the analogies of structural elements forming genitive (-n) and object case (-gi and variants). He also noted the fact that Midob had retained the voiceless plosive /p/, which in Nile Nubian (which Westermann called 'Ostnubisch' in this article) corresponds either to /w/ or /m/. Nile Nubian word initial /k/, he noted, has often been dropped in Midob, where the respective lexemes have /Ø/ instead. It was only in his 1918 article 'Nubian elements in Darfur', that MacMichael stated the linguistic relationship between Nile and Darfur Nubian, in which he also included Birgid, which he spelled Birqed. He said: 'The dialect spoken at Midob is a form of Barabra' (i.e. Nubian) (1918: 46). Nowhere in this article

did he say that Westermann had recognized the Nubianness of Midob before him. It may or may not be that he had knowledge of Westermann's article.

A few years later, E. Lampen drew a rather detailed picture of Midob life in his article entitled 'A Short account of Meidob' (1924). During his time of work in the region he had enquired into tribal customs, historical reminiscences and other aspects of Midob life.

Zyhlarz, building on MacMichael's material, tried to ascertain the relationships within the Nubian group (1928b), and later elaborated on the basis he had built by including Old Nubian (1949). Arkell investigated into Midob customs and social structures in the 1930ies and included some of his findings in his various publications on the history of the Sudan. In his archives there is a number of papers entitled 'J. Meidob, Arkell papers', in which he gives the names of a number of Midob kings, of clans, and also quotes notes by a certain D.C. Cumming. These papers, of which I possess a photocopy, are unpublished. Tucker and Bryan (1966. 313-328) give Midob data obtained from material collected by Roland Stevenson. Thelwall then researched into Midob in the 1970ies, which is reflected in a number of publications (1971, 1982, 1983, 1984 et.al.). Both Robin Thelwall and Roland Stevenson supplied me with unpublished Midob manuscript notes, which informed the present study at various stages.

The above may serve as a general sketch of the somewhat short history of linguistic research into Midob. Other fields of research, such as ethnological, geographical, sociological and historical studies, have purposely been left out, as they would greatly transcend the aim and scope of this study. I equally have refrained from listing other publications that deal with general Nubian linguistic history and reconstruction, and mention Midob within that framework. (cf. the already mentioned article of Angelika Jakobi 1989 for that purpose).

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