

EARLY KANURI VOCABULARIES (1670-1820)

P. E. H. HAIR

The Polish Orientalist Tomasz Habraszewski has recently drawn attention to a vocabulary of Kanuri collected in 1671-3 by Evliya Çelebi, the Turkish traveller.¹ As Habraszewski points out, Çelebi's interest in the vernaculars of the lands he visited was in marked contrast with the disinterest shown by his co-religionists, the Arab travellers and geographers. But since Çelebi wrote in Turkish, his *Seyâhatnâme* or Travel-Book is less well known—and has been less carefully edited—than corresponding Arabic works. The section relating to Africa remained in manuscript until 1938, and only small parts of it have yet been translated into world languages. In 1960 and 1964 a few paragraphs of the work describing Bornu and the Hausa appeared in print, in English and French, but the Kanuri linguistic material does not appear to have been noted in print before Habraszewski's article.²

We might almost speak of Habraszewski's 'discovery' of the vocabulary, inasmuch as it is presented in the Turkish work in a muddled and obscure fashion. A dozen words and phrases (largely concerned with eating and drinking) are to be found in Çelebi's account of Ethiopia, where they are stated to belong to a language called 'Habeşi', i.e. Abyssinian, spoken by an imprecisely located black Moslem tribe called the 'Abraşi': one supposes that these inaccuracies arose because Çelebi received the information through a third party. Though Çelebi is known to have made direct contact with Bornuese during his stay in Egypt—and it is assumed that he obtained the description of Bornu in his account in this way—almost certainly this part of the Kanuri vocabulary was collected during his visit to Ethiopia in 1673. The second part of the vocabulary consists merely of the numerals 1-10, yet is perhaps more significant since it indicates something like a systematic linguistic interest on Çelebi's part. This time the language is called 'Iberi' which, though a name also employed by Çelebi to designate two other (non-West African) languages, probably should be connected with the modern Hausa name for the Kanuri, 'Barebari'. Again, however, the language is imprecisely (on a strict view, erroneously) located, for Çelebi thought it was spoken within the kingdom of Funj, in the Nilotic Sudan. He collected the vocabulary while visiting Funj in 1671-2.

Habraszewski has effectively identified the greater part of the Kanuri vocabulary by comparing Çelebi's terms, transcribed from Turko-Arabic into Roman script, with

¹ T. Habraszewski, 'Kanuri—language and people—in the Travel-Book (*Siyahetname*) of Evliya Çelebi' *AFRICANA BULLETIN*, vol. VI (Warsaw, 1967), pp. 59-66. The most accessible account of Evliya Çelebi (the latter word is, strictly, a Turkish honorific, not a family-name), 1611-84, is in the *ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF ISLAM* (1963), under 'Ewliyâ Çelebi'.

² Articles on the African section of the Travel-Book are cited by Habraszewski: Çelebi visited Egypt, the Nilotic Sudan and Ethiopia, but not West Africa. Translations of material on Bornu and the Hausa appear in T. Hodgson, *NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVES* (1960), pp. 136-7; and in T. Ciecierska-Chlapowa, 'Extraits de fragments du *Siyâhatnâme* d'Evliya Çelebi concernant l'Afrique Noire', *FOLIA ORIENTALIA*, vol. VI (Krakow, 1964), pp. 239-44. The account of early Kanuri vocabularies in P. E. H. Hair, *THE EARLY STUDY OF NIGERIAN LANGUAGES*, *West African Language Monographs* 7, (1967), is deficient in that only the extract from Çelebi in Hodgson's work was known, and the vocabulary described in the present paper was therefore not mentioned.

Table 1

	Çelebi ³ 1671-2	Niebuhr 1770	Lucas 1792	Bowdich (a) 1816-18
1	tilū/tilo	telu	lakka	leskar
2	indī	jadi	enkee	ahndee
3	yāşgi	jasku	nieskoo	yaskar
4	dāqi	dāku	dekoo	deegah
5	ūqū/ūgū	uku	okoo	ooōgoo
6	arāşqi	arasku	araskoo	araskoo
7	leqār/legār [= 9]	tullu	haskoo [= 8]	toolor
8	ṭulūr [= 7]	usku	tallôre [= 7]	woskoo
9	sāqi [= 8]	lakār	l'ilkar	likkar
10	rāqi [?]	māku	meiko	meeāgoo
				Modern dialect variants ⁴
	Bowdich (b) 1816-18	Lyon 1819-20	Lukas 1937	
1	lagen	teelo	tiló	laska
2	indē	andee	indí	—
3	eāska	yaskoo	yaskó	yasgu
4	daāger	daigoo	dégə	deṛu
5	ohoo	oogoo	úgù	—
6	araska	araskoo	araskó	arasgu
7	toolor	tuller	túlūr	—
8	weska	oskoo	wuskú	usgu
9	lekar	lekār	ləgár	—
10	inagoon	maigoo	megú	meogu

equivalent items in more recent material on the language. It is to be noted that he has adopted the sound method of employing, for comparative purposes, not only the latest and most scientific study (in this case, the 1937 study by J. Lukas), but also the study nearest in time to that under examination, on the grounds that the earlier work, despite its obviously limited accuracy and comprehensiveness, may testify to appropriate earlier forms. Habraszewski, however, selected Mrs Kilham's vocabulary of Kanuri, collected in Sierra Leone in the 1820s, as the nearest in time to Çelebi's vocabularies of the 1670s, whereas there are in fact several vocabularies earlier than Mrs Kilham's (though admittedly not as full). The earliest of these was collected in the 1770s in Copenhagen by Carsten Niebuhr, and printed in 1790: it consists only of the numerals 1-10. The numerals were again collected in 1789 (printed 1790), in 1816-18 (printed 1821) and in 1819-20 (printed 1821): and a vocabulary of more than 100 other words (but not the numerals) was collected in 1816-17 (by J. L. Burckhardt, in Cairo, from Bornuese pilgrims: printed 1819).⁵

³ The items appear as transliterated by Habraszewski, with possible variants of reading, except that a double-dotted i (? short i) in the numerals 3-4, 6, 8-9 is not here distinguished.

⁴ Variant dialect forms which may explain some of the earlier items are cited from S. W. Koelle, *POLYGLOTTA AFRICANA*, (1854), or from Lukas.

⁵ Hair, *op. cit.* pp. 32-5.

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Students of the development of Kanuri may care to compare Çelebi's and Burckhardt's general vocabulary. In Table 1 we make a briefer comparison between the early versions of the numerals: those under Niebuhr's name have not been reprinted since their original appearance in print, in a German periodical, in 1790.⁶

The set illustrates, of course, some of the errors and deficiencies found in early vocabularies. Nevertheless, when allowance has been made for orthographical peculiarities, there is a high degree of conformity throughout and none of the vocabularies could fail to be recognized as Kanuri. This serves to remind us that mere collection of the numerals, the simplest of collecting tasks, very often provides—even when the collector is unskilled or incompetent—an effective guide to the recognition of languages. It is a pity that this was not known before modern times. A great deal of history might be less obscure if we had collections of numerals made by Marco Polo, or Thorfinn Karselfni, or Herodotus, or Hanno.

⁶ C. Niebuhr, 'Das Innere von Afrika', *NEUES DEUTSCHES MUSEUM* (Leipzig, October 1790), pp. 963-1004, (April 1791), pp. 419-30, the vocabulary on pp. 982-3.