

Sub-Saharan Influence on North African Arabic and Berber

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The impact of the trans-Saharan trade, and in particular of the importation of slaves from the Sahel, is immediately visible across the oases of the Sahara, and in some regions even further north. Yet its linguistic impact remains virtually undocumented, masking significant parts of the region's linguistic history. Which sub-Saharan African languages have influenced North Africa, and to what extent? This paper seeks to provide an overview of Sub-Saharan loans across the Maghreb.

Initial examination indicates that such loans appear to be particularly conspicuous in the arena of crop names. These are unsurprisingly most numerous in Hassaniya, eg *mâru* “rice” (< Wolof) or the many Songhay loans documented in Heath (2004), but are not absent further north: probable cases include the widespread Maghrebi Arabic term *kabuya/bkewa/etc.* (and Berber equivalents, eg Figuig *tkabiwt*) for “pumpkin” (probably < Hausa); the Libyan Arabic term *gafuli* for “sorghum” (< Kanuri); the Timimoun Berber term *dəmši* for “peas” (< Songhay); the Ghadames Berber term *bārkanō* for “chilli pepper” (< Hausa, cf. Lanfry (1973)); Tidikelt Arabic *agaşu* “gourd” (< Songhay, via Tuareg); and the widespread *dəmman* sheep breed, popularly believed to have come from the Sahel (< Kanuri?). In some cases the sense of the word has changed slightly, illustrating environmental differences between the source and the destination.

A more socially restricted environment for sub-Saharan loans, preserving a richer selection of them, is the specific context of Gnaoua brotherhoods, within songs and as an argot on an Arabic base. This has received some prior attention, as in Aguadé (2002) or Berjaoui (1997). However, the origin of most of these loans has not yet been pinpointed. The argot material provides a particularly rich source, making it possible to pinpoint riverine Songhay and Bambara sources as well as Hausa; not all terms' origin can be identified, suggesting a greater diversity of sources. The borrowed names of certain musical instruments used by the Gnaoua, in particular the *ganga* drum (< Hausa or Songhay), also fit within this context, but differ in being widely known. Another “argotic” usage is so far attested only from the Timimoun region: the substitution of words of sub-Saharan origin for body parts in curses and insults.

It is clear that the principal sub-Saharan influence on Maghrebi Arabic comes from languages of the Sahel. For the most part, each region seems to be primarily influenced by the principal lingua franca of the part of the Sahel directly to its south, as might be predicted from the mostly north-south orientation of medieval trans-Saharan trade routes. However, the influence of Hausa at least is more widespread than this generalisation would indicate, and the distribution of argot terms indicates that, at least in some areas, speakers of many different languages must have mingled – a conclusion confirmed for some parts of the Sahara by first-hand testimonies.

References

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