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AFRASIAN ETYMOLOGY OF THE NAME OF OSIRIS?

Abstract: After many vain attempts for the etymologization of this divine name, we approach the question from the viewpoint of Afrasian (Semitic-Hamitic) comparative linguistics. The suggested hypothesis, based on the linguistic data from the cognate Afrasian languages, confirms the traditional Egyptian conception on Osiris as the god of the dead, lord of the necropolis.

The name *wsjr* „Osiris“ (OK, Wb I 359, 5) has ever since its appearance in the middle of the third millennium B.C., been a challenge for speculations about its meaning and origin. These speculations have continued even until nowadays. Well known are the various Egyptian „priestly“ and modern etymologies for the name Osiris – nearly all based on the inner Egyptian linguistic evidence. A brief overview of all the previous attempts can be found in Griffith 1982. Since Egyptian etymologies for this name are far-fetched or even unreal, I am afraid that the problem cannot be solved purely on Egyptian grounds; and it will be worth examining the possibilities of an attempt for the etymology of the name in our days in an Afrasian (Semitic-Hamitic) perspective. My proposal presented below is mainly to set Egyptian philology into motion, to break silence around the question. I admit that also this theory on the name of Osiris and Abydos discussed below is purely hypothetical. But, as always in philology, we cannot work and hope to achieve progress without good theories.

1. First, I would like to consider two of the most attractive speculative theories for an etymology by the modern scholarship, both based on extra-Egyptian (Afrasian) evidence.

1.1. O. Bates (1915) has suggested a common origin of Eg. *wsjr* and the Berber word for „old“ (he quotes a nominal reflex *a-ussar* „old man“).

1.2. A. Ember (1917) regarded the Egyptian divine name identical with the Old Testament *'ašērā*, the name of the sacred tree or pole, erected at the place of worship. It was – as Ember writes – the symbol of fertility and reproduction. In half a dozens of Old Testament

passages Asherah is the name of a goddess (in the 16th edition of Gesenius' dictionary of Old Testament Hebrew, p. 75: „Benennung der kultische Baum oder Pfahl die m.d. männlichen Gottheit symbolisierte“). Ember called the difference in sex of the fem. Hebrew *'ašērā* and the masc. Eg. *wsjr* secondary. The Hebrew name is said to be cognate with the West Semitic goddess Aširtu and some further Semitic forms with various signification (Gesenius), what has very recently been discussed by Hess (1996).

The idea of Ember was shared by Barton (1934, 133–135), who joined here also the name of Isis. Barton believed that Eg. *3s.t* was originally **3sr.t* (outfall of **-r*), the feminine counterpart of *3sr* (i.e. Osiris in his transcription).

Still, the fem. character of Asherah ~ Ashirtu is disturbing, just like the lack of the feature in them corresponding with that of Osiris, the main god of the deceased people, lord of the necropole.

1.3. Finally, re Sumerian *ASAR(U)*. This sign – as is well known – is used in the writing of Marduk's name: *ASARI/ASAL.LU₂.HI* or *ASAR.RI*. It may be added to the brief history of etymologies for Osiris by Griffith (1982, 624–626) that it was perhaps Fr. Hommel (1904, 115) the first (thus preceding Smith 1922 quoted by Griffith) to note the same combination of signs representing a „seat“ + „eye“ in the writing of Sumerian *ASAR* and Egyptian *wsjr*. If we examine this theory, we must face the problem that the reading of Sumerian *ASAR* does not issue from any of phonetic values of the two combined signs: *URU* „town“ + *IGI* „eye“ (Borger 1978, 379, #44) and thus seems unexplained on Sumerian grounds. At the same time, the orthography of Eg. *wsjr* is clearly motivated by the Egyptian phonetic value of the sign „seat“ (*s.t*) and „eye“ (*jr.t*). That is why we have the conviction that the Mesopotamian word cannot have been the source for *wsjr* and cannot serve as its etymology. If there was a connection, the direction of this contact may have been the opposite in this case. It is highly suspicious, however, that Sumerian *ASAR* has an alternative usage (then to be read *ŠILIG*) in the meaning „puissant“ (= Akk. *šagapuru*, Labat 1976, 57, #44), while the word of the same meaning in Egyptian sounds *wsr*.

2. My etymological suggestion for Eg. *wsjr* is closer to the viewpoint of Bates. The comparative Afrasian linguistic data treated below support to interpret the primary character of Osiris as the god of death. If we consider this feature as original, the closes Afrasian candidate equivalent may be found in the West Chadic language family: Hausa *šure* „to die (of animals)“ (Starostin et al. 1995, 4). This verb differs from the general term for „to die“: *mutu* (Ol'derogge 1954, 146), which is widespread in all the Afrasian languages (from the archetype **mut-*).

It will not be without interest to note the presumed Meroitic pronunciation [šo/urey] of Eg. *wsjr* „Osiris“ (with no trace of the first syllable), vocalization of which was reconstructed by Satzinger (1980, 83) as *wšsūrŷ.

2.1. It may not be excluded that the development of meaning seen in Hausa was „to die“ < „to die of natural death at an old age“. The etymological connection of „old“ vs. „die“ is not unique in Semito-Hamitic. As parallels we may quote:

2.1.1. **Eg.** *kkt* „alt werden“ (Gr., Wb V 146) ~ **Berb.** Ahaggar *kātiy-āt* „to die“ (Militarev 1991, 247, 255) ~ „**Cushomotic**“ **ki[H]t* „to die“: **Agaw** Hamir *kit-* „to die“ and **ECu.** Mogogodo *akehet* „sterben“ but Elmolo *inikutate* „alt“ (Heine 1973, 279) ~ **NOM.** Kaficho *kit-*, Yamma *kiitu*, *kit-*, Mocha *qitib*, Bworo *kitō* „to die“ (Dolgopolskij 1973, 245; Orel 1989, 12: Om. **kit-*) ~ **WCh.** Tangale *kude* (< **kut-*?) „old“ ~ **CCh.** Lame *kōtókó* „old“ (Mukarovskij 1987, 278).

2.1.2. **Sem.** Ar. *fānin-*, fem. *fāniy-at-* „old, dilapidated“ cf. *yafan-* „décrépit, très agé“ ~ **Eg.** *fn* „schwach sein“ (MK, Wb I 576, 10) ~ **WCh.** Ron gr.: Bokkos, Daffo-Butura, Sha *fun* „cadavre“. See Ember 1930, #9.a.9; Calice 1936, #613; SISAJa I, 120, #146; Belova 1992, 16.

2.1.3. **Eg.** *jh.w* „kindische Schwäche des Greises“ (MK, Wb I 121, 1) ~ **HECu.** **lih-* „to die“: Hadiyya *lih-*, *leh-* „to die“, *lého* „death“ (Dolgopolskij 1973, 171).

2.2. In light of these parallels Hausa *šure* and Eg. *wsjr* may be etymologically related with the word „old“ in a number of Afrasian daughter languages: **Berb.** **-wsar* „(to be) old“: Ahaggar *iwhār* (intens. *wāššār*) „lange her sein, alt sein“ (Zyhlarz 1934, 111), Ghat *auššar* „old“, *uššer* „to be old“, Nefusa *usser*, Beni Snus *ússer* „to be old“, Sokna *aussar/wussūret*, Ghadames *wesser* „vieillard“ (Wölfel 1955, 51–52; also Zyhlarz 1932–33, 32: PBerb. **√wsr*; Mukarovskij 1969, 37, #10.8: **ussār* „alt sein“) ~ ?**ECu.** Yaaku *-sirgin*, pl. *-siragde* „old“ (if *-rg-* < **-rw-*, Blažek 1992, 28, #29: from AA **Siwar-* „old“) ~ **WCh.** Sura-Angas gr. **sir-* „old“: Ankwe *sir*, Angas *n-sār*, *n-sir*, Sura *dī-siyir*, Chip *wū-siyir* (possibly from **sifw|ir*, the inlaut *-γ-* being secondary here as pointed out by Dolgopolsky 1982) ~ **CCh.** Daba *musār* „old“ (prefix *m-*), cf. also Hwona *sūxwūřin* (secondary *-xw-* < **-g^w-* from **-ww-*?) „old“ (Mukarovskij 1987, 277).

3. This kind of reasoning for the etymology of *wsjr* is close to that proposed by Bates in 1915. A new circumstance may now also speak for our etymology of Eg. *wsjr*, and for his original rôle as a god of the deceased. This support is yielded by the etymological interpretation of the dwelling place of Osiris, the „Town of the Dead“: *Abydos* – Eg. *3bd.w* (OK, Wb I 9, 1) > OCop. *abōt*, Cop. (S) *ebōt*,

and Greek Ἄβυδος. The toponym displays a perfect phonological match of the **LECu.** root $*libd-$, „to vanish, disappear“ > Somali *libd-*, *libid-*, Konso *libb-* „id.“ (Sasse 1979, 57). If this is valid, the Eg. toponym should be regarded as collective (*.w*) and interpreted indeed as the „Town of the Dead“. I must note that we do not know about further ECu. or at all, Cushitic cognates (even so, Sasse reconstructed a PECu. form). The full description of Konso by Black and Otto (1973) is as follows: „1. to be extinguished, go out (candle, fire, flashlight etc.), to drain (intr., e.g. water), 3. to disappear (living things), die in great number“ (kind pers. conn. of Prof. A. Zaborski on 1 July 1996, who also knows of no further ECu. cognates).

The phonological correspondence of Eg. 3- vs. ECu. $*l-$ and Eg. d vs. ECu. $*d$ (from PAA $*çl'çl'ç$) is regular.

3.1. Note that Eg. *dw3.t* (~ *d3.t*) „Unterwelt“ (Pyr., Wb V 415–416) seems to have a similar origin, having promising cognates in **Agaw** Hamir *dīa* „to die“ (Starostin et al. 1995, 4) ~ **ECu.** Oromo *du-* „to die“, *du-a* „death“ (Dolgopolskij 1973, 171).

4. Working on the etymology of Egyptian *wsjr*, we have to account also for the „law of Belova“, which has been published only recently (Belova 1987, 278–282; 1991; 1993, 51–55; Diakonoff 1988, 55, note 10). The law has proved valid on many new examples (Takács 1996, #5). According to this rule, the first *w-* and *j-* in Eg. triconsonantal roots cannot be always treated as morphological prefixes, but in many cases reflect rather the original PAA internal root vocalism $*-u$, $*-i-$ (i.e. Eg. wC_1C_2 and jC_1C_2 < PAA $*C_1uC_2-$ and $*C_1iC_2-$ respectively). As for PAA $*C_1aC_2-$, it may eventually yield Eg. jC_1C_2 , but $3C_1C_2$ as well, though the examples for this case are of limited number.

If my derivation of *wsjr* is correct, the origin of *w-* in Eg. *wsjr* may be explained two alternative ways. First, it may be due to „Belova's law“ (i.e. *wsjr* < $*si[ʼu]r$ or sim.). On the other hand, it may be a prothetic (prefixal) *w-* too (observed mainly in Egyptian and Semitic), just like the $*w-$ in the Berb. verbal root $*\sqrt{wsr}$.

5. Conclusion. To sum up, we presented here linguistic evidence for that both *wsjr* and *3bd*. *w* were names of Afrasian origin. If correct, our new etymological proposals strengthen that the original cult of Osiris, lord of Abydos may have been connected with the world of the deceased.

ABBREVIATIONS

AA: Afrasian Akk.: Akkadian, Amh.: Amharic, Ar.: Arabic, BD: Book of the Dead, Bed.: Bedewye, Berb.: Berber, C: Central, Ch.: Chadic, Cop.: Coptic, CT: Coffin Texts, Cu.: Cushitic, E: East, Eg.: Egyptian, Gr.: Greek and Roman Period or Greek (language), H: Highland, Hebr.: Hebrew, IE: Indo-European, L: Lowland, LP: Late Period, Mag.: Magical Texts, Mand.: Mandaic, Med.: Medical Texts, MK: Middle Kingdom, N: New, NE: New Egyptian, NK: New Kingdom, OK: Old Kingdom, Om.: Omotic, P: Proto-, Pyr.: Pyramid Texts, S: South, (S): Sahhidic, Sem.: Semitic, SH: Semito-Hamitic, Soq.: Soqotri, Syr.: Syriac, W: West.

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