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Preliminary report on the new comparative-historical phonology and etymological dictionary of Southern Cushitic

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Dedicated to Profs. V. Blažek and K.T. Witzcak
gratefully remembering the 19th of June 1992¹

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The paper offers a preliminary report of the current research for a monographic comparative-etymological elaboration of the Southern Cushitic lexical stock with its uniquely archaic consonantism set in its ancient Afro-Asiatic context. The project is based on the author's studies over more than two decades by now.

Keywords: Cushitic languages, Afro-Asiatic, comparative linguistics

Southern Cushitic is part of the Cushitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic macrofamily, whose southernmost extremity is represented by this small sub-branch on the periphery of the Kenyan-Tanzanian border area. Southern Cushitic comprises two groups (West Rift, East Rift) plus two isolated languages (Ma'a and Dahalo), whose classification is disputed. All these languages, doubtlessly related as a distinct unit in my view, were altogether comprehensively compared for the first time in Ch. Ehret's (1980) pioneering, albeit highly

¹ It is with gratitude that, during writing this report, I remember having learnt precisely 30 years ago about their work in comparative Indo-European and beyond on the 19th of June 1992, an unforgettable day on whose decisive significance for the start of my researches one can read more in Takács (2012, see esp. p. 21). It was then that I first got acquainted with an entirely new world thanks to K.T. Witzcak's (1992) attractive paper on the Indo-European word for "leech" and its Nostratic equivalents along with a similarly impressive study on the diffusion of agricultural terms from Mesopotamia jointly by V. Blažek and C. Boisson (1992).

controversial attempt at reconstructing Proto-South-Cushitic, which has long been well known as not being at all void of serious drawbacks and imperfections that were discussed by former reviewers.²

In the light of my own researches, I can also confirm that a considerable part of Ehret's (1980) cognate sets and lexical reconstructions is indeed either not convincing or clearly incorrect either for semantic problems or phonological reasons. I have avoided using Ehret's disputable or mistaken proto-forms (unless confronted with more reasonable ones and/or provided with the adequate critical comment). Nevertheless, it has always been inevitable for me that the lexical material is a precious treasure itself, so has to be exploited with the necessary restrictions and changes. Since Ehret's Southern Cushitic proto-forms (instead of the purely attested lexical materials from the daughter languages) were greatly used as basis for his subsequent, equally or even more disputable, reconstructions of Proto-Cushitic (1987) and Proto-Afro-Asiatic (1995), composed along with similarly problematic comparative methods,³ a new Southern Cushitic synthesis is triply urging.

That the highly precious lexical treasure accumulated by Ehret (1980) has to be almost completely re-arranged and fully re-evaluated in a new etymological dictionary, has always been evident for me, which has permanently stimulated my research on the Southern Cushitic comparative-historical phonology and lexicon (ongoing since 1998). First of all, however, I only tried to better understand those segments of the Southern Cushitic thesaurus that have peculiar bearing on especially labial triad and the system of sibilants, then the back consonants also in the light of a simultaneous work with both the inner and external evidence. Its selected results I have been (since 1999) periodically publishing in diverse studies.⁴ Finally, I summed up more than a decade's research over this extremely archaic consonantism in a separate chapter of my first volume on Afro-Asiatic historical phonology.⁵ No other (sub)-branch in the entire Afro-Asiatic macrofamily has retained this rich variety and such a full set of sibilant and velar, pharyngeal, laryngeal phonemes in an intact form which we only know from Proto-Semitic.⁶

With a new comparative-historical Southern Cushitic consonantism, multiply refined over the past two decades or so, I have long felt the need of composing a new comparative dictionary of this peculiar root stock with up-to-date Afro-Asiatic etymological entries. For achieving this ultimate goal, a fundamental re-writing of Ehret's (1980) lexical entries is needed in a wholly new structure and arrangement in the first step. This work has been ongoing since autumn 2021 and is expected to be soon completed during summer 2022. Then, in the second step, the lexical entries of the internally basically reliable West Rift lexicon by E.D. Elderkin & J.B. Maghway (1992) and by R. Kießling & M. Mous (2004) are to be

² See the masterful assessments by Hetzron, R. & Tálos, E.P. (1982), Voigt, R.M. (1983) and Zaborski, A. (1984).

³ On these, cf. Takács (2018, esp. pp. 237-239).

⁴ Takács 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2009a, 2009, 2010.

⁵ See my chapter "Outlines of a South Cushitic historical phonology (consonants)" (Takács 2011a) in Takács (2011b: 115-152).

⁶ For the demonstration of this thesis, see, a.o., esp. Takács (2013).

entered with the necessary criticism on their homophonous pseudo-etymologies.⁷ This is going to become a solid starting point, which the rest of the South Cushitic data (Qwadza, Asa, Ma'a, Dahalo and the older sources on West Rift) are to be confronted with in the third step for achieving a long desired new reconstruction of the Southern Cushitic lexicon. Its root stock has then, in the fourth step, to be confronted with the Afro-Asiatic cognates from my Egyptian etymological word catalogue (EEWC, ongoing since summer 1994) as well as my Afro-Asiatic root catalogue (AARC, since Dec. 1999), both paper-based and unpublished, in order to establish the Southern Cushitic etymological dictionary, whose significant importance for precisely understanding the Proto-Afro-Asiatic consonantism cannot be overstated.

A new impulse for renewing my old research on the Southern Cushitic lexicon (1998-2011), which had been interrupted but definitively not concluded a decade ago, has now come in spring 2019⁸ with returning to my original research strategy⁹ of a simultaneous work on both my Afro-Asiatic root catalogue by the extensive revision of former comparative works searching for all plausible solid cognates¹⁰ and an accelerated micro-reconstruction of numerous Southern Afro-Asiatic (Cushitic, Omotic, Chadic) groups.¹¹

⁷ On this inherited deficiency in their methodology see Takács, G. 2005c, esp. p. 214-217; 2011b., esp. pp. 140-141; 2010, esp. pp. 136-138.

⁸ This timing is due to the happy fact that the obligation of an enormously time-consuming and intellectually destructive commuting to the remote Hungarian capital has ceased in April 2019 and, henceforth, I have been able to exclusively devote myself to a desired full-time research in my private Afro-Asiatic library, established at the turn of 1991/2 in Székesfehérvár and re-built in spring 2015 at Balatonederics.

⁹ The idea of accelerating micro-reconstruction in the lesser-explored Southern Afro-Asiatic groups has arisen in me in the late 1990s, which had resulted in the first period of my Southern Cushitic and Angas-Sura researches (ca. 1998-2011) and in starting my work for the comparative dictionaries of Dangla-Migama and Mubi-Toram in 2008. Ironically, whereas over the past quarter of a century, my original intention of extracting A-Z comparative wordlists of a number of West and Central Chadic groups by turning Kraft 1981 upside-down and by completing it up-to-date with more recent sources has until now had to remain a plan (except for Angas-Sura), my renewed researches starting from spring 2019 on have yielded A-Z comparative wordlists of Southern Cushitic and Omotic along the same pattern by turning the invaluable raw thesaurus of Ehret 1980 and Bender 2003, resp., upside-down, whose evaluation in the light of other sources is ongoing.

¹⁰ Since spring 2019, I have already accomplished 3 fruitful new seasons scanning through a considerable segment of the literature on Afro-Asiatic lexical comparison remaining unfiled after the first intensive decade (1994-2006) of my research for this catalogue.

¹¹ Although my research on the lexical reconstruction of some individual Chadic groups dates back to around the turn of the millennium (thus, e.g., Angas-Sura since 1998, Dangla-Migama and Mubi-Toram since 2008), my work in this domain has only become accelerated and extensive since the spring of 2019, when a whole set of further Chadic groups (North Bauchi, Musgu, Masa) as well as Southern Cushitic and Omotic were subject to a comprehensive lexical reconstruction. This research has now been manifested in the new project of micro-reconstructions in the Southern Afro-Asiatic lexical root stock, which has been supported since 2021 by the grant "Advanced Research in Residence" (ARR) of the University of Łódź, which I gratefully acknowledge in this place.

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