

Place-Names in Dodoth

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ABSTRACT

Dodoth, a Karamojong dialect spoken in northeast Uganda, has received relatively little attention in scholarly literature. Most extant works focus on other Karamojong dialects or on purely anthropological aspects of the Dodoth people. As a study of Dodoth toponymy (place-naming), this paper fuses linguistics and anthropology to describe the intimate link between the Dodoth language and the local landscape. First, the paper introduces the Dodoth language and people and situates them in the habitat that gave rise to their current place-names. Second, the morpho-phonological, semantic, and historical aspects of thirty Dodoth place-names are briefly explored. The findings of this study demonstrate that Dodoth place-names are in many cases still transparent to their original meanings. As such, they give clues as to how the Dodoth originally named the features of their frontier pasturelands, and furthermore how humans in general exercise the impulse to name their life-world. Although often squelched by modern, insulated lifestyles, this impulse can be reawakened, as the conclusion of this paper playfully illustrates.

1 Introduction

Most of us from the West know precious little about the deep history of the names of the places we inhabit. For example, I know that the name of my home state in America is also the name of a First Nation tribe—*Alabama*—but I have not the slightest clue what *Alabama* means or meant originally. We are often too far removed from the events, people, animals, and languages that originally gave rise to the many *toponyms* (place-names) that dot our familiar landscapes.

For the Dodoth of northeast Uganda, however, most place names have readily accessible originary meanings, such that with a little linguistic sleuthing, one can gather what events, creatures, or characteristics provoked the early Dodoth cattle-herders to assign the names that they did. Even though the meanings themselves are quite vivid, it is unlikely that the Dodoth think of those meanings every time they speak a place name, any more than Americans envision William Penn and his beloved forest whenever they say ‘Pennsylvania’. As original meanings get sedimented and buried over time, the name of the place becomes a substitute for the meaning in the minds of speakers.

What is presented here is a brief explication of Dodoth place-names in terms of their morpho-phonological structure, their semantics, and the histories that produced them. The sample of thirty place-names that contributed to this study were elicited from a car-full of Dodoth people, happy to be jostling along on their way to Kaabong (Dodoth capital) and eager to share their ethnolinguistic wealth with interested friends. While the place-names discussed here represent Dodoth toponymy in general, no claim is made to cover this topic exhaustively (see Appendix A).

2 Dodoth People & Language

Dodoth is the northernmost dialect of the language known widely as Karamojong. Karamojong is closely related to Turkana of Kenya, Toposa of Sudan, and Teso of south-central Uganda, all of which fall under the Nilotic branch of Nilo-Saharan. The Dodoth are fierce cattle-herders who entered their current habitat several hundred years ago. Forced by the government to disarm and thus begin abandoning their cattle culture, the Dodoth are now struggling to adapt in a rapidly changing world.

3 Dodoth Landscape

Dodoth County (hereafter ‘Dodoth’) is a land of stunning natural beauty. From the Acholi plains in the West and the Teso lowlands in the South, the jagged hills of Dodoth begin to rise like specters from a tumultuous geological past. Millennia ago, molten rock surged through cracks in the earth’s crust, cooled, and hardened into elbows, knees, and backbones of solid granite, now crumbling with the passage of time. The Dodoth heartland forms a bowl encompassed by mountains and hills on all sides, the tallest of

which—Mt. Moruñole—peaks at over 9,000 feet, overlooking the confluence of Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda.

When ancestors of the Dodoth climbed up from the Turkana plains onto the 2,000-ft. escarpment forming the Uganda-Kenya border, they were entering a land characterized by seasonal extremes. Frequently beset with draughts, floods, famines, and fires, the landscape holds the imagination of the people who attribute its fury to spirits of the land. In rainy season, lush greenness explodes all over Dodoth, causing one to forget the white dryness that ravished it only a few short months ago. Dodoth is a place that is severe in its grace as well as its terror, ruggedly beautiful yet frequently life-threatening.

The Dodoth land once had wildlife to match it—lions, elephants, buffalo, giraffes, and even rhino in abundance a hundred years ago. Today, Uganda’s Kidepo National Park protects a fragile remnant of Dodoth’s enviable faunal heritage. When the Dodoth forbearers crept over the edge of the escarpment in search of pasture for their livestock, they would have had to contend with the strongholds of local wildlife. Navigating by rocky outcroppings, groves of wild fig trees, and the lairs of wild animals, the early Dodoth shepherds settled throughout the land that would soon be their home.

It is in such a historical context, imagined through the eyes of the first Karamojong settlers of northern Karamoja, that current Dodoth place-names come alive. Like in many pre-industrialized societies, the Dodoth then and now maintain a close tie to the patch of earth on which they dwell. Their language still preserves that closeness.

4 Morpho-phonology of Dodoth Place-Names

A large percentage of Dodoth place-names exhibit a morphological form that signifies the notions of ‘direction’ or ‘location’. Such forms show a prefix—*lo-* for masculine and neuter nouns, *na-* for feminine—which can mean location or direction in time or space. In this form, we hear place-names like the following:

Lowakuj	Nacakonet
Lobalanjit	Naita
Lokinene	Nareñapak

Another large percentage of Dodoth place-names come with a preposition that is often prefixed or cliticized to a stem or root. The preposition is *ka* and can mean ‘with, on, of, from’, depending on context. A morphophonemic rule dictates that the vowel in *ka* assimilate to the following vowel, as in *Koputh* and *Kepak*. Occasionally it is not clear what caused the vowel to assimilate as it did. For example, *Komuria*, the name of a small town, is formed from *ka* + *ñamura*, ‘home of duikers’. Otherwise, in terms of toponymy, *ka* tends to carry the idea of ‘from’ or ‘home of’ someone or something and yields place-names like the following:

Karenga	Kapedo
Kasile	Kaabong
Kamion	Kapalu

The third and last place-name morphology examined here is the root *moru-*, which means ‘rock/mountain’ (cf. *amoru* ‘rock’ and *emoru* ‘mountain’) and is often prefixed or suffixed to another stem. As noted above, Dodoth is a boulder-strewn country in which it is no wonder ‘rocks’ and ‘mountains’ figure prominently as key landmarks. Translated loosely as ‘rock of...’ or ‘Mt. ...’, this morpheme contributes names like:

Moruñole
Morukori
Moruatap

Besides these clear-cut morphological forms, several place-names can be heard that result from adaptation by foreigners or simply from diachronic change. For example, the name of Dodoth’s splendid

game park, *Kidepo*, comes from the Dodoth verb *akidep*, meaning 'to pick up', which in turn originates in the activity of picking up the palm nuts found fallen along the banks of Kidepo River. It is not known whether the final *-o* is a European adaptation or is the voiced form of the word-final voiceless vowels common in neighboring Toposa and less so in Dodoth (i.e., *akidepo*). What is more likely a case of foreign adaptation is *Moroto*, the name of a parish in Dodoth, as well as a city and administrative center of southern Karamoja. The name itself comes from *emorotoŋo*, 'python', and presumably identifies the place of one or many pythons. Another is *Timu*, the name of a forested area on the edge of the escarpment. It is supposed that the name is a reduction of the verb *akitimur*, 'to rest, relax, (and possibly 'swoon')'. Legend has it that Timu Forest used to be such a lush area that those who entered it would forget themselves in green, misted fantasies and lose track of time.

5 Semantics of Dodoth Place-Names

The meanings of Dodoth place-names seem to have arisen from human responses to certain events, landscape features, activities/states, or people/animals/plants associated with those places. Among the thirty place-names looked at in this study, only two recall events, and four, activities or states. By contrast, thirteen place-names focus on geological features, and eleven are in honor of memorable people, animals, or plants.

Rising from the plains in west-central Dodoth is a mountain named *Lowakuj*. On Lowakuj, a natural ring of rocks reminiscent of Stonehenge encircles the entire peak. From a distance, it resembles the snow or tree-line of higher mountains. However, this stone ring is so complete and so distinct that the locals say of it: *ewait Akuj*, 'God has fenced it', and all who enter its only gate are thought to be brining disaster upon themselves. Lowakuj is *lo* + *ewait* + *Akuj*, or 'the place where God has fenced'. Not far from Lowakuj is another mountain/village complex by the title of *Nacakunet*. Nacakunet comes from the verb *acakun*, having to do with 'throwing' or 'falling' down. The story is that a young woman threw herself down off the cliff to commit suicide. Today the place is known as *Nacakunet*, 'the place she threw herself down'. *Kasile*, from *ekasile* 'loneliness', marks the township and surrounding villages that at some point in time must have been a very lonely place. No one was lonely in *Loyoro*, though, at least not during white-ant harvest. This place-name stems from the verb *akiyor*, 'to harvest white-ants'.

It is not surprising that the tall mountains in Dodoth were imagined to be like the 'heads' of the landscape and given appropriate attributes. *Moruŋole*, the highest mountain in Dodoth, means 'the bald mountain', while *Lotim*, another slightly shorter mountain, means 'the place of hair', from *lo* + *ŋitim* 'hair'. It is true that the top of Moruŋole is somewhat flattened like a bald head, and Lotim is, despite deforestation elsewhere, still covered in forest. *Morukori*, a foothill of Lotim, comes from *moru* + *ekori* 'giraffe' and is so named because the many different kinds of stones dotting its slopes give it a giraffe-like appearance. Ten miles from Morukori, a dog-eared hill juts abruptly from the earth; this is *Kepak*. One of the more creative toponyms, *Kepak* takes its meaning from the bizarre shape of its host. The hill has two peaks of almost the same elevation, on the extreme, opposite sides, which are separated by a uniform dip or valley. To some early Dodoth, this hill resembled an *apak*, a 'piece of meat joining the hips'.

Not all names pointing out geological features are this vivid. For example, *Lobalanjit* is simply 'the place of salt', and *Lorjoromit*, 'the place of the small stream'. *Kalapata* is *elapat*, 'flat, spacious', while *Kapedo* is *epeded*, 'hollow, pierced'. *Naita*, from *eitaana* 'sharp, pointed', names several sharp, pointed rocks that stick up from the ground, and *Lokinene*, from *akinen* 'to hang', hangs high above the valley as if from the clouds.

While Lotim is just the 'mountain hairy with trees', other places are known for their specific plant or tree species. For example, *Lomusian* was once 'the place of many (certain native thorn-) trees', which in Dodoth is *lo* + *ŋimusya*. *Lokwakaramoe* commemorates the *ekwakaramoe* tree (English name unknown). Whether gourd-shaped or the home of many gourds, *Kalotwo* gets its title from *ka* + *etwo* 'gourd'.

As already mentioned, Dodoth is rich in wildlife. *Kamion*, from *ka* + *ŋamion* 'fireflies', marks a region on the escarpment where one might have seen a host of fireflies. Dodoth was at one time crawling with primates, and one can still find baboons and monkeys of various species. *Locom*, from *ecom*

'baboon', names a bizarre, volcanic plug where troupes of baboons can still be seen on a regular basis. While climbing Mt. *Lowala* (fr. *ewala* 'patas monkey'), I found not patas monkeys but rather more baboons!

A particular curiosity is *Lokolia*, the so-called 'place of fish', from *ekolia* 'fish'. Standing water is extremely rare in Dodoth because of the type of soil found here. Fish are so rare that the Ik people, who preceded the Dodoth in the region by hundreds of years, do not even have a word for 'fish'. A much more likely meal for the Dodoth in those days were duikers, which we have already seen to lead to the name *Komuria*.

Last but not least are the human inhabitants that left enough of a mark to have a place named after them. The hill named *Kakamar* is named after the *ɲikamar*, 'the elders'. It was perhaps a place where the elders went to pray for rain. Then there was Mr. Abong, of whom it was known that his home was a place for weary travelers to stop and rest. To this day *Kaabong—ka* + *Abong*—continues to function as the largest town and administrative center of Dodoth. Many weary travelers still stop over there for the night.

6 Conclusion

Naturally, for a few of the toponyms discussed here, more than one etymology exists; and for others, all we can offer at present is speculation. Nevertheless, it is hoped that through this brief study, the components of Dodoth place-names and the general mechanism used to produce them have been introduced.

The impulse to name features of our life-world is as old as humanity. In closing, I offer the following table to express this impulse and demonstrate how Dodoth place-names might find a playful near-equivalent in English. I encourage you to take a first and second look at the place-names in your home area or where you find yourself today. Not only will such an exercise make the landscape come alive to you, but also it will furnish you with ethno-info to dialogue with friends and guests alike.

Appendix A: Translation of Dodoth Place-Names

Dodoth Place-Name	Literal Translation	Idiomatic Paraphrase
Lowakuj	'place where God has fenced'	Holy Fence Top
Kakamar	'place of elders'	Old Man Mountain
Kalapata	'flat, open place'	Flat Back
Kalotwo	'place of gourds'	Gourd Garden
Kamion	'place of fireflies'	Firefly Ridge
Kapalu	'bald place'	Smooth Top
Kapedo	'hollow place'	Hollow Hill
Karenga	'red place'	Big Red
Kasile	'place of loneliness'	Loner's Lane
Kepak	'place of the meat connecting the hips'	Hip-Bone Hill
Kidepo	'place of picking up (fruit)'	Calm Palm River
Komuria	'place of the duikers'	Duiker Den
Lobalarjit	'place of salt'	Salt Lick
Locom	'place of the baboons'	Baboon Bump
Lodoi	'place of sunset'	Sun Sleep
Lokinene	'hanging place'	Hang Up
Lokolia	'place of fish'	Fish Bottom
Lokwakaramoe	'place of [tree species]'	Acacia Alley
Lolelia	'place of the spring'	Spring Bottom
Lomusian	'place of thorn trees'	Spine Slope
Lonjoromit	'place of small stream'	Crick Drip
Lotim	'place of hair'	Hairy Hill
Lowala	'place of patas monkeys'	Monkey Mound
Loyoro	'place of harvesting white-ants'	White-Ant Camp
Moroto	'place of the python'	Python Playground
Morukori	'giraffe-like mountain'	Spot Slope
Morunjole	'bald mountain'	Bald Top
Nacakunet	'place of throwing down'	Throw Down
Naitaa	'pointed place'	Sharp Stack
Timu	'place of relaxing'	Green Dream