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A NOTE ON "LA"

by M.E. Kropp*

1. Numerous and widely scattered places in the Ga-Adangme territory have names involving a stem la or le. For example, Gā la, lagma a hill at the western limit of the Ga coast, lafibi a deserted site near Sakumofio lagoon, legon the site of the University of Ghana, lenfi a quarter of Teshie; Adangme lakpleku just north of Old Ningo, lasibi-kpo an island in the Volta near Kpong, ladoku, laga and lawe-ekpo in Shai, lanə in Osudoku, lenom in Shai, lekponunə between Ningo and Ada. la and le are also common elements in personal names; Ga lai kotei a historical personage, lale, lawote, laakpa the Labadi deity, legble a Teshie deity of Adangme origin; Adangme lawe, lamuede, layo, lalo, lanmes, ladze, laako, lamle, late, lanə, lenee, lasi, lasiki.

It is generally believed by both Gas and Adangmes that la and le are in some sense the same name, and that the geographical and personal names containing this element perpetuate the name of an ancestral ethnic stock. It is the purpose of this note to use linguistic evidence a) to indicate that the identification of la and le is historically correct, and b) to shed a little light on the etymologies of certain geographical names which have given rise to considerable speculation.

2. Ga lai: Adangme le.

It was suggested by Wilks (page 14) that the e of le in lekponunə (the name of a village on the coast near Ada) is the result of a sound change in the vowel; that is, that in this word (only ?) a has changed to e in Adangme. In a sense, this is

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correct. It is demonstrable that in Adangme there has been a change of *ai to ɛ. Ga still retains the ai. For instance, Ga fai: Adangme sɛ 'Shai', Ga fai: Adangme pɛ 'hat', Ga mlai: Adangme mɛ 'tick'. It may be said therefore that the Adangme name lɛ is probably a reflex of *la-i. That is, the name "La" (like several other nouns) was sometimes followed by a suffix *-i. The combination *la-i became lɛ in Adangme, but not in Ga. The form la still occurs in Adangme, in words in which the suffix *-i was not present. Evidently the lɛ of lɛ-gan 'La hill' and lɛ-n-fɪ is an import into Ga country from Adangme.

Although not very common, the form lai occurs in certain Ga names, e.g. lai kotei. Old documents mention an important town between Prampram and Ada, which is spelled "Lay", "Laye" or "Ley". Ogilby (Map) spells it "Lay", as does Barbot (page 185). Dapper (page 303) spells it "Ley". This suggests the pronunciation lɛi, spelled "lay" in English but "ley" in French. This is a plausible reconstruction if it is assumed that at the time these people wrote, the *a had become ɛ before *i, but the suffix *-i had not yet been dropped. A place marked "Laidoku" appears on early nineteenth century maps (Wilks page 113).¹

3. "Labadi".

The town, now part of the Accra urban area, which is called la in Ga, drew at least a segment of its founding settlers from old "Lay", whence its name. In English, but not in Ga or Adangme, it is called "Labadi". The precise origin of this name has been a source of some puzzlement. Also associated with the area is the name bone, as in la bone, now the name of a secondary school and a housing estate. The meaning of bone is also somewhat obscure, but according to Field (page 142) this was the name of one section of the Gas, "the Gā Boni, or La, people". This

name is apparently the source of the speculation that the Gas originated at Bonny in Nigeria (e.g. Field page 200).

It is fairly certain that there has been a change of *d to n in Ga (and also in Adangme) when the *d was followed by a nasal vowel *ẽ. The nasality of the vowel itself was then lost. There is documentary evidence for this change in Proffen's (1764, page C4) spelling of the word for 'hand', "dindẽ" (i.e. *didẽ), modern Ga nĩne.² It is likely that, like nine, bone contains the nominal suffix *-dẽ.

Roemer (1760, page 49) spells "Labadi", "Labode". This spelling suggests that the second vowel may have been *o.

On this basis, it is suggested that the English "Labadi" is a corruption of the eighteenth century Ga form, *la bõ-dẽ, of which la bone is a direct and regular descendant. In the light of this analysis, the resemblance to "Bonny" appears spurious.

4. "Ada" and "Adangme".

The etymology of the word "Adangme" (Ga), "Dangme" (Adangme) has puzzled several people. Both Pupilampu (pp. 14-18) and Wilks (pg. 114) suggest that adã, adãã is derived from la. Wilks goes further to suggest that adãme is from *alã-bi. The linguistic evidence is strongly against these derivations. First, there is no evidence for an Adangme change of *l to d. The nasal vowel might provide the condition for such a change, since l in Ga and Adangme does not occur before nasal vowels, except in the position C V. However, the nasal vowel is itself irregular. There is no evidence whatever for an Adangme change of bi to gbe (to me). Also, the tones are wrong, i.e. lã-bĩ but adãmẽ. We therefore conclude that la and adã are not related names. There is also non-linguistic corroboration for the dissociation. Tradition³ makes a clear distinction between the four original tribes

of Ada, the Akan and Ewe tribes that joined them near Ada, and the Les of Lekpoɔnɔ, who came ultimately from Sega, near Kpone, and were also Adangme speaking.

A more popular etymology is quoted by Pupilampu (pg. 12) in which "Adangme" is derived from Ewe. In Ewe, ada is the name of Ada, the place, and is also a noun meaning 'courage'. Gbe means 'language'. Ada-gbè means "Ada language" in Ewe, and is in common use with that meaning. Derivation of adaŋmè from ada-gbè, with nasalization of gb after a nasal vowel, is linguistically acceptable. As Pupilampu points out, this implies that the Adangmes adopted the Ewe term for their language and derived their ethnic name from that (so dangme-li, "Ada-language people"), and this in turn implies very close association between the two groups.

On the other hand, one of the four original Adangme clans of Ada is called dangmɛbɔwe. Since these four clans are said to have arrived at Ada as recognizable units (viz. fn. 3) the clans must have formed before arrival at Ada. Although it cannot be directly proved, it seems likely that they had the same names then as now. There is a strong possibility, therefore, that the name dangmè was in existence before the group associated with the name became associated with the place called Ada. If the names "Ada" and "Adangme/Dangme" may be associated at all, it is very likely that the latter name was derived before the former was attached to the place that presently bears it. In the present state of linguistic knowledge, the safest position is to regard the word dangmè as unanalyzable.

The rising final tone is a characteristic of Ewe nominals, but not of Ga-Adangme ones. It is likely therefore that the place name ada is in fact an Ewe word. That the two ethnically important place names lovo and ada are Ewe supports the traditional contention (Wilks pg. 106; viz. fn. 3) that Ewe-

speaking peoples were in the Osudoku-Ada area before the Adangme-speaking peoples arrived. The fact that Dangmebiawer went from Lolovor to Ada, plus the folk-etymology associating the two names, probably explains why, although Adas associate the name "Dangme" with all Adangme-speaking people, Krobas and Shais tend to associate the name mainly, but not exclusively, with Ada people.

A further problem is posed by a name which appears in various spellings, as "Alempy, Alampoe, Lampi", and is used by Wilks to support derivation of adāme from la. Barbot (1732, pg. 185) mentions that Ningo "by the French, is called Lempi, and by the English, Alampoe", and he lists the villages of "Labade" as including "Great Ningo, Lay or Alempy". He also speaks (pg. 186) of "the country of Ningo, Alempy, or Alampoe". It seems quite clear that "Alempy" etc. were strictly European names for what in Adangme was called "Lay" (*|ɛi). Although in old European spellings "mp" or "mb" often indicates modern ɲm, this is not always the case, as the old spelling "Aqvamboe" for "Akwamu" indicates. It is suggested here that these names are European corruptions of names which contained a stem la or le, and probably a suffix "mpy" or "mpoe", the phonemic shape and meaning (or even the language - see fn. 1) of which is not known. They have nothing to do with either adā or adāme.

Notes

(1) It may be noted also that the Guan town of Larteh is called lete in Larteh (Guan), late in Ga. The author hopes in future to pursue linguistic aspects of the relations between the La and Guan-speaking peoples.

(2) The initial n of the modern word is the result of a different change, whereby nasal prefixes were assimilated to the following stem consonant. In this case, the plural form with

assimilated prefix has been generalized by analogy to the singular.

(3) From the transcript of an unpublished interview by Dr. E. O. Apronti with Nene Lomo II of Lomobiawer, Ada. I am very grateful to Dr. Apronti for allowing me to use this valuable material.

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