

# On the origin of the placenames in the Old Provinces

## Foreword

Below is a translation of the introduction to “On the Origin of the Placenames in the Old Provinces”, a document written by the 14th demicentury<sup>1</sup> Tralyeo scholar Shamphayër Norkeon. After a lengthy and very interesting introduction, translated below, he gives a list of all the placenames —names of cities, towns, hamlets, going all the way down to settlements of only one or two families, even including some noteworthy names of valleys and natural places— he studied. The introduction is a general overview of all the different kinds of etymologies he encountered, with ample examples that would be an eye-opener to anyone familiar with these names but ignorant of their origin.

A major issue in the translation was, of course, how to transcribe the Trayeum proper names appearing in the text. The pronunciation of the language changed a lot over time, and was at times very fragmented due to the lack of regular contact between different regions. I have strived to reflect the pronunciation from the time of Norkeon, and of all the different dialects and accents that existed at that time I —quite naturally— chose the one that can be gleaned from Norkeon’s own writings. This basically amounts to the accent of the imperial capital Gël. However, when spelling out the pronunciation of words, it seems like Norkeon quite systematically chose not to reflect the reduction of unstressed vowels, which was most probably present in his speech —as exemplified by the occasional error in his transcriptions. Furthermore he also tends not to show stop glottalisation, a phenomenon that was most probably already quite widespread —at least in the region of Gël. Thus, I will write *Chiunyòm-bèt Kreol* rather than —more closely reflecting Norkeon’s actual pronunciation— something like *Chiunyamba Kreol*.

One should know that the so-called Old Provinces are a very mountainous region, which was unified under the theocracy of the earth goddess Trai in prehistoric times. One major event in the history of the empire is the invasion by the plains empire centered around the city of Khlv —or Huf in Trayeum. This invasion eventually led to the defeat of the plains empire at the hands of a defected plains soldier named Kvandar of the Gul-Yentel tribe —usually simply called *Kvandar* in later Trayeum. Both empires were then unified under the authority of the earth goddess Trai. The year of the invasion is usually taken as the beginning of the calendar. In the years following the war the beginning of a script was devised by —or maybe rather just under the supervision of<sup>2</sup>— Kvandar of Gul-Yentel. This script was later further developed to become the standard way of writing the Trayeum language.

Footnotes are annotations aiming to clarify further points that might be otherwise problematic to the terrestrial reader not well-versed in the study of the planet of Tralyeo.

1. It interests many people what the meanings and origins of names are. Not only parents who want to give their children apt names, but also to scholars who like to learn about the history of words and names. Therefore, much research has been done, and is still being done, to uncover more knowledge in that domain. Let me just mention the very interesting work of Wuntsikëni Gërëf on the names of the rivers in the Sur river delta, which seem to stem from a variety of different local languages, many of them, alas, extinct. And it should be quite scandalous if I were

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<sup>1</sup>Due to Trayeum’s septenary counting system, long time periods are typically counted in periods of 49 years, called *èrmyau*.

<sup>2</sup>Official history has it that he had the help of someone called Tsankl —the keeper of a cock-fighting bar in Khlv— and his second son Nzhwltsr. Usually it’s Kvandar and Nzhwltsr —pronounced Ènzeutsër or Ènzultsër in Trayeum— who get the credits for the invention of the script, but Tsankl —or Tsankël— is credited with having the original idea. It is not possible to establish how large a role each man played.

to forget the wonderful work of Hëlvas Waramër, who has compared all the different ways parents name their children in the different tribes and peoples making up our Empire.

My work is more modest in nature than that of Waramër, as I limit myself to the placenames in the Old Provinces —from the settlements in the Jewel in the south to the scattered villages in the Broken Mountains in the north, from the westernmost hamlets in the Ochre Land and the Southern End<sup>3</sup> to the hardy settlements in the formidable God Mountains.

I do not go beyond these limits. North of the Broken Mountains lie the lands of the Korom-rëndë, and therefore all names are from their own language; this makes a study of their names simply a study of their language, which is another endeavour altogether. The same goes for the province of Gaisu beyond the God Mountains. A very interesting study would be to study the names existing beyond Gaisu, as, as is well-known, the region there is very rich in different peoples, making for a wonderful variety of languages and different names. One has but to read the work of Waramër to appreciate that, or else look at Èundzutas Zhulyan’s “About the Tribes Living in the Hilly Countries”.

**2.** As a first category of placenames from our Provinces, of course, we have the likes of Gël,<sup>4</sup> Kaunt<sup>5</sup> and Nunuts,<sup>6</sup> which seem not to mean anything in particular. Names such as these ones are old names in our language, which have probably been given to us together with all the rest of our language when God<sup>7</sup> deemed us, mere *dzëh*,<sup>8</sup> worthy of language. If these names meant anything specific originally, the meaning has been lost with time.

Then, there are names that obviously mean something. A well-known city of this kind is, of course, Greungshuh.<sup>9</sup> Near there is the city of Suchai, the meaning of which is obvious when reading the characters.<sup>10</sup> Recent settlements often have such names, such that most placenames in the God Mountains or in the Great Wall will need no explanation. Some, however, may contain elements unknown to many people, such as Gunyonk,<sup>11</sup> where the second character was once used to mean “ford”,<sup>12</sup> or they might contain strange elements, such as is the case with Verng Valley.<sup>13</sup> This last name comes from the name of the founder, who was called Verng<sup>14</sup> because he was the fifth child in his family.

With some such names the original meaning might be obscured. For example, Nyás<sup>15</sup> clearly means “water”,<sup>16</sup> even though it is nowadays written with a different character. The same goes

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<sup>3</sup>The Southern End is named such because it is the southernmost point one can go following the imaginary line separating the mountain ranges of the Old Provinces and the desert plains west of them. Beyond the Southern End the mountain ranges turn west by northwest, thus making the Southern End really the “southern end” of that stretch of desert.

<sup>4</sup>The capital of the Empire.

<sup>5</sup>A town northeast of Gël. In later times this name has been conjectured to be related to *èunt*, meaning “hill”, through some ablauting process that lost all productivity before historical times.

<sup>6</sup>A smallish village near Gël.

<sup>7</sup>Norkeon sometimes follows the then very new tendency to just call Trai “the God” or “God”. He received some criticism due to this, as it was by some deemed “unprecise” for an author as diligent and precise as Norkeon to talk just about “God” in what was essentially a polytheistic society.

<sup>8</sup>The name of the species inhabiting Traleyo in the Trayeum language. Sometimes Traibu is encountered as a synonym, although this last name strictly speaking only denotes the followers of Trai or the inhabitants of the empire of Trai.

<sup>9</sup>This is where the major spaceport of the planet is. The name means “mountain river”.

<sup>10</sup>The name comes from *suts*, “to rise”, and *shai*, “sun”. The pronunciation has undergone some assimilation, but the spelling —the Trayeum script being etymological— still keeps the two components separate.

<sup>11</sup>A town near the Whitehaired Mountains.

<sup>12</sup>The first one is, in isolation, pronounced *guin* and means “cold”. The village of Gunyonk is actually named after a ford through the Gunshuh, literally “Cold River”.

<sup>13</sup>A settlement in between the Broken Mountains and the Threehead Land.

<sup>14</sup>*Verng* means nothing but “five”.

<sup>15</sup>A merchant town at the end of the Little Wall, in the region where this range starts to give way to the God Mountains.

<sup>16</sup>Also pronounced *nyás*.

for Ras,<sup>17</sup> which was in Chiunyòmbèt Kreol’s dictionary<sup>18</sup> written as BRUSHWOOD.<sup>19</sup> It must be noted, however, that sometimes one might come at wrong conclusions taking this kind of reasoning too far. The city of Ngaits,<sup>20</sup> for example, happens to have the same pronunciation as *ngaits*,<sup>21</sup> which has led to local lore claiming that the village was founded where Ngaits-Chubarn, one of the many sons of Vreogwant,<sup>22</sup> landed after his father, angry of some issue or other, grabbed him under the armpits and threw him away as far as he could. However, the two characters appear at completely different places in venerable Kreol’s dictionary, meaning that their original pronunciation and, therefore, their origin was completely different.<sup>23</sup> What *Ngaits* means, is not known to us.

**3.** Another kind of names are names that were given by peoples speaking other languages. Placenames in Gaisu<sup>24</sup> and in the lands of Koromrëndë<sup>25</sup> north of the Broken Mountains, for example, will often have a meaning in the respective local languages. But even nearer to Gël one should mention the Busëk, who have preserved their ancestral language long contact with Trayeum notwithstanding.<sup>26</sup> The name of their main town, Lyèkemëter, means nothing but “bridge over the Lyèk” in their tongue.

More surprisingly, perhaps, are Sar<sup>27</sup> names. The town of Hërmbe near the White-Haired Moutains got its name from the Sar word for “new mountain village”, while Tsuksegëlrèf means nothing but “miner’s place”. These are settlements of plainspeople who immigrated into the Old Provinces after Kwandar unified mountains and plains. Similarly there are several villages on the plains that have Trayeum names, founded by people who went the other way. In the same vein, Nakëni<sup>28</sup> comes from *Sanakana Kënyi*,<sup>29</sup> which is “the new village of Nakana” in the Gaisu language, which is similar to the still-existing town of Sanakana. The name was shortened with time. Nakana is, of course, no-one but Dzenai Drak.<sup>30</sup> In the north several, Koromrëndë settlements also have such names. One will note that these names often have no characters to write them with, as they were never important enough, or because they were founded after the invention

<sup>17</sup>A village at the northwest and at some distance of Gël.

<sup>18</sup>Chiunyòmbèt Kreol compiled his dictionary approximately seventy years after the invention of the script by Kwandar and Ènzeutsër. It gives all—or at least it claims so—characters in use at that time, with their various meanings and uses. Even though the language and the script both changed considerably in the centuries to come, the dictionary remains of utmost interest to linguists as the characters are ordered by their phonetic reading, thus giving a way to reconstruct the pronunciation of the ancient language in the time before the invention of the phonetic script.

<sup>19</sup>The current consensus on Ras is that this interpretation is a folk etymology. Chiunyòmbèt Kreol’s dictionary mentions a city written with the character for “brushwood”, which probably is Ras, but no other attestation of this particular spelling is known.

<sup>20</sup>A hamlet at the northern end of the Whitehear Mountains.

<sup>21</sup>Here Norkeon writes the character for “armpit”. One should note that in many dialects from Norkeon’s time this character would be pronounced as *ngwaits*, as can be seen from learning notes from the time.

<sup>22</sup>A mythical hero. His name literally means “Ironarm”. Mark that Ngaits-Chubarn, whose name means “Armpit-Boy”, is not part of any legends surrounding Vreogwant, nor is he even known outside of the village of Ngaits.

<sup>23</sup>Based on their place in the dictionary, the original pronunciations are reconstructed to be *\*bm<sup>w</sup>e:lts* for the city and *\*zn<sup>w</sup>ajts* for “armpit”. This also fits with the regional pronunciation of “armpit” in dialects that have preserved the labialisation of *\*zn<sup>w</sup>-* while losing it in *\*bm<sup>w</sup>-*.

<sup>24</sup>The province at the other side of the Emerald Mountains from the Old Provinces. Before the expansion of the empire centered on the plains, Gaisu was a vassal state of the Trai empire, but was then conquered by the army of Khlv.

<sup>25</sup>A conglomeration of tribes sharing a language. A tribe with a similar language exists on the plains, and is also often called Koromrëndë due to their lack of a name of their own.

<sup>26</sup>It seems that this language finally died out half a century after Norkeon compiled his work on placenames. Shëbarnkre Maikë, writing half a century after Norkeon, mentions in her work on this language that she spent five days in Lyèkemëter searching for someone able to speak it correctly.

<sup>27</sup>The main language of the plains. Originally it was the language of the region around the confluence of the Sur and Finj rivers, subsequently becoming the language of the empire centered around the city of Khlv.

<sup>28</sup>A smallish town in between the Whitehaired Mountains and the God Mountains.

<sup>29</sup>The correct name in contemporary Gaisu would be *Shanákan Kinyi*. Due to long language contact, the old town of Shanákan is known as Sanakana in Trayeum, which is probably why Norkeon writes this form.

<sup>30</sup>Drak One-Eye. The legends of Nákan/Nakana and Drak have completely separate origins, but due to certain similarities they have been linked with one another, and very often stories featuring one of them will be attributed to the other one, leading to the popular consensus that they are one and the same person.

of the letters,<sup>31</sup> which were then deemed sufficient. Sëgzwashchë is a noteworthy exception on this. It was originally a Koromrëndë settlement of plainspeople,<sup>32</sup> the name meaning “little hamlet” in their language.<sup>33</sup> As Gnwès the poetess<sup>34</sup> spent a lot of time near that village, making many friends in the region, she invented a character to write the name of the town with. This is also the reason why this is one of the only characters in our language with such a long pronunciation.<sup>35</sup>

Names that were exceptionally pleasurable to investigate were the likes of Pizatakakhal and Fëzaufënginyasa. Names like these are quite common in the White-Haired Mountains, and they date from the time when the ancient empire of Khlv invaded Gaisu. A great many people fled the wars and settled at the other side of the God Mountains, resulting in a region with many a Gaisu name. Some settlements, however, were given names mixing the Gaisu language with Trayeum. Pizatakakhal, for example, consists of *pizha*, which means “village”,<sup>36</sup> and a Gaisu pronunciation of *tòchal*.<sup>37</sup> Fëzaufënginyasa, on the other hand, means “house at the Ginyasa” in Gaisu,<sup>38</sup> where “ginyasa” is just water.<sup>39</sup>

4. And then there are names coming from forgotten tongues. In days of old, in the times after we received the gift of language, our Provinces contained many more different languages than today. Trayeum, originally, was only spoken around Gël, which is also the region where most nonsensical Trayeum placenames are found. Use of Trayeum has spread with the expansion of the religion of Trai and with the administration of the Empire, similarly to what happened with Sar in the plains. Many tribes and peoples abandoned their ancestral languages and started speaking Trayeum. This fact can be lamented, as it has led to the death of a gripping linguistic variety, but one must admit that it considerably simplifies communication among the different regions.

The cities of Threehead Land give many nice examples. In former times, this region was inhabited by a people that called itself Hánkretsa, and the descendants whereof still live there, although they have abandoned some of their barbaric practices<sup>40</sup> to follow the way of God. The name of the city Nondzalëpsëk, for example, means “gift to God” in the ancient Hánkretsa language, while Këtrërbonskhrek seems to be named after its founder Bonskhrek, *këtrër* meaning “wall”. In ancient documents, the name of Nondzalëpsëk was often written GIFT\*-DIVINITY\*,<sup>41</sup> which illustrates the etymology very well.

Closer to home it seems that the language of the Naifya also survived until recent times, giving rise to names such as Gnombëndzwavë,<sup>42</sup> meaning “copper spring”. This town is often also called

<sup>31</sup>With this, Norkeon means the phonetic writing system.

<sup>32</sup>One or several tribes of the Koromrëndë moved to the plains in prehistoric times, and strictly speaking the term Koromrëndë should not be applied to them, as they now form a different people, albeit with a similar language. However, due to the difficulty of finding a satisfactory name for these plains tribes, the name Koromrëndë is often used to denote them regardless.

<sup>33</sup>*Thik zvaskli* in the original. Mark that the name is badly bastardised, mainly due to recent sound changes in Trayeum.

<sup>34</sup>Gnwès lived not long after the war unifying mountains and plains. She was one of the first writers in history, and has for long been considered the greatest. As during her life the script was not yet fully developed, her prolific writing played a key role in its shaping.

<sup>35</sup>The ancient Trayeum language being monosyllabic —or nearly so— results in most characters having a one-syllable reading. Most exceptions are words that got epenthetic vowels inserted. The second most numerous class of polysyllabic readings are loanwords that entered the language sufficiently long ago to have received a character of their own when characters were still routinely being invented. Later loanwords typically did not get their own characters assigned anymore, except, for example, in cases where the loan word replaced a native one and the character for the native word became free in the process.

<sup>36</sup>The retroflex sibilant was lost due to early borrowing into Trayeum, which originally did not distinguish different sibilant series. Mark also that, in the time of Norkeon, the word would have been pronounced *pèzha*.

<sup>37</sup>“Safe, secure”. The original pronunciation is reconstructed as *\*tòk'h'al*.

<sup>38</sup>In contemporary Gaisu this would be *fázau fën Ginyá*.

<sup>39</sup>*Nyás* in contemporary Trayeum. The reconstructed pronunciation is *\*gɲ'as*.

<sup>40</sup>Air burial and animal sacrifice are the two of those practices leading to the most revulsion among the Traibu and among “civilised” followers of Trai in general.

<sup>41</sup>Here Norkeon shows the characters that were used. They are basically the characters for “gift” (reconstructed pronunciation *\*hírint*) and “divinity, god” (*\*me:ɲ*), but with an extra sign added to mark that they should not be read according to their usual Trayeum reading. This extra sign was often used to write foreign names of which the meaning was known.

<sup>42</sup>A town at the northeast of Gël.

Taphalhwik, which is nothing but a translation of this meaning.

Other languages died out too long ago to be able to tell much about them. It is known that the city of Manchèsta<sup>43</sup> was named after Kahal,<sup>44</sup> but the name of the language or of the people who spoke that language are not known to us nowadays. Many features of this language can be recovered, however, by studying placenames, names of people and of their ancient gods which are still remembered in legend, and also of words the local population retained of their language when they switched to Trayeum and which they now still mix with Trayeum. Certain of these words are now even used in other places, such as *rutwa*<sup>45</sup> and *dawal*,<sup>46</sup> which most people even consider normal words, and have received characters of their own as were they real Trayeum. Nyeoskre Èmvrë made such a study of this lost language, and his work is fascinating to read.

5. Other languages were less fortunate and disappeared with hardly a trace. The villages Sëkadazdrai and Liblëzdrai<sup>47</sup> exemplify this perfectly. It is clear that the suffix *-drai* must have meant something in some language of old, but that is all one can say of it.

Names in this last category are sometimes the most difficult ones to classify. In the direction of the Land of Trai from Gël there is a region with many names such as Aurukana and Aidëmalasè, or like Mëreurengèk and Rètèpshakrai. The first two of these are quite similar, and these two places are also near to each other, suggesting that they come from one and the same language. The same goes for the second pair.<sup>48</sup> But when confronted by a name like Tè, which is a town somewhere in between the two pairs, and which has a sound that could fit either language, one can but guess what its origins are. In this case, the work of Taredèpshám can shed some light. She extensively studied the traces left by the language once spoken in Mëreurengèk and Rètèpshakrai, and she discovered that much agricultural vocabulary in our language is of the same origin, such as the words *nòpòp*<sup>49</sup> and *hèntwai*.<sup>50</sup> With all this knowledge put together, it seems that Tè cannot be of the same origin, because it does not fit the pattern of the words and placenames identified by Taredèpshám.<sup>51</sup> In many other regions, however, the original languages never spread wide enough, or did not leave sufficient traces for other reasons, for such a strategy to work. One will therefore find many placenames in my list with no origin given at all, or sometimes just a guess.

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<sup>43</sup>A city very close to Gël, already enclosed in the region where Trayeum originated.

<sup>44</sup>The Sun goddess. Traditionally, the female aspect of the divinity of the sun was called Mantë, which is probably of the same origin as the name of this city.

<sup>45</sup>“Broken”. In the region around Manchèsta this word is pronounced *rutuwa*, which probably comes closer to the original pronunciation.

<sup>46</sup>“Hello”.

<sup>47</sup>Two villages near the Heumpòr river, at some distance east of Gël. The first name has later been linked to the boy’s name Kadai, which is quite common in the region, while the second one seems to be related to “Liblë”, the local name of the Heumpòr river, which the locals still used for a long while even after switching to Trayeum, and which still seems to see occasional use even now.

<sup>48</sup>Also of note is the fact that the stress is on the first syllable in the first two names, while it is on the ultimate one for the last two.

<sup>49</sup>“Windmill”, of the type as they are typically used in irrigation.

<sup>50</sup>“Terracing field”.

<sup>51</sup>The argument is that the sound / $\varepsilon$ / cannot appear word-finally in loans from that language. It appears that the language distinguished checked and free vowels, with checked vowels only appearing in closed syllables.