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 lɛ .   For example, Gã la, laŋma a hill at the western limit of the Ga coast, laʃibi a deserted site near Sakumofio lagoon, legɔŋ the site of the University of Ghana, lɛnʃi 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, lanɔ in Osudoku, lɛnom in Shai, lɛkpoŋunɔ between Ningo and Ada.   la and lɛ are also common elements in personal names; Ga lai kotei a historical personage, lale, lawote, laakpa the Labadi deity, lɛgblɛ a Teshie deity of Adangme origin; Adangme lawɛ, lamuede, layo, lalo, laŋmɛɛ, ladzɛ , laako, lamle, late, lanɔ, lɛɲɛɛ , lasi, lasiki.

It is generally believed by both Gas and Adangmes that la and lɛ 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 lɛ 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 lɛ .

It was suggested by Wilks (page 14) that the ɛ of lɛ in lɛkpoŋunɔ (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 ɛ 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 ʃai: Adangme sɛ 'Shai', Ga fai : Adangme pɛ 'hat', Ga mlai : Adangme mlɛ '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-gɔɲ 'La hill' and lɛ -n- ʃi 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 bɔne, as in la bɔne, now the name of a secondary school and a housing estate. The meaning of bɔne is also somewhat obscure, but according to Field (page 142) this was the name of one section of the Gas, "the Gã Bɔni, or La, people". This

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

It is fairly certain that there has been a change of *d̲ to
n̲ in Ga (and also in Adangme) when the *d̲ was followed by a
nasal vowel *ẽ̲. The nasality of the vowel itself was then lost.
There is documentary evidence for this change in Protten's (1764,
page C4) spelling of the word for 'hand', "dinᵭe" (i.e. *didẽ),
modern Ga nı̃ne.[2]   It is likely that, like nine, bone contains
the nominal suffix *-dẽ̲.

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

On this basis, it is suggested that the English "Labadi"
is a corruption of the eighteenth century Ga form, *la̲ bo̲-dẽ̲,
of which la̲ bo̲ne 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 Puplampu (pp. 14-18)
and Wilks (pg. 114) suggest that adá, adãá is derived from la̲.
Wilks goes further to suggest that adã̲ŋme is from *alã̲-bi. The
linguistic evidence is strongly against these derivations. First,
there is no evidence for an Adangme change of *l̲ to d̲. The
nasal vowel might provide the condition for such a change, since
l̲ 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 ŋme). Also, the tones are wrong, i.e. là-bĭ but dã̲ŋmè.
We therefore conclude that la̲ and adã̲ are not related names.
There is also non-linguistic corroboration for the dissociation.
Tradition[3] makes a clear distinction between the four original tribes

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

A more popular etymology is quoted by Puplampu (pg. 12)
in which "Adangme" is derived from Ewe. In Ewe, adá is the
name of Ada, the place, and is also a noun meaning 'courage'.
Gbe means 'language'. Adá-gbὲ means "Ada language" in
Ewe, and is in common use with that meaning. Derivation of
ádáŋmὲ from àdá-gbὲ, with nasalization of gb after a nasal
vowel, is linguistically acceptable. As Puplampu points out,
this implies that the Adangmes adopted the Ewe term for their
language and derived their ethnic name from that (so daŋme-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 dáŋmēbɾāwε. 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 dáŋmὲ 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 dáŋmὲ 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 adáá is in fact an Ewe word. That the two ethnically
important place names lɔlɔvɔ and adáá 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, Krobos 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 adãŋme 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" (*lɛi). Although in old European spellings "mp" or "mb" often indicates modern ŋm, 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 lɛ, 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 adã or adãŋme.

Notes

(1)   It may be noted also that the Guan town of Larteh is called lɛtɛ in Larteh (Guan), latɛ 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. D. 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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