

## An Overview of al-Ḥallānīya Place Names

**ABSTRACT** This paper presents a selection of 30 place names of the island of al-Ḥallānīya in the Kuria Muria archipelago. These data have been obtained by means of elicitation during a semi-structured interview with one of the most prominent elders of the island. Firstly, the scant historical data on the toponomastics of the islands are presented. Subsequently, 25 out of the 30 items are analysed both grammatically and etymologically, and a tentative English translation is provided for each of the analysed place names.

**KEYWORDS** Modern South Arabian, Kuria Muria, Hallaniyat islands, Jibbali, Shehret, field research

The toponomastics of al-Ḥallānīya, the only inhabited island in the Kuria Muria<sup>1</sup> archipelago (officially known as Ġuzur al-Ḥallānīyāt), is a field which received possibly less attention than the understudied Jibbali/Shehret dialect spoken by the islanders. Indeed, there are records of a good deal of speculation about the origin of the toponym Kuria Muria (Buckingham 1830),<sup>2</sup> as well as that of the other names by which the archipelago has been known: Zenobian islands in the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* (Schoff 1912: 34), Male and Female islands in Marco Polo's *Milione*

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1 Arabic spelling kūryā mūryā. Also spelt kūryān mūryān, xūryā mūryā and xūryān mūryān.

2 'By Kurian-Murian would be meant the islands of Kurian and others around it: as it is common in Arabic, Persian and Hindoostanee, when speaking of several things of the same or a similar kind, to add a word exactly like the name of the thing expressed, except it always begins with an M, as Bundoock-Mundoock, for musket and all accoutrements thereto belonging; Barsun-Marsun, for plates and dishes, and all the other tableware' (Buckingham 1830: 434). It can be added here that this figure of speech, akin to paronomasia, is also commonly found in the languages of the Mediterranean-Balkan area. The following examples have been collected by the present author: Turkish *saç maç* 'hair and the like,' Bulgarian *водки модки* 'vodka and other liquors,' Italian *'cazzi e mazzi* 'various things' or 'various annoyances.'

(Cliff 2015: 283–284). In addition to that, Pliny the elder, in his *Naturalis Historia* lists a great number of islands in southern Arabia and provides the names by which they were known to him: among these, we find a few islands that match the position and physical characteristics of the Kuria Muria islands, such as Chelonitis, Deuadae and Dolicae (Holland 1847 VI: 149). In spite of this, no mention of internal place names of the archipelago can be found in the published literature.

The data presented here proceed from a fieldwork session carried out in April 2017 with a Jibbali/shehret speaker from al-Ḥallāniya, who also provided the text published in this volume (Castagna 2022: 245–253). During a semi-structured interview, the conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee was steered by the interviewer towards the names of specific places in al-Ḥallāniya, which were subsequently elicited with the aid of a physical map of the island. Unfortunately, it was seldom possible to determine the precise location of the places named by the informant, due to his unfamiliarity with maps. However, the place names presented in this paper have been double-checked and confirmed by another collaborator of the present author, who has tribal ties to the island and is considerably more familiar with maps.

The above-mentioned fieldwork session yielded 30 place names, which are listed in Table 1.

The present paper aims at carrying out an etymological analysis of the lexical items which make up the place names and, for the sake of clarity, providing a translation of their meaning. The tentative results thus obtained serve as the means of elaborating on the phonological, morphological and lexical peculiarities of Kuria Muria Jibbali/Shehret encountered, in contrast to mainland varieties.

Firstly, it must be pointed out that al-Ḥallāniya is colloquially referred to as *e-gizírt ſamkés ayó* ‘the island where people are’ by its inhabitants. This probably speaks to the fact that the island in question has been the only inhabited one in the archipelago

TABLE 1. Al-Ḥallāniya place names.

1	xīzót ē-zǧar	11	e-nhúr e-rḥót	21	xīzót ē-ǧafēnót
2	xīzót ē-ǧet	12	rēš eb	22	ḥār īnhít
3	xīzót ē-ger <sup>a</sup> béb	13	rēš ē-gemǧút	23	Rəhúr ē-ḥaṭót
4	xīzót ēḥált	14	rēš məḥábət	24	rēš ē-ktennitə
5	xīzót ē-sáʿaf	15	śaḥāṭót	25	ǧót āśáʿt
6	xīzét et-tōḥ	16	xīzét ṭaḥlún	26	xīzét ēl-lennót
7	ḥār ēk-keddót	17	xīzét mištót	27	xīzét ē-tardót
8	ḥār axléf ~ aḥléf	18	xīzét oḥūr	28	ḥār ē-sizōḥ
9	ǧadét aǧyót	19	fǧká ē-zǧif	29	ḥār ē-delatí
10	nəhúr hendí	20	xīzét āśré ~ ātré	30	nhúr e-delatí

for a rather long time. Secondly, not all the place names collected are of interest: one of the names islanders use for the main settlement, *maḥāl*, is clearly an Arabic loan-word (*maḥall* ‘place, location’).

Most of the place names above contain fixed elements: *ḥēr* ~ *ḥār* ‘mountain, hill’ (JL: 111), *n(a)hūr* ‘river, wadi,’ probably ultimately akin to Arabic *nahr*,<sup>3</sup> *ḡadēt* ‘depression on a mountain’ (JL: 83), *ḡōt* ‘deep hole, depression’ (JL: 80), *reš* ‘head’<sup>4</sup> (JL: 201), *fōká* ‘rain pool’ (JL: 55), *ḡayn al-māʔ aḡ-ḡaḥla aš-šaḥīḥa al-miyāḥ* ‘a shallow and scarce watering place’ (MLZ: 713). As for *xīzēt* ~ *xīzót*, it is a term that in spoken Jibbali/Shehret tends to be used to signify ‘place,’ although this seems to be a recent development, as *Jibbali Lexicon* does not mention it<sup>5</sup> and the *Muṣṣam lisān Ḥufār* (MLZ: 307) defines it as *al-xaliḡ aš-šaḡūr*; *aš-šaḡīʔiʔ ar-ramlī al-wāqīʔ bayn ḡabalayn/minṭaqatayn* ‘a small inlet; a sandy beach located between two mountains/areas.’ The two variants may be either singular/plural, or diminutive/non-diminutive respectively. The variant *xīzót* fits into the feminine diminutive pattern (Johnstone 1973: 99; Dufour 2016: 44–45), but *xīzēt* does not seem to correspond to a masculine diminutive pattern, which, in the case of the root *x-l-y*, would yield *\*xīzé*.

These place names frequently feature a genitive exponent *e-*, which normally coalesces with the definite article *ε-* ~ *e-* ~ *i-* ~ *a-* and triggers the elision of /b/ and /m/ at the beginning of a term (Rubin 2014: 308–309): i.e. *ḥār ēnhīt* < \**ḥār e-e-mānhīt*.

Having provided a description of the fixed elements involved, each place name will be now analysed singularly:

- 1) *xīzót ē-zḡar* contains the term *zḡar*, which is described in the *Jibbali Lexicon* as ‘kind of bitter, peppery cactus which in an emergency can be chopped up for camel fodder’ (JL: 316). Hence, the place name in question can be translated approximately as ‘place of the *zḡar* cactus.’
- 2) *xīzót ē-ḡet* can safely be interpreted as ‘place of the sister’ (JL: 90; MLZ: 683).
- 3) *xīzót ē-ger<sup>a</sup>béb* contains the term *ger<sup>a</sup>béb* ‘the plain between the sea and the mountains in Dhofar,’ which appears in the *Jibbali Lexicon* as *gerbéb*<sup>6</sup> (JL: 78).
- 4) The second element in *xīzót ēḡált* is likely the result of the intervocalic elision of /m/ of *\*e-meḡált*, which can be derived from Arabic *maḥalla* ‘place of residence’

3 The *Jibbali Lexicon* (JL) does not list this term.

4 In the case of place names, this is best translated as ‘cape.’

5 However, compare *xalé* ‘empty place, something empty; loneliness’ (JL: 301) stemming from the same root *x-l-y*.

6 Without the intrusive vowel /ə/ which occurs widely in KM, and does not trigger the elision of /b/ (Castagna 2018: 135–137).

(Wehr & Cowan 1976: 199). Hence, the interpretation of this place name as ‘settlement place’ seems rather unproblematic.<sup>7</sup>

- 5) *xīzót ē-sáfaf* contains the term *sáfaf* < *sáfab* (see Castagna 2022: 250), which means ‘valley, watercourse’ (JL: 244).
- 6) The second element in *xīzét ēt-t5h* may be considered as a nominal form derived from the root *t-b-h* ‘to swing, to wander off’ (JL: 281). Hence, this place name may be interpreted as ‘place of the wandering.’
- 7) *hār ēk-keddót* exhibits a second element which reflects a feminine diminutive form of *kidéd* ‘long hill, long ridge’ (JL: 125). Thus, this place name can be interpreted as ‘mountain with a little long ridge.’
- 8) There are two possible interpretations of *hār axléf* ~ *ahléf* (for /h/ < /x/ (see Castagna 2022: 251): it may be either a nominal form derived from the verbal H-stem of the root *x-l-f* meaning ‘to change, to transhume’ (JL: 299), or an unattested term derived from the same root, but more semantically akin to the term *mixizéf* ‘deserted place’ (JL: 299).
- 9) The second element in *gadet agyōt* is a diminutive form of *gām* ‘flood’ (MLZ: 684). Thus, it can be translated as ‘flooded depression.’
- 10) While *nāhūr hendí* (literally ‘Indian river’) is rather unproblematic etymologically speaking, this unusual denomination calls for further investigation.
- 11) The second element in *e-nhūr e-rhót* is, in all likelihood, a diminutive form of *erhít* ‘beautiful’ (JL: 210). Thus, this place name may be interpreted as ‘the beautiful little river.’
- 12) *reš eb* literally translates as ‘big cape.’ The informant who double-checked the present data affirms that this place is also called *ras kabír* in Arabic.
- 13) *reš e-gemgút*, whose second element means ‘skull’ (JL: 76), translates as ‘cape skull.’
- 14) As for *reš maḥábəṭ*, its interpretation is less straightforward: the second element seems to be a participial form derived from the root *h-b-t* whose basic meaning is ‘to swell’ (JL: 102). The non-occurrence of the intervocalic elision of /b/ (Castagna

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7 The speaker affirms that this place is located in the vicinity of the harbour, where, in actuality, the main settlement of the island is found.

- 2018: 114–115) points to the presence of an intrusive vowel between C<sub>2</sub> and C<sub>3</sub>, but similarly to *hóboṭ* ‘swell at sea’ (Castagna 2018: 227), it seems not to be there. This place name may be translated as ‘swollen cape’ or ‘cape swell.’
- 15) *śahāṭṭ* is undoubtedly related to the term *śebḥaṭat*<sup>8</sup> ‘sperm whale.’ However, it is not clear whether this form should be considered a diminutive (Johnstone 1973) or a plural form.
- 16) The second element in *xīzét ṭahlún* is related to *ṭ-h-l* ‘residue’ ‘mud’ (JL: 276; MLZ: 578), with the agentive suffix *-ún* suffix (Rubin 2014: 36). The place name can then be loosely translated as ‘place full of mud.’
- 17) *xīzét mištót* contains a problematic second element: the root *š-k-w* ~ *š-k-y*<sup>9</sup> carries the basic meaning of ‘sword’ (JL: 314; MLZ: 488), hence *mištót* would fit into an *m*-prefixed place pattern<sup>10</sup> and might indicate a ‘place of swords’ or more broadly speaking, a ‘weapon storage.’ However, this term is not attested in the available corpora.
- 18) *xīzét oḥūr* contains the element *oḥūr* which should be interpreted as < \**e-moḥūr*. This means ‘raindrops dripping off the trees and bushes’ (JL: 111), and a similar meaning is reported by the *Muṣḡam lisān Zufār* (MLZ: 267). Therefore, this place name may be interpreted as ‘place of raindrops.’
- 19) *foḳá ē-zḡif* can be quite transparently translated as ‘spring of abundance.’ However, it must be noted that, besides ‘abundance,’ the term *zḡif* can also mean *an-nasīm al-ṣalīl* ‘a gentle breeze’ (MLZ: 414).
- 20) The second element in *xīzét āsréb* ~ *ātréb*<sup>11</sup> bears witness to the large number of ticks found on the island. This place name can be interpreted as ‘place of ticks.’
- 21) *xīzót ē-dafēnót* contains a second element which would be unidentifiable in Jibbali/Shehret. However, a clue for its identification comes from the neighbouring Baḥari language, in which *dafēnót* indicates a species of small shark.<sup>12</sup>

8 Informant’s personal communication. JL and MLZ do not report this term.

9 Compare Mehri *aškay* (ML: 394), Hobyot *škí* (Nakano 2013: 83), Soqotri *ško* (Leslau 1938: 416).

10 This pattern is attested in Jibbali/Shehret (and in MSAL at large), albeit less frequently than in Arabic.

11 From the root *š-r-b* (JL: 254; MLZ: 508). Cf. the cognate Arabic root *š-r-b* ‘to drink.’ For the fluctuation between /š/ and /t/, see Castagna (2022: 246–247).

12 Fabio Gasparini’s personal communication.

- 22) *ḥār ʿnhít*, whose second element must be interpreted as a definite form < \**e-māhít* ‘the poor man’ (MLZ: 887), translates as ‘mountain of the poor man.’
- 23) *nāhūr ʿ-ḥaṭṣt* is rather problematic: the element *ḥaṭṣt* seems to be a diminutive form stemming from *ḥ-s-b* > *ḥasbé* ‘*Cucumis Sativus*’ (MLZ: 239; Miller and Morris 1988: 122), with /t/ < /s/, and although it must be pointed out that *Cucumis Sativus* is not present on al-Ḥallānīya, another closely related species, *Cucumis Prophetarum*, can be found (Gallagher 2002: 64). Thus, the use of *ḥ-s-b* for *Cucumis Prophetarum* on the part of al-Ḥallānīya islanders is not far-fetched.
- 24) *reš ʿ-ktennītā* does not raise any major interpretation issue, as the second element *ktennītā* is the feminine sound plural of كُنُس, meaning *al-baqq* ‘cimex, bed-bug,’ from the root *k-t-n* (MLZ: 787). Similarly to *xīzét āsréb ~ ātréb* (see above), this place name speaks to the widespread presence of parasitic insects on the island. This is confirmed by Michael Gallagher’s survey of the island, which reports a large number of ticks of the *Ornithodoros muesebecki* species, as well as an unidentified member of the *Solifugae* camel spiders (2002: 29).
- 25) *gṣt āsáft*. The root *m-s-ʿ* has two basic meanings: it can indicate both a ladder/stairway and a type of pot for the storage of butter (MLZ: 870). Given the proximity of this place to the main harbour<sup>13</sup> and, hence, the settlement, its interpretation as ‘butter storage’ seems to be sensible.

As for the remaining five items in the list above, namely *xīzét ʿl-lennót*, *xīzét ʿ-tardót*, *ḥār ʿ-sízóh* and *ḥār ʿ-delatí* (and the closely connected *nḥūr e-delatí*), it was not possible, at the present time, to identify their meaning with an acceptable degree of certainty. It goes without saying that the unrecorded historical events of the island (both from a linguistic and a cultural point of view) might easily account for the presence of obscure place names.

One cannot fail to notice an extensive presence of diminutive forms in the toponomastics of al-Ḥallānīya. Currently, however, the semantics of the diminutive in Jibbali/Shehret (as well as in other MSAL) lacks a proper description: Johnstone (1973: 98–99) and Watson (2012: 62) are the only partial accounts of certain properties of the diminutive in these languages.

The *raisons d’être* of some place names analysed in this paper are obscure, despite their being relatively transparent etymologically, and raise questions with regards to the unwritten history of the island: for example, *xīzót ʿ-ger ʿbéb* (a reference to the plain north of Salalah) and *nāhūr hendí*.

<sup>13</sup> Informant’s personal communication.

Overall, most of the items analysed at this time can be reliably traced back to Modern South Arabian lexical roots (and Semitic in general), although some of them (especially those whose meaning could not be found at this time) call for further study involving other lexical strata of the wider region.<sup>14</sup>

To this end, a thorough *in loco* linguistic and anthropological survey of the islands (al-Ḥallānīya in the first place) must be carried out. In all likelihood, this will shed light on the meaning of the place names which have been left undescribed in the present paper, and yield more data.

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## Abbreviations

- JL JOHNSTONE, THOMAS M. 1981. *Jibbali Lexicon*. London: Oxford University Press.
- ML JOHNSTONE, THOMAS M. 1987. *Mehri Lexicon and English-Mehri Word-List*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies.
- MLZ AL-MAŠŠANĪ, AḤMAD BIN MAḤĀD. 2014. *Mušgam lisān Zūfār. Ġabalī-Ṣarabī faṣiḥ*. Bayrūt: s.n.

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<sup>14</sup> I.e. Arabic, Epigraphic South Arabian and pre-documentary Malagasy (Castagna 2018: 235–256).

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