

The donkey in East Africa

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This paper will explore the possibilities and the challenges comparative historical linguistics poses for the domestic donkey (*equus asinus*) from a perspective of the Cushitic languages (East-Africa) and how they influenced languages of neighboring language families i.e. (East) Bantu, (Southern) Nilotic, Ethiosemitic, and Omotic, as these language families have very likely borrowed words that came to mean 'donkey' or 'fool' and perhaps even 'deaf' in different stages.

Cushitic languages are spoken in East-Africa and the Horn of Africa and are traditionally sub-classified into four main branches: Agaw (or: Central Cushitic), Beja (or: Northern Cushitic), Eastern Cushitic and Southern Cushitic (Tosco 2000). The domestication of the donkey probably took place in or close to these regions (Todd et al. 2022). The basis of this paper is to be found in Cohen (1951) in which a possible link between several terms for 'donkey', 'fool' and 'deaf (person)' is suggested throughout several language families of languages of East Africa. In reconstructing Proto-Cushitic, Ehret (1987) mentions the root *dikw'- 'donkey' on the strength of two reconstructed roots in Proto Southern Cushitic and Proto Agaw. Among the Eastern Cushitic languages, regular reflexes of Proto Cushitic *dikw'- 'donkey' seem to mean 'stupid' or 'fool'. For Proto Eastern Cushitic, on the other hand *harr- 'donkey' is reconstructed by Sasse (1979). Similarly, the Proto Eastern Cushitic root *harr- for 'donkey' can be connected to words meaning 'female camel' in other Cushitic languages. The field of historical linguistics can benefit from this research as it will shed light on previous and prehistorical migration patterns and contact situations among the peoples of East Africa, particularly those contact situations that are no longer present today. Similarly, it can provide evidence of where a widely used animal, the donkey, was likely to be domesticated.