SHENOUDA OR SHENOUTE OR EVEN SHENOUTI?

‘Shenouda’ is a common name for boys in Coptic communities. It has always been popular. The much-loved late Pope Shenouda (1971 – 2012), the 117th Patriarch of Alexandria, made it even more popular. In Coptic language, the name is written as ‘\(\text{\textgreek{y}n\textgreek{p}t}^\text{\textgreek{t}}\)’, sometimes as ‘\(\text{\textgreek{y}n\textgreek{p}t}\)’ or ‘\(\text{\textgreek{c}n\textgreek{p}t}\)’, but never as ‘\(\text{\textgreek{y}n\textgreek{p}\textgreek{t}}\)’. The etymology of the name shows that it is originally Egyptian and means “Son of God” [‘\(\text{\textgreek{y}n}\)’ meaning ‘son’, and ‘\(\text{\textgreek{p}t}\)’ meaning ‘God’].

Even though the orthography of the name in Coptic is agreed on, there is a dispute between two camps on how it should be pronounced. What is the right way to say the word? Recently, there has been a debate on the right phonology of the name between two Coptologists on Wikipedia: the American Stephen Emmel and the Coptic American Hany N. Takla. Emmel is an expert on the famous archimandrite of Atripe, in Upper Egypt, who is the most famous of all Copts who have carried the name in dispute, and who lived in the 4th/5th centuries (c. 347 – 465).1 Emmel published in 2004 a reconstruction of the literary corpus of the archimandrite in two volumes titled “Shenoute’s Literary Corpus”.2 Takla is also an eminent Coptologist with an interest in the archimandrite of Atripe; and, in 1987, he published a book, titled “St. Shenouda the Archimandrite - His Life and Times”.3

Even from the title of their publications, one can detect that Emmel and Takla use different pronunciation of the name of the Atripe archimandrite, based on how each interpret its correct pronunciation: Emmel uses ‘Shenoute’ while Takla uses ‘Shenouda’.

The debate was public, and arose round the Wikipedia article, “Shenoute”.4 Takla commented on the orthographic form used in the English Wiki article, which is meant to be pronounced as it is:
“The name ‘Shenouda’ reflects what I understand to be the proper pronunciation of the name Shenoute in Coptic, where the ‘t’ and the ‘e’ are. There is ample evidence in manuscripts from the past several centuries in Coptic that substantiate this pronunciation scheme. However there was a change in the pronunciation to bring it in line, incorrectly as it may be, with the Modern Greek. In such a new system, the ‘t’ is a ‘t’ and the ‘e’ is an ‘e’.

Takla, in effect, is suggesting changing the headword of the Wikipedia article from Shenoute to Shenouda. To Takla, the Coptic ‘\textit{\textsc{\textgamma}\textsc{\textepsilon\textnu\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron\texttau}†}’ should be written in a way that reflects how it should be pronounced: that is, ‘Shenouda’ and not ‘Shenoute’. Takla is a staunch supporter of what is known as the Old Bohairic Pronunciation System of Coptic. This system was strongly promulgated by Emile Maher Ishak in a 1975 Oxford University PhD thesis. In his thesis, Ishak studied several medieval and modern manuscripts, and phonetic representations of Coptic sounds from the same periods, and concluded that the pronunciation system of Coptic that had been adopted by the Coptic Church since the 1850s, under Pope Cyril IV (1854 – 1861) – a system termed ‘Reformed’ (or ‘Greco-Coptic or Neo-Bohairic or just Modern) – is inaccurate. Before the 1850s, there were differences within the Coptic Church on the sound values of some Coptic letters, particularly its vowels. Pope Cyril IV wanted to standardise their phonology; and he resorted to the help of a prominent expert in Coptic language, Iryan Affendi Jirjis Muftah, who assigned the Coptic letters in dispute the same sound values of Modern Greek. In the Reformed System, ‘e’ is pronounced as ‘e’, and ‘t’ as ‘ti’, and therefore ‘\textit{\textsc{\textgamma}\textsc{\textepsilon\textnu\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron\texttau}†}’ should sound as ‘Shenouti’ in English script, and ‘شَنُوْتِي’ in Arabic script (there seem to be no dispute about the rest of the letters in the name). This is, of course, different from what it should be spelled in the Old Bohairic system: ‘Shenouda’ in English, and ‘شَنُُدَآ’ or ‘شَنوْدَآ’ for ‘Shenouda’ in Arabic.

Emmel disagreed with Takla’s comment, and writes in response:

“The spelling ‘Shenouda’ (or ‘Shinūdah’ etc.) represents the medieval and modern Egyptian Arabic pronunciation of Shenoute’s name. In the oldest sources (in the Sahidic dialect of Coptic), his name is spelled either \textit{\textsc{\textgamma}\textsc{\textepsilon\textnu\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron\texttau} =} ‘Shenoute’ (which is the spelling that English-speaking scholars mostly use, although one finds also ‘Shenute’) or \textit{\textgreek{\textomicron\textnu\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron\textupsilon}} = ‘Sinouthios’ (which was the Greek form of Shenoute’s name and a form that he himself sometimes used; in earlier scholarship this Greek form was often Latinized as ‘Sinuthius’). Later Coptic sources (in the Bohairic dialect of Coptic) spell his name \textit{\textsc{\textgamma}\textsc{\textepsilon\textnu\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron\texttau}†} = ‘Shenouti’. The headword of this article should certainly remain ‘Shenoute’.

Emmel, in a way, says that ‘Shenouda’, rather than being an original pronunciation of ‘\textit{\textsc{\textgamma}\textsc{\textepsilon\textnu\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron\texttau} † †}’ or ‘\textit{\textsc{\textgamma}\textsc{\textepsilon\textnu\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron\texttau}†}’ is a corruption of the original pronunciation found in “the oldest sources” – a corruption introduced into the Coptic tongue in the Middle Ages and carried out into modern times. It wasn’t so in the classical period of Coptic history in which the archimandrite of Atripe lived. He gives three orthographic forms of the archimandrite’s name, one in Coptic, ‘\textit{\textsc{\textgamma}\textsc{\textepsilon\textnu\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron\texttau} †}’, which sounds as ‘Shenoute’; one in Greek, ‘\textit{\textgreek{\textomicron\textnu\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron\textupsilon}}’, which sounds ‘Sinouthios’; and one in Latin, which sounds as ‘Sinuthius’. None of these forms sounded anything close to ‘Shenouda’.

Who is right? In the following articles, I shall try to study the matter further; and as I am doing this, I shall into the matter of the authentic sound value of Coptic letters in the classic period. The conflict...
created by the camps on either side that fought over the proper phonology of Coptic letters has caused a lot of confusion; and, in my opinion, has slowed the speed with which we can revive Coptic.

1 His leadership of the monastic congregation started in c. 385 until his death at the age of 119 years. To get to know the Atripe archimandrite better, click here.
2 The two volumes were published by Peters Publishers: Emmel S., Shenoute’s Literary Corpus. Volume One Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Subsidia ; Corpus Scriptorum Christ, 599; and Emmel S., Shenoute’s Literary Corpus. Volume Two. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Subsidia ; Corpus Scriptorum Christ, 600.
3 Hany N Takla, St. Shenouda the Archimandrite: His life and times (Los Angeles, 1987).
4 See the debate in Wikiwand here.
5 Takla says his opinion is based on his findings which he explained in his book, St. Shenouda the Archimandrite - His Life and Times. I have not been able to find a copy of his book to study this further. His comment was made under the user name Htakla 22 October 2009, at 15:31 h (UTC).
6 The title of Ishak’s thesis is, ‘The phonetics and phonology of the Bohairic dialect of Coptic and the survival of Coptic words in the colloquial and Classical Arabic of Egypt and of Coptic grammatical constructions in colloquial Egyptian Arabic’. To access its four volumes, go here. Even though, Ishak is seen as the leader of this group, a few people preceded him in writing about it, including George Sobhy and W. H. Worrell.
7 Manuscripts in which Arabic text is transcripted in Coptic orthography, or the other way round.
8 See the article about Muftah in the Clermont Coptic Encyclopedia here.
9 It seems that Emmel was the author of the Wikipedia article on Shenoute. He added his comment on 3 September 2011.