

Rethinking Indigenous Languages: Drivers and factors influencing the disappearance of indigenous languages. Reflections from the Ogiek community in Kenya.

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Abstract

"Language is ourselves and the storage of our information. It is a tool to link and inspire the future generation". These words were spoken by an old Ogiek woman (*nda'sat*). Our old folks passed on traditions and culture of hunting and gathering to us (the new generation), but now things are changing. The old language is disappearing. Young men are shunning the village life and are migrating to urban areas for education and jobs. Preserving the indigenous language in such a situation is tricky, but it calls for putting measures in place to recognize language diversity, promote and value speaking of indigenous languages as a means of community expressions with acceptance that all languages are equal and none is superior to the other.

Key words: Ogiek People; indigenous languages; traditional knowledge; Kenya.

Resumo

"A língua é o que somos e é onde guardamos nossa informação. É um instrument para conectar e inspirar a geração futura". Essas palavras foram ditas por uma anciã Ogiek (*nda'sat*). Nossos anciões nos transmitiram tradições e a cultura da caça e coleta, mas agora as coisas estão mudando. A língua antiga está desaparecendo. Os jovens estão abandonando a vida na aldeia e migrando para as áreas urbanas para buscar educação e

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empregos. Preservar a língua indígena neste tipo de situação é difícil, mas nos impele a posicionar medidas para o reconhecimento da diversidade linguística, promover e valorizar a comunicação nas línguas indígenas como um meio de expressões comunitárias, com a aceitação de que todas as línguas são iguais e nenhuma é superior à outra.

Palavras-chave: Povo Ogiek; línguas indígenas; conhecimento tradicional, Kênia.

“Language is ourselves and the storage of our information. It is a tool to link and inspire the future generation”. These words were spoken by an old Ogiek woman (*nda'sat*). Our old folks passed on traditions and culture of hunting and gathering to us (the new generation), but now things are changing. The old language is disappearing. Young men are shunning the village life and are migrating to urban areas for education and jobs.

In schools they are subjected to official languages or national languages at the expense of their indigenous languages. The official languages were once the language of colonization, which carries very little as far as African language and traditions. Indigenous languages, especially of the minority and indigenous communities, are getting extinct due to the influence of colonial languages, as well as languages from the dominant neighboring communities.

Indigenous languages are repositories of knowledge held by the communities. The traditional knowledge on conservation and sustainable use of the forest resources, ecological knowledge, handicraft production, and traditional medicine, are all anchored in the indigenous languages. The knowledge and value associated with biodiversity is in the language passed on down the generations. For instances, it is known that an Ogiek healer can name hundreds of medicinal plants in the forest, which they take as a natural hospital for various remedies of various diseases.

The loss of the language would therefore mean the loss of knowledge and values for biodiversity, and what would follow, then, is a catastrophe of biodiversity loss and increasing negative effects of climate changes.

Some vital aspects like the customary values held by members of the community are challenged upon language loss. For instance, aspects such as greetings by bowing one's head and a touch have no equivalent in colonial languages. Language signals, associated with practices such as hunting, cultural and religious rituals, immediately fade away with indigenous language loss. Translating these aspects is difficult and almost impossible.



Figure 1. Ogiek medicinal plants, hunting and honey gathering tools named in Ogiek language.

Main threats to our language

A threat to indigenous language is a threat to the identity of a community, as well as their culture. Indigenous communities, which are known to possess unique ways of life adapted to their environment and values, continue losing their identity due to the gradual loss of their language as a result of constantly speaking the language of dominant ethnic groups (neighbours). The influence of dominant groups in territories of indigenous communities suppresses the indigenous language and reduces its use. The loss of language means loss of identity, which is the most important element of an ethnic group in the world.

Preserving the indigenous language in such a situation is tricky, but it calls for putting measures in place to recognize language diversity, promote and value speaking of indigenous languages as a means of community expressions with acceptance that all languages are equal and none is superior to the other.

Further, indigenous communities have a role of preserving their language through innovative initiatives involving the community. One of the initiatives amongst the indigenous Ogiek people of Kenya is the involvement of young and college students in folk writing competitions using the indigenous languages. These resulted into back and forth discourse with community elders who are well versed with the knowledge. With this initiative, we have

been able to document prayers, poems, songs and stories of moral lessons for our generations to come.

One of the main languages of instruction in Kenyan schools is English, which is a colonial language. A child is taught the language from early childhood to teenage and through adulthood in college and universities. For over 16 years of education, most citizens are programmed to colonial language at the expense of their mother tongue. To rescue the indigenous language, would call for incorporation of the indigenous languages into the national educational curriculum to provide for learning of the indigenous languages, especially by the children during their early childhood education. In this sense, the government should recruit, hire and engage indigenous communities to find the best ways to promote use of indigenous languages. Teachers who teach in indigenous languages should be promoted.

Globalization, urban development and migrations are also threats to indigenous languages. These elements affect indigenous communities and especially young people who are influenced by the new languages. For instance, in urban centers and major towns there are new “sheng”² languages which the urban community uses. Anyone in the urban areas is subject to use the business language, which often is not indigenous.

How could we preserve our languages in such situations? I suggest the creation of indigenous languages learning centers, small community libraries, for example, where people can access to literature materials, audio and video to promote the learning and use of indigenous languages.

Sharing experiences

The folktale writing competition in Ogiek language that took place in February 2019, by Ogiek organization, enabled several youths to participate in the writing Ogiek folktales relating to nature. This catalyzed the Ogiek language research and the language is being revived. Young Ogiek are engaging in social media discussing Ogiek language elements, including vocabularies, meanings and phonetics and language structures. This is scaling up into a series of folk tale contests. Artists are also supported by emerging songwriters in the indigenous language. In 2019, Ogiek observed the UNESCO Year of Indigenous Languages through their cultural festival which focused on language.

² Sheng is a mixed Swahili and English-based language originating among the urban underclass in Kenya, and influenced by many of the languages spoken in the urban areas.

Ichumuun koogilenee?

***This is one of the questions they keep asking,
To them, our beautiful language doesn't make sense,
This generation! How do we solve this!***

***If they don't know that "ichumuun" is "speed up",
How will they know that girls are not supposed to shake hands with their dads?
Who will teach them to know that?
Ama kila kitu sasa ni kubahatisha? (we are lost to scampering on our language)
It is so painful that we don't have our stand.***

The poem by Lesingo Winnie (2019) highlights the challenge by the young Ogiek population that they don't have the grasp of basic words and the risk of losing great things that come with understanding their indigenous language.

Language and politics

Language is a major tool not only in education and economics, but also in politics. For many times, the language of the dominant or the majority has determined the social economic and political equations. The inclination to the language of the dominant, i.e. colonial language, is linked to proximity to favorable political and resource allocation terms.

The dominant language groups take the lion share of resources most of the time. It happens that their language is their strength, as it influences resources negotiations. The minority indigenous groups are not exposed when it comes to education, but rather linked to their customs. Economically, indigenous people obtain minimal resource allocation from the government as opposed to dominant communities, who have stronger voices and representation in the government.

Historically, indigenous people have been marginalized and now struggle to get their rights recognized.

Language and women

In Africa, the role of teaching language and speaking is mostly reserved for mothers. Since women spend a greater portion of time dedicated to child development, they play a major role in language learning and identity. The women leaders in society, the midwives, mothers and grandmothers are the best custodians of the language, and their role is crucial in de-colonization and language revival.

Language and artistic expressions

There are traditional folk songs praising the magnificent blessing of nature to the community in the forest, the serenity and abundance of nature gifts such as honey, the flower plants, beautiful landscapes comprising of hills, plains and valleys. In recent times, many songs highlight land degradation, deforestation and climate change as processes that have pushed the community to the bitter end. In one of the songs, it is noted that with the loss of forest and biodiversity, the future generations wouldn't know much about the environment, they won't be able to relate with it any better.



Figure 2. Ogiek women singing a traditional folk song in efforts to preserve their language.

Colonial languages: strangeness and silence

Colonial languages are my second language. In spite of it being taught in schools and colleges and it being a business language, it is still a challenge for many people to use it. It is still a rather strange language that everyone is forced to learn and communicate.

In assemblies, parliaments and official gatherings, it is obvious to see very few make contributions while the majority remains mum, not because they don't know, but they

rather retain their ideas than expressing themselves with difficulty in a foreign language that in the end they seem less informed.