

Yaaku and Ma'á: An Endangered Language and the Way Out

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Abstract

The Yaaku have shifted from an East Cushitic language to Maasai (East Nilotic) and are presently interested in revitalizing their language as part of a process of emancipation due to changed socio-political circumstances. There are too few speakers left to hope for a successful revitalisation of the language as it was. Another strategy may be more realistic: create a Yaaku language based on Maasai grammar with insertion of Yaaku words. The Ma'á or Mbugu who arguably originate from the Yaaku, took that path in creating their own language which functions fully for the purpose of a strong expression of their identity.

The Yaaku of Kenya and their Language

The Resurrection of the Yaaku

The Yaaku form a relatively small group of people who live near Doldol, a village near the town of Nanyuki in North Central Kenya, in an area known as Laekipia. Only a handful of people speak Yaaku and all Yaaku speak Maasai as their first language. The Yaaku a.k.a Mukogodo Maasai have formed an association, one of whose main aims is to save their language. In my view this is one of the remarkable outcomes of the United Nations' attention to indigenous peoples and the growing concern about endangered languages. For decades the Yaaku people have lived as a group within the Maasai, adjusting to Maasai language and culture but not acquiring equal status within the Maasai community. In the Maasai view they remain people of a lesser sort as a consequence of their (former) mode of existence as hunter-gatherers. Thus, for the better half of the last century the Yaaku have had a vested interest in being indistinguishable from the Maasai. Their renewed pride in Yaaku ethnicity has been brought about by a new social context of the modern Kenyan and international world. A number of factors are of importance: first, cattle ownership, though still the major source for self-respect in the Maasai society, is not deemed to be a higher aim in life in the wider Kenyan society in which the Yaaku function; second, the ridicule of smaller communities with pre-modern modes of existence is no longer endorsed by the national and international establishment; thirdly and most importantly, the recent changes in Kenyan politics and the discussions about a new constitution have seeded hope for the possibility of communal ground rights for the Yaaku people of the forest in which they live which is presently under government protection. The perceived economic prospects that are linked to such rights have caused the Yaaku to seek ways of securing them.

The History of Yaaku Studies

In 1963 the famous linguist Joseph Greenberg published an article on the Yaaku language. The title of the article is telling: "The Mugogodo, a forgotten Cushitic people" (Greenberg 1963). At that time already the Yaaku were in decline. Greenberg acquired his data second-hand: he has never been among the Yaaku. He based his analysis on Hobley who in 1910 had published an ethnology of the Kamba people and other tribes. The words that Hobley had published as Yaaku were recognised by Greenberg as solid evidence for the fact that these people spoke a Cushitic language. Greenberg classified Yaaku as an East Cushitic language (Greenberg, 1966). The only serious description of the Yaaku language is by Bernd Heine (Heine 1975). In the period 1968-1970 he paid regular visits to the Yaaku area and worked for some time with a Yaaku speaker in Nairobi. His research was interrupted but in spite of that, his description is rich. Heine presents a social and sociolinguistic background of the Yaaku including notes on their history, a phonological inventory, nominal and verbal morphology and an English-Yaaku lexicon of about 900 items. During Heine's times there were about twenty speakers left. The anthropologist Lee Cronk and his wife Beth Leech have done extensive research among the Yaaku since 1985 and this has resulted in a large number of publications, see for example Cronk (1989, 2002). Matthias Brenzinger carried out sociolinguistic and botanical research among the Yaaku. Brenzinger et al. (1994) contains information about Yaaku botanical terminology, many terms being Mukogodo Maasai but their work includes 200 non-Maasai and presumably original Yaaku lexemes. Brenzinger (1992) contains a detailed and interesting discussion of remnant Yaaku vocabulary in their present Maasai speech, specifically in the area of bee-keeping. Heine and Brenzinger (1988) show the influence of Samburu on the Maasai dialect that the Yaaku speak. In January 2005 I visited the Yaaku area on invitation of the Yaaku association in the company of Jennifer Koinante, their spokesperson. We were accompanied by Matthijs Blonk, a filmmaker working for the Dutch Centre for Indigenous People NCIV and Hans Stoks, a Maasai expert, see Blonk et al. (2005). We spent one week among the Yaaku, guided by the board of the Yaaku association in order to establish the state of the Yaaku language and the feasibility of documentation of the Yaaku language and possibilities for revitalisation. Our findings are presented below in the section on the Yaaku linguistic situation. The

linguistic data that we gathered contain little that was not already reported in Heine (1975).

The History of the Yaaku

Heine (1975) and Brenzinger (1992) contain summaries of Yaaku history. The Yaaku were a so-called Dorobo group among the Maasai when they were first met with Europeans. Dorobo is a term used by the Maasai for groups that are poor, have no cattle, and that provide services for them, see Rottland and Vossen (1977) for an overview of such groups among the Maasai. In the same area there are several such groups. According to the oral tradition of both the Yaaku and their neighbours, the Yaaku were the first inhabitants of the Mukogodo forests and people still remember that they once lived in the caves and lived from hunting, gathering and beekeeping and wild homey collection. After the intrusion by the Maasai, Maasai became the dominant language of the area. A change in economy towards cattle keeping was accompanied by a shift in language towards Maasai (Cronk 1989). With this change the Yaaku inherited the Maasai negative attitude towards the Yaaku language. It is difficult to speculate about the history of the Yaaku prior to their presence in the Mukogodo area. The only clue we could possibly use is historical linguistics. The Yaaku language is classified as (Lowland) East Cushitic but the position of the Yaaku language within the genetic tree of Lowland East Cushitic is open to dispute. The nearest Cushitic languages nowadays are Elmolo and Rendille. Neither of these are particularly closely related to Yaaku. Rendille is in the Somali cluster and Elmolo, which, like Yaaku is on the brink extinction, is more closely related to Dasanech and Arbore, forming a continuum into Ethiopia. Blažek and Tosco have suggested closer links between Yaaku and Dahalo, a Southern Cushitic language spoken at Lamu island and on the coast opposite Lamu in Northern Kenya. Tosco (2000) summarises Cushitic subclassification and argues for the inclusion of Dahalo into East Cushitic but at the same time proposes a branch consisting of Yaaku and Dullay. The Dullay languages are spoken in Southern Ethiopia and this subclassification of Yaaku separate from Elmolo leads to a hypothesis of an early spread of pre-Yaaku into Kenya. Nurse has proposed that Dahalo was once spoken in Central Kenya, i.e. closer to the Yaaku speaking area. Yaaku and Dahalo seem to form the remnants of the earliest Cushitic presence in Kenya. This old Kenyan Cushitic branch possibly also contained the reconstructed now extinct Cushitic languages proto-Baz (Heine et al. 1979) and a language in Kenya's Taita hills (Ehret & Nurse 1981). The presence of a click in Dahalo has led scholars to speculate about an earlier shift from a language of hunter-gatherers to pastoralist Cushitic speakers (Nurse 1986) and even more speculative such an option could be entertained for the Yaaku, assuming pastoral activity when the pre-Yaaku speakers spread from Southern Ethiopia to Kenya. Archaeologists tend to correlate Savannah Pastoral culture with

Cushitic people which would date the presence of Cushitic people in Kenya at about 3300 years ago, see Ambrose (1981).

The Present Yaaku Linguistic Situation

The number of Yaaku speakers was already low when Heine worked on the language and at that time he could not find monolingual Yaaku speakers. In the 1980s there were approximately ten speakers left. When we carried out our survey in 2005 we met with three speakers who seemed to be confident about their competence in the language: Yaponay, a bright elderly lady who is raising her great-grandchildren with whom she actually uses Yaaku words. Nagunia, an elder who is reluctant to use Yaaku but is quite fluent when he does speak it and an old lady called Roteti in the village of Nadung'oro. All are nearing the age of about 100 years. In the generation below them there are some, not many, people who are able to speak some Yaaku, but not very naturally, and who can understand Yaaku. These include Stephen Leriman Letico and Jomo Lelendula near Doldol, and Kitime in Nadung'oro, and possibly more. For the rest the competence of most people does not go beyond remembering a few words. We arranged a conversation between some of the speakers and semi-speakers. This was probably the first Yaaku conversation that had taken place for decades. The speakers rarely meet each other and when they do they find it more natural to speak Maasai. In the remote village of Nadung'oro where Roteti is still a speaker of Yaaku, and Kitime a semi-speaker, the same applies. We have heard reports of other people who were not present during our stay or who live in a different part of Kenya who might still be able to speak Yaaku.

The Yaaku Language

Yaaku has a rich consonant inventory which I present in Table 1 below in an attempt at a proposal for a spelling following Swahili spelling conventions. The table differs from Heine (1975:34) in one detail: the ejective velar *k'* and the voiceless uvular implosive *q* do not seem to be pronounced differently anymore and have collapsed into one phoneme, here written as *q*. The pronunciation of *t'* and *ch'* is difficult for the semi-speakers but is still clearly ejective and distinct from *t* and *ch*. There is now an opposition between a voiced and voiceless trill, *r* and *hr*. The voiced stops are implosive.

p	t	ch	k	q	'
b	d	j	g		
	t'	ch'			
	s	sh	x		h
	l, r, hr				
m	n	ny	ng'		
w		y			

Table 1: Consonant phonemes in proposed orthography

Some examples:

t'	<i>t'eeho</i> 'charcoal', Swahili (Sw.) makaa
	<i>t'eeso</i> 'daylight', Sw. mchana
ch'	<i>moch'o</i> 'bone', Sw. fupa
q	<i>qee</i> 'hill', Sw. mlima
hr	<i>hreke</i> 'skin', Sw. ngozi
x	<i>xoopi</i> 'four', Sw. nne

Tone is distinctive, e.g. *qopé* 'finger' versus *qópe* 'fingers'. For the seven vowels I would suggest to underline the open *e* and *o*, reflecting the Maasai convention, and double vowels for length: *le'e* (*l[⊖]e'*) 'come', Swahili *kuja* versus *lee* 'hit', Sw. *kupiga*.

The Mbugu of Tanzania, an Example for the Yaaku?

The Mbugu (Ma'á) History

The Mbugu or Ma'á people live in the Usambara mountains in Tanzania. They are a people with a Cushitic origin but who now speak a Bantu language. In addition they speak a mixed language that consists of the grammar of their Bantu language but the vocabulary, and in particular the basic vocabulary, is different and partly of Cushitic origin. They once spoke a Cushitic language, shifted to the Bantu language and reinvented their old language in order to express their identity, see Mous (2003) for details. Interestingly the Mbugu (Ma'á) people claim to come from Lukipia, which must be identified as Laekipia, the area where the Yaaku are today. This claim is found in the first sentence of their oral history and such a claim of origin is usually not to be taken literally. One explanation for the mention of Laekipia could be the fact that they once formed a servant group among the Maasai and the Maasai of Tanzania spread from Laekipia, see Galaty (1993); and thus they copied it from the Maasai origin tradition. However, upon closer inspection of the oldest layers of Ma'á vocabulary, a close link between the Ma'á and Yaaku language cannot be ruled out. The following possible cognates have been proposed in Mous (2003:40):

Ma'á/Mbugu	Yaaku
<i>'ihlé</i> (aj) 'unripe, bad'	<i>'ihle'</i> (m) 'grass sp., pasture';
<i>gú</i> (v) 'uncover, come out'	<i>gu'</i> 'uproot' or Dahalo <i>gud-</i> 'remove'.
<i>ké</i> (v) 'put'	<i>kEY'E</i> (v) 'put up, plant';
<i>kó</i> (v) 'hear'	<i>ókó</i> 'voice, word'.
<i>kulelé</i> 'kid of goat or sheep'	<i>klllEh</i> 'castrated goat'
<i>ló</i> (v) 'have'	<i>lo'o</i> 'have'.
<i>nuḡa</i> 'nose'	<i>núka</i> possibly conflated with Iraqw <i>dunga</i> 'nose'.
<i>tú</i> (v) 'pound, dig'	<i>tuu'</i> 'pound'
<i>rú</i> (v) 'be ill' and <i>u-rukáo</i> 'illness'	<i>lu'</i> 'be ill', Dahalo <i>ruk'o</i> 'illness'
<i>wá</i> 'cow(s)'	<i>wáa'</i> 'cattle'

Table 2: Ma'á - Yaaku cognate candidates.

It is possible that the Yaaku and Ma'á are of a common origin.

The Mbugu Solution

The Mbugu created their own language in a way many people do when they feel the need to take conscious control over language, either for reasons of respect/fear or in order to create a distinct identity. Since language production is mostly an unconscious process, the methods at hand for the language manipulator are limited and include borrowing forms from another language, even one they hardly know, and by changing the word form of given words by truncation, adding meaningless material, reordering syllables and sounds. The Mbugu did a bit of both and often at the same time but most of their foreign material comes from a variety of languages that they were in contact with; mostly non-Bantu languages since the purpose was to differentiate themselves from the Bantu. The extra vocabulary was created primarily in the basic vocabulary and as a result the newly created language is indeed completely different and incomprehensible for their neighbours. It is not unlikely that a period of initiation helped to create a learning environment for the new language.

The situation among the Yaaku is now that there is a number of people who are eager to speak Yaaku again but who have lost the language. There is a group of speakers who remember the language but those who are willing to speak it and to help with the enterprise of revitalisation are purists. It is very understandable that people who search for the nearly lost language try to block out Maasai and speak "pure" Yaaku but at the same time this hinders the natural flow of words, the ease of conversation and rules out the option that the Mbugu took. In my view it would help if the semi-speakers felt free to speak Maasai with as many Yaaku words as they remember. This way they would have the power to engineer their own easier, and more easily

acceptable, variety of Yaaku. Those people who still speak Yaaku should ideally have more opportunity to speak together. In fact the most effective way of postponing the disappearance of the Yaaku language is probably to make sure that Yaponay can raise her great-grandchildren in Yaaku.

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