Markers of Ethnic Identity and Factors that Contributed to the Death of the Ngoni Language of Zambia

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***Abstract*: This paper examines some factors that contributed to the death of Ngoni language of Eastern province of Zambia. The study was carried out in Chipata town, the home district of Ngoni people. The paper also attempts to establish factors behind the vitality the Ngoni ethnic identity. A case study was conducted in a multi-ethnic community in which Ngonis were identified through their names and clans. A total of 25 participants were interviewed to elicit the participants' ability to speak Ngoni language and knowledge of their clan background. The data collection method was complimented by information from written sources about Ngoni language. It has been revealed that factors such as intermarriage between Ngoni people and Nsenga speakers coupled with migration and Christianity led to the gradual extinction of Ngoni language. Despite the language shift of ngonis to Nsenga and Tumbuka languages, Ngonis have maintained the vitality of Ngoni ethnic identity due to their strong cultural values and practices.**

***Key words*: ethnic identity, Ngoni, language death, intermarriage, assimilation**.

I. INTRODUCTION

In Africa in general and Zambia in particular, ethnicity or tribe is synonymous to language. Just like any other speech community in the world, one's mother tongue is the major marker of one's ethnic affiliation in the Zambian society. It is evident that a Zambian cannot claim to belong to a particular ethnic group whose language one cannot speak or understand. In this vein, Schmidt (2008) points out that it is clear that language is a crucial element of group identity and if a language does not give a *social identity* to the group, that language is at risk of dying out. According to Wolfgang (1988), language death occurs in unstable bilingual or multilingual speech communities as a result of language shift from a regressive minority language to a dominant majority language.

Language death and ethnic identity is not peculiar or uncommon to the Zambian linguistic landscape. Zambia has 72 languages and dialects (CSO, 2010) and Ngoni is one such a language regionally spoken in the Eastern province of Zambia. The Ngoni people of Eastern province of Zambia have undergone a transition phase with their language. There are several factors that have affected and threaten the vitality of the indigenous Ngoni language and these factors are intermarriage, modernity, commerce, education and globalization among others. The Ngoni speaking people came into contact with many different tribes as they migrated from Zulu land in South Africa. This social interaction with other tribes as they moved up to their present settlement is one factor that has triggered the extinction of the language.

When language dominance occurs, the elements of the dominated language can quickly be lost. Since the Ngoni speaking people were the minority among other languages in Zambia which had more dominance, their language became endangered. It is as the result of this dominance of the languages whose speakers the Ngoni assimilated that adversely affected the indigenous Ngoni language, (Kashoki, 1990).

The term Nguni or Ngoni is used to denote the peoples in the southeast coastlands of southern Africa who speak similar languages and who share some aspects of a common culture. The Zulu, the Swazi, the Xhosa and the Ndebele have been culturally and linguistically classified as Nguni. According to Barnes J. (1954), in classifying the Nguni, includes not only the Ndebele of Zimbabwe who broke away from the Shaka's kingdom of the early nineteenth century and who still speak the Nguni language, but also the Ngoni of Malawi, Tanzania, and Zambia (Barnes J. A, 1954). The Ngoni of Malawi, and Zambia are one of the several Nguni groups from the east coast of South Africa, who during the turmoil of "mfecane" resisted amalgamation into the Zulu kingdom under the leadership of Shaka son of Senzangakona, and marched northward as far as the lake region of central Tanzania.

Currently, Ngoni is one of the languages regionally spoken in the Eastern province of Zambia. It has been observed with keen interest that although the Ngoni people have lost their language, their cultural traditions are still very strong. This study attempts to establish factors that contributed to the death of Ngoni language and to investigate the social markers of Ngoni identity.

II. THE ORIGIN AND MIGRATION OF THE NGONI PEOPLE

The Ngoni (Nguni) people are an ethnic group found in the present-day Southern African countries of Malawi,

Mozambique, Tanzania, and Zambia. The departure and migration of the Ngoni people in the great Mfecane following the Zulu wars had serious impact in social reorganization and linguistic landscape in both north of Malawi and Eastern Zambia. The Ngoni history can be traced to have started as back as 1818 with the defeat of Chief Zwide who was chief of the Ndwandwe by Shaka's Zulu warriors. One of the significant tribes which fled from Kwa Zulu after this defeat was Zwangendaba's Jele tribe, who later became known as Ngoni. Chief Zwangendaba lived at Elangeni in today's Natal. He was a very short and energetic young man whose poet orators described him as, "Umfitshane onganyathel' ingubo, ingani ezabade bayazinyathela."

However, Chief Zwangendaba married two of King Zwide's sisters, namely Lompethu and her younger sister Soseya who was later gave birth King Mpezeni. Before leaving Ndwandweland for the north, Zwangendaba briefly settled in Swaziland where he had married Mnene Nzima, the woman who later became Prince M'mbelwa's mother. Fearing to be trailed by Shaka of the Zulu, Zwangendaba, fled north in 1819. Zwangendaba's followers started to use the name Ngoni which is a corrupted original name of Nguni. Over the next 20 years they had to find ways to survive. They had to fight other tribes on the way and steal food in order to survive. Because they knew Zulu fighting techniques the Ngoni could outrightly defeat any tribes that resisted their advance. The Ngoni like Zulu warriors were well trained. Langworthy (1972) explains that, the Ngoni took with them on their long migration both the social and political systems which had grown up in the area over a long period and recently developed and adopted Zulu military system.

At first the Ngoni settled in Mozambique where they found other group refugees who had fled from Shaka. The most important and largest group was under Shoshangane. Few years the Ngoni under Zwangendaba peacefully co-existed with Shoshangane people. By about 1830 however, Zwangendaba and Shoshangane had a dispute and the Ngoni decided to move on. Zwangendaba took with him not just his original Jele tribesmen, but other people as well who had fled from Shaka to join him and local captives who were assimilated into the Ngoni ranks (Langworthy H. W, 1972: 89-43).

Around 1830, Zwangendaba and his people crossed the Zambezi river and briefly settled among the Nsenga who they easily defeated and captured. However, after hearing of news about Mzilikazi's Ndebele military terror south of the Zambezi, the Ngoni did not want to settle near another strong military group, so they advanced further north and east into Malawi. Here and at other places father north in Malawi, the Ngoni added the Chewa and Tumbuka subjects to the already diluted ethnic population. Finally, Zwangendaba led his people into Tanzania, where they settled in Fipa country about fifty miles north east of Mbala, at a place called Mapupo, or Dreams, as it was the place which he had been dreamt of during the long migration, partly because it had many fine cattle. At Mapupo, after five or six years of settlement, Zwangendaba died in about 1848. For about 30 years he had been leading the Ngoni through a long migration of over two thousand miles with short and brief stops at various places in five modern countries, and numerous military encounters. Starting with possibly two thousand followers of Jele tribes, the Ngoni had successfully assimilated thousands of people of different cultures and languages who had been captured during the migration. The original refugees from Natal were undoubtedly vastly outnumbered by the new Ngoni. Both the original Ngoni and those who were captives were loyal to the Ngoni system and Zwangendaba's leadership (Langworthy, 1972: 90).

After the death of Zwangendaba the Ngoni state began to break up and one reason for this break up was the traditional social and political system, which involved continual segmentation of royal household; another was the large population. Probably the most important reason was the uncertainty of the succession to the thrown. The succession dispute which led to the establishment of a number of separate Ngoni kingdoms in Zambia, Malawi and Tanzania was largely due to the uncertainty as to who was actually Zwangendaba's kingdom heir. On Zwangendaba's death the two heirs, Mpezeni and Mbelwa, were both too young to become king so a period of regency was needed. There was a struggle for the regency between the supporters of Mpezeni and Mbelwa. This caused the first split in the state as the defeated regent for Mpezeni seceded and led his segment north into Tanzania. Another segment left at about the same time to settle in Tanzania, east of Lake Malawi. The main group was, under the regency of Mbelwa's supporter, moved south in about 1850 to settle in Mbala district in Zambia's Northern Province. It was probably at this time that the Ngoni wars with the Bemba began. Mpezeni remained with this main group for a few years until he was old enough to lead his followers away, though these were numerous they were not sufficient to outnumber Mbelwa's followers.

It took Mpezeni more than it had Mbelwa to reach the area of his final settlement in Chipata district. Mpezeni and his younger brother Mpelembe, spent about fifteen years in the Northern Province trying to defeat the Bemba. Together or separately the two Ngoni segments settled in various parts of Mbala, Chinsali and Mpika districts as they tried to conquer the Bemba from all sides. Finally the Mpenzeni and his Ngoni break-away faction settled in the present day Chipata where they conquered again the Nsenga who they assimilated into the Ngoni group.

The Mpezeni Ngoni of Chipata district, are offshoots of the northern Ngoni group. Naturally, all the people the Ngoni captured learnt to speak the Ngoni language. However, this assimilation proved later to be disastrous as soon as the foreign wives they married outnumbered the Ngoni husbands. Thus by the opening of 1900 it was evident that the Ngoni language was not being used by most people in the region and merely confined to the grandparent generation. Linguistically,

the Ngoni of Chipata district are in a predominantly Chinsenga and Chichewa speaking area. As a result, the Ngoni people speak Ngoni which has been influenced by these two languages, as John Barnes remarks: Three languages are used in the region: Ci-Ngoni, a language akin to Zulu, is now heard only in songs and royal praises; C1-Nyanja (Chichewa) is taught in schools and is used for communication with Europeans and Indians; while the normal language used every day in the villages is a dialect of Ci-Nsenga.

III. METHODS AND SOURCES

This study is based primarily on materials collected by researchers from various literatures written by scholars within and outside Zambia. However, bulk of the data was elicited from observation of sociolinguistic characteristics and language attitudes of Ngoni people of Eastern Zambia. A case study was conducted in speech in which Ngonis were identified and selected through purposive sampling through their names and clans. A total of 25 participants were interviewed to elicit the participants' knowledge of Ngoni language and culture leading to their clan background. The data collection method was complimented by information from written sources such as articles in journals and history books about Ngoni language .The corpus of the inquiry was oral interview through interaction with the aim of establishing the communicative competence in Ngoni language by the selected Ngoni ethnic subjects. The competence of the speakers interviewed ranged from poor-speaker abilities through to limited fluency. All subjects interviewed were able to identify Ngoni words used in Nyanja language and were also able to sing Ngoni folk songs though could not interpret them into Nyanja the lingua franca of the region.

Information about the historical background and migration of the Ngoni speakers was elicited from research articles from researchers such as Mtenje, A and Soko (1998), Vansina J, (1962), Mushinda. P (1963), Langworthy H.W(1972) and Stokes E and Brown R.

IV. FACTORS THAT LED TO THE DEATH OF NGONI LANGUAGE

Despite efforts to preserve Ngoni traditions, there is overwhelming evidence to conclude that the language has gone into total extinction (Mtenje A 1998). The Ngoni speakers, no doubt have a rich cultural heritage which can be traced several generations back to Zululand as shown in the following oral traditions below; these are still being practised by the Ngonis in Zambia and Malawi: Ngoni traditional marriage and weddings (umthimba) Folktales and proverbs, Praise lyrics (izithakazelo) Ingoma group of dances performed during Ncwala ceremony.

However, a lot of factors have contributed to the death of Ngoni language and a complete shift to other languages by its speakers.

Intermarriages

It is clear that although the Ngoni dominated militarily, they did not have a policy regarding their own language like the Ndebele of Mzilikazi who changed the names and totems of the Karanga they defeated. Naturally, all the people the Ngoni captured learnt to speak the Ngoni language. However, this assimilation proved later to be disastrous and temporal soon as the Nsenga and all the other people outnumbered the Ngoni. By the end of 1800, it was evident that the Ngoni language was not being used by most people in many domains of their speech communities. The children from Nsenga and Tumbuka mothers preferred speaking the languages of their mothers to speaking Ngoni the language of the fewer fathers. Ngoni language was confined to the grandparent generation and eventually some words remained in royal praises and spiritual incantations.

The coming of Missionaries

The coming of missionaries and Christianity had an adverse impact on the vitality and use of Ngoni language in Eastern Province Zambia. Missionaries were quick to translate hymns from English to Chewa/Nyanja and prayers were to be said in Chewa and Tumbuka. The Catholic, Seventh Day Adventists and the Dutch Reformed Church in Chipata and Katete respectively trained locals as Evangelists and interpreters of English and Chichewa without considering Ngoni language.

However, there is strong and firm grounds for claiming that the Ngoni language has through the same interaction, greatly enriched the Nyanja language spoken in Eastern province and Zambia in particular. There are a lot of Ngoni words and phrases that have found themselves in the Nyanja language spoken in Zambia today.

Colonialism

According to Mtenje (1998), the coming of the British administration to Nyasaland contributed to the death of the Ngoni language. He reports that by the 1890s the Ngoni were still sending out armies to loot other smaller tribes because they depended on food supplies obtained in this way. But when the territory of Nyasaland was declared a British protectorate, this war-mongering came to a halt. In the similar manner, the Ngoni war machinery and raids were greatly weakened in Northern Rhodesia as all tribes were under the British colonial administration protection and were preoccupied with search for formal jobs in order to pay hut tax. It was at that same time that the status of the Ngoni king (lnkosi ya Makosi) was also reduced to that of an ordinary chief. That time only King Lewanika of the Lozi was recognize as king in the territory. With military power and domination of other tribes completely frozen, this meant the end of Ngoni cultural influence in the region. By the beginning of the 20th century, Ngoni language became obsolescent but contributed a lot of vocabulary to the current Nyanja language which is a lingua franca of the region.

Migration

Kuncha and Bathula (2004) state that among the factors such as economic, cultural and intermarriage, *migration* is the most influential factor that can facilitate Language Shift and Language Death. Kuncha and Bathula (2004) further remark that when a community of speakers moves to a region or a country where the language spoken is different from theirs, there is a tendency to shift to a new language. Langworthy, H (1970) points out that due to the Ngoni encounter and assimilation of tribes of different linguistic background into their group, Ngoni language became threatened with gradual language shift. A lot of information from various sources attest to the fact that the movement of the Ngoni and their settlement among other tribes had an adverse impact on the vitality of Ngoni language.

Ngoni identity

This study has shown that the linguistic identity of Ngoni people is very weak. Considering language as a mark of ethnic identity, the Ngoni people are generally mistaken for Nsengas, their southern neighbours, because they both speak Nsenga language. As already mentioned, Ngonis have naturally acquired Nsenga language as their mother tongue or first language. Despite the sociolinguistic scenario the present Ngoni generation finds itself in, all Ngonis are able to identify themselves as Ngoni.

Despite their language having gone into extinction, Ngonis have for a long time lived in a culture which respects traditional values. In such cultures or societies tradition is highly valued. Every Ngoni community has guardians of traditions who are the most valued members of the clan. According to elders interviewed, Clan names play a very significant role in marking one's ethnic identity. Besides, the researchers used clan names in selecting Ngoni subjects for interviews. Ngoni names such as Zulu, Sakala, Tembo, Dingani, Dube, Ndhlovu, Ngoma, Biziwayo, Jere, Nyoni, Miti, Mbuzi etc are some of the common names found among the Ngoni.

V. CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to highlight the genesis of the Ngoni language and narrated the migration and expansion of the Ngoni ethnic group. It has been clearly established that the Ngoni people we know today are products of multi ethnic intermarriages and assimilations. We have also discussed factors that contributed to the death of the Ngoni language and that factors such as intermarriages, Christianity, migration and colonialism were responsible for the extinction of Ngoni language. However, it has been observed that although Ngoni language has gone into extinction, clan names and traditional ceremonies are still effective markers of Ngoni identity

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