

"Flogging a Dead Cow?": The Revival of Malawian Chingoni

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores how Chingoni, a language of the conquering Ngoni, lost out to Chitumbuka and Chichewa, the languages of the conquered Tumbuka and Chewa respectively, as a language of everyday communication to the extent of being moribund. Since language is usually considered to be a marker of identity, the link between the Ngoni identity and Chingoni is also explored and it is concluded that language is not a sine qua non ingredient of group identity. The paper also examines efforts being made by the Abenguni Revival Association to revive Chingoni which is now considered an endangered language. It concludes that although the efforts are laudable, it is very unlikely that they will produce positive long term results.

Keywords: mother tongue, ethnicity/nationalism, endangered language, language planning, group identity, language revival

INTRODUCTION

The first group to intrude upon nineteenth century Malawi was the militant Ngoni, an offshoot of the Zulu ethnic group of South Africa. Following the death of their leader, Zwangendaba, in 1848 at the southern tip of Lake Tanganyika, and subsequent succession disputes, the Ngoni dispersed in different directions. Of interest for our discussion are the Maseko Ngoni and, especially, the Mpezeni Ngoni who settled in the present day Malawi. The former, under Gomani, settled in the Kirk Range mountains of Dedza and Ntcheu districts, whilst those under Chidyaonga settled in Ntcheu, among the Chewa. Also settled among the Chewa in Dowa district was a minor group under Gwaza Jere. The Mpezeni Ngoni under Mbelwa settled in Mzimba district among the Tumbuka.

The Ngoni settlements produced a number of cultural and societal changes to the Ngoni themselves as they coexisted, interacted and integrated with the indigenous people (Kayambazinthu 1998). The cultural and linguistic exchanges between them and the indigenous people took a variety of forms depending on the Ngoni policy of assimilation or the lack of it, coupled with local conditions. For example, Harding (1966:2) comments that the Gomani Ngoni who conquered the Nyanja-speaking people in Dedza and Ntcheu spoke the Nguni dialect of Zulu "except for a few words, no trace of Nguni is found in the present

dialect hereafter called Chingoni". Similarly, the Mpezeni Ngoni who settled in Zambia became largely influenced by Chewa and Senga traditions and languages, and those of Mbelwa were influenced by Tumbuka (see Mtenje and Soko, 1998).

In the wake of political changes in the country, from a dictatorship to a democracy, and a new language policy championing mother tongues as part of Malawi's cultural heritage, the Ngoni, whose language has been believed to be dead, have sought to revive it.

In this paper we shall first explore the state of Chingoni in Malawi. Secondly, we shall discuss the revival efforts that are currently taking place. And, finally, we shall examine whether or not the revival efforts are worthwhile.

1. CHINGONI - THE LANGUAGE

According to the 1966 census there were fifteen languages spoken in Malawi by an estimated population of 4 million people. Among these, 1.1% (i.e. approximately 44,000) were speakers of Chingoni. Yet evidence on the ground seems to suggest that Chingoni is not a language of everyday use. In fact the 1966 figure of 44,000 speakers is itself suspect when the relevant facts are taken into consideration. As early as 1936 Margaret Read was pointing out the limitations of the language. She writes,

Most of the true Ngoni today are bilinguals, with the exception of a few very old Ngoni people; everyone today speaks one of the local vernaculars, Nsenga, Tumbuka or Chewa. Ngoni is the language of the aristocrats.

This process of acculturation that led to language shift among the Ngoni is better explained in "the lessened prestige and power of the Ngoni and the greater persistence of the culture of the peoples who were numerically superior in their home territory" (Spear, 1972:36).

The fact that Chingoni was a language of the aristocrats did not augur well for its spread. For example, initially the Livingstonia missionaries in what was then the kingdom of Mombera, realizing that the Ngoni elite spoke Chingoni "[a] language (...) almost identical with old Zulu" (Read 1936:461) hoped to be able to use Zulu to communicate with the local people. Evangelists from Lovedale, South Africa, were brought in to act as interpreters, and they even translated certain tracts into Zulu. However, it immediately became obvious that Chingoni was not a practical choice for the mission work, since it was not a medium of everyday communication. For mission work to succeed the indigenous Chitumbuka had to be used. The adoption of Chitumbuka by Livingstonia Mission meant that Chingoni was not to become the Mission's language hence it was further undermined. With no mission or government

support the status of Chingoni was to diminish drastically such that Wills (1964:68) was to observe later that:

(...) the old Ngoni language too, was disappearing and today completely gone, being used only to sing the chief's praises on ceremonial occasions. The Ngoni speak the tongues of the people they conquered - Tumbuka, Chewa, Mang'anja and Yao.

And in a similar vein, Pachai (1973:187) in relation to the Maseko Ngoni points out that:

I found that the language of Ntcheu natives (Maseko Ngoni area) was entirely Chinyanja. A few natives could understand Zulu.

The general consensus from these observations seems to be that Chingoni was not really a language of everyday use and it has more or less disappeared. Perhaps more importantly the observations cast serious doubt on the authenticity of the 1966 linguistic profile figures. Be that as it may, there are still remnants of Chingoni in the Mzimba district. According to Kumwenda, "the Ngoni language is rarely spoken in [Mzimba] district, except in a few areas such as Ekwendeni in Mpherembe and Matandani in Euthini. The Ngonis of Mzimba are virtually Tumbukas by language."¹ What could have led to this situation? An informed conjecture would lead one to suggest that the census questions did not distinguish one's ethnic group and the ability to speak one's ethnic group's language. It is a well-known fact, however, that a majority of Irishmen do not speak Irish. Alternatively, it may simply have been fashionable at the time for individuals to identify themselves as Ngoni for census purposes.

2. REASONS FOR THE LOSS OF CHINGONI

Reasons for the loss of Chingoni are varied and many, here we discuss some of the most pertinent. One of these includes the fact that the original migrants who had left Zululand, South Africa, had few pure Zulu. By the time their leader Zwangendaba was crossing the Zambezi River he had absorbed a large number of conquered indigenous tribes. As Bryant (1929:464) points out:

(...) although the original racial name persisted, there was precious little Nguni blood still left in the membership of the several hordes. The following of Zwangendaba, already in Portuguese East, must have degenerated into quite 50% dilution of Tonga nationality and, before his death up north, probably 90% of his adherents had become Karangas, Sengas, Bisas, Nyanjas, Tumbukas, Nkhondes, Sukumas and such. We frequently find Hehes, Henges, Bungas, Gwangwaras and numerous other Central African Bantu peoples dubbed "Zulus". But their Zulu "origin" consists solely therein that, at one time or other, they had

¹ Fedelis Kumwenda, "Relics of a lost language." *The Nation* 1 June, 2000, p. 15.

become more or less incorporated after conquest into migratory Ngoni host, from which they subsequently cut themselves loose, taking along with them so infinitesimal a modicum of Zulu blood - if any at all that rarely sufficed to confer on their language and physique, anything more than the usual remote Bantu resemblance to Zulu.

We have quoted Bryant at some length because he puts the matter of what constitutes Ngoni in its proper perspective. As Willis (1964:66) points out, these conquered peoples came to be known as Ngoni though many other names were accorded various tribes. When questioned, according to Read (1936:456), they acknowledged their local origin as Nsenga or Chewa by kinship and clan, but claimed the name Ngoni in terms of political allegiance. Secondly, intermarriages played a major role in the demise of Chingoni prior to settlement, Ngoni was retained as the language because of its prestige and because there was no language competing with it. After settlement, however, the alien group became the minority, and due to intermarriages between Ngoni and Senga, Ngoni and Chewa, Ngoni and Tumbuka, the children spoke the language of their mothers (who belonged to the conquered group (Read 1956:272, Timpunza Mvula 1988). Since each absorbed tribe had brought to the Ngoni society its own language, the whole society had become multilingual and the numerically dominant language became the lingua franca.

Since languages are perpetuated by children who learn from their parents, and Chingoni is no longer learned as a mother tongue by children, it is therefore, beyond mere endangerment, for, unless its course is somehow dramatically reversed, it is already doomed to extinction, like species lacking reproductive capacity. Krauss (1992:4) describes a language such as Chingoni as "moribund". Should it be necessary, therefore, to revive Chingoni or any other moribund language? Or should we accept that the death of a language is in the natural scheme of things?

To the Ngoni the matter is not so simple. The loss of their language is a matter of profound regret. Indeed, Read (1936:464) recorded an instance when a Ngoni chief's counsellor revealed why he liked the idea of being "written up":

"At least," he said "someone will know about us." He went on to speak with regret about the old days when one or two missionaries and others knew about the Ngoni and could speak their language. He spoke with bitterness about the present, lamenting that the Ngoni were no longer regarded as a great people.

It can be observed from the counsellor's remarks about the "disrespect" that he feels other tribes demonstrate towards the Ngoni stems directly from the fact that Chingoni is not a language of everyday use and that the language lacks literature. The counsellor would have felt differently had his language been written down. The feeling of loss which results into bitterness is neither new nor peculiar to the Ngoni. It affects all those whose languages are on the margins.

And it is a recurrent theme in the current debate among the advocates of mother tongue education.

Even in the present generation the Ngoni are still lamenting the loss of their language. As *The Nation's* reporter observes:

A Ngoni elder (...) said the Ngoni are slowly losing their identity through assimilations (sic) with other tribes. He also said most of the youths these days are not interested in the culture and tradition.

The most painful loss to the Ngoni identity is the loss of their language, Ngoni, which is now only spoken in three villages in the Inkosi Mtwalo (...). Most of the Ngonis speaking [sic] tumbuka a language they learned from the tumbuka.²

The operative word here is identity. Language seems to be viewed as being more than a mere communicative tool. The loss of Chingoni entails the loss of identity for the Ngoni. Below we turn to the issue of language and identity.

3. LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

The issue of language and identity has had a long history. It is an issue that has preoccupied nationalist for a good part of the last two centuries. It has been observed among groups as diverse as the Irish, the Welsh and the Jews just to mention a few. The issue is further complicated because in the popular imagination it is unextricably linked with ethnicity/nationalism. In this section we will discuss three issues, namely: (3.1) language as a link with the glorious past, (3.2) language as the link with authenticity, and (3.3) language as a means of contrastive self-identification. In the discussion no effort will be made to differentiate ethnicity and nationalism since, in most cases they stem from the same need and as such they are intricately interwoven.

3.1 LANGUAGE AS LINK WITH GLORIOUS PAST

One of the major driving forces of modern nationalism/ethnicity has been the need to retain the ethnic past since within it could be found both the link to the greatness as well as the essence of greatness itself. Mazrui et al (1993:670) have called this view, with reference to African philosophy, romantic gloriana. As regards language, however, it was on both counts that the mother tongue became sacred, " the mysterious vehicle of all national endeavours" (Jaski 1929:262), particularly for those whose current greatness was dubious. For the "people

² Rex Chikoko, "Ngoni language disappears" *Malawi News*, 29 September - 5 October, 2001, p. 8.

without history", history and language were viewed as two sides of the same coin. The mother tongue was not merely the highroad to history, it was history, it is itself "the voice of years that are gone; they roll before me with all their deeds" (McPherson 1760, in Hayes 1937:16). It is felt that "in its mother tongue every people honour itself; in the treasury of its speech is contained the charter of its cultural history" (Ludwig Jahu in Rocker 1937:295). Consequently language [and] a history" were considered as twins since together they constituted "the first needs for a people... There is not a new nation in Europe which has not been proceeded by fifty to eighty years of philological and archaeological studies" (Elieenne Fournol in Sulzbach 1943:24.)

The association of language and nationality/ethnicity has had a long history especially in Europe. Michelet ([1846]1946:200), held that "in this [French] is continued the grand human movement [so clearly marked out by the language] from India to Greece to Rome, and from Rome to us". While the first currents of Pan-Indian nationalism generated claims that "Sanskrit was the most enduring monument of the past greatness of the country and was destined to act as one of the most powerful agents in India's future generation" (McCully 1940:225). These nationalistic/ethnic tendencies are now a major preoccupation among the marginalized. It is not surprising that the ethnic/nationalistic/linguistic battles have resurfaced in the new democracies of Africa and other developing countries.

In Malawi a number of ethnic groups are now actively reclaiming their languages. Among these are the Ngoni. They, too, try to link their language with a glorious past. This glorious past has to be underscored by periodic reenactment of their arrival in Malawi. As a *Malawi News* commentator puts it:

A tribe without heritage is like a tree without roots, as the saying goes. This is what forced the Ngonis of Mzimba and other places throughout the country to converge at Mabiri dambo in the Inkosi ya Makosi Mbelwa area in Mzimba district to commemorate 162 years of their existence since the arrival of Ngoni leader Zwangendaba Jere. The Ngonis are believed to have come from South Africa.³

It is this South Africa link; the link with the warrior Nguni rulers such as Shaka that the Ngoni long for when they re-enact their arrival in Malawi. In this re-enactment they seem to be saying that heirs of past greatness deserve to be great again. The purported continuity of Chingoni is the authenticating device for finding, claiming and utilizing one's inheritance. Notice what a spokesperson of Mzimba Heritage Association says about Chingoni:

(.....) the revival of Ngoni is a very important task because it is an international language, largely spoken in South Africa - mainly in

³ Rex Chikoko "Ngonis celebrate in style." *Malawi News*, 29 September - 5 October 2001, p. 8.

Kwazulu Natal Province, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique, Swaziland and Mpherembe here at home.⁴

The message here seems to be that a language spoken in all these countries must be an important one. There is, however a deliberate distortion of facts to serve a political purpose. Students of language will recognize a clever juggling of facts. Language maps of South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Swaziland will not show a language known as Chingoni. In the case of Zambia, Chingoni, according to Ohannessian and Kashoki (1978:13), is "practically extinct and only survives in songs and royal praises and perhaps in the speech of a few old people." As already intimated, Chingoni is related to IsiZulu but the Malawian variety cannot be seriously be considered identical to IsiZulu in light of the degree of foreign elements incorporated, passage of time and isolation from the IsiZulu heartland. What is being underscored here, however, is the importance of Chingoni which justifies the need for its revival.

3.2 LANGUAGE AS A LINK WITH AUTHENTICITY

The essence of nationality/ethnicity is most of the time not clearly spelled out in History but merely implied. The essence of nationality/ethnicity is apparently its spirit, its individuality, its soul. As Fishman (1972:46) points out, the individuality of the people's nationality; their 'soul'. This soul is not only reflected and protected by the mother tongue but in essence, *the mother tongue is itself an aspect of the soul*, a part of the soul, if not the soul made manifest (emphasis in original). The major figure in placing language firmly at the emotional and intellectual center of modern nationalism's/ethnicity's concern for authenticity is unquestionably Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). Although Herder was himself influenced by others, particularly Vico's (1725) writing, the phrases, concepts and emphases that have emerged repeatedly during the past two centuries, throughout the world, wherever vernaculars are defended or admired, tend to be his. In Malawi, for example, when the Tumbuka were fighting for the retention of their language in the education system in the 1930s similar language was used. Their sponsor, Livingstonia Mission, intimated that "The Tumbuka ... were a scattered subject people, whose language was proscribed. Yet they clung to it as a symbol of their identity as a people.... to them in a peculiar sense, their language is their life." ⁵ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a contemporary Kenyan writer, commenting on the language issue in literature says, "language and culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that

⁴ Daniel Nyirenda "Ngoni revival: Beyond church responsibility". *Weekend Nation*, 31 March - 1 April, 2001.

⁵ See Mission Council of the Livingstonia Mission of the Church of Scotland: July 1933, Minute 5. Malawi National Archives File S1/5/10/30.

makes possible its genesis" (Ngugi 1986:15). Ngugi views the choice and use of language as central to a people's definition of themselves since it is at the core of their self-definition in relation to their social and natural environments and thus the entire universe. Ngugi is here echoing Herder two centuries down the line. Herder's writings were seminal in developing the complementary views that the mother tongue expresses a nationality's soul or spirit, that since it was a collective achievement par excellence, language was also the purest way for individuals to safeguard (or recover) the authenticity they had inherited from their ancestors as well as pass it on to generations yet unborn. And, finally, the view that worldwide diversity in language and culture was a good and beautiful thing in and of itself, whereas imitation led to corruption and stasis. The Ngoni revivalists have, without realizing it embraced Herders views when their spokesperson claims that "the most painful loss to the Ngoni identity is the loss of their language." Linguists, too, have not escaped this emotional and spiritual pull of the "sacredness" of language. The so-called "responsible linguists" view of language is encapsulated in Hale (1992:4) observation that:

Of supreme significance in relation to linguistic diversity, and to local languages in particular, is the simple truth that language - in general, multifaceted sense-embodies the intellectual wealth of the people who use it. A language and the intellectual productions of its speakers are often inseparable, in fact. Some forms of verbal art-verse, song or change depend crucially on morphological and phonological, even syntactic properties of language in which it is formed. In such cases the art would not exist without language, quite literally. Even where the dependency is not so organic as this, an intellectual tradition may be so thoroughly a part of people's linguistic ethnography as to be, inseparable from language.

The emotional and intellectual attraction, not to say romanticization, of language is certainly a powerful aspect in the argument for authenticity.

3.3 LANGUAGE AS A MEANS OF CONTRASTIVE SELF-IDENTIFICATION

The frequency with which mother tongues have become an integral part of the authenticity message of nationalism/ethnicity directly or otherwise is to a large extent due to the ease with which elites and masses alike could make inferences from linguistic differentiation and literary uniqueness to sociocultural and political independence. However, the latter inference is not always made to begin with, and is even explicitly rejected on some of the occasions on which it is made. Smaller and weaker nationalist/ethnic movements, on the one hand, are particularly likely to consider political independence as an ephemeral phenomenon. On the other hand, the uniqueness of the folk spirit and lifestyle

that is represented by the mother tongue is considered to be more genuine and more durable. "If we had to choose between language and freedom" De Valera is said to have told his friend of the early Gaelic League, "he would choose language" (Bromage 1956:226), and so did, and do, the leaders of several other smaller nationalities ethnicities, both in the past and currently.

Nationalists/ethnic leaders and masses frequently view the mother tongue not only as the most visible manifestation of uniqueness, but, precisely because it is so viewed, also as an unquestionable device for contrasting or continuing nationality, depending on which view is felt to be in need of reinforcement. For the Ngoni reviving their language would distinguish them from the Tumbuka who they feel have swamped them. The Ngoni paradox is that although militarily they conquered the Tumbuka and still lord over them politically, linguistically the Ngoni are the conquered. The Tumbuka have had the last laugh. The Ngoni cannot do without Chitumbuka in their everyday communication.

Contrastive self-identification on the basis of language is a very ancient human inclination. However, it is not always the case that it is also an ideological issue. When it is not, it is easily ignored. It usually becomes ideologized in the period of mass nationalism. It can be manipulated not only with regard to unity of a people, but also the future of the mother tongue itself. By rejecting Chitumbuka the Ngoni nationalists/ethnicists, for example, could not only establish their uniqueness, but could also operate directly upon a corpus of ethnic behaviour and symbolism, a corpus that can be easily manipulated to achieve desired effect. Thus the associations between nationalism/ethnicity and the mother tongue are many and mutually reinforcing. While they ultimately derive from the human dependence upon language to communicate and to channel experience, they derive more directly from the human tendency to "seek for the essence or reality in the words used to designate this reality as experience" (Friedrich 1963:45). Nationalist/ethnicist beliefs, like all societal patterned beliefs, are language dependent. That nationalists/ethnicist recognize this dependence and seek to exploit it. As a result of such recognition, masses are bound into nationalist/ethnicist integration "through their emotional investment in system symbols" (Katz 1965:361). That the mother tongue so commonly becomes a symbol is partially a reflection of the fact that it is the carrier of all other notions and symbols advanced by nationalism/ethnicity.

4. REVIVAL OF CHINGONI

Recently, there has been quite some excitement over what has been called "endangered languages" (see Robins and Uhlenbeck 1991, Hale et. al 1992, Kishindo 1995). In addition to its purely scholarly purpose, these publications have also a propaganda role directed at governments as well as international organizations such as UNESCO. It is not surprising, then, that since

democratization of African states, UNESCO documents on mother tongue have become "sacred texts" on the issue. In Malawi the mother tongue issue has captured the imagination of language practitioners as well as educationalists (see Kishindo 1998).

The Chingoni revivalists have pinned their hopes on education as means of reviving their language. In 1998 the Abenguni (or Ngoni) Revival Association was established.⁶ The association's objectives are:

- (i) to revive the language which is not being passed on from their forefathers to younger generations;
- (ii) to bring unity to the Ngoni from both central and northern regions;
- (iii) to foster Ngoni identity.

The Association's activities have included the drafting of a constitution, revival of Ingoma dance using old songs. It also runs a club at Mzuzu museum which practices old songs and provides entertainment to museum visitors. One may legitimately ask: to what extent is this genuine cultural revival or pure entertainment?

As regards language there are Chingoni classes which those interested can attend. According to Kayambazinthu (1998) a handout based on Nyembezi's *Learn Zulu* and Cope's *A Zulu Comprehensive Course* forms the basis of the course. The Association is hoping to have village based clubs where Zulu learning lessons will be offered and teachers will be provided by the chiefs. Currently the Association has two volunteer teachers who have learnt Zulu up to 'O' level in Zimbabwe and South Africa. The Association's ultimate goal, according to their spokesman, is to have Chingoni included in the school curriculum.

Meanwhile an affiliate of the Abenguni Revival Association, the Mzimba Heritage Association has been performing the public relations activities for the Association. For example, they have been dusting up old abandoned Bibles and hymnbooks and donating them to churches. The reason for doing this, according to the facilitator, is "to revive the language which was becoming extinct in the district."⁷ According to the same facilitator, people in Mzimba used to hold their church services in Chingoni between 1935 and 1940. Apparently to prove this point, he claims that William Emslie who introduced Christianity in the area sold over 1,000 Chingoni Bibles in 1904.

While a handful of individuals are trying hard to revive the language, the majority are disinterestedly going about using Chitumbuka and desperately trying to learn English. So, while we applaud the efforts of the Abenguni Revival Association, it should be remembered that the voluntary and conscious efforts of "secondary bilinguals" are not quite of the same vitality as the more

⁶ The revivalist movement was initiated by A.W. Thole, a senior museum curator at Mzuzu Museum by virtue of being his job interest in the language and its culture (Kayambazinthu 1998).

⁷ See Daniel Nyirenda, "Ngoni revival...".

"natural" ones of native speakers using their mother tongue in all domains to their children.

5. CULTURAL LOYALTY AND LANGUAGE

A "cultural loyalty" is often more widespread than a narrower "language loyalty". In Malawi a sizeable population labels itself Ngoni and proud of it, yet it does not speak Chingoni. For most people this is not something unusual. They would prefer to be associated with their ethnic group but not the language perhaps because they accept the fact that their language is no longer viable. From another perspective, this may be another angle on the tension between old and new, tradition and change in that, while acting to support a declining language may be risky, stigmatizing and unproductive, maintaining or developing an interest in a cultural manifestation is relatively easy. This is why in most cases minority languages are despised yet their cultural manifestations such as dances are espoused.

The example of Chingoni is particularly salient. It is perhaps the only ethnic group, which celebrates its arrival in the country. Recently, as already pointed out, they celebrated their arrival at Mabiri in Mzimba.

This is the second time the arrival of the Ngoni has been commemorated, the first ceremony was held in 1959 at the same venue under the reign of Inkosi ya Makosi Mbelwa II who died later the same year.⁸

The same is true of the Maseko Ngoni of the Central Region; in 1998 they commemorated the centenary of the death of Inkosi Gomani I. The cultural calendar of the Ngoni is replete with events, which no other ethnic group in Malawi commemorates. Their dances, *Ingoma* and *Insindo*, grace all the celebratory national events. Yet despite the prominence of their dances, the nationalists among them feel it is not enough, their language must be revived.

It would appear that for traditionalists nothing short of going back to the original way of life would satisfy. The untenability of such an approach to ethno-cultural problems of modern Africa has often been pointed out in the scientific literature. It is underscored in this context that the matter of cultural correlations in Africa is a complex one, which must be approached with caution so that the dust raised by polemic does not blind one to genuine values and real problems. Cultural traditions can and do serve as the basis on which the modern African cultures and civilizations are built, yet it would be foolhardy for one to advocate unconditional wholesale preservation of all that is traditional in African cultures. This is so because colonialism has interrupted the natural growth of these cultures and artificially arrested their development. In debating the conservation of African culture one must be conscious that it is not the

⁸ See Rex Chikoko "Ngoni celebrate in style".

culture it might have been. It is "ossified", stunted culture or only one side of it is developing. The wish to conserve it in pristine condition is an urge to preserve not even yesterday's Africa, but one of days long gone (Bromley 1987:36).

6. LESSONS FROM OTHER LANGUAGE REVIVAL EFFORTS

What generalizations can be extracted from the various revival language situations? There are, of course, a great many points here, which will be recognized, as applicable to Chingoni.

First, language revival efforts may be viewed as artificial when they operate in the face of historical realities. This is true in two senses. They are artificial, first of all, in that they are divorced from the forces of day-to-day life of masses. Simply it is not possible to bring about widespread language shift when the appeal is made on the basis of abstractions like culture, heritage or tradition. These are not, naturally, trivial or ignoble aspects of life, but frankly they are not conscious priorities for most people. In Ireland we see those who might have accepted to respond best to revival rhetoric - the Irish speaking Gaeltacht residents - did not do so in any united way.⁹ As for the Welsh language and culture, according to Huw Edwards, they are facing "a long painful, subsidised, but avoidable death".¹⁰

Secondly, revivalism is often artificial in the type of language form it attempts to resuscitate. In the case of Chingoni the language being taught at Mzuzu Museum is not Chingoni as spoken in a few pockets of Mzimba district but IsiZulu as clearly demonstrated by the activities of the Abenguni Revival Association. Now Chingoni and IsiZulu may be genetically related but they are not identical. Even for the old folks who speak Chingoni, IsiZulu would be an alien language. Linguistically, in fact Chingoni is closer to SiSwati than IsiZulu. IsiZulu therefore is some way removed from the maternal patterns of any native speaker of Chingoni in Mzimba.

Thirdly, crucial in the Chingoni situation is the importance of the living heartland for a language, a place where it is regularly used across a broad range of domains. If this has shrunk to such an extent that it is seen to require support, then what has been described elsewhere as the "paradox of the Gaeltacht"¹¹ occurs. If nothing is done, there is every likelihood of continued decline. If things are done, then a danger exists of creating a situation in which language matters is treated with the same self-conscious attention, which characterizes foreign language learning. We believe that, although there is nothing wrong with the situation *per se*, it hardly contributes to that unselfconscious use of language,

⁹ See D. Fennel "The Last Days of Gaeltacht: Why the Gaeltacht wasn't saved". *Irish Times*, 3 & 4 June, 1980.

¹⁰ This is so because of in-migration and the lack of respect the in-immigrants show for Welsh and local culture. See Huw Edwards, "Self respect means that we must stop pretending to be English." *The Independent on Sunday*, 12 August 2001.

¹¹ See John Edward (1985) *Language, Society and Identity* pp. 49-51.

which we associate with normal personal interaction. Besides, the process of out-migration, which is associated with isolated heartlands, says much about the desires and priorities of residents, which often interfere with the hopes of revivalists.

Finally, it seems clear that the Ngoni experience indicates that the link between original language and identity is not essential. There exists today, a strong Ngoni identity, which does not involve Ngoni in any communicative sense, for the vast majority. At the same time, the language continues to serve a symbolic function for many. The revivalist flaw is to single out communicative language as the most important marker of identity, ignoring the evidence of history and daily life. People from Maseko Ngoni areas for example, are proud of their identity through their cultural manifestations. Most of them cannot utter a single word of Chingoni yet they do not doubt their Ngoni identity. Some would argue that the existing Ngoni identity is less than it might be, because of the loss of the language, but this is condescending and historically naïve view to pursue.

In sum, then, the Ngoni situation demonstrates that attempts to halt the decline of shrinking minority languages are not likely to be successful. This is because the shrinking itself reflects larger trends, which cannot be significantly affected by linguistic action alone. Language support can be a dubious quantity and may do harm if linguistic moves damage group solidarity by making people believe that broad social change will ensue.

The Abenguni Revival Association's enthusiasm for the survival of Chingoni may not be in the best interest of the ordinary Ngoni. The consequences of language distinction are cultural, not biological or ecological (unless language death means the wiping out of speakers) and if a community seems not to feel the need to "protect" its distinct way of speaking it may be arrogant of any language association to regard the survival of the language as in anyway sacrosanct.

7. DISCUSSION

We began by observing that questions of language and identity are quite complex. The simple conclusion is that, while language is commonly held to be a crucial or, indeed, essential ingredient of group identity, it is not *necessary* to retain an original variety in order to maintain the continuity of a sense of groupness. The erosion of an original language does not inevitably entail the erosion of identity itself. While various agencies have concerned themselves with supporting language so as to prop up threatened identities, language *per se* has typically not been of the greatest concern to people having those identities.

We can construe the overall message as both negative and positive. There is, we believe, a general inevitability to language shift under certain conditions, and no amount of revivalism or educational support can significantly affect the

powerful social currents which produce shift. This can be viewed as negative, unfavourable occurrence after all, what was once common is now lost and the group is obliged to adopt another's language. We would underscore, though, that to view as negative implies a static conception of history that is, simply, unrealistic. We concur with Edwards (1985) that it is much more useful to view language shift as adjustment; this accords with the social dynamics, and, in any event, there is never a question of absolute loss with nothing to replace the abandoned transitional period, bilingualism is the norm. Consequently given adequate time, the adopted language becomes a new group language, fulfilling all the requirements once met by the original variety. For the Ngoni that language is Chitumbuka. And no one has complained that Chitumbuka is inadequate in satisfying their communicative needs. This has been the normal trend all over the globe if we take long enough view. In this sense, much of the contemporary debate over the fate of "minority" languages and cultures can be seen to represent this volatility which always accompanies periods of transition.

However, all this notwithstanding, there is also a much more positive interpretation that should be placed upon language and group dynamics. Social continuity can be and is ordinarily maintained through and beyond the transitional periods. Groupness is a tenacious quantity and capable of surviving the loss of any objective marker, including language. The classic example here is perhaps the Scots. The Scots are conscious in their being Scottish but do not have a living language to point at as a marker of his identity. They consider themselves as being from the English or the Welsh. The loss of their language has not entailed loss of identity. There is, naturally change, but change need not imply loss. Historical records show, repeatedly that ordinary group members - much better than spokespersons, pluralists, revivalists and others - understand this. The adjustments made in order to maximize social well-being, access and advancement are seen to be necessary and involve cultural adaptation. Perhaps Ladefoged (1992:811) observation captures this change succinctly:

Last summer I was working on Dahalo, a rapidly dying Cushitic language, spoken by a few hundred people in a rural district of Kenya. I asked one of our consultants whether his teen-aged sons spoke Dahalo. 'No' he said. 'They can still hear it, but they cannot speak it. They speak Swahili' He was smiling when he said it, and did not seem to regret it. He was proud that his sons had been to school, and knew things that he did not. Who am I to say he was wrong?

But at the same time, marks of distinction are retained which contribute to continuity without interfering with social progress. This is not suggesting that people consciously determine which markers are to be maintained and which must be retrieved. The appeal of the concepts like "pluralistic integration" or "modern assimilation" resides exactly in the fact that they describe a socially *natural* process of accommodation, which represents a gradual evolution through several stages. This understanding is different from the psychologically

understandable but sociologically and historically naive exhortations and hopes of consciously committed apologists for group and language maintenance.

Of course, it is not being suggested, that the idea itself of intervening in the social fabric is inevitably useless. Far from it: the development of cultures is the result of constant and cumulative alteration. The point being made here is one of degree and complexity. Social adjustments reflect social needs and the overall pattern is an intricately woven one. Alterations may begin by small adjustments, but their success or failure in contributing to, and changing the pattern depends very much upon the degree to which they recognize and accommodate the contemporary state of things. Put differently, history tells us that with regard to language and identity, the lesson is clear: they reflect the workings of powerful economic and social forces and cannot be attended to in isolation. Language revival or maintenance cannot be instituted by fiat. If languages are seen to be at risk, it is because of a intricately interwoven social evolution. To remove them from risk would entail wholesale reconstruction of history, a broad reweaving of the fabric; except perhaps for a partisan few, this has never been even considered as a practical exercise. It is also important to emphasise that languages do not possess "an inner principle of life," nor do they have intrinsic qualities, which bear upon any sort of linguistic survival of the fittest. The fortunes of language are interwoven with those of its users, and if languages decline or "die" it is simply because the circumstances of their speakers have changed. The most common scenario here is that involving language contact and conflict: one language supplants another. For the Ngoni youth, for example, the altered circumstances can only be experienced in a new language and not through a revival of a dead one.

Once again, the optimistic position here- and one, which is firmly grounded on social reality - is that the essential element of groupness need never be at risk. More specifically group continuity can survive the most radical changes, if its maintenance is desired by group members themselves, because the core requirements are intangible and private. They do not need conflict with social progress, but neither are amenable for intervention. On the other hand, visible markers like language are highly susceptible to change in the face of transformed environments and, although their visibility invites intervention, there is no evidence to suggest that they can be maintained for any substantial length of time through active and usually isolated efforts. Planning a language revival is certainly a dubious undertaking. Attempts to revive Chingoni could therefore, easily be likened to flogging a dead horse. Perhaps with the Ngoni legendary love of cattle the more apt phrase would be "flogging a dead cow".

8. CONCLUSION

In this paper we have discussed the state of Chingoni in Malawi and concluded that it is a moribund language; lacking the regenerative capacity. We have also

explored the link between language and identity and concluded that language is not a *sine qua non* ingredient of group identity; therefore, its erosion need not entail loss of identity. The paper has also discussed efforts, which have been put in place to revive Chingoni as a language of everyday use. From the discussion, and from lessons from other language revival efforts, the unattractive but perhaps inevitable conclusion is that it is a dubious exercise unlikely to yield positive viable long-term results. The futility of the exercise can be likened to flogging a dead cow.

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