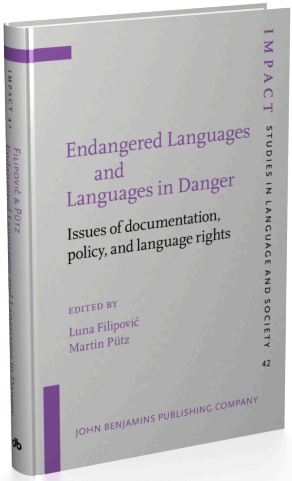
IMPACT: Studies in Language, Culture and Society
42

Reacting to language endangerment

The Akie of north-central Tanzania

Bernd Heine | University of Cologne
Christa König | University of Frankfurt
Karsten Legere | University of Gothenburg

https://doi.org/10.1075/impact.42.13hei



Pages 313–333 of
Endangered Languages and Languages in Danger: Issues of documentation, policy, and language rights
Edited by Luna Filipović and Martin Pütz
[IMPACT: Studies in Language, Culture and Society, 42]
2016. ix, 413 pp.

Reacting to language endangerment

The Akie of north-central Tanzania

Bernd Heine, Christa König and Karsten Legère
University of Cologne / University of Frankfurt / University of Gothenburg

Language endangerment in Africa is of a different kind than it is in many other parts of the world. Globalization and the impact of languages such as English, French, or Portuguese are not a major problem for the maintenance of African languages. Language loss is no less a factor in Africa than it is elsewhere in the world, but the replacing languages are, with very few exceptions, not international languages such as those of the former colonial powers but rather fellow African languages (Sommer 1992; Brenzinger 2007a: 197; 2007b).[1]

On the basis of the research findings on language endangerment that exist it is possible to understand the main factors that can be held responsible for language replacement. But there is less information on why replacement does *not* take place – that is, why people in certain situations do not give up their heritage language in favour of some other language even if their sociolinguistic environment discourages such a behavior. This is the question looked into in the present paper, using the Akie, a traditional hunter-gatherer people in Tanzania as an example.

Keywords: African, Akie, defensive culture, language purism, language transmission, Maasai, quadrilingualism, Swahili

1. Introduction

1.1 Language death in Africa

Language endangerment in Africa is of a different nature than in many other parts of the world. Globalization and the impact of languages such as English or French

1. While this issue is in need of much further research, it would seem that one reason can be seen in the fact that languages such as English or French tend to be acquired in formal education rather than in informal, everyday communication in most parts of Africa.

DOI 10.1075/impact.42.13hei

Table 1. Status of West African languages (adapted from Blench 2007: 143)

Status	Number of languages	Percentage
Not threatened	683	63.5
No information	304	28.3
Definitely threatened	55	5.1
Probably extinct	16	1.5
Declining	10	0.9
Moribund	7	0.7
Total	1075	100.0

is not a major problem for the maintenance of African languages. Language loss is not less a factor in Africa than elsewhere, but the replacing languages are as a rule not international languages such as those of the former colonial powers but rather fellow African languages (Sommer 1992; Brenzinger 2007a: 197).

Considering that half of the world's languages are said to have disappeared in the course of the last 500 years, Africa's rate of language loss is remarkable, but not really dramatic.

On the basis of a survey of 1075 languages of West Africa, Blench (2007) proposed a classification of the languages based on their relative degree of endangerment. As the data provided by Blench (2007) suggest, nearly two thirds of the languages of West Africa are not threatened and only less than ten percent are clearly endangered (see Table 1). On the basis of such observations one may predict that the majority of the roughly 2000 African languages are not immediately endangered, that is, are likely to survive the present century.

A wider perspective of sociolinguistic situations in Africa suggests, however, that such predictions must be taken with care. On the one hand, there are a number of African languages that have disappeared over the last century. On the other hand, various cases have been reported where earlier writers had predicted that a given language will soon be extinct yet where the language concerned is still alive and well to this day (cf. the data in Brenzinger 1992, 2003; Sommer 1992; see also Petrollino & Mous 2010).

Why then do languages in Africa die out? A number of reasons have been proposed. Perhaps the factor most frequently invoked is the number of speakers and the minority status of a language. Another frequently named factor concerns the prestige of a language, even it is not always entirely clear what exactly this notion stands for. Batibo (1992) argues that it is the relative degree of language prestige that "has been the major determinant of language shift in Tanzania," and he proposes the following hierarchy (see also Legère 1992):

(1) A scale of types of prestige hypothesized to determine language shift in Tanzania
   1 Language of national prestige
   2 Language of regional prestige
   3 Language of local prestige
   4 Language without special prestige[2]

Rather than such language-internal factors, external factors have also been proposed. A cursory survey of language shift situations in Africa suggests that quite commonly it was one or more of the following factors that appear to have played a role: (a) the impact of a dominant culture, (b) a global ideology or religion, and (c) the transition from one form of economy to another.

But factors such as these are neither necessary nor sufficient for language shift. There are some linguistic communities in Africa that have resisted language replacement. What such observations suggest is that language development is hard to predict in Africa. The question to be looked into in this paper is the following: Why does a community that has been predicted to give up their language nevertheless not do so?

The reasons are complex, we are restricted here to one kind of reason – one that can be described with reference to the notion "defensive culture".[3] In the remainder of the paper we will illustrate the significance of this notion by looking in more detail into the situation of what has been portrayed in previous research as a seriously endangered language. This is the Akie language of Tanzania.

1.2 A "defensive culture"

In the 1920s, the British government official R. Maguire, placed in Kibaya (Kiteto District), studied the Akie hunter-gatherer community of north-central Tanzania.

---

2. However, as long as ethnic and linguistic homogeneity prevails, the question of language prestige seems to be rather insignificant in a number of cases. Only when language contacts and ethnic-linguistic diversity are relevant for an area, the question of which language could facilitate the communication among linguistically different people arises. Often in what is now Tanzania the answer was Swahili for its wide-spread distribution as a second language and, in more recent years, its status as (semi-) official language used in administration and in other domains.

3. An anonymous reader of this paper suggests the terms 'exclusive', 'protective', and 'sheltering' culture, instead. To the extent that the people that are the main concern of this paper aim at defending institutions that are conceived as central to their socio-cultural life against influence from outside we prefer the notion "defensive culture" for the purposes of the following discussion.

He concluded that these people (called Mósiro by him) were seriously endangered in their linguistic identity:

> All the Mósiro speak Masai, but many of them do so very imperfectly … The language of the *Mósiro* is dying … I have asked many *Mósiro* to give me the names of various common objects, and I have often been given a Masai name, my informant protesting that he knew no other. (Maguire 1948: 10)

On the basis of such an assessment one might expect that by now, nearly a century later, this language is no longer alive. More than half a century after Maguire, researchers such as Rottland (1982), Kaare (1996) and Bakken (2004) found Akie still to be spoken, even if they classified it as seriously or critically endangered (Brenzinger 2007a: 199) or as "probably dying out", to be replaced by Maasai (Sommer 1992: 305; Legère 2012; MLT 2009; Heine, König & Legère 2014; see also Rottland & Voßen 1977).[4]

There would in fact be reasons for the language to have disappeared: First, Akie is spoken presumably by hardly more than 300 people whereas the language of the surrounding Maasai has well over one million speakers. Thus, in terms of their absolute number of speakers, the Akie are a tiny minority. Second, in the ideology of the Maasai, acknowledged to some extent by Akie people, the latter are socially, culturally, and economically a fairly marginal group.[5]

Third, most Akie have a fluent command of Maasai, and for many of them it is the primary language (see Table 2 below). Fourth, the Akie are economically dependent on the Maasai. Herding the lifestock of the latter and selling them their honey is one of the major income sources for the Akie. Fifth, they are also culturally dependent. For example, they have largely adopted the age-set system of the Maasai and may practice the ceremonies associated with the system jointly with the Maasai. Younger Akie also imitate the dressing and ornamentation practices

---

4. Following Heine (1980), the Maasai are sometimes referred to as Maa since they are part of the Maa society, which in addition to the Maasai also includes other ethnic groups such as Parakuyu (see 1.3.2.1), Arusha, Samburu and Chamus. The first two are restricted to northern Tanzania, the last two live in north-central Kenya, while the Maasai are found in the same way in Tanzania and Kenya.

5. What Kaare (1996: 149) claims with reference to "Dorobo" groups in Kenya and Tanzania (see also Klumpp & Kratz 1993) applies to quite some extent to the Akie, being part of these groups: "… what underlies the Maasai idea about symbiotic relations with their Dorobo neighbours is the construction of marginality". Marginalization affects the Akie at all levels of social and economic life. Akie women find it hard to sell their products on the local markets: "Some of my female informants told me for example about their problems of going to the market and trading commodities. They stated that other people were avoiding their wares because they were assumed … to poison them" (Schöperle 2011: 45).

of the Maasai. And finally, for a number of Akie, living like a Maasai pastoralist would be clearly preferable to leading the fairly miserable existence of an Akie hunter-gatherer.

Thus, there would be reasons enough for language shift to take place. As a matter of fact, however, this does not clearly appear to happen: As we will see in more detail later, Akie is still spoken today. [6] We will argue that the main reason of the Akie people for not having given up their language is that they have developed a "defensive culture".

With this term we are referring to speech communities that make a deliberate attempt to keep their language and culture separate from those of surrounding cultures. This attempt manifests itself in particular in the following features of behavior:

(2) Manifestations of defensive behavior
   a. *Traditional culture:* Members of other communities are strongly discouraged to participate in inherited cultural practices, such as rituals, dances, singing, etc.
   b. *Language use:* The language is used in some sense as a "secret code".
   c. *Language planning:* There is a pronounced "purist" attitude whereby attempts are made to keep the language "clean", i.e., free from lexical and other material from other languages, even if the Akie are not really successful in these attempts, as the multitude of Maasai borrowings and code-switches suggests.

1.3 The present paper

Based on a field survey carried out by the present authors, this paper looks into the question of what the present state of a language is that ninety years ago was believed to be in a process of extinction.[7] The paper is based on field surveys carried

---

6. We are concerned here with the Akie of Kilindi District, that is, the eastern part of the Akie territory. That the situation is different in the western part (Kiteto District) is suggested by observations made by Schöperle (2011), who found hardly any Akie speakers in this district: "… the Akiek-language is only spoken by a small minority of elderly people. Some of my informants had the ability to understand it but I found only two adult men who were able to communicate fluently in it. The younger generations meanwhile have adopted Maa as their mother tongue, and Maa is in fact the most widely distributed language throughout the region" (Schöperle 2011: 35–36).

7. In this survey, demographic and sociolinguistic information was collected on 115 people who claimed, or were claimed by others, to belong to the Akie community. Whether, or to what extent, this sample is representative of the Akie as a whole is open to question; we suspect that

out within the *DoBeS* (Documentation of Endangered Languages) program of the *VolkswagenStiftung* (Volkswagen Foundation) between January and March, 2013 and 2014.[8] The primary concern in this project is with language documentation, and this paper is restricted to findings made on the sociolinguistic situation of the Akie language.

2. Akie and language endangerment

The Akie-speaking people inhabit mainly the Kilindi District of Tanga Region and the Kiteto and Simanjiro Districts of Manyara Region of north-central Tanzania between Handeni to the east and Kibaya and Simanjiro to the west; they seem to have been living in this area before all their neighbors, such as the Maasai or Nguu (Ngulu), arrived (Kaare 1996; Bakken 2004: 38ff.; Schöperle 2011). The language is fairly homogeneous, there do not appear to be any dialects or other noticeable linguistic cleavages, even if phonetic variation among speakers is quite pronounced. The language is not used in writing.

The Akie call themselves *akie* (singular *aki-ántee*). According to Rottland (1982: 305; p.c.), their autonym is *ákiék* (with unreleased final *k*). As for the number of Akie speakers, Sommer (1992: 305) mentions a figure of less than 1000 speakers, and Brenzinger (2007: 199) of 50 speakers, both classifying it as a seriously or critically endangered language. According to our own estimate, it is hardly more than 300 people who still speak Akie.

The Akie are known in Tanzania as (*N*)*dorobo*, a term originating from the Maasai noun *ol-tórobóni* (sg.), *il-tórobo* (pl.) 'people without cattle, poor people'. The term, also applied to other traditional hunter-gatherer groups in the area, such as Kisankare (*kisaŋkárɛ*), Kinyalang'ate (*kiɲalaŋáte*), and the Cushitic

---

the sample includes less than half of all the people classifying themselves as Akie. The main data collected within this survey are presented in König et al. (2014, Appendix 1).

8. The three-year project, "Akie in Tanzania – documenting a critically endangered language" (AZ. 86 405), is directed by Karsten Legère and Christa König; the first-named author is affiliated to the project as a consultant. We wish to express our gratitude to the *VolkswagenStiftung* for all its support. Our gratitude is also due to the University of Dar es Salaam and various other authorities of the Republic of Tanzania for providing us with a research permission to carry out this research and for all the support they gave us during this research (Research clearance of the University of Dar es Salaam, Ref. No. AB3/3(B), as well as of Tanga Region, Ref. No. DA. 258/288/02/84, 14th August, 2012). Most of all, our thanks are due to the Akie people, who not only volunteered as language consultants but also generously provided us hospitality while we were staying with them.

language Aasá (Áasax, Aramaní, Aramanik), clearly having derogatory connotations but used by the Akie people themselves vis-à-vis other ethnic groups.

Earlier information about Akie falls under the rubric of research on "Ndorobo", "Nderobo", "Dorobo", or Mósiro (Maguire 1948; Maghimbi 2005; Legère 2006). The only readily available linguistic material stems from Rottland (1982). What Rottland's work demonstrates beyond reasonable doubt is that Akie is a language closely related to the cluster of Kalenjin languages spoken in Kenya, Northern Tanzania, and Southeastern Uganda, including the Kenyan traditional hunter-gatherer communities commonly referred to as Okiek. The Akie are, however, essentially unaware of this relationship;[9] there are no contacts of any kind with their linguistic relatives in Kenya and Uganda, or in Tanzania.

Being a member of the Kalenjin cluster, Akie belongs to the Southern Nilotic branch of the Nilotic family (see Rottland 1982). The latter has been classified as belonging to the Eastern Sudanic branch of the Nilo-Saharan phylum (Greenberg (1963).

According to a sociolinguistic survey of 115 Akie people that we were able to carry out between January and March, 2013, the majority of these people were essentially quadrilingual. As Table 3 shows, nearly two thirds of them have not only Akie but also Maasai as their primary languages, and the Bantu languages Nguu (or Ngulu)[10] and Swahili are not only useful secondary languages but are also spoken by a sizable portion of the population as primary languages – that is, as languages spoken with close to mother tongue competence.

After Maguire (1948) and others had observed indications of a process of language decay, the question then is: Is Akie presently threatened by extinction? One way of looking into this question is by using the list of factors proposed by UNESCO (2003) in its document *Language Vitality and Endangerment* for assessing language endangerment. These factors are listed in Table 4 (Brenzinger 2007: 544–555).[11]

We will now look at each of these factors in turn.

---

9. This has changed, however, since we stayed with them. As we learned from recent visitors to them, our informing them about their linguistic ancestry had an impact on their understanding of their past: At least the Akie with whom we worked are now convinced that the Kalenjin people in Kenya, speaking a closely related Southern Nilotic language, are their cousins.

10. Nguu (or Ngulu, G31 according to the reference system of Bantuists) belongs to the Zigula-Zaramo group of Bantu languages (Guthrie 1948; Nurse & Philippson 2003).

11. The UNESCO document adds a ninth factor to the list of Table 4, namely "Urgency of documentation: Amount and quality of documentation". This factor is omitted here because it is of a different nature, relating to what needs to be done rather than what there is.

Table 3. Languages known by the Akie people (based on König et al. 2014, Appendix 1)[12]

Age group	Their primary language	A secondary language	No knowledge	Total in percent	Total number of persons
Akie	61.1%	11.5%	27.4%	100	113
Maasai	65.2%	14.3%	20.5%	100	112
Nguu	49.0%	22.1%	28.9%	100	104
Swahili	38.4%	49.5%	12.1%	100	99
English	0%	0%	100%	100	113
Other languages	0%	2.4%	97.6%	100	86

Table 4. Degree of language endangerment according to UNESCO (2003; see also Brenzinger 2007 and Legère 2008 for discussion)

1. Intergenerational language transmission
2. Absolute number of speakers
3. Proportion of speakers within the total population
4. Loss of existing language domains
5. Response to new domains and media
6. Material for language education and literacy
7. Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, including official status and use
8. Speakers' attitudes towards their own language

1. ***Intergenerational language transmission.*** For good reasons, this factor is widely accepted to be the most crucial to assess language endangerment (Brenzinger 2007: 545; Legère 2008). Presumably the most reliable indicator of possible language replacement is found in the language behavior of young people. In our survey we were restricted to a comparison of two age groups, namely people below 20 years of age and people from 20 years onward. Table 5 summarizes the patterns of language knowledge among these two age groups.

While Akie is usually transmitted by parents to their children, it is an endangered language. As observed earlier, Maguire predicted language replacement some 90 years ago, and Brenzinger (2007: 199) classifies Akie as a seriously endangered language, that is, as one that is spoken only by the grandparental generation and above (see Krauss 2007: 1). As can be seen in Table 2, this is not entirely in accordance with the findings made in our survey: Akie is spoken as a primary

12. The findings presented here and in the following tables are based primarily on self-assessments. Only in a smaller number of cases could they be tested by means of participant observation.

Table 5. Numbers of Akie having a knowledge of Akie according to age (based on Appendix 1 of König et al. 2014)

Age group	Their primary language	A secondary language	No knowledge	Total in percent	Total number of persons
20 and over	73.1 %	11.5 %	15.4 %	100	78
2–19	34.3 %	11.4 %	54.3 %	100	35
Total	61.1 %	11.5 %	27.4 %	100	
Total	69	13	31	100	113

language by nearly three quarters of the adult population, even if hardly more than one third of the people below 20 years have a full command of it, and more than half of the young population (54.3% of Table 3) are ignorant of it altogether. Accordingly, it would seem more appropriate to classify Akie as "instable" or "eroded" in the sense of Krauss (2007: 1), that is, as one that is still spoken by at least some children.

Does this mean that Akie people are in a process of shifting from their own language to Maasai? The figures in Table 6 suggest that there is no clear answer to this question. If the figures can be taken to reflect a change from one generation of speakers to another then they suggest that, in much the same way as Akie is losing speakers, Maasai is gaining speakers, being one of the primary languages of four out of six young Akie – that is, Maasai appears to be the most important means of communication for younger Akie. For more evidence in support of this hypothesis (see König et al. 2015).

Nevertheless, there is no clear indication that Maasai will replace Akie. First, for about a third of all younger Akie (34.3%, Table 5), their own language is still a primary language. And second, almost one third of younger Akie have no knowledge of Maasai. On the basis of such observations it would seem hard to predict how attitudes on language behavior will develop in the years to come.

To conclude, there clearly is intergenerational language transmission, even if there is also a possible shrinking process: The percentage of younger Akie (34.3%) is less than half that of generations above 20 years of age (73.1%). This fact could be indicative of loss in transgenerational transmission, but need not be: Conceivably, young Akie learn the language of their parents later in age. We observed in fact a few cases where this happened, but these observations were far from sufficient to allow for any predictions.

2. ***Absolute number of speakers.*** As observed above, there are hardly more than three hundred Akie speakers.[13] Compared to the number of well over one million Maasai people surrounding them, this figure suggests that the Akie form a tiny linguistic minority within an essentially Maasai-speaking world.

3. ***Proportion of speakers within the total population.*** Table 3 provides an approximate answer to this question: About two thirds of the Akie community speak their language at least as one of their mother tongues.[14] With reference to Tanzania as a whole, the number of Akie speakers is insignificant.

4. ***Loss of existing language domains.*** A comparison of the Akie (or Mósiro) people of roughly 90 years ago with their modern descendants suggests that none of the existing language domains was really lost: Like their ancestors, the Akie are still predominantly hunter-gatherers (see König et al. 2014), even if their farming activities have become more prominent.[15]

5. ***Response to new domains and media.*** Obviously, there is response to new domains, but these domains have hardly affected their economy and culture. These new domains concern in particular (a) new techniques of growing maize and beans, (b) consumption, e.g. new kinds of alcoholic drinks, spices, and other goods, and (c) material culture (tools, etc.). Communication with the outside world is severely limited: Cell phones or transistor radios, forming part of the every-day life of modern Tanzanians, are hardly available to the Akie.

Linguistic communication on such innovations may take place in Akie but, more likely, will rely on any of the three other languages they are familiar with,

---

13. This figure is fairly vague, for the following reason: Quite a number of Akie live far away from the settled areas of Kilindi and Kiteto Districts deep in the forest and savannah areas of the Maasai Steppe of north-central Tanzania, inaccessible even to other Akie (as well as the anti-poaching units of the national authorities). We were able to get second-hand information at least on some of them from fellow Akie but were assured by them that there were more Akie people in the forests than they could tell.

14. We are ignoring here the issue of alternative definitions. For our Akie consultants in particular, Akie include in a wide sense all those that subscribe to a traditional hunter-gatherer culture, even if they may now be primarily farmers of pastoralists, and their mother tongue may be Maasai, Nguu or any other language. Thus, Kisankare, Kinyalang'ate, or Aramani people are also clear "Akie" (see König et al. 2014). With our use of the term "Akie" we are restricted to Akie speakers and their immediate relatives.

15. The situation is different in larger parts of Kiteto District, where has been a large-scale shift from a forager to a food-producing economy, accompanied by language shift (see Schöperle 2011 for details).

namely Swahili, Maasai, Nguu and, most probably, Swahili, which has the most elaborated lexical means for expressing relevant concepts.

6. ***Material for language education and literacy.*** Akie is an exclusively oral language. There are no kinds of written documents that could serve as a basis of education and literacy and, what is more, there is no orthography that could be used.[16]

7. ***Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, including official status and use.*** The Akie and their language are distinctly beyond the scope of national or regional political or social concern. At least for some people in Northern Tanzania there are people known as "Ndorobo", believed to adhere to some form of archaic subsistence. But there is hardly any information on who the "Ndorobo" are, whether they have a language of their own -- or whether they exist in the first place.

8. ***Speakers' attitudes towards their own language.*** Speakers' attitudes towards their own language are complex. On the one hand, they realize that their language has serious deficits:

a. Its communicative value is low, being restricted to the small number of its speakers.
b. To express new cultural, economic, or technological concepts it has to rely on borrowings from Maasai and Swahili.
c. Speakers realize that Akie with its tiny speech community is hard, if not impossible, to find a generally recognized role in the modern nation state of Tanzania.

At the same time, speakers adhere to the language, for the following reasons:

a. Being still largely a hunter-gatherer community, there would be no other language that could be used to express the wide range of lexical and constructional means that is needed to survive in this cultural and economic niche.
b. Akie society includes in much the same way the living and the dead, that is, the *asííswe* 'ancestors'; Schöperle (2011:97) was told by his Akie informants in Kiteto district "that without remembering the life of the ancestors and the highlighting [of] the hunt the spirit of the Akie would die out". No major decision can be made without the approval of the *asííswe* (see König et al. 2014). Addressing them in any language other than Akie is hard to conceive for the

16. In 2013 we prepared a small primer for Akie willing to read and write in their own language. Whether this first piece of writing will have any impact on them remains to be seen.

people and, what is more, would be strongly disapproved by the *asiiswe*, resulting in misfortune of all kinds.[17]

c. All attempts that Akie people may have made in the past to become part of Maasai society, or at least to be accepted as social equals have failed. Maasai commonly take Akie wives, but these women will never become Maasai, they will be stigmatized for their whole life as Akie, that is, as second-class members of their new family. The Akie have reacted to all this by setting themselves off from their neighbors and strengthening their own socio-cultural identity (Kaare 1996), and their language is for them a paradigm symbol of this identity; we will return to this issue in Section 4.

Conclusions. According to the description volunteered by Maguire (1948), Akie was clearly more endangered than it is now. While he does not provide detailed information, his description suggests that about 90 years ago the language was on the verge of being replaced by Maasai. This situation appears to have changed: First, the language continues to be transmitted to children. Second, it has not lost any of the domains of use that are central to their present life and, third, the majority of Akie people want their language to be retained.

But what accounts for this apparent reorientation in their attitudes that the Akie appear to have experienced in the course of the last 90 years? We will look for an answer in the next section.

3. Akie as a "defensive culture"

In (2) of Section 1.2 we proposed three main kinds of manifestation for defining a "defensive culture", and it would seem that Akie culture can in fact be viewed as an example of it. We will now look at the factors with reference to their significance for the Akie.

3.1 Traditional culture

The Akie view Maasai people as their close cousins with whom they share the same origin, and consider them to be part of their cosmos; one of the explanations given for why they dress in a way similar to the Maasai is because they "all came from the same honey bag" (Kaare 1996: 179). But the attitudes that the Akie

17. Such beliefs and activities appear to apply throughout the male adult population of the Gitu area, where we carried out our field research. Whether, or to what extent, they apply to the Akie community as a whole could not be tested during our field research.

have vis-a-vis their numerically, economically, and socially much more powerful neighbors are complex. There is on the one hand admiration but, on the other hand, there is also suspicion and mistrust. We may illustrate the latter with a couple of examples.

There were a number of social functions that we witnessed where Akie people tried to keep Maasai people away from participating in or getting information on inherited cultural practices such as rituals, dances, singing, etc.

One aspect of these relations concerns what the Akie portray as protection of their cultural life. This behavior surfaced time and again during our work; a few observations may illustrate it. When a group of about a dozen Akie people were celebrating the Blessing-the-Hunting-Weapons ceremony in February, 2013, there was a Maasai woman watching. The Akie would then interrupt their activities and insist that that woman leave before they would continue.

In the same month there was another Akie dancing festivity also taking place at the fringe of the forest close to the village of Gitu. When two Maasai men approached, the dancers stopped and there was a small uproar, characterized by passionate discussions. In the end, the Akie told us that the Maasai would destroy their ceremony. Therefore, dancing would only be resumed when the Maasai had left, and this is what then happened.

In another event in January, 2014, a group of nine Akie gave us a demonstration of how they would ritually demarcate a plot that could not be approached by enemies or dangerous animals (the *mundee* ceremony). For some time there was a middle-aged Maasai man present, known to the Akie people who were singing and dancing. At some point one of the Akie men jumped up and physically threatened the Maasai, blaming him for trying to "steal" their culture. It was only when the Maasai man was removed from the place that singing and dancing resumed.

Such observations, impressionistic as they are, were a common theme during our research among the Akie. The people would freely share most central aspects of their ritual practices with the alien researchers but not with the Maasai, in spite of the fact that the two peoples share a long history of symbiotic interaction (Kenny 1981; Kaare 1996), and at times even friendship (Maguire 1948).[18]

Note that they never had problems with non-Maasai people being present, which frequently happened during our work, nor with us. Being aware that our

---

18. Symbiosis manifested itself most clearly but not only in situations of famine. When the Maasai were close to being wiped out by the rinderpest epidemic in the 1890s, the Akie helped them to survive by providing them with game meat and, conversely, the Maasai supplied the Akie with livestock products when the latter were unable to hunt (Maguire 1948). Furthermore, at times in the past when the ivory trade was thriving the Akie killed many elephants for Maasai to sell the tusks to outside traders.

goal was to document their language and culture they were at all times highly cooperative, even revealing details of cultural activities that were inaccessible to their own women and children.

3.2 Language use

The language is used in some sense as a "secret code", Akie people try to keep the Maasai away from it. Working on the western Akie in Kiteto District, Marianne Bakken (2004: 150) noted:

> […] they (the Akie) usually even refrain from speaking the Akie language at all when within hearing distance of their neighbors, whether Bantu or Maasai. This became apparent to me on our visits to the monthly market in Kibaya town, and in the larger shopping villages. When friends and kin meet and want to exchange news, they typically separate themselves spatially from non-Akie by clustering in small groups on the outskirt of the market place, or under a tree where they talk together in a low-voiced manner. In fact they only speak Akie freely in the secrecy and privacy of their own homesteads and settlements, or when alone in the bush.

The following example may illustrate a common attitude shown by them. When doing our field work in front of our tent in Gitu Juu next to an Akie home, people quite commonly used to pass by watching us. One day in January, 2014, there was a Maasai herding boy curiously watching what we were doing. Our Akie consultant Nkoiseyyo became irritated and shouted at the boy, asking him to leave us alone. Since even young Maasai have little respect for the Akie, the boy ignored Nkoiseyyo's words and stayed on. The latter then turned to us: "Why don't you chase this Maasai away, you never know what these people really are after."

We observed similar attitudes time and again. Note that roughly four fifths of the Akie speak Maasai very well (see Table 3). Many of their conversations are suggestive of a high degree of code-switching and, when dealing with certain topics relating to modern life, Akie people, both men and women, may switch entirely from their own language to Maasai, sometimes not even being aware that they are not using their own language.

But this can change rapidly in the presence of Maasai people. For example, when a Maasai person approaches a group of Akie, the latter might stop talking or turn to their own language. And in such a case they tend to make a deliberate effort to talk in a way that is unintelligible to Maasai people, avoiding code-switching and Maasai loanwords, using Akie as a kind of secret code. In such a situation they may turn into "language purists".

3.3 Language "purism"

We will loosely say that language "purism" is an attitude where speakers make an attempt to keep their language free from lexical and other material of another language in spite of the fact that that material is an integral part of their speech.

That there is a pronounced "purist" attitude was apparent when we analyzed the Akie texts we had recorded with our consultants. These texts contain a number of expressions that were beyond any reasonable doubt taken from Maasai.[19] When our Akie consultants came across such expressions they frequently asked us to eliminate them and replace them with corresponding Akie terms. Our submitting that these texts must remain as recorded, hence, could not be altered did not convince them. They would ask why we wanted "mixed" texts rather than "pure" Akie. And even arguing that they themselves had produced these Maasai expressions in the texts had little effect on them.[20]

Such problems never concerned borrowed material from other languages, as if it was only Maasai that was "contaminating" their language. Maasai language and culture was viewed as an eroding force that was on the way to destroying everything that the Akie aimed at defending: A distinct culture, society, and language.

While "purism" is an important ideological factor for many Akie consulted by us, as a matter of fact it is essentially ignored in informal language use, which abounds with lexical material borrowed, mostly from Maasai but also from Swahili.

3.4 Why is there a "defensive culture"?

If the hypothesis is correct that the Akie represent a defensive culture then one may wonder what motivation there may be for such a behavior.

The evidence available suggests the following answer. The Akie realize that there is no place for them in the modern nation state of Tanzania. Except for a few men who are recruited as game scouts or trackers to the national parks of the

19. There are also many Swahili loanwords but most of them have entered the Akie language via Maasai.

20. The basis of this disparate behavior between linguistic ideology, on the one hand, and actual language use, on the other, is in need of much further research.

country, especially Tarangire, Selous, and Serengeti, they do not participate in any national activities.[21]

- Their inherited economy is no longer sufficient to feed them and, what is more, is discouraged by national and regional authorities. The natural resources on which this economy is based, and which are needed for physical survival, have dwindled.
- While many nowadays do some farm work, they are clearly less successful in this work than any of the peoples around them.
- Being too few to be recognized as a distinct segment of the national population, they have no political standing to voice their concerns.[22] Note also that they are generally held in low social esteem by all their neighbors.
- Their children do not take advantage of the educational facilities provided by the state.[23]

But more important than all this is the fact that the Maasai have set a social barrier that the Akie cannot cross, even if quite a few would like to, such as:

- Some Akie have in fact acquired livestock and adopted Maasai as their culture and language. Yet, they will never be accepted by the Maasai as being the same.

21. Working on the Akie in Kiteto District in the 1996/7, Marianne Bakken writes: "They [the Akie] have limited access to a seat on the village council (total seats 25) as Councillors on the basis of pure numbers. According to my experience their village neighbours also have no interest in voting in 'poor Dorobo' who in their eyes do not share important values with themselves" (Bakken 2004: 169).

22. Already two decades ago, Kaare (1996: 188) observed: "Because their Bantu neighbours control the entire government structure, Akie feel left out of most of the decisions which pertain to village administration. In most cases they are just drafted to work in village self-help schemes from most of which they do not benefit as they spend most of their time away from the village in the forest either hunting or collecting honey or employed as casual labourers."

23. The village of Ngababa (Ngapapa) in the east of Kiteto District is a notable exception: Schöperle (2011: 82) found most of the children in the village school to be Akie from all over the district.

– Akie girls are commonly married to Maasai men but they never acquire a status that is equal to that of a Maasai woman.[24] Note that, according to Bakken (2004: 160), Akie women would prefer Akie to Maasai men.[25]

In this world of socio-political, economic, and cultural isolation, the Akie appear to have turned to their own traditional world in which they feel at home. In doing so, they themselves are setting boundaries vis-a-vis their human environment, trying to keep their culture "clean" and to prevent outsiders, and essentially always the Maasai, from having access to it.

One effect of this behavior is resistance to language shift. Whether the Akie will be successful in these efforts, and what their long-term consequences will be is hard to predict. And it is equally unclear whether, or to what extent, the situation of the Akie, as portrayed in this paper, can be related to or can offer an explanatory basis for that of some other linguistic minorities in Africa.

4. Language, culture and the future

One possible outcome of the research discussed in this paper is that the use of the Akie language will possibly be extended to some form of written communication. Another outcome will presumably be that the people's awareness of their language as a symbol of social and cultural identity will be strengthened. But this raises a number of problems.

One problem concerns the potential contribution that researchers can make for the future development of the language and its social functions: It would seem that such a contribution must remain a modest one. But another, even more serious problem is the following. The Akie language is deeply entrenched in the traditional culture of the community. The following example may illustrate this. As we observed in (viii) of Section 2, the life of all Akie persons we came across is to a large extent determined by their relationship with the ancestors (*asííswe*, sg. *asííswantee*), and the *asííswe* have to be addressed only in the Akie language, even if in practice this is not always the case. Once one's father or mother dies s/he

24. For Maasai in Kiteto District "marrying an Akie woman recently became very fashionable, because the bride prices for these girls are generally lower than for Maasai-girls. They told me that especially young men who possess only few livestock and little money would approach Akie women. This statement was affirmed by some elderly hunters from Napilo Konya, who told me that most bride prices for Akie girls would be comparably little, because many families were economically weak (Schöperle 2011: 43).

25. "Akie women … would rather marry Akie, feeling unsecure as to settle among the Maasai whatever other benefits it could bring in terms of material wealth" (Bakken 2004: 160).

turns into an *asííswantee*, meaning that s/he is always watching you – as far away as you may be – one cannot escape them. For example, going to town for a drink in a bar does not help: The *asííswe* are already there, waiting for their share. The *asííswe*'s main complaint is that they are hungry. In order not to be hit by accidents or death, people bless the ancestors at all special occasions, especially when something unexpected has happened or one intends to travel. Another complaint of the *asííswe* is that the Akie are rapidly discarding their traditional culture in favor of a *puuní* (Maasai) or *mɛéyɛ* ("Swahili") life style (König et al. 2014).

One central concern of the *asííswe* is that the Akie do not give up their economy, and in particular hunting: Most interactions with the *asííswe* involve hunting in one form or another – be that in personal exchanges or in communal ceremonies, such as the Blessing-the-Hunting-Weapons ceremony. Abandoning this economy would be strongly disapproved by the *asííswe*, resulting e.g. in misfortune, sickness, and/or death. To conclude, language, ancestor cult and economy are strongly intertwined domains and abandoning one would have repercussions for the other two.

What this means is that any language planning activities aimed at changing the status of Akie are likely to also affect the other two domains of culture. In particular, strengthening the position of the language by developing it into a medium of written communication might entail strengthening the significance of the other two domains as well.

But there does not appear to be much of a future for their traditional economy. Hunting is strongly discouraged by the government[26] and for collecting wild honey, a government licence is required, which is hardly affordable for most Akie people. Accordingly, the people may be facing a situation where they are forced to look for alternatives to earn their living. Attempts in this direction are already on the way: More and more Akie are engaged in farming, maize and beans being their primary crops.

To conclude, the situation of the linguist working on this language is not an easy one: Should s/he focus on documentation work or should s/he aim at strengthening the status of the language and support the aspirations of many people to prevent their language from being lost? Is s/he really sufficiently competent to assess the social, cultural and economic implications that any planning activity towards language empowerment might entail for the future of the Akie society? The responses that we received from the Akie people on this issue do not allow for clearly deciding on this issue. It would seem that there is so far no straightforward answer to these questions.

---

26. There is substantial hunting taking place in the Akie area but rather than by Akie most of it is performed by professional poachers from outside who, unlike the Akie, use firearms.

5. Conclusions

The patterns of language knowledge and language use among the Akie are complex and it is hard to predict any general trends of development. The most plausible conclusion would be that the Akie people are heading for a situation of quadrilingualism where each of the four languages, namely Akie, Maasai, Nguu, and Swahili, has its place and its preferred functional domain. Akie relates the community to its traditional past, which is far from becoming extinct. Maasai symbolizes the traditional relationship between the Akie and an essentially pastoralist outside world, while Nguu is a symbol of a new economic orientation towards an existence as farmers – an orientation that a number of Akie people see as their main alternative to a gradually declining existence as hunter-gatherers. Swahili finally offers a link to a new world – one that makes it possible for the Akie to participate in activities of a modern African nation state.

While language knowledge thus exhibits roughly a quadrilingual profile, there is one language that enjoys a privileged role, namely Maasai. At the same time, Maasai is also a threatening force and the Akie are aware of this potential and are reacting to it. What the success of their defensive behavior will be remains to be seen.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for valuable comments on an earlier version of the present paper. The paper is based on a field survey carried out within the *DoBeS* (Documentation of Endangered Languages) program of the *VolkswagenStiftung* (Volkswagen Foundation) between 2012 and 2014.[27] The authors wish to express their gratitude to the *VolkswagenStiftung* for all its support. Our gratitude is also due to the University of Dar es Salaam and various other authorities of the Republic of Tanzania for providing us with a research permission to carry out this research and for the assistance they gave us during this research (Research clearance of the University of Dar es Salaam, Ref. No. AB3/3(B), as well as of Tanga Region, Ref. No. DA. 258/288/02/84, 14th August, 2012). A special word of thanks is due to Professor Daniel Mkude of the University of Dar es Salaam, who accompanied this project from its beginning with all his advice and support. Without his incessant efforts, the project might not have been accomplished.

The first-named author also wishes to thank Dr. Matthias Brenzinger and the University of Cape Town, South Africa, and Professor Haiping Long and Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China, for their hospitality and support while he was working on the paper.

Most of all, our thanks are due to the Akie people, who not only volunteered as language consultants but also generously provided us hospitality while we were staying among them.

---

27. The three-year project, "Akie in Tanzania – documenting a critically endangered language" (AZ. 86 405), is directed by Karsten Legère and Christa König.

References

Bakken, M.H. 2004. Becoming Visible: Economic and Social Transformation and Marginalization of Akie Hunters and Gatherers in Northern Tanzania. PhD dissertation, University of Oslo.

Batibo, H. 1992. The fate of ethnic languages in Tanzania. In Brenzinger (ed.), 85–98.

Blench, R. 2007. Endangered languages in West Africa. In Brenzinger (ed.), 140–162.

Brenzinger, M. (ed.). 1992. *Language Death. Factual and Theoretical Explorations with Special Reference to East Africa* [Contributions to the Sociology of Language 64]. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. doi:10.1515/9783110870602

Brenzinger, M. 2003. Language and conceptual diversity under threat: Language endangerment on the African continent. In *Linguistic Cultural Identity and International Communication*, J. Vielberth & G. Drexler (eds), 59–77. Saarbrücken: AQ-Verlag,

Brenzinger, M. 2007a. Language endangerment in Southern and Eastern Africa. In Brenzinger (ed.), 179–204. doi:10.1515/9783110197129

Brenzinger, M. (ed.). 2007b. *Language Diversity Endangered* [Trends in Linguistics, Studies and Monographs 181]. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. doi:10.1515/9783110197129

Greenberg, J.H. 1963. *The Languages of Africa*. The Hague: Mouton.

Guthrie, M. 1948. *The Classification of the Bantu Languages*. London: International African Institute.

Heine, B. 1980. *The Non-Bantu Languages of Kenya* [Language and Dialect Atlas of Kenya 2]. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer.

Heine, B., König, C. & Legère, K. 2014. What does it mean to be an endangered language? The state of Akie, a Tanzanian language. In *Current Research in African Studies: Papers in Honour of Mwalimu Dr. Eugeniusz Rzewuski*, I. Kraska-Szlenk & B. Wójtowicz (eds), 107–122. Warsaw: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa.

Kaare, B.T.M. 1996. The Symbolic Construction of Community Identity of the Akie Hunter-gatherers of Northern Tanzania. PhD dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Kenny, M.G. 1981. Mirror in the forest: The Dorobo hunter-gatherers as an image of the other. *Africa* 15(1): 477–495. doi:10.2307/1158950

Klumpp, D. & Kratz, C. 1993. Aesthetics, expertise, and ethnicity: Okiek and Maasai perspectives on personal ornament. In *Being Maasai: Ethnicity & Identity in East Africa*, T. Spear & R. Waller (eds), 195–221. Oxford: Currey; Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota; Nairobi: EAEP; Athens: Ohio University Press.

König, C., Heine, B. & Legère, K. 2014. *The Akie language of Tanzania: Observations on their language and culture*. Typescript, Universität zu Köln/Universität Wien.

König, C., Heine, B. & Legère, K. 2015. *The Akie Language of Tanzania: A Sketch of Discourse Grammar*. Tokyo: Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies).

Krauss, M. 2007. Classification and terminology for degrees of language endangerment. In Brenzinger (ed.), 1–8.

Legère, K. 1992. Language shift in Tanzania. In Brenzinger (ed.), 99–115.

Legère, K. 2006. Language endangerment in Tanzania: Identifying and maintaining endangered languages. *South African Journal of African Languages* 26(3): 99–112.

Legère, K. 2008. Vidunda (G38) as an endangered language? In *Vanishing Voices: The Endangered Languages across the Globe*, S. Priya (ed.), 83–100. Bangalore: Icfai Research Center.

Legère, K. 2012. Endangered languages in Africa: Focus on Tanzania's Ngasa and Akie. In *Issues of Language Endangerment*, X. Shixuan, T. de Graaf & C. Brassett (eds), 89–102. Beijing: Chinese Academy of Sciences.

Maghimbi, S. 2005. The dynamics of household livelihood strategies in the drylands of Central and North Eastern Tanzania: The case of Kiteto District. In *Biodiversity Research for Livelihood Support and Food Security*, B. Kamondo et al (eds), 145–149. Nairobi: National Museum of Kenya.

Maguire, R.A.J. 1948. Il-Torobo, Being some notes on the various types of Dorobo found in the Masai reserve of Tanganyika territory and contiguous districts. *Tanganyika Notes and Records* 26: 1–28.

MLT (Mradi wa lugha za Tanzania [Languages of Tanzania Project, LoT]) 2009. *Atlasi ya Lugha za Tanzania* (Language Atlas of Tanzania). Dar es Salaam: University of Dar es Salaam.

Nurse, D. & Philippson, G. (eds). 2003. *The Bantu Languages*. London: Routledge.

Petrollino, S. & Mous, M. 2010. Recollecting words and phrases in Aasá, a dead language in Tanzania. *Anthropological Linguistics* 52(2): 206–216. doi:10.1353/anl.2010.0012

Rottland, F. 1982. *Die südnilotischen Sprachen: Beschreibung, Vergleichung und Rekonstruktion* [Kölner Beiträge zur Afrikanistik 7]. Berlin: Reimer.

Rottland, F. & Voßen, R. 1977. Grundlagen für eine Klärung des Dorobo-Problems. In *Zur Sprachgeschichte und Ethnohistorie in Afrika*, W.J.G. Möhlig, F. Rottland & B. Heine (eds), 213–238. Berlin: Reimer.

Schöperle, F. 2011. The Economics of Akie Identity: Adaptation and Change among a Hunter-gatherer People in Tanzania. MA thesis, University of Leiden.

Sommer, G. 1992. A survey on language death in Africa. In Brenzinger (ed.), 301–417.

UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages. 2003. Language Vitality and Endangerment. Document submitted to the International Expert Meeting on UNESCO Programme Safeguarding of Endangered Languages. *Paris*, 10–12 March.