"We are *Indigenous* and We Want to be Literate in Our Own Language"

The Ogiek of Mariashoni: A Good Example of How a Literacy Project with the Best Premises Can Be a Failure

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Abstract

The Ogiek of Mariashoni living in the Mau Forest of Kenya are a group of hunters and gatherers, who in the last 30 years have been facing a progressive process of habitat and climate change which obliged them to settle down and leave their semi-nomadic way of life. The major characteristic of the Ogiek has always been a very high degree of adaptability to their social and environmental context, which allowed them to develop what we can now call a fluid identity.

Recently they have come into contact with new social (and economic) movements promoted and supported by national and international NGOs working in the field of human rights and for the safeguard of indigenous peoples, which gave them the possibility to enter the international circuit of aid for cooperation and development. In a socio-linguistic perspective one of the most interesting aspects of this new situation is the speakers' changed attitude towards their own language and its promotion. This paper contains an accurate description of a project aimed at the definition of a good orthographic system for the Ogiek language and the production of didactic materials for primary schools. The project, which ended up as a failure due to the lack of participation and funding from the local Kenyan official institutions, was promoted by the University of Trieste in the framework of the ATrA project.

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1 Introduction. Minority Languages and the Government in Africa

If we agree that speaking of languages and the State in Africa is not an easy task, we should also agree that speaking of *Minority* Languages is something even more difficult.

The problem can be put in a very simple way. We, the *Westerners*, are in fact quite used to believe in the famous equivalence we owe to the German Renaissance 'One Nation = One Language = One Country'. It is a reality that, when we try to apply the very same equivalence to an African context, it results clear that things simply do not match our ideal model.

Due to its colonial and post-colonial history, Africa, more than any other continent, is formed today by countries which are internally united only on the paper. African State boundaries have been traced on the maps by people whose very last concern was to care about the complex ethnic, cultural and linguistic mosaic of the many peoples obliged to share one and the same geo-political and economical destiny. Even though a few cases of quasi-monolingual states actually exist (one example for all can be Somalia) the great majority of modern States in Africa are strongly multilingual, with cases like Nigeria where, in a single country, more than 400 languages, belonging to three different linguistic phyla (Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo), are spoken (cf. Ethnologue http://www.ethnologue.com/country/NG/maps).

It is self-evident that such a situation can be easily exploited as an explosive factor by those who, for this or that reason, are interested in destabilizing a country. The history of post-colonial and modern Africa is rich in examples of this kind. Therefore, the famous words pronounced by Nyerere, the first elected President of Independent Tanzania, as reported in Laitin (2006: 12), are still to be considered valid and precious today: "Africa's Boundaries are so absurd that 'we must consider them sacrosanct'".

If we take this as a starting point, we must add that our concern is not what happens in terms of ethnolinguistic identity negotiation *outside* or *inside* the State-Borders, but rather what happens *inside* those borders, where minority groups (such as for example the Ogiek of the Mau forest of Kenya), live side by side to economically and politically much more powerful peoples (such as, in our example, the pastoralist Maasai of the Narok district or the Kikuyu of the region of Molo).

In a sense, then, our concern is also bound to a question of linguistic policies.

Again, we face a very difficult issue. In most African post-colonial countries linguistic policies concerning minority languages simply do not exist, and in many cases, if they exist on the paper, they are far from applied in the real world. As Simpson (2011: 4) puts it: "While the leaders and governments of a number of states did make affirmations that certain languages should be considered as national languages, this often appeared to be a principally symbolic gesture not supported by concrete moves".

What is true is that, from independence onwards, with the growth of a more mature democratic participation of larger and larger parts of the population in the elective process, the attitude of politicians towards African languages in general has changed quite evidently, and this is true above all in West Africa. For the first generation of high level politicians and bureaucrats, it was in fact important to distinguish themselves from the commoners and peasants. The influence and economic support of ex-colonial international parties was very strong and the fact of being able to speak and behave like the ex-colonialists was seen as a necessity to enter the world of those who really 'counted'.

Therefore, those who had had the possibility to study abroad and to dispose of a net of important international political relationships were facilitated in the access to the political career in the newly born African countries.[1]

As a consequence, in the first years after independence, leaving aside those rare cases like Ethiopia, where Amharic was chosen as the official language, in most African countries, where the languages of ex-colonizers were adopted as languages of the State, people saw themselves obliged to use them at all levels of governmental activities, and what distinguished most politicians and bureaucrats from commoners was precisely the more or less correct use of those European languages. In many cases according to the constitution it was even prohibited to politicians to speak an African language, or better, an African non national language, in parliament. This happened for example in Kenya, until the last revision of the constitution in 2011.

Anyway, as time passed by, African democracies became stronger and African electors became more aware and informed in political matters. Contemporarily, international agencies started to focus their attention on human rights in emergent and developing countries and African politicians understood that the times of their elitist behavior were over. Their new key for success could not be but a more inclusive and popular approach.

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1   As it happened in the case of the first presidents of the two major French ex-colonies: Senghor in Senegal and Houphouet-Boigny in Ivory Coast.

For this reason, already with the second generation of African politicians around the '90s, African languages (or at least the most widely spoken of them) stopped to be confined to the restricted stage of the private and the domestic and made their first appearance in official political settings, so that today, using the words of A. Simpson (2011: 8), we can say that "African languages are being used significantly more by politicians to address the woo audience[2] both in face-to-face public gatherings and in television interviews".

In the last 20 years, speaking at least one African language for an African politician, have ceased to be a synonym of backwardness and 'underdevelopment' and has gradually become a synonym of far-sightedness, human concern and devotion to his/her country's own identity.

This new vision brought to the interesting fact that today many African constitutions, at least nominally, finally have included the safeguard and / or promotion of national or minority languages (cf. Simpson 2011) as one of their priorities.

Since our case-study will focus on the Ogiek of Kenya, let us see what is envisaged for minority ethnic and linguistic groups promotion and protection in the new Kenyan constitution of 2011. Hereafter I report word for word the most significant articles:

> Art. 7. (3) The state shall (a) promote and protect the diversity of language of the people of Kenya; and (b) promote the development and use of indigenous languages, Kenyan Sign language, Braille and other communication formats and technologies accessible to persons with disabilities.
> Art 27. (4) The State shall not discriminate directly or indirectly against any person on any ground, including race, sex, pregnancy, marital status, health status, ethnic or social origin, colour, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, dress, language or birth.
> Art 44. (1) Every person has the right to use the language, and to participate in the cultural life, of the person's choice. (2) A person belonging to a cultural or linguistic community has the right, with other members of that community—(a) to enjoy the person's culture and use the person's language; or (b) to form, join and maintain cultural and linguistic associations and other organs of civil society.

As we will see in a while, however, for the moment this attention to minority languages and cultures remains just a wishful thinking.

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2   Of course, in my opinion, in order to obtain more votes.

2 Focussing on the Minority Group of the Ogiek of Mariahsoni, Kenya. A Peculiar Question in the Context of Minority Languages Definition and Preservation

The Ogiek of Mariashoni are a group of hunters and gatherers living in the Eastern Escarpment of the Mau forest, in the region between Nakuru and Molo. Their language is classified as Nilo-Saharan, Eastern Sudanic, Nilotic, Southern, Kalenjin and it is structurally very close to Nandi and Kipsigis.

Until 30 years ago, the forest cover in the region was still very rich, but during the last generation, due to the damages of global climate change and of a savage deforestation (miraculously reduced in this new millennium thanks to the joint actions of NGOs and the local government), their habitat changed so much that they were obliged to abandon their previous semi-nomadic way of life and to settle down adopting a small farming activity for their survival.[3]

From a cultural/ethnical/historical point of view, the Ogiek were a parasite community of *dorobo*, living in a symbiotic relation with their more prestigious, powerful and technologically more skillful neighbors, the Maasai.

Anthropological evidence concerning the Ogiek living in the southern part of the region, in the Narok district (see for example Kratz 1980, 1989, 1990*a*, 1990*b*, 1991, 1993) published among the '80s and '90s, revealed a very complex situation, pointing to a prevision of erosion of peculiar linguistic and cultural traits in a very short time.

Grimes (2000) confirmed in some ways this vision and placed the Ogiek language at level 7 (*i.e.* 'shifting') on its scale of the status of a language, what means that "the child-bearing generation can use the language among themselves, but it is not being transmitted to children".[4]

The feeling that the Ogiek is to be considered as one of those 3000 languages destined to be extinct in the next century[5] is palpable and very widespread in literature. Also Githiora (2011: 237) writes in fact that "a few of the indigenous African languages such as El Molo and Okiek languages are nearly extinct, principally because the speakers of these languages have assimilated into larger communities of Maa, Kalenjin and Gikuyu speakers (Heine, Möhlig 1980; Ethnologue 2005)" and a few pages later he adds that: "A […]

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3 More on this subject in Micheli (2013, 2014*b*, 2014*c*).

4 Cited from https://www.ethnologue.com/about/language-status.

5 Even though the issue is most debated, see Grenoble, Whaley (2006: 1): "there is a general consensus that at least half of the world's 6000–7000 languages will disappear (or be on the verge of disappearing) in the next century".

process of cultural and linguistic assimilation also places the Okiek—a Nilotic language—on the list of Kenyan near extinct languages" (Githiora 2011: 239).

Even though this is true for what concerns those Kenyan Ogiek living in the Narok district, who have almost completely switched to the use of Maa also in their daily activities, and who do not transmit their original language to their children, recent data collected in in 2013 and 2014 in the region of Mariashoni and published in 2014 (Micheli 2014b) give luckily a quite different overview of the situation of the Ogiek language in that particular context.

If the ethnic Ogiek population in Kenya consists of circa 79.000 speakers,[6] the Ogiek of Mariashoni, who are around 15.000, represent about the 20% of the Ogiek population of Kenya, which is not a negligible proportion, since it could represent the reality in which to develop a project of safeguard and promotion of the still lively and daily spoken Ogiek language.

According to the Sociolinguistic Survey presented in Micheli 2014b, during which 142 adult speakers were interviewed, in fact, "141 interviewees out of 142 declared that the only language spoken at home, with parents, children, other family members and neighbors is Okiek. The only one exception is that of a Kipsigis woman, who uses to speak Kipsigis or Kiswahili both with her children and her husband. Her husband instead declared to speak only Okiek with his children, even though he switches to Kiswahili when speaking with his wife. Any-way these two cases represent only 1,4 % of our sample". This, together with the fact that in the region the only other language regularly spoken in formal contexts (police, governmental offices and the like) is Kiswahili and that the proportion of Ogiek declaring to know and sometimes speak other African neighboring Kalenjin languages such as Nandi and Kipsigis is inferior to 10%, and that those who know Gikuyu or Maa are less than 5%, which is even lesser than those who understand English (circa 6%; Micheli 2014b: 157), seems effectively to give Ogiek a concrete hope for survival.

If we consider the vitality of the Ogiek variant of Mariashoni following the method suggested by the UNESCO's *ad hoc* Group on Endangered Languages contained in the document *Language Vitality and Endangerment* of 2003[7] which is based on the evaluation of the 9 following determinant factors:

1) Intergenerational language transmission
2) Absolute number of speakers
3) Proportion of speakers within the total population
4) Trends in existing language domains

6 Cf. https://www.ethnologue.com/language/oki.
7 On this point see Grenoble, Whaley (2006: 4).

5) Response to new domains and media
6) Materials for language education and literacy
7) Governmental and institutional language policies, including official status and use
8) Community members' attitudes toward their own language
9) Amount and quality of documentation

We can say that Ogiek is not really in a dangerous situation.

Main concerns of this contribution will be point 1, point 6, point 7 and point 8. Anyway, in general, as demonstrated by Micheli (2014*b*), in Mariashoni there is no menace on point 1, as intergenerational transmission is still the rule. The absolute number of speakers, which is around 15.000 represents at least the 20% of the Ogiek population, even though, if we consider the percentage of the Ogiek among the global population of Kenya (about 44.000.000), they do not even reach the 0.18% of the total population of the country, *i.e.* they represent a very small component of the Kenyan ethnic mosaic. Concerning the trends in existing linguistic domains, Ogiek is still used in all daily activities, even though the language's response to new domains and media is non existent and many are the loans which come from Kiswahili or Gikuyu (but the same is true also for non traditional domains, anyhow present in the Ogiek material culture since ages, such as for example agriculture and farming). Real problems are represented by factors 6, 7 and 9, because at the moment the language is not at all documented (point 9), even though a grammatical description of the Ogiek of Mariashoni and its vocabulary are being developed. Moreover Ogiek does not have a coded and agreed upon orthography (point 6) and the government seems not to have the slightest intention to take any kind of action to ameliorate the situation. Concerning point 8, which is the speakers' attitude towards their own languages, it is interesting to notice that, since the starting of projects of cooperation and development in the region, the attitude of the Ogiek of Mariashoni, used since centuries to be considered and to consider themselves as well, nothing more than *dorobo*, that is *servants* of their neighbors, is now changing and something which has the taste of a newly developed 'pride of being Ogiek' seems to be growing even among the youth.

All this given and considered, I guess that we could now say that the status of Ogiek should be considered not as 'shifting', but simply as 'at risk', as that of any other African language not officially recognized and promoted through appropriate school programs by the government of its country.

Before passing to the description of our case study, two more observations have to be done.

First of all it is important to underline that in this new setting it is possible that what Laitin (2006: 32) presented as his view of Language shift in African contexts, *i.e.* that "Language shifts are here seen not as methods of transmitting information but as strategies for repositioning oneself in the social order", could now be applied not only to the typical condition of a minority group choosing to speak a majority language in order to advance its socio-political condition, but also to the current tendencies of some politically sustained *indigenous* groups to make of the 'coming back' to their ancestral origins a way to attract the attention of international observers and to gain something in terms of economic return.

Secondly it is necessary to consider here the interesting and illuminating distinction made by Grenoble and Whaley (2006: 166) between *language ownership* and *language knowledge*, which reveals itself fundamental in any kind of language revitalization project. With the label *language ownership* the two scholars intend the speakers' identification with a language they may also not speak as their mother tongue, just because it is supposed to be the language of their ancestors. With the label *language knowledge* they intend instead the effective speakers' competence in that language in daily use.

3   The Projects Funded and Promoted by NECOFA, Manitese, the Province of Bolzano, and the University of Trieste among the Ogiek of Mariashoni

The idea of an orthography for the Ogiek of Mariashoni was born in a wider context of cooperation and development projects promoted in the region since 2004 by the Kenyan NGO NECOFA (Network for Ecofarming in Africa) based in Molo, and the two Italian NGOs Manitese (Kenya Branch) and Ethnorêma, based respectively in Milan and in the autonomous Province of Bolzano.

Primary objectives of the three NGOs were reforestation and the promotion of small projects aimed at the amelioration of the socio-economic situation of the Ogiek community through micro-interventions, for example in the field of sustainable horticulture and beekeeping.[8]

In 2013 these activities were implemented with the introduction of an ethnolinguistic project, aimed at documenting the traditional vocabulary and

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8   Beekeeping and honey collection was one of the traditional activities of the Ogiek of the Mau forest. According to their tradition, the ogee appeared in this world together with their dogs and their bees. Beehives are the only good which Ogiek males inherit from their fathers (cf. also Huntingford 1955).

techniques of beekeeping. The University of Trieste was involved as a partner in the research phase.

The inclusion in the ongoing projects of a specific part, focussing on the safeguard of the Ogiek language and culture, and in some ways the constitution of an Ogiek cultural heritage to be valued, brought the community of Mariashoni to develop a sense of pride in its identity, which until then lacked completely.

On this specific point and on the role of ethnolinguistics in general in cooperation and development projects, I refer the reader to Micheli (2014a).

When the idea of trying to create an orthography to give the Ogiek of Mariashoni the possibility to keep a written memory of their traditions, tales and histories came to the mind of the elders of the MACODEV, our positive answer as researchers was anchored on four fundamental points, which made us feel the project as a moral obligation:

> 1) Article 5 of UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which states that "All persons should therefore be able to express themselves and to create and disseminate their work in the languages of their choice, and particularly in their mother tongue; all persons should be entitled to quality education and training that fully respect their cultural identity".
> 2) Article 17 of the UN Charter of 1950, which says that "Every national or ethnic minority or group has the right to preserve its own cultural identity".
> 3) Article 19 of the UN Charter of 1950, which affirms that "Cultural autonomy consists further in an educational system providing instruction on all education levels in the language of the group".
> 4) Article 20 of the Un Charter of 1950: "Linguistic autonomy consists in facilitating the use of the mother tongue before administrative and juridicial authorities".

4 Choosing an Orthography and Promoting a Literacy Program in a Minority Group: a Question of Standardization and Language Policies

It is true that when one has the idea to invest in a literacy project for a minority group, he must first of all be aware that linguistic policies involve not only languages, but they also have many other social implications in terms of status, access to higher education and/or to administrative careers.

In the context of the Ogiek of Kenya, due to the insignificant percentage of the whole Ogiek speaking community among the Kenyan population (a scarce 0,18%) this issue could seem out of discussion, but this is true only if we consider it on a national level, where the literacy of, say, a bunch of ex-hunters and gatherers would likely have no impact on the status, privilege and rights of their more numerous and historically more powerful neighboring communities. If we focus on the regional context anyway, the very same assumption remains valid, because the very simple fact of choosing a dialectal variant rather than the other can bring to the undesirable outcome of stimulating even very animated tensions among the two sister-communities.

In this case, two points underlined by Grenoble, Whaley (2006), are precious:

> 1) "choices among dialects for use in a written language must be made with careful attention on how they will be received by the full range of people who are being targeted for training in literacy" (*ibid.*: 132), and
> 2) "choices in orthography reflect the desire of a group to distinguish itself from surrounding groups or, sometimes, to align itself with certain groups" (*ibid.*: 143).

The choice of the 'right' variant lays at the basis of a likely successful project of language revitalization, but it is of course a process which can take much time and which cannot bring to a positive solution if the reference communities are not adequately engaged in the project itself with a collaborative spirit.

This is true not only if we think of the aforementioned possible inter-ethnic tensions generated by a question of prestige and identity, but also if we consider the mere technical aspect of the creation of a stable orthographic system, for which "a certain degree of linguistic standardization" (Grenoble, Whaley 2006: 129) is pivotal.

Apart from these questions concerning the local dimension, another factor conditioning the success of a literacy or revitalization project is the attitude of the national government. Of course where governments are really involved in the safeguard and promotion of minority languages and cultures, everything becomes much easier, in that it can be envisaged that the government itself invests money in it, and above all the promoters can likely count on experienced institutional procedures for the official acknowledgement and validation of the programs they eventually propose for the schools.

As we have seen in our introduction, the Constitution of Kenya of 2011 contains at least three articles referring explicitly to the safeguard and promotion of minority languages and cultures, and therefore, we could expect that

the Kenyan government has a clear and well organized plan for its linguistic policies.

In reality this is not the case and we can of course agree with Githiora (2011: 246) that "the laissez-faire attitude towards languages in Kenya is without any specific ideological grounding or cohesion. It has resulted in unregulated, natural development of languages with little consciousness of focused planning".

5   Indigenousness and Literacy in a Minority Group as a Viable Means to Get into the Circuit of International Aid

During my work with the Ogiek of Mariashoni in 2013 and 2014, I could realize that sometimes even the best intentions can change in something different as time goes by.

As I said in the previous paragraphs and elsewhere (Micheli 2014a), the idea of developing an orthography and a literacy project for the Ogiek and in the Ogiek language was born as a response to a specific request moved by a group of elders, motivated only by their desire to give their grandchildren a tool to preserve, also in the future, a knowledge that risks to disappear due to the collapse of the Ogiek original habitat and to the consequences of economic and socio-political development of the country.

The original motivations were thus very noble and had the taste of an operation in the name of the promotion of human rights.

Anyway, as it often happens, problems were hidden around the corner.

As I claimed in Micheli (2014a), the Ogiek of Mariashoni, as any other still existing group of hunters and gatherers have as their prior characteristic a surprising ability to negotiate their easily modifiable and always modified identity, in order to adapt themselves to their surrounding context, to their neighbors and to their habitat. Their identity has always been everything but a fixed one, and *fluidity* was the only one element which could grant them to survive for millennia as a distinct group.

The Ogiek today speak a Nilo-Saharan, Kalenjin language, but their physical appearance and their living tradition have nothing to do with other Kalenjin groups, and would rather place them in that continuum of hunters and gatherers tribes, once very widespread in East and Central Africa, who could likely have had a kind of a 'common' origin. In 1990 Distefano produced evidence of an Ogiek word containing a click sound, and even though this is not enough to trace their origin back to a Khoisan ancestry, it is still interesting that the same happens for example in Hadza and in other languages of ex hunters and gatherers

of the macro-region, while it doesn't happen, for example, in the languages of pastoralist or agriculturalist Nilotic/Kalenjin groups of the same region.

What is interesting to point out here is that for the Ogiek their language has always represented a tool, an instrument for communication, and they have always been ready to abandon it in order, if needed, to adopt their neighbors' language instead. This is probably also the reason why in the Narok district the Ogiek, as witnessed by Kratz and Ethnologue, speak Maa without making of it any identity drama.[9]

If it is true that language is an instrument easily negotiable for survival, it should also be true that language preservation too can become an instrument for an even better survival. Language in this case represents a strong symbol under which to gather a group of people moved by the very same political and/or economical interest. From this to the use of language in ideological movements grounded in the romantic postulate 'one language, one country, one people', it's a short step.

Of the same opinion is for example Gilmore (2011: 125), who writes: "One language, one people. While this ideological position is often used as a rationalization for harsh assimilationist policies, the very same ideology, ironically, is at the heart of most indigenous and minority language revitalization movements".

In times of political instability, or when someone understands that stressing the 'language identity' theme can reveal itself to be a good business because it can bring money from the circuit of international aid for cooperation and development, the issue of carefully choosing to support a literacy project or not becomes central.

Sometimes even the best projects can change in embarrassing frauds if they fall in the hands of the wrong people, and sometimes a very promising project can result in a flop because of the recognition *in itinere* of the ideological trap hidden behind the best original purposes.

All this can happen because even when speakers of a minority language consciously switch from their mother tongue to a different, more widely diffused official language, they still feel that they have done something wrong towards their ancestors.

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9   On this point, *i.e.* about the issue 'language as an instrument', cf. also for example Skallum (2011: 115), referring to Mali: "French is not used for identity purposes, but as an instrument of social promotion. For the Songhai and Tamachek who use it to avoid Bambara domination, French has an instrumental role as well".

As Laitin (2006: 52) puts it: "Admittedly impressionistic, the evidence points to a fascinating psychological quality about language. People are willing to learn languages other than their mother tongues as instruments for the fulfillment of economic or social goals. As the newly learned language(s) begins to replace the mother tongue in a widening circle of social domains, however, many people feel a sense of loss, of alienation from their roots, of betrayal. This sense of betrayal is passed on through the generations, even to children who have never heard the languages of their ancestors. Revival movements of 'dead' languages, led by intellectuals who have never spoken that language [...] use that sense of guilt and betrayal to political advantage".

6 Orthography and Literacy for the Ogiek of Mariashoni: A Well Constructed, but Unlucky Project

The project aimed at the creation of an orthography for the Ogiek language, which would have allowed for the production of a written thesaurus of tales, myths, legends and traditional histories to be collected in didactic booklets dedicated to primary school children, was funded and promoted by Manitese, Ethnorêma and the University of Trieste in Italy.

It started in February 2013 and was abandoned around may 2014.

The first steps moved on the field, brought to excellent results. The participation of people was great. During the collection of oral traditions in January/February 2013, many elders came to Mariashoni even from very far locations, in order to leave their own contribution to posterity, and in the second mission, in January/February 2014, the directors of the three primary schools of the region were engaged with linguists of the University of Trieste, in the testing of the three proposed orthographies realized on the basis of the analysis of the Ogiek Phonological system deduced from the rules identified in the materials recorded during the first stay on the field.

In this paragraph is reported the scientific evidence of these first steps, which brought to the selection of a viable orthography. The dialect used is the variant spoken in Mariashoni.

I *Basic Traits of the Ogiek Phonology*

Analyzing the first 700 words collected, the phonetic repertoire of Ogiek seems to be actually the same as that of Nandi, as described by Creider, Creider (1989), with the addition of a set of fricative phonemes.

Consonants:

	bilabial	labiodental	alveolar	postalveolar	palatal	velar
stop	p		t		c	k
fricative		f v	s	ʃ		
nasal	m		n		ɲ	ŋ
lateral			l			
tap			r			
semivowel	w				y	

Rather than palatal /c/, Ogiek presents the corresponding affricate sound, *i.e.* /tʃ/ which becomes voiced /dʒ/ in intervocalic position.

The same distribution rules as described by Creider, Creider, with really a few exceptions, are to be considered valid also for Ogiek.

The behavior of stops seems to be the most complicated problem, and I think that not by chance also Creider, Creider (1989: 13) started their description of Nandi phonology right from this point: "The phonetic realization of the stop phonemes is quite complex. /p/ and /k/ are voiced and optionally spirantized intervocally".

In Ogiek the fricative voiced phonemes /β/ and /ɣ/ appear in free variation with voiced stops /b/ and /g/ and therefore are not to be considered in a discussion on orthography.

> Ogiek "sheep" /nɛ́ɛkɔ̀/ [nɛ́:ɣɔ̀] = Nandi "goats" /ne:kà/ [ne:ga / ne:ɣa]
> Ogiek "daily life/living" /sɔ́pèèt/ [sɔ́βè:t] = Nandi "to dig" /kee-pál/ [kee-bál / kee-βál]
> Ogiek "cow—cows" /té:tà—tú:kà/ [té:tà—tú:ɣà] = Nandi "cow" /teetà/ [teetà]

In Nandi all stops are voiced after nasals and /l/, but not after /r/:

> Nandi[10] "to taste" /ke:-camcam/ [ke:camdʒam]
> Nandi "foot" /ke:ltà/ [ke:-ldà]
> Nandi "to disappear from sight" /ki:carca:rtà/ [ki:carca:rtà]

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10   All the Nandi examples are taken from Creider, Creider (1989).

In Ogiek stops are voiced after nasals (with a few exceptions) and /l/, and the same is true for /p/ and /k/ after /r/:

Ogiek "food" /ɔ́mtìt/ [ɔ́mdìt]
Ogiek "mais" /pántiàt/ [pándiàt]
Ogiek "eye" /kɔ́:ŋtà/ [kɔ́:ŋdà]
Ogiek "leg" /ké:ltɔ/ [ké:ldɔ] and also [gé:ldɔ]
Ogiek "household goods" /kúrpɛ̀:t/ [kúrβɛ̀:t]
Ogiek "bark used for chest problems" /ʧélùmpùd/ [ʧélùmbùd].

Either in Nandi and in Ogiek only /p/ and /k/ are voiced after glides and /r/:

Nandi "warm" /púrkéy/ [púrgéy]
Nandi "happy" /páypáy/ [páybáy]
Nandi "please!" /ka:yká:y/ [ka:ygá:y]
Ogiek "stone—stones" /kɔ́ıtà—kɔ̀ík/ [kɔ́ıtà—kɔ̀íɣʰ]
Ogiek "roof" /pátaikɔ̀/ [pátaiɣɔ̀].

but there are also incoherent examples:

Nandi "cold" /káytît/ [káytît]
Ogiek "body" /pó:rtɔ̀/ [pó:rtɔ̀]
Ogiek "stick for smoking the meat" /sá:rtìt/ [sá:rtìt].

In Nandi /p/ is voiced before /w/, but /k/ is not, what is not true for Ogiek, where sometimes also /k/ in this position is voiced:

Nandi "to think" /ki:pwâ:t/ [ki:bwâ:t]
Nandi "to flatulate" /ke:kwa:t/ [ke:kwa:t]
Ogiek "buttocks" /sùgùtwék/ [sùgùtwéɡʰ]
Ogiek "neck—necks" /mó:ktɔ̀—mó:kwèk/ [mó:ktɔ̀—mó:kwèɡʰ]
Ogiek "child—children" /lá:kwà—lɔ́:kùk/ [lá:kwà—lɔ́:gùɡʰ]
Ogiek "nettle" /síkwɔ̀t/ [sígwɔ̀t]
Ogiek "back" súkwèt [súgwèt].

In Ogiek, as it is true for Nandi, nasal consonants, except for /m/, seem to assimilate to the place of articulation of a following stop (sometimes voiced) consonant:

Ogiek "firewood" /kwéntèt/ [kwéndèt]
Ogiek "great eater" /kɔ́ntɔ́mɔ́/ [kɔ́ntɔ́mɔ́]

Ogiek "stick for making fire" /kɔŋdamat/ [kɔŋdamat]
Ogiek "raw food" /tɔmkéjɔ̀/ [tɔmɣéjɔ̀] negative <akéjɔ̀ [agéjɔ̀] "cooked".

In Ogiek, like in Nandi, there are some syllable final consonant clusters /nk/:

Ogiek "beehive" /múinkèt/ [múingèt].

In final position (mostly plural nouns), /k/ is voiced and sometimes spirantized. The same does not happen with final /t/ (mostly singular nouns), which remains voiceless and very rarely spirantized.

Ogiek "bodies" /pó:ruèk/ [pó:ruè^{gh}]
Ogiek "skins" /mɔ́ɣɔtɔ́k/ [mɔ́ɣɔtɔ́^{gh}]
Ogiek "tendon" /mè:ltèt/ [mè:ldèt]
Ogiek "saliva" /ŋùliát/ [ŋùliát^{h}].

Being spirantization in these cases just optional (even though some speakers tend to use it very much) I think it is not necessary to consider it in the designing of an Ogiek orthography.

In Ogiek there seem to be only short consonants, even though sometimes, voiceless stop /t/ results very strongly emphasized.

Ogiek (sit down!) it:epɔ́ten [it:eβɔ́ten].

Vowels

	front	central	back
high	i ɪ		u ʊ
mid	e ɛ	ɘ	o ɔ
low		a	

Ogiek, like Nandi, has a complete set of +ATR vowels and a compete set, except for ɑ, of -ATR vowels. Ogiek makes also a distinction between long and short vowels. In addition to the basic ±ATR 5 vowels, Ogiek has also a central *schwa*,

which seems to appear only in initial position, when followed by a nasal consonant.

As it is the case in Nandi, Ogiek has a basically root driven vowel harmony, even though in the recordings in my possession there seem to be some exceptions, but I guess this is simply due to the process of obsolescence of the language. Central low vowel a appears either in +ATR or in -ATR contexts.

For the moment it is impossible for me to offer a reasonable list of minimal pairs.

For what concerns super-segmental phonology, Ogiek recognizes at least three different tones: HML. Modulated tones appear as a consequences of contacts of two different kind of tones on two distinct syllables. For the moment I do not have examples of minimal pairs based only on tonal distinction.

II   *A Reasoned Proposal for an Ogiek Orthography*

From the analysis of the phonological structure of the language as described above it seems to me that the principal issues to be discussed and decided are the following:

1)   how to handle tones
2)   how to handle voiced stop consonants
3)   how to indicate + /- ATR vowels and
4)   how to indicate vowel length.

Treating these issues, in order to make a reasonable proposal for an Ogiek orthography, I refer mainly to the recommendation for the "Harmonization of the orthographic system and the IPA system of Nilotic Languages in Kenya" by Oduor (2012).

Concerning point 1, the decision is subjected to what will be the solution of point 3. Basically I think we have two choices:

a)   not indicating tones at all
b)   using ´ for the HT and ` for the LT only when it is necessary to disambiguate the meaning of a word, in case of a minimal pair.

The guidelines contained in Oduor (*ibid.*: 184) would agree with my point a).

Oduor in fact, citing Banda (2002: 16 manca in bibliografia), writes: "Perhaps there is a good argument for not symbolizing tone as one can always get the meaning of words from the context. However, there could be an argument for

symbolizing the high tone vowel with a diacritic particularly in dictionaries or the teaching of vocabulary".

On this point I must add that Ogiek is still well known and I am sure that the children / readers are still able to add the tones by themselves, at least in the region of Mariashoni.

Moreover, as I said, on a sample of more than 700 words I do not have for the moment a single case of minimal pair based on tonal distinctions, and therefore I think the best solution is a).

Concerning point 2, I would suggest to write stop consonants as voiced (b,d,g) always when the phonological rules do not admit exceptions, *i.e.*:

a)   p and k in intervocalic position
b)   p, t, k after nasals and l
c)   p and k > b and g after glides and r
d)   p > b before w
e)   k > g in final position.

Concerning point 3, that is tongue root distinctions, Oduor (2012: 176–77) underlines that in the currently used writing systems of Kalenjin languages there is no coherence. Sabaot and Marakwet use to make the distinction between [+ATR] and [-ATR] vowels, putting the symbol ̄ above a, e, i, o, u in case of [+ATR] and no symbol for [-ATR]. However, [±ATR] is not marked in the Kalenjin Bible written in Kipsigis, while Creider, Creider used italic for [-ATR] words and regular for [+ATR] roots.

Be it as it may, according to the author, this distinction should not be made in orthography, "however when preparing dictionaries, transcription should be included to show the difference in pronunciation between [+ATR] and [-ATR] vowels" (*ibid.*: 184).

It is true that the use of many special symbols or diacritics can be a hindering factor in the learning of a writing system, but I am not sure that the trait [±ATR] can be treated as a secondary issue and relegated only to transcriptions in dictionaries, but maybe this is one of the points which we should best discuss with the native speakers in order to get to an agreed upon decision.

If we decide to mark [±ATR] distinctions, we can use one of the following systems:

a)   using all the international symbols for—ATR vowels except for a, which is always pronounced as "a", that is ɪ, ɔ, ʊ, ε

b) using diacritics to indicate the distinctions, (like in French é vs è), having e, i, o, u for +ATR and è, ì, ò, ù for -ATR vowels. This choice would actually impede the use of ´ and ` as indications for H and L tones.

Concerning point 4) The simplest and most economic choice is the indication of vowel length through the use of two consequent identical vowel signs: aa, ee, ii, oo, uu, εε, ιι, ɔɔ, ʋʋ.

According to Oduor (*ibid.*: 181) this is what already happens in all Kalenjin writings and in many other Nilotic languages of Kenya, like Maa, Iteso, Samburu and Njemps and it is therefore, a choice to be maintained.

Apart from the main points discussed above, there are also minor elements to be considered, in order to choose the best graphemes for the palatal affricates /ʧ/ and /ʤ/, the labiodental fricative /ʃ/ and finally for semivowels /w/ and /y/.

According to Oduor (*ibid.*: 179) either palatal stop /c/ or palatal affricate stop /ʧ/ is written with the grapheme 'ch' in all Nilotic languages except for Iteso, and therefore, her suggestion is to adopt 'ch'. I totally agree with her.

For palatal voiced stop /ɟ/ Oduor proposes the grapheme 'j', which I think could be used in Ogiek for the corresponding affricate /ʤ/.

Concerning the velar nasal phoneme /ŋ/, Oduor (*ibidem*) reports that it is transcribed with the double grapheme ng in Turkana, with ng' in Dohluo, and with the IPA symbol ŋ in Iteso.

Her suggestion (*ibid.*: 186), on the basis of Mtenje (2002: 89 manca in bibliografia), is to use ng' in case /ŋ/ and /ng/ are distinctive.

For the moment I do not have any evidence of the distinctiveness between /ŋ/ and /ng/ in Ogiek and therefore, I agree that the best graphic rendering for /ŋ/ and /ng/ is ng.

Last but not least, as reported by Oduor (2012: 179–80) there is also no coherence in the rendering of semivowels in the different Kalenjin writings:

/sw/ is in fact alternatively written sw or su (seed: keswot—kesuot)
/oy/ appears as oy and oi (fruit: logoyat—logoiat)
/ry/ + vowel is represented by ri or ry (donkey: sikiriet—sikiryet).

On this specific point Oduor has no specific proposal and suggests that the issue should be discussed with speakers and agreed upon.

My personal idea is that the best choice is anyway to use the graphemes w, y in order to distinguish vowels from semivowels.

Table of proposed graphemes for an Ogiek orthography

IPA symbol	Proposed grapheme
a	a
e	e
ɛ	ɛ / è
i	i
ɪ	ɪ / ì
o	o
ɔ	ɔ / ò
u	u
ʊ	ʊ / ù
p	p
b	b
β	b
t	t
d	d
c	ch
ɟ	j
k	k
g	g
ɣ	g
ʧ	ch
ʤ	j
f	f
v	v
ʃ	sh
m	m
n	n
ɲ	ny
ŋ	ng
l	l
r	r
w	w
y	y

7   Some Considerations on How Things Went and on the Reasons Why the Project Failed

As it is explicit from our title, the project here described failed without any other motivation but the failure of the taking of responsibility by the local community and the lack of an institutional investment in it.

After a first very participated phase, in which all the community members were involved in the collection of tales, histories, riddles, legends, but also simple lexical materials about specific fields of traditional activities, such as beekeeping or hunting in the forest, the Ogiek of Mariashoni let the further ongoing of the project in the hands of the specialists.

Of course, after the field research had been carried out I needed time to work on the collected materials in order to understand the basic phonological and grammatical rules of the language in order to have the possibility to individuate the proper graphemes to be proposed as functional in primary school books.

The second period on the field saw again the committed cooperation and involvement of the school directors and of the teachers, who were pleased to participate in our first tests with their students and with whom we agreed on three possible solutions for an Ogiek orthography, which differentiated themselves just in the way of writing ±ATR vowels (1. through the use of IPA symbols, 2. through the use of diacritics, and 3. without any differentiation). The three options had to be tested with the children during the academic year 2014/15.

In order to make the test, I prepared a tentative copy of a booklet containing 4 tales, each one written in the three different ways, and left it to the school directors.

The test should involve the participation of about one hundred students and I waited a first feedback already before the end of the academic year 2013/14, in order to adjust at least the major problems eventually emerged, but unluckily, since my return to Italy at the end of February 2014, I never received any news about the ongoing of the project and everything fell in oblivion.

The testing in the three schools of Mariashoni would have been just the first trial after which the same tales, with the finally defined orthography would have been submitted to other teachers and students in other Kenyan districts where the presence of Ogiek is significant, even though their knowledge of the language is much lesser good. One of these district should have been, for example Narok, and the test should have aimed at individuating and adjusting problems derived from different dialectal variations, but this was impossible. The project, which was born on the best premises in terms of participation of the whole community, was thus abandoned.

It is now time to ask ourselves why this happened.

The issue is not really simple, because, again, things must be considered on different levels:

1)   the local, community level
2)   the contextual level
3)   the national level.

In order to be successful, a literacy project needs at least to satisfy three premises, each one corresponding to one of the aforementioned levels:

1)   an active participation and a strong commitment on the part of the speakers' community[11]
2)   a context in which to use the skills acquired, often with great efforts[12]
3)   a good support from national or local official institution, in terms of investments in the education of a well trained staff and in the production of didactic materials.

In the Ogiek case, even though we could count on the genuine interest of the community elders, organized in the MACODEV we lacked completely the match with the second and third points.

In fact even though the context to which we were addressing our efforts (primary schools) had been easily identified and engaged in the first phases of the project, the difficulty of finding an official interlocutor at a national, ministerial level, for the eventual official recognition of the didactic materials we could have produced, and the subsequent impossibility to fund the activities on the field through a budget from the Kenyan Ministry, most likely discouraged the schoolteachers of the region ahead of time, so that they just abandoned the project not seeing any point in going on with it.

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11   On this point cf. Laitin (2006: 17), who states that language revivals "are difficult to sustain, because while people may vote for the revival of a language in desuetude, they may not like the idea of having their own children educated in it".

12   On this point cf Grenoble, Whaley (2006: 103): "literacy in the local language or the language of wider communication, cannot be implemented without support from the local community. [...] Unlike literacy of wider communication, in most cases, there is no context which requires local literacy".

In Kenya all the didactic materials circulating in the schools must be approved by the KICD (Kenyan Institute of Curriculum Development), but during my stay in 2013 and 2014 it was impossible to find the correct reference person in the institution. They do not have official guidelines for the development of specific orthographies and they just express their advice on already produced didactic materials. Therefore, in that moment I was of course knocking at the wrong door.

The only Kenyan (semi) official institution who followed me in the development of the Ogiek orthography, as it has been presented here, was the Center for Bible Translation in Nairobi, which I wish to thank here sincerely even though our project had finally an unlucky end.

8 Final Remarks

As it comes out from the study presented in paragraph 6, phonetics and phonological system of the Ogiek dialect of Mariashoni are very close to those of Nandi as described by Creider, Creider in 1989.

Despite the literacy program proposed and promoted by the University of Trieste in cooperation with the Network for Eco-farming in Africa, Manitese Kenya Branch and Ethnorêma failed, something good still remains.

From the first tentative tests done on the field with the teachers of the three primary schools of the region of Mariashoni in January and February 2014, it resulted that the writing system outlined in this paper could in fact reasonably represent a viable option for the revitalization and preservation of the language.

My hope for the future is that this writing system will be tested on a wider scale in order, if needed, to be adjusted according to the needs of related vernacular varieties. The final purpose should always be the obtaining of an official position of the language in school programs.

Concerning this point, suffice it to notice that a major problem for the success of the project was in fact the structural unreliability of the Kenyan Institute of Curriculum Development.

My hope is that new and better policies for the actual safeguard and promotion of minority languages and cultures will really be developed by the Kenyan government at soonest and that the issue of indigenous language rights will finally be taken into serious consideration in a country which defines itself modern and democratic.

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