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LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT: ILLUSTRATIONS FROM MARSABIT COUNTY, KENYA

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This paper interrogates the two opposing positions regarding the implications of language loss to the survival of the relevant culture. While one position (cf. Miyaoka 2001:8; Thomason 2001:10) holds that language and culture require each other for their continued survival, the other position (cf. Duenhauer and Duenhauer 1998:76; Rigsby 1987:370) contends that the relationship between them is such that, in spite of their closeness, the loss of one does not necessarily lead to the loss of the other. The discussion is based on the linguistic situation in Marsabit County. The county is linguistically heterogeneous with over ten indigenous ethnic communities who claim to be natives, and not (recent) immigrants. The languages spoken by these inhabitants of the county are drawn from two major language phyla: Afro-asiatic and Nilo-Saharan. A good number of these languages, however, are grappling with the threat of assimilation following contact with other (indigenous) languages whose speakers, apparently, exhibit some dominance (political, economical and statistical) over the rest. In particular, the paper examines the threat posed to Elmolo and Rendille by Samburu, and to Burji, Waata and Konso by Borana. Using illustrations drawn from these cases of language shift, the paper demonstrates that the decline of linguistic diversity in Marsabit County has a potentially impoverishing effect on the culture and by extension on the human development of the county.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the linguistic situation in Marsabit County with a view to demonstrating that the linguistic diversity in the county is not stable. The main argument advanced in the paper is that language is an integral part of culture and its loss inevitably impoverishes the society. The paper begins by exploring the literature on language contact and the possible effect of the same on linguistic diversity from a global perspective. This is followed by a brief analysis of the correlation between linguistic diversity and ecological diversity. The better part of the paper focuses on the linguistic influence by some languages on others in Marsabit County. Particular attention is accorded to Borana and Samburu and their assimilatory effect on Burji and Konso and on Elmolo and Rendille respectively. The paper ends by pointing out the need for decisive action by the County Government of Marsabit aimed at kick-starting the revitalisation of the endangered languages in the county.

2. LANGUAGE CONTACT: CHANGE AND DEATH

The number of bilinguals and multilinguals in the world is estimated to be between a half and two-thirds of the world's population (Baker 2001:43). The rest of the population is made up of monolinguals. In the next couple of decades, the number of bilinguals and multilinguals will continue to rise as a result of improved communication networks, emigration and a liberal global economy. It is often the case that when people speaking diverse languages interact in the course of daily life, the impact of the interaction is likely to be reflected, in one way or another, in the languages involved; some languages are strengthened by the interaction, while others decline and, even, end up dying.

Thomason (2001:10) points out three possible effects of language contact. The first one is contact-induced language change which takes a variety of manifestations ranging from code-switching to loss of features, addition of features and replacement of features in the languages involved. The second one is extreme language mixture occasioning the birth of pidgins, creoles and bilingual/multilingual mixed languages. And, the third effect is language death. While consensus on the definition of language death is still problematic, there seems to be a general understanding that a dead language is one that has no speaker(s) using it as a regular means of communication and for socialization within a speech community (Batibo 2005:87; Nettle and Romaine 2000:2, Thomason 2001:224).

2.1 Bleak future for language diversity

The future of language diversity is not promising. To demonstrate the gravity of the threat on linguistic diversity and the fact that languages are dying at an alarming rate, Nettle and Romaine (2000:2) claim that about half of the known languages of the world have vanished in the last five hundred years. While addressing the phenomenon of decline in linguistic diversity, Krauss (1992) predicts that between 20% and 50% of the existing languages are likely to die or become perilously close to death in the next 100 years. This compares well with Wurm (1996), who estimates that 50% of the world's languages are endangered. At the close of the 20th century, the U.S. Summer Institute of Linguistics provided startling statistics that showed that in 1999, fifty-one languages in the world had only one speaker, 500 had fewer than one hundred speakers and 1,000 were spoken by 100 to 1,000 people (Baker 2001:50, Grenoble & Whaley (2006:18).

2.1.1 Why should we be concerned?

Seeing that a considerable proportion of languages that exist today are on the

brink of extinction, it is reasonable to question what the communities/speakers of the concerned languages and possibly linguists can do about the whole state of affairs. And if there was anything they could do, would it be worthwhile? Without feigning an attempt to answer these questions, it is in order to consider this 'eulogy' by Thomason (2001:223):

> Language death is as melancholy as its label, a culturally devastating loss to every speech community whose language dies and loss to the scholarly community too. Every loss of a language deprives us of a window into the human mind and the human spirit; every language that dies deprives us of a unique repository of human experience and thought. Loss of a language deprives its speech community of much more, because a large part of a culture must inevitably vanish with the language….current rates of loss are alarmingly high, and are a matter of urgent concern to linguists as well as to speakers of endangered languages.

Crystal (2000) admonishes speech communities and linguists on the importance of upholding linguistic diversity by enumerating a number of the benefits of ancestral languages. He starts off by pointing out that languages express identity: the shared characteristics of members of a group, community or region. Sometimes identity is based on dress, religion, beliefs, rituals, etc. but language is almost always present in identity formation and identity display. Like Thomason (2001:223), he points out that languages are repositories of history. They provide a link to a personalized past, a means to reach the achievement of knowledge, ideas and beliefs from the past. Inside each language is a portrait of the past, present and future so that when a language dies, its perception of the world dies with it.

Crystal (2000) also notes that languages are interesting in themselves. Its functions notwithstanding, language itself is important. The different sounds, grammar and vocabulary in each language reveal something different about linguistic organization and structure. The more languages there are to study, the more our understanding about the beauty of language grows.

3. THE LINGUISTIC SITUATION IN MARSABIT COUNTY

Marsabit County is located in the former Eastern Province of Kenya, some 550 km north of Nairobi. It is one of the largest counties in Kenya, covering 70, 961 square kilometres. The county covers part of what in colonial Kenya was referred to as the Northern Frontier District (NFD)[1]. The headquarters of the

[1] NFD encompasses an expansive region in northen Kenya that Ominde (1965:8) describes as a 'region that suffers from serious moisture deficit and conditions unsuitable to agricultural activities'. It was acquired by the colonialists not because of the potential resource viability but as a buffer zone to keep hostile powers at a distance of a few hundred miles of semi-desert away from the White Highlands, the Brooke Bond tea plantations and the Uganda railway (Schlee 1989:44; also see Fratkin 2004:49; Fratkin

county is Marsabit town. The county has a population of 291,166 (KNBS, 2010)

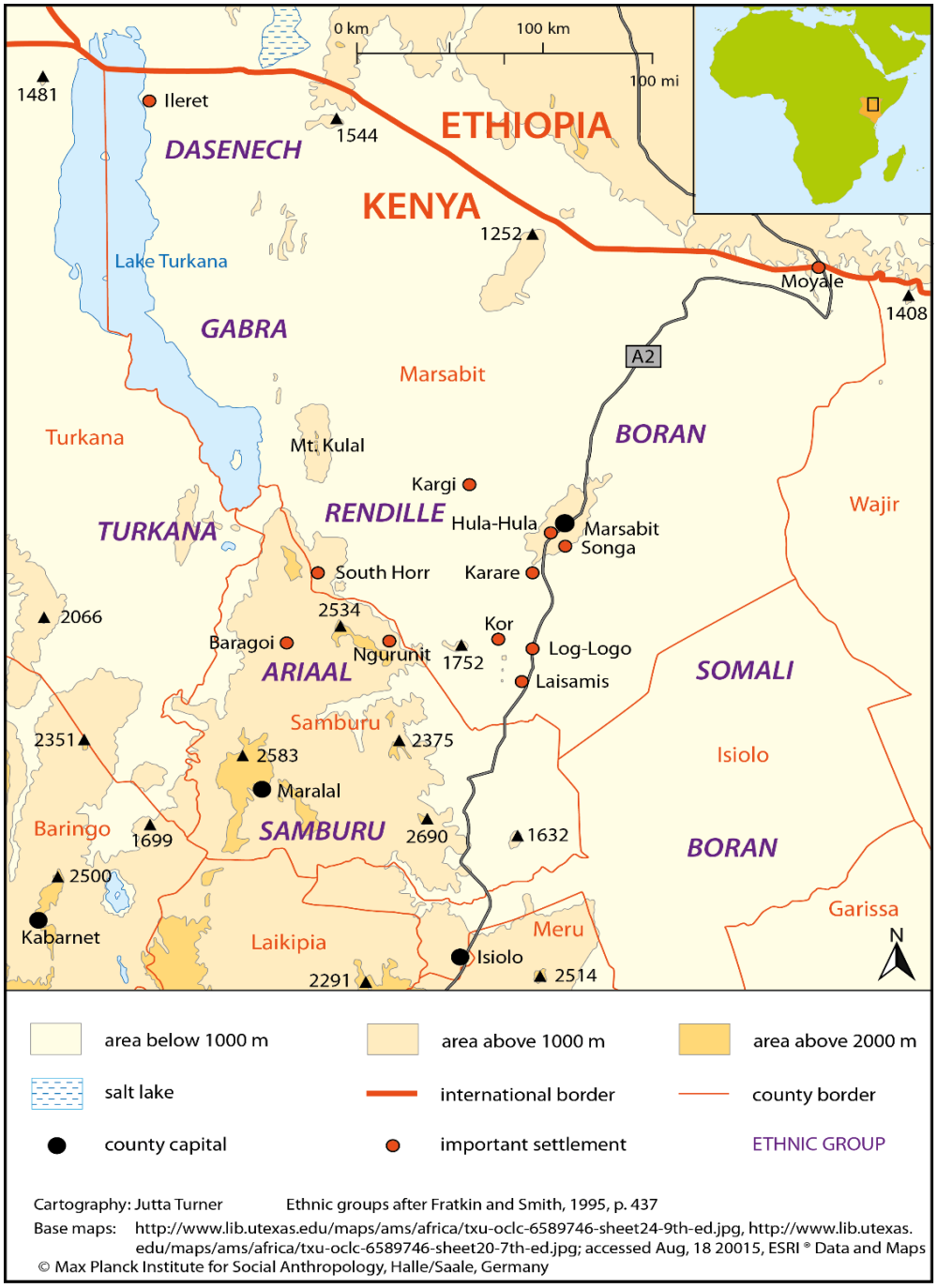

Fig 1: A map showing ethnic communities in Marsabit County and neighbouring counties (adopted from Ngure (2015)

1991:10).

3.1 Linguistic heterogeneity

Unlike many counties in northern and central Kenya, Marsabit County is inhabited by a fairly heterogeneous linguistic composition of communities who regard themselves as indigenous members of the region. They include Turkana, Sakuye, Gabbra, Boran, Dasenech, Somali, Samburu, Waata, Konso, Burji, Elmolo and Rendille.

Traditionally, most of these groups have subsisted mainly on nomadic pastoralism, a few on farming and, a very small group on hunting and gathering (Kassam and Bashuna 2004:211; Schlee 1989:31). Reports by explorers, mostly European, and studies conducted in the region by linguists, ethnographers, anthropologists and geographers reveal that Northern Kenya has had an interesting linguistic history, where linguistic groups have forged and renegotiated alliances for decades. The affirming and, sometimes, shifting of allegiance between the different ethnic groups have bolstered the survival of some languages, on the one hand, and undermined the survival of others, on the other (Ngure, 2012:59).

3.2 The glottophagic[2] languages of Marsabit

In Marsabit County the power relation that obtains among the languages is highly assymetrical. Some languages seem to wield more power than others and, consequently, the more powerful ones are assimilating the less 'powerful'. Two languages are notable in this regard: Borana and Samburu.

I will begin by looking at the linguistic havoc visited on some languages by Borana. Borana belongs to the Cushitic family of the Afroasiatic phylum of languages. In relation to other languages in Kenya as a whole, Borana is perceived as one of the minority languages, but in Southern Ethiopia and Northern Kenya, it is not a language of the minority. According to the latest national census report, members of the Borana ethnic community in Kenya are 161,399 (KNBS 2010). The apparent dominance of the community over other communities in Northern Kenya dates back to the sixteenth century, with the start of the Oromo expansion[3]. The Borana community was dreaded for its military prowess which enabled it to conquer a large part of Southern Ethiopia and Northern Kenya to a point of exercising a hegemonial influence over that region until the 1920s, when the British took over. Regarding their exploits in conquest Schlee (1989:47) observes that the Borana,

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[2] The term 'glottophagic' is an adjective borrowed from Rajend Mesthrie (2008, p. 1) where it is used to refer to the attribute or tendency of a language to 'eat' another language.

[3] *Oromo expansion* is a phrase used in history to refer to the spread of the Oromo ethnic group from their homeland in Southern Ethiopia to Northern Kenya and parts of Somalia and Djibouti. In Kenya Oromo is represented by Boraana.

> … could stampede a camel herd by beating against their shields and drive them away at a gallop in broad daylight, without any fear that the the Rendille would catch them. The panicking camels would simply follow the horses (Schlee (1989:47).

Shortly before the decline of the Oromo hegemony, the Gabbra language was 'swallowed' and the community shifted to Borana, the language they speak to date. The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed the assimilation of Sakuye and Garreh into Borana (Schlee & Shongolo 2012:5). Joining the list of linguistic casualties, all fallen courtesy of Borana are Konso, Waata and Burji. For these three language communities, the shift is not complete but underway. Having made this observation, it is important at this juncture to point out that none of these languages is indicated either in the Ethnologue or the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing as endangered. Their absence in these reference documents should not be construed to mean that these languages are safe.

Consider, for instance, the case of Burji. In an on-going research, this researcher carried out a survey among sixty-nine youth from the Burji community with a view to finding out the language of use in the home domain[4] between the respondents and their parents.

Tables 1 and 2 below display the findings of the research conducted among youth from the Burji community interested in finding out the language(s) used in the home domain.

Language(s)	Respondent to mother		Respondent to father	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Burji	15	21.7	14	20.3
Borana	50	72.5	35	50.7
Kiswahili	1	1.4	5	7.2
English	0	0	5	7.2
Burji-Borana	2	2.9	3	4.3
Borana-Kiswahili	0	0	4	5.8

[4] The rationale behind identifying the home domain lies in the perception among linguists that the home domain is critical when it comes to intergenerational transmission of a language. This is aptly put by Nettle and Romaine (2000:178) "Without safeguards for language use at home sufficient to ensure transmission, attempts to prop the language up outside the home will be like blowing air into a punctured tyre."

Kiswahili-English	1	1.4	1	1.4
Borana-English	0	0	1	1.4
Missing	0	0	1	1.4
Total	69	100.0	69	100.0

Table 1: Language of respondents to parents

Language(s)	Mother to Respondent		Father to Respondent	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Burji	27	39.1	28	40.6
Borana	33	47.8	24	34.8
Kiswahili	2	2.9	6	8.7
English	0	0	6	8.7
Burji-Borana	4	5.8	1	1.4
Borana-Kiswahili	0	0	2	2.9
Kiswahili-English	0	0	1	1.4
Borana-English	1	1.4	0	0
Missing	2	2.9	1	1.4
Total	69	100.0	69	100.0

Table 2: Language of Mother to respondents /Father to respondents

From the results displayed in the tables above showing the incidence of language use in the home domain between the youth and their parents, it is clear that Burji is not the number one choice by both the youth and parents. The number one choice is Borana. The increasing replacement of a language by another in the home domain is a significant tell-tale sign that the language is well on its way to death, unless, of course, appropriate language revitalisation measures are employed.

The scenario in Konso homesteads in Marsabit is even more aggravated. A similar survey was conducted among the Konso youth. Thirteen youth drawn from Konso homesteads were asked to indicate the languages they used in the home domain when talking to their parents and by the parents when talking to their children. The results revealed that the incidence of choice of Konso as a language of use at home was zero; interlocutors use Borana exclusively

in the home domain (Ngure forthcoming).

The situation that obtains in Konso homes, in as far as language choice is concerned, is replicated among the members of the Waata community.
An interview with Ali Balla Bashuna provided useful insight regarding the vitality of Waata. Mr Bashuna is a leading advocate of the Waata cause and has been involved in lobbying for the recognition of the Waata community as a distinct ethnic community living among the dominant Borana neighbours. The community has traditionally subsisted on hunting and gathering but following the creation of game parks and national parks by the government in the 1940s, the community has been forced to resort to a sedentary lifestyle among the Borana and embraced the subsistence strategies of their neighbours, pastoralism/agriculture (Kassam and Bashuna 2004:211). Bashuna claims that Waata is not a dialect of Borana but acknowledges that following the contact with Borana, the Waata community is experiencing cultural and linguistic assimilation.

To illustrate that Waata is distinct from Borana, the following lexical items were provided by Bashuna:

Waata	**Borana**	**English**
Ware	bisan	water
Tilifi	anan	milk
Gattoba	gara	stomach
Areya	naden	Female (person)
Galtacho	dubra	A young girl
Afku	afan	mouth
Nyabalte	guchi	ostrich
Bayo	salla	oryx
Dokoli (thokodi)	warrabes	hyena
Bruss	arba	elephant
Dhubursho	sotowa	giraffe

Table 3: Words from Waata and Borana along with their English translation (the data was obtained courtesy of Bashuna)

From the table, it is clear that the lexical items from the two languages are distinct and do not exhibit any close resemblances. On the basis of this phonetic discrepancy in the words from the two languages, establishing genetic closeness between the languages may be inconceivable.

According to Bashuna, Waata is treading on the path to extinction as the community has adopted Borana and uses it in almost all domains including at home. Waata is, however, spoken by a few elderly people in Dukana and North Hor when they want to hide some content of their conversation from their Borana/Gabra neighbours. The language also features in some songs on

special occasions, mostly public holidays and during cultural festivals organised by the County government of Marsabit.

Fig. 2: Waata men dancing during a cultural festival in Marsabit (photo by Moghal)

The other language that has had significant assimilating effect on other languages in Marsabit County is Samburu. The language belongs to the Nilotic family of the Nilo-Saharan phylum of languages (Fedders and Salvadori 1994: 162). Speakers of Samburu are concentrated in the Samburu County, which borders Marsabit County to the north and northeast. The border is highly porous allowing for the communities from the two counties to interact easily. It is worth noting that the part of Marsabit County that borders Samburu County is inhabited by the Rendille community. Spencer (1973:1), referring to Rendille and Samburu says,

> ….the two tribes are bound together by strong traditional links of political alliance and kinship ties resulting from generations of intermigration and intermarriage, to an extent that they do not share with any other tribes of the area.

A number of scholars agree that the close association between the two communities has resulted in the "birth" of a distinct subgroup of the Rendille community known as Ariaal Rendille (Ngure 2012; Sobania 1980: 155; Spencer (1973:134); Fratkin 1987:55; Swanepoel and Pillinger 1985:1). Ngure (2012) documents the evidence of shift to Samburu by would be speakers of Rendille. He points out that in a number of Rendille settlements, intergenerational transmission of Rendille is absent; children are being socialised into the

Rendille custom using Samburu. Below, in Table 3, the results of a survey conducted in two settlements situated in what is regarded as a Rendille territory are displayed. The survey involved 20 youth from each of the settlements. The youth were selected through purposive sampling; care was exercised to ensure that no two youth came from the same household. The youth were required to indicate the language they used with their parents at home.

Language	Laisamis		Karare/Songa	
	R-M	R-F	R-M	R-F
Ren	0	30.0	15.0	5.0
Sam	65.0	40.0	80.0	80.0
Ren-Sam	0	0	0	5.0
Kis	25.0	20.0	5.0	0
Eng	0	0	0	5.0
Ren-Kis	0	0	0	0
Sam-Kisw	5.0	0	0	
Kis-Eng	0	0	0	0
Ren-Kis-Eng	5.0	0	0	5.0
Missing	0	10.0	0	0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 3: Language of the Respondent Speaking to the Mother/ the Father (R-M, R-F respectively) (%)

KEY

R-M= Respondent to the mother; R-F= Respondent to the father; Ren=Rendille; Sam= Samburu; Kis= Kiswahili; Eng= English; Ren-Sam=interchange involving Rendille and Samburu; Ren-Kis=interchange involving Rendille and Kiswahili;Sam- Kis= interchange involving Samburu and Kis; Kis-Eng= interchange involving Kiswahili and English; Ren-Sam-Kis= interchange involving Rendille, Samburu and English;Ren-Kis-Eng= interchange involving Rendille, Kiswahili and English; Sam-Kis-Eng= interchange involving Samburu, Kiswahili and English; Ren-Samb-Kisw-Eng= interchange involving Rendille, Samburu, Kiswahili and English;Missing= the respondent did not give a response

From the table, it is apparent that Samburu is the language used dominantly by the youth when talking to their parents at home. Rendille, which is supposed to be the ancestral language, is relegated to a distant second position. This is, clearly, a sign of the diminishing vitality of Rendille.

Omondi (2013), in a study aimed at examining the sociolinguistic change of Elmolo as a dying language, illustrates how Elmolo, a Cushitic language, is on its way to extinction as a result of intense contact with Samburu in Marsabit County. According to the findings of the study, Elmolo is already advanced in death since the shift to the use of Samburu is nearly complete (Omondi 2013:243). That Elmolo is nearly extinct is a fact documented in the 17th edition of Ethnologue (http://www.ethnologue.com).

The two cases involving Samburu are puzzling not only because the languages involved belong to different language phyla but also owing to the fact that statistically, members of the Samburu community in Marsabit constitute a very small percentage. The report of the national census conducted in 1989 revealed that the members of the Samburu ethnic community in Marsabit comprised of only 4.55 percent of the District population. Rendille population then comprised of 18.25 percent. Basing our analysis on statistics alone, one would find it baffling that such a small number would have an assimilatory effect of such a magnitude as to endanger other languages. However, linguistic contact and assimilation are complex phenomena that cannot just be explained or predicted by focussing on only one factor. This is why Crystal (2000:88) says,

> Languages are not like people, in this respect: it is not possible to write a single cause on the death certificate for a language…there are so many factors involved…

4. IMPLICATIONS OF LANGUAGE DEATH FOR MARSABIT COUNTY'S HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

The question 'what is lost when the country loses its languages?' was asked by Joshua Fishman, a leading sociolinguist, when he was interrogating the effect of the loss of numerous American Indian languages both on the individuals who are supposed to be speakers of these languages and the nation as a whole. He casts aspersions on the view held by some linguists who 'pretend' that when a language dies, "nothing is lost…except the language…just a little language" (Fishman 1996). He points out that there exists a deep relationship between language and culture. In his own words,

> ... language stands for that whole culture…it just stands for it and it sums it up—the whole economy, religion, health care system, philosophy, all of that together is represented by the language.

So when one loses a language, the culture is definitely affected; it cannot remain unscathed. Okombo (1993) aptly captures the relationship between language and culture in the statement, "….the degree of interdependency between language and culture is such that none of them can be healthy when the other is unhealthy."

While there is evidence to the effect that it is possible for certain aspects of a community's culture to persist long after the language has been lost, this may be treated as the exception rather than the norm in view of the available evidence that points to the contrary[5].

[5] The Gabra community is a classical case study of a community that lost its language

Fishman (1996) while still pursuing the important question about language loss and culture throws these thought provoking interrogatives:

> What does the country lose when it loses individuals who are comfortable with themselves, cultures that are authentic to themselves, the capacity to pursue sensitivity, wisdom and some kind of recognition that one has a purpose in life? What is lost to a country that encourages people to lose their direction in life?

The core of Fishman's argument is that the loss of a language translates to a loss of "all those things that essentially are the way of life, the way of thought, the way of valuing, and the human reality…"

Cultural dislocation has been reported to have disastrous effects among members of certain communities. Chandler and Lolande (2008), conducted a study among the Aboriginal community in British Columbia and established that there was a correlation between youth suicide and lack of conversation knowledge in native language. What that meant is that the incidence of suicide among the youth was higher among those youth who had suffered cultural dislocation than among those who had remained reasonably affiliated to their cultural heritage. They observed that "in the absence of a personal and cultural continuity…life is easily cheapened and the possibility of suicide becomes a live option."

Arising from this research and other similar ones, Christopher Lolande gives this advice,

> The very simple message is that promoting culture, promotes health. So if you want to intervene in terms of suicide, you don't target suicide. What you should target is making the community a more healthy place for you to live and to the extent that you do that , you support the cultural aspirations of the community, you allow…expression of their political will. It creates an environment that supports healthy youth development. (www.uvic.ca/research)

4.1 What is development?

Now that the importance of cultural heritage to a person's development and longevity has been alluded to, it is prudent to explain the concept of development. It is not easy to define the term development because of the various facets and angles the term assumes. The school of African and Oriental studies, UK, defines development as "bringing about social change that allows people to achieve their human potential." While this definition is good to go

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centuries ago but did not lose some fundamental aspects of its culture. The community still observes their ritual calendar and festivals that are uniquely Gabra which their Boraana neighbours, whose language they adopted, do not practice.

by, I will prefer, for the purpose of this paper to adopt the definition by the United Nations Development Program .However, the UNDP definition incorporates the word 'human' so as to talk about human development. According to UNDP;

> Human development is the expansion of people's freedoms to live long, healthy and creative lives; to advance other goals they have reason to value; and to engage actively in shaping development equitably and sustainably on a shared planet. (http://hdr.undp.org/en/)

This definition aptly articulates the perspective of development envisaged in this paper. It is crystal clear that human development entails promotion of freedoms and well being of persons. Mahbub ul Haq, a professor of economics, says that "the objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives" (http://hdr.undp.org/en/). The use of a person's ancestral language easily predisposes one to that 'enabling environment' that promotes freedom of thought and creativity. This is the idea expressed by Fishman (1996),

> A language long associated with the culture is best able to express most easily, most exactly, most richly, with more appropriate over-tones, the concerns, artefacts, values and interests of that culture.

As pointed out earlier, languages contribute to the sum of human knowledge. Inside each language is a vision of the past, present and future. Peoples' aspirations and world view are often articulated, explicitly or otherwise, in the language they speak. This point is reinforced by Batibo (2005:32) when he avers that languages are vehicles through which cultural experiences are accumulated, stored and transmitted from one generation to another. The accumulated cultural experience is a product of long interaction between members of the society and their environment resulting in a unique knowledge of the environment, including plants and wildlife and the skills to deal with it.

This knowledge, if properly harnessed, in a multilingual county such as Marsabit, has the potential of translating to economic progress. Taking the Waata as an example, Bashuna (1993:36) says "Since time immemorial, the Waata have practised a life of dependence on wild animals, wild berries and fruits". The community was well informed in environmental conservation techniques. They did not kill animals indiscriminately, nor fell trees as they pleased; they were guided by some cultural wisdom which was enshrined in their language. They could discern not only which plants had medicinal value but at what age of the plant the medicine was most potent. This knowledge and skills were stored in their language. However, when the Waata were assimilated into cattle nomadism and farming following contact with Borana, a considerable portion of the knowledge irretrievably disappeared.

But having made this assertion, it is worth pointing out that some of these skills, apparently, can still be applied even when the original language is absent. So what would be terribly wrong with allowing the language to die but propagate the other aspects of the culture associated with that language using a different language?

Take the case of Konso and Burji in Marsabit County, for instance. The communities associated with these languages have not shifted to nomadic pastoralism; have retained their way of subsistence but now have to pursue it using Borana. The Burji, for example have traditionally been preoccupied with agriculture. Right from their homeland on the eastern side of the Ethiopian Rift Valley in the Amarro Mountains to the redsoil farms in Marsabit, the Burji have exhibited great expertise in agriculture and matters to do with food security. They are also known for their exploits in trade. Amborn (2009:91), commenting about them, says,

> The Burji also play a significant role in trading especially long-distance and whole sale trading. In some small towns along the road from Addis Ababa to Nairobi, almost 90 per cent…have been active traders at some point in their life.

The Konso community too, is still actively engaged in agriculture in Marsabit County. In an interview with Guyo Diba, the lead soloist of the Konso cultural dancers, the Konso community has derived its livelihood from agriculture since time immemorial. He was quick to enumerate the types of crops that have traditionally been their speciality. He named them using their Konso names.

KONSO	ENGLISH
futta	Cotton
bogolota	Maize
negaiya	Green grams
halquwa	Beans
shulaiya	Sorghum
bichita	Millet
gaiyada	Tobacco
chaathitha	Khat
gaapa	Wheat
boorta	Barley

Table 4: Names of traditional Konso crops

Fig. 3: Mr Guyo Diba (at the centre), the lead soloist of the Konso dancers, entertaining guests at one of the public national events in Marsabit (Photo by Moghal)

Looking at the list of crops in Table 4, it was obvious that some of those crops are no longer grown in Marsabit County and those that are still grown have not retained their Konso names but Borana names are used instead. Mr Diba did not have a good explanation for the reason why some of their traditional crops are no longer grown but was careful to point out that the Konso community detests food relief supplied by the government during famine. They prefer growing their own food and preserving the surplus using their traditional preservative methods.Considering the case of these two languages, it would appear, at face value, that nothing much is lost here. The hard truth is that there are aspects of the culture that can outlive the language but a considerable proportion of the culture goes with the language.
This is what Fishman (1996) seeks to illustrate when he says,

> The most important relationship between language and culture that gets to the heart of what is lost when you lose a language is that most of the culture is in the language and is expressed in the language. Take it away from the culture and you take away its greetings, its curses, its praises, its laws, its literature, its songs, its cures, its wisdom, its prayers.

The language spoken by the Elmolo community was very rich in terminologies pertaining to aquatic life as well as terminologies relating to preservation of products from the lake and conservation of their environment. Owing to limitation of resources in their neighbourhood, the Elmolo community is socialized to a life of austerity. Wastefulness is highly abhorred.

Fig. 4: An Elmolo girl using the shell of a turtle for a plate and the bone of a Nile perch for a spoon (photo taken by Moghal)

The shift to cattle economy by the Rendille will definitely introduce some challenges to efforts geared at promoting camel rearing in the county but also on the socio-cultural existence of the residents of the county. The effect of the first challenge may be assuaged, though not perfectly, by the fact that there are other camel keepers in the county. However, it should be kept in mind that it has been noted that the camels reared by the Rendille are not the same type as those kept, for example, by their linguistically close relatives, the Somali (Schlee 1989). The effect of the shift on the socio-cultural wellbeing of the Rendille is what needs to be handled with care. The Rendille community has a complex camel culture that influences the behaviour of the community to a large extent. It includes an extensive ritual calendar, based on dual lunar and solar calendars. This calendar regulates ceremonies for the wellbeing of both camels and human beings (Orvillejenkins.com/profiles/rendille.html) (for more on Rendille belief and cultural system see Schlee 1989; Spencer 1973). In order to avert the negative consequences of this cultural dislocation, concerted efforts on the part of the Rendille elders, county government officials, anthropologists and other stakeholders may be required.

As we approach the end of this discussion, it is worthy mention that quantifying what is lost when a language disappears is a rather tricky affair

because a speech community has what Batibo (2005, p. 33) calls 'a unique set of traditional practices'. This may be a conglomeration of complex kinship relations, stratified social structure, avoidance conditions, taboos, modes of politeness, codes of conduct, age and gender relations among others. These unique sets of traditional practices are what make or break the essence of a person's sense of self worth. When there are violations or impediments undermining the appreciation of one's self worth, that person may not be in a position to achieve their full human potential.

For the county government of Marsabit, seeing that the cultural and linguistic heritage of a number of languages is threatened, it would be imprudent to just wait and see. The authorities should begin measures aimed at revitalizing these languages and creating the requisite environment that supports, to use Lolande's words, the cultural aspirations of the community and allow expression of their political will (www.uvic.ca/research). That way, the people will be better placed to exercise their freedom to live long, healthy and creative lives as they engage actively in the pursuit and advancement of goals they value. And that is what UNDP regards as human development.

As the Marsabit County government grapples with this matter it would be appropriate to note that the timing of language revitalization programmes is crucial in determining the success or failure of such programs. Regarding the timing of such programs, Fishman (1996) makes the assertion "**what** to do is really a terribly important issue and what to do **when** is a very important issue."

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the general linguistic situation in Marsabit County, giving an intentional emphasis on the fact that the county is linguistically heterogeneous with over ten ethnic communities that claim to be indigenous to the county. Some attention has been given to the benefits of linguistic diversity, using examples from history, as well as the current scenario to show that the threat on language diversity in the country is real. Illustrations from language use in the home domain have been employed to demonstrate that in a number of languages in the county, intergenerational transmission of language is broken. Drawing insights from contributions made by renowned linguists on the relationship between language and culture, it has been pointed out that when a community loses its ancestral language, which is a critical ingredient of culture, it may be grossly disadvantaged in its effort to achieve its full developmental potential. Finally, the importance of taking a decisive action by the County Government of Marsabit in order to revitalise the languages faced with the threat of extinction has been highlighted.

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