

South Cushitic in Inner Mbugu: Historical Linguistics and Linguistic History in the Tanzanian Rift

Andrew Harvey (Universität Bayreuth)

Inner Mbugu, also known as Ma'a (ISO 639-3 [mhd]), is an example of a mixed language. The predecessors of the contemporary Mbugu people, who spoke a Cushitic language, underwent a significant change, probably to do with the arrival of new people in their homeland, bringing with them new lifeways including greater social stratification and agriculture. This led to the loss of their original language and its replacement with a Bantu language similar to Pare [asa], today called Normal Mbugu. Shortly after this language shift had occurred, the Mbugu language community developed a new way of speaking which was markedly different from Normal Mbugu: a language which employed a grammar which was primarily that of Normal Mbugu, but with a lexicon entirely different from it: Inner Mbugu. Crucially, this lexicon draws from a number of different sources, including the Nilotic language Maasai [mas], other Bantu languages such as Taita [dav] and Sagalla [tga], as well as Eastern Cushitic and Southern Cushitic. This striking occurrence, a kind of reconnecting to identity through language (c.f. Sands et al. 2023:184-187, 200-203), where a speaker community actively decided to engineer a new language variety (Tosco 2020:292 and Kießling 2020:325-326), is presented together with detailed empirical evidence in Mous (2003).

Over the course of the aforementioned work, it is identified that the South Cushitic material in Inner Mbugu comes from either Iraqw [irk] or Gorwaa [gow], and that “[it is] assume[d] that the Southern Cushitic source for the Inner Mbugu lexicon was Gorwa [sic] rather than Iraqw” (p.33). Further, it is observed that “[o]ne of the significant words from Gorwaa/Iraqw is m-lagé which means ‘mother’ in Inner Mbugu and ‘cow acquired in war’ in Iraqw (and presumably Gorwaa). This suggests that a number of women entered Mbugu society at times of conflict between the Mbugu and the Gorwaa/Iraqw” (p.45). The hypothesis therefore contains two elements: 1) that the South Cushitic element in Inner Mbugu came into this language from Gorwaa, and 2) that the historical scenario was the incorporation of Gorwaa-speaking women into Mbugu society through conflict. With the aim of exploring one specific and small-scale element of the linguistic history of East Africa, this talk will examine both elements of this hypothesis.

First, to identify whether the South Cushitic lexical material in Inner Mbugu is from either Gorwaa or Iraqw, a historical linguistic method will be used. With recourse especially to Kießling (2002), lexical material in Inner Mbugu (Mous 2003:231-298) will be examined with particular focus on identifying whether the posited South Cushitic forms are from either Gorwaa or Iraqw.

Second, to explore the possible historical event of Gorwaa women being incorporated into Mbugu society during a time of conflict, a linguistic historical method will be used. Drawing especially on concepts surrounding treating “oral tradition as history” (Vansina 1985), several tellings of the lightning story in the Gorwaa community will be analysed with the aim of learning if what is being recounted relates to historical migrations, flights, or forced relocations of

Gorwaa people from their homeland in the west to the homeland of the Mbugu people in the east.

References

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