Speaking of tradition: how the Ngoni talk about value maintenance and change

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents results from an ethnographically informed study based on focus group discussions where rural Ngoni farmers in the southern highlands of Tanzania voice their ideas about their cultural heritage, with a special focus on attitudes towards Ngoni culture and cultural changes. With a model based on Ehala [2009. "Connecting the Individual and Cultural Level Value Analysis: The Case of Utilitarianism vs. Traditionalism." Journal of Human Values 15 (2): 107–118; Ehala, Martin. 2010. "Refining the Notion of Ethnolinguistic Vitality." International Journal of Multilingualism 7 (4): 363–378. doi:10.1080/14790711003637094] this study investigates the relationship between the ideological system of a community and the social system of this community. This in-group perspective contributes to insight into values systems of rituals, taboos and traditions, including a case study of naming traditions. Earlier findings of extensive codeswitching between Swahili and other Tanzanian languages have had a language loss perspective. This study combines this focus with a new framework to investigate the relationship between the competing ideological and social systems. Changing practices have been attested. These seem to be mainly due to asymmetrical power differences and influences caused by modernity, globalisation and especially the nation-state.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 24 October 2017
Accepted 28 January 2018

KEYWORDS
Culture; traditions; practices; taboos; naming; Ngoni

Introduction
What can the relationship between a linguistic group’s value system and its members’ social practices tell us about cultural vitality and language maintenance? This paper addresses this issue in an analysis of rural Ngoni subsistence farmers in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania.

Earlier studies of the linguistic situation in Africa indicate that African languages with no official support tend to be less used, are often mixed with a more powerful language and lose speakers in contact situations, especially in urban areas. The same trend seems to be the case even in rural Tanzania, where Swahili has had a growing impact during the past decades. The present article puts these findings into a wider context by framing language use within a cultural value system.

Based on a model by Ehala (2009, 2010) this study investigates the relationship between the ideological system of a community and the social system of this community. In this ethnographically informed study, the Ngoni speakers themselves are given the opportunity to freely talk about their cultural heritage and value systems within their culture. What the Ngoni say themselves is important, especially what they say about ongoing changes. This in-group perspective is needed,
combined with an analysis of local conditions and local space, to evaluate if there are specific local conditions which counteract the loss of Ngoni norms, values and lifestyle.

This paper will, after giving a theoretical overview of ideas behind the study, summarise the background of the present study and the local space of the Ngoni. Subsequently, methods and methodological considerations which have governed the methodological choices are given. What the Ngoni say about rituals, taboos and traditions are summarised. Naming traditions are presented as a case study and described in a more detailed way, followed by a concluding summary and analysis.

**Background and theoretical overview**

At independence, Tanzania empowered an African language, Swahili, as a co-official language. This was in contrast to most countries in post-colonial Africa. The *ujamaa* (brotherhood) policy with its egalitarian approach to national development and its use of Swahili as the language of administration and medium of instruction has led to the positioning of Swahili as the national (and transnational) medium of communication. In consequence, Swahili has permeated communication all over Tanzania, even in very remote areas (Rosendal 2017, 5). Research about how other Tanzanian languages have been affected by this linguistic situation have indicated a possible future loss of these languages. However, the findings are preliminary. A new approach, as suggested in this study, may give further indications about the survival or loss of one of these languages, Ngoni.

The Ngoni have for long lived in a culture which respects traditionalist values. In such cultures or societies tradition is highly valued. Guardians of traditions are the most valued members. Additionally, conforming individuals who are emotionally attached to other individuals who belong to the group is characterising a traditionalist culture (Ehala 2005, 41). As opposed to this culture, we find the modern utilitarian value system, often associated with Western societies and which focuses on the individual (Scollon and Wong Scollon [1995] 2001, 115). Mobility is central to what it is to be modern (Cresswell 2006, 20). However, even people who keep up a traditional lifestyle in a physical place, such as the Ngoni who infrequently physically leave their territory, are part of the modern world. Not only the physical context, but also the mental nature of this context must be taken into account. Tradition is often seen as invariant, and cultural identity as ‘rooted’ to a specific territory – a place (Turton 2005, 260). This attitude is challenged in the presented article, which sees customs as changing within a dynamic space. Language use and language choice operate in this space.

Culture is created and maintained through a social learning process; it is what members of a community have learnt. Cultural structures preserve group identity and help members to survive as a group (Riley 2007). Thus, transmission of ideas and customs is central when studying maintenance and sustainability of a culture. Following Riley, culture includes ‘the traditions and history of the group, its common sense, beliefs, values, attitudes and language’ (Riley 2007, 36). Thus, the language in use is a major tool for communication, but also for expressing thoughts and feelings, facilitating cooperation and negotiating meaning among members of the group. Every member constructs his/her own language based on what is available to this person. The language or code choice is made on the individual level. We can talk of a cultural competence which is the sum of beliefs, information and skills. The micro level code choices by individual users accumulate to shape sociolinguistic norms (Ehala, forthcoming). Communicative practices are part of the culture and thus a social knowledge system (Riley 2007, 66). Ethnic group membership is thus based on descent, but also symbolic practices (Benor 2010). In a society where people are bi- or plurilingual the group members negotiate and accommodate according to norms of this society. Thus ‘memberships’ social action must be socially accepted.

A series of publications, especially within anthropology, have attempted to frame a new theory of space to capture cultural flows of the postcolonial world, especially transnational flows, e.g. Appadurai (1996) and Gupta and Ferguson (1997). Locality and community are central concepts and tools for critically discussing the classical idea of culture as the shared and the agreed upon. Locality, that is people’s sense of place (Appadurai 1996) is context-generative as it requires and produces context locally. In doing so, it is inherently colonising, but is simultaneously colonised by other
contexts it encounters, especially the nation-state. It is thus necessary to investigate language use as a local practice.

Spatial practices in the local community, what people do in a physical space (Lefebvre [1974] 1991), are framed by values, norms and contexts, and spatial practices are affected by dynamisms of modernity, as used by Giddens (1991, 20). There is an ongoing process of place-making and self-reproduction, and as stated by Appadurai (1996, 179): ‘Even in the most intimate, spatially confined, geographically isolated situations, locality must be maintained carefully against various kinds of odds.’ The behavioural repertoire, the actual range of forms of behaviour that people display and that makes them identifiable as members of a culture (Hymes 1981, 84), cited in Blommaert and Jie (2010, 4) are particularly relevant to this place-making.

The communicative actions in the local community tell us both about individual and group identification within a community. The characteristics of the community also influence the sustainability of both culture and language. The group adjusts and adapts to ideological and social systems to survive in its environment (Ehala 2010). Locality, the contextual structure of feeling, as used by Appadurai, is made up by the ideological system (norms, values, ideologies, beliefs and language in its integrative function). Spatial practices (family, marriage, economy, religion, political institutions and language in its instrumental function) form the social system. The relationship between these two systems determine the vitality, or rather sustainability, of a minority language (Ehala 2009, 2010), see Figure 1. Social identity is constructed and determined by the ecological setting of the group and reflected in the discourse of individual Ngoni speakers. Thus, language vitality is built and maintained discursively – a discursive practice.

Cultural and ethnolinguistic vitality thus depend on the group’s ways of dealing with the natural and social environment. Factors which must be analysed are their cultural distinctness, the group’s perception of in-group strength in comparison with other groups (outgroups), the group members’

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**Figure 1.** Theoretical model, based on Ehala (2010).
commitment to maintain their cultural values, in addition to closeness of their social networks. These parameters are central, and Ehala (2010) uses a mathematical model for prediction of sustainability, based on these factors. The analysis presented in this article does not set out to quantitatively predict or calculate the probability for the Ngoni language to sustain the pressure which the national language Swahili represents. Instead, the framework is used as a model to analyse what the Ngoni themselves say and think about their language and their culture. Thus, their ideas, revealed in focus group and interview sessions, are given in the part Spatial practices in local Ngoni communities. This qualitative approach will shed further light on earlier work which has observed that the Ngoni mix Ngoni with Swahili (Rosendal and Mapunda 2014, 2016; Mapunda and Rosendal 2015) and that the inter-generational language transmission is weak. It will help us understand if the established language use is a result of asymmetric power differences in the local linguistic ecology or if there are factors in local space which counteract language shift.

Influenced by the framework expressed in Ehala (2010), I have summarised the ideas of the present analysis in Figure 1.

The model stipulates that both the ideological and the social systems form the cultural identity of a community. This local community is simultaneously linked to and affected by larger societal processes which operate within a language ecology.

Underlying this model are ideas of how attitudes determine acculturation, as used by Berry (1997, 10). Berry outlines a conceptual framework with the maintenance of one’s linguistic and cultural identity as one variable and adoption of the linguistic and cultural identity of the dominant culture as the other. The outcome could be integration/assimilation or separation, segregation and marginalisation, depending on whether or not it is considered of value to maintain one’s identity and characteristics and how important it is to maintain relationships with the larger society. Although this framework mainly was developed for investigating individuals who have been raised in one cultural context when they attempt to re-establish their lives in another one, it can be useful in a context where no physical displacement or movement takes place, but where societal forces through imposition of an official language has proven to have a major impact.

Ehala (2009) investigates these attitudes on a utilitarian – traditionalist scale. This way of analysing cultural values in rural Tanzania seems highly appropriate, especially when integrating this model with Appadurai’s place-making and locality framework. Cultural identity can be seen as the members’ sense of place in their local space. Thus, this study investigates the strength of Ngoni cultural identity, reflected in traditional ways of living, taboos, rituals, traditions and lifestyle. The discussion especially exemplifies Ngoni naming traditions and taboos and changes that the Ngoni themselves perceive have taken place or are taking place. Their attitudes towards changes in their intangible cultural heritage and the role of language in their Ngoni culture are here focused.

In studying Ngoni culture based on this framework, factors which need to be analysed are cultural distinctness, the group’s perception of in-group strength in comparison with other groups (out-groups) and the group members’ commitment to maintain cultural values. Are they ‘marginalised’ by what lies beyond their means of control? What are their attitudes towards changes, and how is their sense of place bound up with social and individual identity? The ultimate aim is to establish whether or not they identify with their cultural origin or the Tanzanian state which increasingly penetrate their lifestyle and world in late modernity.

Earlier research – an African perspective

Present everyday life in Africa is influenced by modernity with its utilitarian value system, more so in urban environments than in rural villages, which are focused on in this study.

However, in the African context, we do not see many studies of spatial practices and changing value systems. When found, we find studies of displaced groups within a nation state. Turton (2005), for instance, investigated conceptual changes which have been taking place among the displaced Mursi in Ethiopia. The Mursi were found to be ‘drawn into the locality producing “project” of
the Ethiopian state’ (Turton 2005, 268). In Turton’s analysis, Mursi locality production was judged to be heavily influenced by the activities of the Ethiopian state. In this process, the Mursi came to see themselves as occupying a peripheral or marginal place in the world (271). However, most research in an African context have more focused on language vitality and language shift perspectives in urban locations than on cultural changes per se and seldom targeted rural conditions, for example, McLaughlin (2008) and Bokamba (2008). For exceptions, see Gibson and Bagamba’s (2016) language contact work in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in Kenya, and publications targeting the influence of Swahili on minority languages (Mekacha 1993; Mkude 2001; Legère 2007; Legère, Heine, and König 2014; Rosendal and Mapunda 2014; Rosendal 2016). The latter have documented how the Ngoni mix their L1 and Swahili. This practice was also confirmed in Mapunda and Rosendal (2015) and Rosendal and Mapunda (2016). Rosendal and Mapunda (2016, 471) state that there is ‘a high frequency of codeswitches (and borrowing) in recordings where the informants were told to stick strictly to their L1. The informants generally did not manage to do so when talking about artefacts and traditions’.

The massive impact of Swahili is a result of post-colonial language policy and allocation of use in official domains. This long time policy has clearly influenced language use. In a sociolinguistic study of attitudes among the rural Ngoni, Rosendal (2016, 337) states that ‘In Tanzania it is the African language Swahili and not the global language English and the ongoing globalization which at present represents the major threat to other African languages and the maintenance of these languages.’ Rosendal, in her quantitative survey of sociolinguistic conditions, language preferences, children’s acquirement of L1 and Swahili and influence of family background, found that the Ngoni are affected by the long and extensive promotion of the national language Swahili. For example, one third of the children with Ngoni mother and father and Ngoni as their L1 preferred Swahili to Ngoni. On a general note, it indicated an undervalued Ngoni culture. A later study confirmed that the Ngoni identity is rather weak (Rosendal 2017).

The intangible cultural heritage of the Ngoni people has earlier been studied by Mapunda (2015). By administering a questionnaire among 300 primary school children, to investigate if they have knowledge of Ngoni core values, he concluded that there is an insufficient intergenerational transfer of values such as language use, knowledge of stories, taboos, dances, sayings and rituals. This affects the future of the Ngoni as an ethnonlinguistic group.

The present study complements this study by letting the grown-up Ngoni discuss freely around customs and culture. In this way, the qualitative data obtained from focus groups (FG) without interference from the researcher, provide natural data which can be analysed further and in more depth, using the framework of Ehala (2009, 2010).

**Methodology**

**Background: the Ngoni**

The Ngoni live in the Ruvuma region of the Southern Highlands of Tanzania. The number of Ngoni speakers is estimated to approximately 170,000 (Simons and Fennig 2017) to 260,000 (LoT 2009). The present study was conducted in two villages north-west of the main town Songea, one semi-urban village, Peramiho, and one remote village, Mhepai. See Figure 2. Map of the area. People living in this area are typically smallholder farmers living in a rural environment. This way of living even applies to most respondents in the bigger village. Tanzania has compulsory schooling, so most children go to school, where Swahili is the medium of instruction.

**Methodological considerations**

How do we know how the traditionalist values are considered today by the Ngoni? How can we avoid expectations formed by Western narratives developed during the colonial era or even anti-
sedentarist post-modernist approaches, which also imply specific pre-defined frames and a Western point of view?

In an attempt at avoiding imposing my own ideal of what the Ngoni should be and European logics and models of Ngoni reality, in this study I let the Ngoni speak themselves about their own culture. I therefore engaged a fellow Ngoni farmer as a facilitator to initiate the discussions and record the focus group conversations. The main research foci of this study, and thus also the
focus group topics, were how the informants valued their roots, heritage and community norms, voiced through their group discussions. These communicative acts showed how the informants positioned themselves in their cultural system. This also reflected how the Ngoni imagined their place in the world and norms among the Ngoni as a group in Tanzania of today.

**Methods**

This study is based on focus group discussions, where groups consisting of three persons, in addition to the facilitator, talked about traditions among the Ngoni. Nine focus group discussions were conducted, five FGs in Peramiho: two with young men of the age-group 15–20 years, one with young women (aged 15–20 years), one with elderly men above the age of 60 and one with elderly women above the age of 60. In the same way, four FGs with the same age and gender grouping were conducted in Mhepai: one with young men, one with young women, one with elderly men and finally one with elderly women. Each focus group discussion lasted between 26 and 50 minutes. Totally, 338 minutes were recorded and later transcribed and translated. NVivo 11 Pro was used to analyse the data qualitatively.

All the focus group participants were, as everyone in the area, bilingual in Ngoni and Swahili and all, except a few of the young men in Peramiho, were subsistence farmers (a mason, a boda-boda/motorcycle taxi driver and a technician). All the discussions took place in the home of one of the focus group participants. The recordings were done in August 2014.

I only give one citation in Ngoni. The remaining focus group citations are presented in the English translation, for better understanding and due to space limits.

**Spatial practices in local Ngoni communities**

**Traditions among the Ngoni**

I have chosen to summarise some central themes of the focus group recordings about traditional ways of living, rituals and taboos. To further demonstrate how traditions have changed and to show attitudes towards these changes, this section will be followed by a more detailed case study showing what the informants say themselves about naming traditions in the focus group discussions.

In all the discussions the informants talked about changes in traditional clothing, food, dances, marriage rituals and taboos. These traditions are considered as belonging to the Ngoni’s behavioural repertoires and have been central to the Ngoni people’s culture and their cultural practices. Both young and old see these changes as inevitable. Both young and old focus group participants, from both villages, also say that traditional customs, and with them values, are being abandoned. They simply acknowledge change as a natural development due to contact with other tribes, but also more generally to modern lifestyle. For example, talking about the lost traditional custom for men to shave off their hair when bereaved, an old man from FG Old men, Peramiho does not regret the changes, as he finds them outdated: ‘It’s nonsense. It doesn’t mean anything anymore. It is a hairstyle. Our traditional values have faded.’

Even young people think that it is positive that some traditions are lost. A young woman in Peramiho, the more urban village, who speaks about traditions, says: ‘The ones that have died are not good, not good. [The ones that are still preserved] are the ones people need. Maybe [because of] the new technology, the youth say no to some old values.’ Another participant in the same group continues:

Yes. Due to globalization the world has become like a village. People come up with other new things and despise the old values. But some of the values that have been abandoned maybe were not good. Yeah, in my opinion, the ones that are still practiced are good.
Moreover, education is recognised by some young as counteracting preservation of traditional culture. This is aptly caught in the following citation from FG Old women, Peramiho:

Again, nowadays children go to schools which are very far from home, some are still very young. They go to study and live in some other places (.) where they are taught other things contrary to the parents’ moral standards. (.) When you ask the child, ‘why are you doing this?’ S/he says, ‘what do you want me to do?’ Those are outdated things. You find a girl hanging around with her brothers.

Although the Ngoni recognise this reality, they even lament the loss of some traditions, especially regarding changes in courtesy and politeness. Even showing respect to older people, which is a traditional Ngoni value, is vanishing. The old women in Mhepai, for instance, say with regret:

We do not do that any longer (.) We no longer do these things to adults of this man’s age. We simply pass by, greet him while standing upright. But these are the things we have to preserve to date, because they mark dignity and courtesy.

Even regarding these changes, the informants blame contact with other cultures and values. They also recognise that the loss is due to lack of intergenerational knowledge transmission, that they do not know traditional values. A young woman, for instance, claims that the older generation have not taught them their Ngoni traditions: ‘[…]Mhm! [It’s not easy. Even our fathers …] … nowadays they don’t observe the traditions’ (FG Young women, Mhepai). This is a general trend which is not common among other tribes living in the same geographical area: ‘[…](.) But for us, we have decided to follow the modern lifestyle. (.) We are now mixed up, while others are not’ (FG Young men, Mhepai).

The informants even recognise that other ethnic groups are better at preserving their language, here exemplified with what old men in Peramiho have noticed regarding another ethnic group which is found in the area. Ironically the informant says this speaking almost only in Swahili himself:

For instance, here at Peramiho, it is only the Yao (.) who speak their language from Tundurru. They have managed to implant their language here. Even the child who is born here will speak the language, contrary to what is happening to the Ngoni children. (FG Old men, Peramiho)

Also, Ngoni taboos, that is prohibitions which belong to the general system of social control, are lost. It is inherent in a taboo that its breach or defiance will be followed by some kind of trouble to the offender, caused by supernatural forces. This loss is established in both types of villages, irrespective of age and gender – all agree that many old traditions and taboos have disappeared, for example, prohibition for a pregnant woman to eat eggs, add salt to her food or to jump over firewood. A girl was, for instance, prohibited to enter her father’s room, and men had to shave when bereaved.

Most of the informants, even old, do not regret the disappearance of many of the taboos, as they recognise that there probably were practical reasons for the rules and that they actually did not cause any repercussions:

Huh! Nowadays they are allowed to eat eggs. They were cautious about eating eggs because during delivery the baby would be very fat and cause you a lot of pain. Instead, it was claimed that if you eat eggs the child would be born with no hair. [Yes … yes] (.) There were soooo many (.) soooo many (.) Oh! (FG Old women, Mhepai)

Traditions and taboos are mostly challenged by the young: ‘As for the youth, they have changed with time. (.) Some of the youth are behaving arrogantly; they test to see if anything will happen afterwards. (.) Really, have you heard about anyone who has been cursed? Huh?’ (FG Young men, Mhepai). However, even old persons reject taboos as outdated and without any function or effect and do not acknowledge their value as guidance to good Ngoni conduct or to good health. Nevertheless, many old Ngoni, especially women, regret that some taboos have disappeared, as they led to traditions which strengthened the social structure among the Ngoni.
The case of Ngoni naming

The Ngoni have several names: Traditional name given at birth, a christening name and very often a name given or taken later when growing up. In addition, there are clan names. In the focus group discussions, naming practices was a topic which engaged all participants and which made them reflect on historical as well as present-day practices and changes. These practices well reflect general changes that have taken place within their culture.

Ngoni names carry meaning. Traditionally, it is believed that the new-born baby ‘cry out’ their names and only stops when the right name is given. The focus group consisting of young women from the village Peramiho expressed this in the following way:

Some babies cry for certain names. The names they have to inherit. Yeah, without giving them those names they won’t stop crying. A ritual is performed, whereby the baby is sprinkled with some water <as a naming process>. The group continues: ‘Afterwards the child will be silent, will stop crying and be calm. (. ) So these things exist (4).’ A young man in one of the Peramiho FGs (2) explained this practice in the following way:

Kachumbali was my uncle’s name given to him from his childhood. (. ) Whenever he was given ugali < maize porridge, staple food in east and central Africa> he cried for kachumbari < a mixture of raw vegetables>. So they gave him this name Kachumbari (.).

The name could also describe the baby’s physiognomy, as big, thin at birth etc., as, for instance, Kadoda (heavy/weighed many kilos), or Kachiki (small/thin). The focus group consisting of old men in the village Mhepai explained this: ‘A male child who was born fat was the one named Kadoda. So people will ask, “is he a male child?” Yes. Then, his name is Kadoda (. ) Later on, he will be baptized/christened and given another name (. ).’

The Ngoni traditionally also chose names which, for example, described the pregnancy. If you do not have any difficulties a name such as Bahati <(Sw.) fortune/luck> or a religious name such as Maua <(Sw.) flowers>, which was often given to a new child if a child had died earlier, are given.

Traditionally, children are also named after a person, often a diseased person, because the parents admire this person.1 It became clear through the focus group discussions that many of the old names were ambiguous to them or had totally lost meaning. Still, these traditions are practised, but have been changing for a long time. They also change their names. The focus group of young men in Mhepai explained this in the following way:

In Ngoni:

• Ndo maana vikemelee tuu, vakavyai vadebe vakakulayi chidogo vagaleka
• [mahina, vikemee mahina gangi] mmmm! < kuguna na kushangaa> Kadoda eti? Mmmm, < anakumbali > (2)
• Hinu akavyai muvaa ichagula mwee lihina au vambatiza kavi vala vaa vangi? … givya nde mbi-limbili (. ) wo … gangi vakukemelee kushuli tuu, eeh kunyumba tuu kushuli vakukemelee gangi [Hinu wona wakamalaa] shuli vibatiza lingi kavili chaugana wa mwee,

In English:

• That’s why they are given names while they are still babies, but when they grow up they abandon them.
• [They choose other names] … yeah … is that what Kadoda did?
• Yes (2)
• So when they grow up they choose names for themselves or they are baptized by different names. They end up having two names (. ) some are used at school only … yes … at home they use a different name from that used at school. [After you finish school] they give you a different name that you like.
These names describe appearance, preferences, skills, deeds, achievements, behaviour or simply something that occurred. An example from the FG Old men, Mhepai shows this practice. An old man remembers:

Segele is a name that I was given by my fellow youth ... hahaha! ... during traditional dances called Madogoli. (.) So during madogoli performances we gave names to one another; that you will be Segele and I will be so-and-so. I will be called so-and-so or I will be called Taifa <nation> or Jeshi<army> (.) Every name had a connotation in those days. They are just nicknames. Yeah.

The FG Old men, Peramiho explained how a name describing physical appearance was coined: ‘For instance, my father’s real given name is Yohane but they call him Nduvimbaya. Nduvi? Nduvi is smallpox. Yes, he suffered from that disease ... chicken pox. It changed his appearance, his face changed ( ...).’ Names could also attribute people a character like Kudoya (means greedy/glutton) or Bong’ola (a female person who lies). Such a male person would similarly be called Pwagu. Today, people are also given Swahili names, like Kazimoto (a person who is hard working) or Kazembe (a lazy person who does not work).

You can also give yourself a name. A young woman in the FG Young women, Mhepai says: ‘For instance, I am Sauda. I decided that I will be called Sauda ( .) Although my real name is Constansia. ( .) People prefer to call me Sauda, and the name has stuck ( 5).’

The Ngoni are famous within Tanzania for their animal clan names like Nyoni (kind of bird), Komba (bushbaby) and Mapunda (Swahili punda means donkey). The young women in the FG, Peramiho say: ‘Others are family names, mhm! A family name like […] Komba or Haule, depending on your family’s origin ( .).’ These names are not used when they present themselves. Mostly only the first name is used. They continue: ‘They don’t mention their surnames. Yeah, when they go to other places they change names. Let’s say, someone is called Haule, if you ask him are you Haule? He denies. Are you Komba? Huh! Someone denies.’ The same view is repeated by another member of the group: ‘Another culture <practice> is when a person doesn’t want to mention his or her family name. He or she is happy with his or her first name only. Yeah, they never mention <the family name>.’

Changing values and practices
In all FGs changing naming traditions are discussed. There are several reasons behind these changes. If you call a child a negative name, it is widely believed that this will stick and influence his or her life. Young men in the village Mhepai explain it in the following way:

[But] nowadays some people do not inherit other people’s names, because they think that the child will be just like that person. If that person was a thief, the child will also become a thief.

On a general note, the young do not accept negative names like Mahuzuniko (Sw.Sadness) ora Swahili name such as Shida (Sw. problem/hardship). Swahili names that are considered positive as Zawadi (Gift), Furaha (Happiness), Asante (Thank you) or Rehema (Mercy) are accepted. This attitude is aptly summarised in the following quote from the FG Young women, Peramiho: ‘Some are good, some not. A name like Kazimoto <Sw.a hard working person> is good. But naming a child Lugendu <a loiter/idler> is not good.’ It is worth noting that most of these examples of names with either positive or negative value are Swahili names. This underscores the extensive codeswitching with Swahili among the Ngoni.

All FGs state that a lot of people no longer want such negative traditional names. Instead they ‘[…] would ( ...) even opt for foreign names. […] Some would choose a name of a certain footballer/actor because they like their performances, but still there are people who follow the roots. Yeah’ (FG Young women, Peramiho). Old women in Peramiho conform this practice:

Yeah, huh! For instance, you call a child Morini <Maureen>, is this not English? Yes it is. We can’t pronounce Morini … or Dorini <Doreen> … eeh … or Kerini <Karen>.
Kerini means … it is an English name just from the way it’s pronounced; even its spelling is English. My grandchild is called Pisiwelu <peace well>. We don’t know what these names mean because they are English names. Yeah (.) we don’t know what they mean.

Especially old people complain that it has become a common practice to give children English names, some of which they cannot even pronounce. However, being given a foreign, European name is not a new phenomenon. In the past, when they went to the old, catholic hospital in Peramiho there would be European doctors.

So when they like the baby, they would give him/her a name. You see! It could be Gerodi, others preferred Maiko <Michael>. But these doctors gave names to the children whom they happen to like most. So if they liked your child they gave him/her a name. (FG Young men (2), Peramiho)

These practices dating back to (pre-)colonial times and the attitudes they represent demonstrate power differences which still are found in present-day naming choices.

Conclusions

Socially or physically isolated languages and cultures often thrive because of lack of contact. The Ngoni, even if they geographically live rather isolated, they are, as Tanzanian citizens, deeply immersed in national cultural practices, but also to some extent transnational flows. This is demonstrated in the present study, which goes beyond previous studies of the Ngoni by qualitatively investigating in more depth what the Ngoni themselves say about their culture.

This in-group perspective of the study highlights the behavioural repertoire of the focus group participants, and makes them identifiable as members of a culture. However, much of what we do do not have an actual awareness or opinion about. Therefore, the ethnographic perspective of this study of language, culture and society is combined with what the participants actually say in analysing local conditions, the local space. This created the needed frame for evaluating the vitality of Ngoni culture, where language has an integrated part.

In this article, I have through my own experience of long-term research amongst the Ngoni, aimed at understanding how people experience place, and how this becomes bound up with their social and personal identity. The focus group participants’ spatial practices, their sense of place, are part of place-making processes which produce local subjects with an identity created through these social activities.

From the group recordings, it is clear that major changes have been and are taking place. This is visible regarding cultural practices (traditional customs such as food, dances, marriage rituals and taboos) and has been exemplified through naming practices. The focus group participants, especially the young, have at least partly forgotten the meaning of names.

Also, the way naming is done has changed, from giving traditional meaning-bearing names to giving Swahili or even international names which do not carry meaning to them. The case study of names also showed that the Ngoni are unwilling to mention their clan names, which would automatically identify them as Ngoni people. This indicates a weak Ngoni in-group pride and identity.

Most of the focus group participants see that traditional values have faded – and state that it does not matter. These values and practices are regarded as outdated. Some even consider it good that some of these practices are completely lost. In doing so, they show a pragmatic approach towards the function of, for example, old taboos. These taboos are now recognised as ways used for controlling people in the past, and not as part of a sacred system involving superstition. The case study of naming practices additionally shows that new practices reflecting other values have developed. The Ngoni informants consider these new practices to have entered the Ngoni culture through people coming to the area. This is true, but what has more effectively influenced their social practices is the long-time locality producing a project of the Tanzanian state, with its modern and rational ideas and its use of Swahili as a medium to create national unity all over Tanzania. Relationships with the larger society have proved to be more important than safeguarding old traditions and
values. Even the globalised world is recognised as a factor which has influenced development, but the focus group participants especially mention education and values of the nation-state as factors that counteract preservation of their traditional culture. While some lament this loss of traditional moral standards among the young, they see it as inevitable.

The Ngoni have been drawn into this development through the asymmetric power differences which are implicit in their locality. The neighbourhood or people who move into the neighbourhood work on a different scale of organisation and control, compared to the nation-state. As Appadurai says, the locality has a contextual nature. The contextual nature of Ngoni locality has shaped linguistic and cultural marginalisation, resulting in a reduction of local knowledge. This process has been visible in the focus group discussions, especially regarding taboos, knowledge of and meaning of names and loss of traditional naming traditions.

As seen, traditional life and traditionalist values are losing ground to modern life and utilitarian ideas. Old norms, values, ideologies and beliefs are disappearing and changing. Hand-in-hand with this also their self-perceived cultural distinctness and commitment to maintain their cultural values is weakened. In this way, the Ngoni’s sense of place, their identity, is changing. The attitudes revealed in the focus group discussions indicate that their relationship to the larger society with its economic possibilities is more valued than traditional ways of living. Thus, the development of the modern Tanzanian state has resulted in lacking transmission of both culture and their Ngoni language. The observations made in this study indicate that codeswitching practices and the extensive use of Swahili which earlier have been documented form part of Ngoni locality. This has implications for the future of the Ngoni language. The recordings did not demonstrate sufficiently in-group strength or cultural pride which would counteract the loss of traditional practices, including the use of the Ngoni language. Thus, earlier expressed worries among linguists of a future loss of the Ngoni language are still valid.

**Note**

1. You cannot address a person with his father’s or grandfather’s name. A child named after them is called *Mzee* (*old man*), *Babu* (*grandfather in Swahili*) or *Gogo* (*grandfather in Ngoni*).

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Funding**

This study was made possible through a research grant from The Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) [grant number 2013-6458].

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