

## AN INVESTIGATION OF LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE STRATEGIES AMONG THE MARAGOLI YOUTH OF URIRI SUBCOUNTY, KENYA

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### ABSTRACT

*Uriri Sub County has a complex language ecology composed of Dholuo, Kuria, EkeGusii, Somali, Luhya dialects, among other languages. Some of these languages have been in contact for many years. It has been imperative that every community maintains their own language. Language maintenance is an integral part of any language survival, as espoused by UNESCO and ACALAN. UNESCO has extensively researched on language death, attrition and shift and reported that many indigenous languages across the globe are dying due to shift and disuse by the speakers, a situation that has been rendered dire. UNESCO has been of the opinion that every effort must be put in place, theoretically and in practice, to save dying languages and to maintain those that are surviving. Lullogoli, a dialect of Luhya, has been in contact with Dholuo for over 78 years and still shows signs of survival despite the fact that it has fewer speakers in Uriri Sub County compared to Dholuo. In an attempt to fulfil the UNESCO and ACALAN mandate, this paper investigated language maintenance strategies employed by the minority Maragoli youth living in Uriri Sub County, Kenya. Our data was collected using questionnaires, interviews and observations. Our findings shows that the Maragoli youth in Uriri Sub County have been using strategies like speaking Lullogoli at home, listening to Lullogoli radio broadcasts, learning from parents and guardians at home among other strategies to keep alive their language.*

**Keywords:** Lullogoli, Maragoli, Maintenance, Strategies.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Context of Study

Our area of study is Uriri Sub County, which has a total of 5 Locations (Wards) and 19 villages. Linguistically, Uriri Sub County is a complex ecology that is composed of Kiswahili, Dholuo, Kuria, various dialects of Luhya, EkeGusii, Somali, Gikuyu, Kamba, and different dialects of Kalenjin. Kiswahili has the highest number of speakers because it is the national language, acquired through the education system. In terms of indigenous language ranking, Dholuo is the first, followed by Kuria, Luhya, and EkeGusii. Lullogoli, one of the Luhya dialects, has the highest number of speakers.

#### Lullogoli in Uriri Sub County

Lullogoli, also called Logoli, Maragoli, Maragooli, Uluragooli or Logooli (Ethnologue, 16<sup>th</sup> ed), is one of the Great Lakes Bantu languages spoken in Kenya by over 618, 000 people and classified by Guthrie as E.41(Maho, 2009). It is also spoken in Mara Region of Tanzania (Lewis, Gary and Charles, 2015). According to the elders interviewed in this study, it was found out that the Maragoli speakers in Tanzania migrated from Migori as they sought to explore more land in late 1930s. Their migration history has been elucidated by two different theories: the European migration theory and the Traditional Oral Narrative Theory. European

Migration theory posits that Maragoli, as part of the larger Luhya community migrated from Niger Congo with other Bantus in what is historically known as The Great Bantu Migration.

According to their oral narrative, the Lullogoli speakers migrated from Egypt through Southern Sudan and settled for a short period in Northern Kenya at a place called Lokitaung. Later, they moved further down to their current home in Vihiga County of Western Kenya. Several centuries later, some Maragoli speakers would disperse from their ancestral home to other parts of Kenya including the current Uriri Sub County and found themselves surrounded by Dholuo speakers. Lullogoli, a substratum language in this environment, has been in close contact with imperialistic Dholuo since then. It is worth noting that the last time a Bantu language segmented from their ancestral land and encountered Dholuo language in their domain, it was assimilated and almost died. Her speakers shifted to the superstrate Dholuo and abandoned their language. The case of Suba language and its encounter with Dholuo has been widely documented scholarly (Okumu, 2005; Obiero, 2008; Wamalwa, 2013; Ochieng et al., 2013).

### **Language maintenance Strategies: Literature Review**

A strategy is a plan of action designed to achieve a long-term goal. It is a plan, method or series of actions for obtaining a specific goal or intended results (Jonas, 2000). Language maintenance strategy therefore is a plan, method or series of actions, conscious or unconscious, used by speakers to keep alive their language from generation to generation. According to Bayley, Schecter and Torres-Ayala (1996), language maintenance involves various strategies including speaking one language only at home, set periods and family tutoring, and minority language awareness. Their study involved Spanish families living in America. According to Cylvn (1992) mass media in all its forms, radio and television programs as well as publishing newspapers, periodicals, and books, can help minority individuals to promote and maintain languages. Media indeed is a good strategy of maintaining language in the modern age where influx of technology has been proven a good tool of recording live speakers and using the clips to pass down the language to next generations.

Okpanachi and Abuh (2017) argues that inter-ethnic marriages is also a way of keeping live a language. From their perspective, in such marriages, the language that has a higher prestige and socio-economic value stands more chance to survive as home language and therefore maintained and inter-generationally transmitted. Even though this strategy, when used over time can lead attrition of one language, it can help maintain the home language, and in most cases, the language of the husband. We say the language of the husband because in African culture, when a woman is married off into another linguistic community, she does not carry her language with her. She learns the language of her new home and then tasked to pass it down to her children. It is a double-edged sword strategy where one language must suffer negative consequences of attrition and loss.

Teaching of an indigenous language in a formal education system helps to keep alive a language. This strategy requires policy formulations and clear implementation in order to bear fruits over a long period. However, Romaine (2002) pours cold water on this strategy by claiming that it does not offer excellent returns. Perhaps, Romaine's fear is vindicated by Arka's (2013) claims that it requires deep financial planning and input by existing governments in order to be sustained. Existence of many indigenous languages in a nation requires consistent training of teachers, recurrent expenditure budgeting and investing in teaching and study materials. This may turn out to be an order too tall for developing nations whose fiscal plans are majorly geared towards infrastructural development. Language issues are treated as peripherals and more often, such governments seldom finance them.

## METHOD

This study employed survey technique as a way of collecting data. Information was collected using questionnaires, interviews and observation. Population for the study was male and female youth of age 18-35 spread across Uriri Sub County, Migori County. Sample size for this study was 82 youth randomly selected across Arambe, Bware, Kajulu II, Kawere II, Kawere Rateng, Lwala and Thim Jope villages. The questionnaires were randomly distributed to the respondents who filled and returned to research assistants and later submitted to the researchers. Two elders were interviewed to corroborate the data collected by questionnaires. Participatory and passive observation technique was used also to verify the findings. Data obtained was analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies and percentiles and presented in tables. Qualitative data obtained from interviews and observation was organized into themes according to research objective.

## FINDINGS

### Lullogoli maintenance strategies in Uriri Sub County

In order to get the desired data, the study asked the respondents to tick the strategies they believed have been instrumental in maintaining Lullogoli in Uriri Sub County. Their responses were calculated and presented in the table below.

**Table 1. Maintenance Strategies among the Maragoli youth**

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Speaking Lullogoli at home	72	87.8
Listening to Lullogoli radio stations	64	78
Parents/elders teaching youth at home	61	74.4
Traditional/Cultural ceremonies	40	48.8
Socio-economic Meetings	40	48.8
Intragroup Visitations	33	40.2
Using Lullogoli in Religious Worship	29	35.4
Chiefs Locational Meetings	10	12.2
Being taught in Schools	3	3.7

## DISCUSSION

According to the table, 72 (87.8%) of respondents agree that speaking Lullogoli at home is the best strategy they have often use to maintain their language. Listening to radio stations that broadcast in Lullogoli was second popular with 64 (78%) followed by parents teaching them Lullogoli at 61 (74.4%). 40 (48.8%) of the respondents ticked on cultural meetings and festivals as a way of maintaining Lullogoli. Among the respondents, 40 (48.8%) agreed that their language has been maintained since 1930s by virtue of Maragoli socio-economic women/men associations. 33 (40.2%) of the respondents agreed that visitations among Lullogoli speakers has been integral in maintaining their language; this was followed by 29 (35.4%) of respondents who approved church worship and general use of Lullogoli in religion. 10 (12.2%) of respondents were of the opinion that using Lullogoli in Chiefs' administrative meetings has been of significance in maintenance while 3 (3.7%) claimed learning Lullogoli in school has contributed to its maintenance. Each of the strategy has been discussed in detail and corroborated with data from interviews and observations in the subsequent sub-sections.

### **Speaking Lullogoli at home**

72 (87.8%) of the respondents who filled the questionnaire agreed that speaking Lullogoli at home was the most popular strategy of maintaining their language. To validate this figure, the respondents were also asked to state where they acquired the language. 75 (91.5%) claimed to have acquired Lullogoli from the home domain with their parents, grandparents, siblings and other guardians who speak it as compared to 7 (8.5%) who learnt it from other sources like church and school. This demonstrates that among the Maragoli youth, home environment is the best place where they can shore up their linguistic skills. As they learn from their parents and other relatives within the home domain, they begin to practice in speech with the same relatives or with their siblings and their neighbors. According to contact linguistics theory, this is the most important age group in terms of deciding the future of a language. If this group decides to keep their language, as it is doing now, the likelihood of it surviving their generation is high, and transmitting it to their children becomes seamless. From observation data, the young men and women were speaking Lullogoli while at work in their family farms, tending for cattle, and chatting with their siblings and parents. The study encountered only one family whose young two daughters were mixing Dholuo-Lullogoli or speaking Kiswahili while at work.

### **Listening to Lullogoli Radio Stations**

Radio and technology in contact linguistics has attracted a lot of attention from various scholars across the globe (Marti-Bucknall, 2007; Obiero, 2013; Iseke, 2013). The role it plays in uniting one speech community spread across the wavelengths is amazing. It acts as a tool of reviving, preserving and maintaining languages. For instance, Obiero observed that radio was used to revive and maintain Suba language in Kenya. Marti-Bucknall (2007) on the other side claims that technology has reshaped national and international relations when it comes to language maintenance. One can easily tune in a satellite TV or radio from one country or region and listen to his/her language as long as it is on the waves. This explains why 64 (78%) of the respondents ticked on this strategy as a way of maintaining their language. Lullogoli language has various radio stations but *Vuka* FM and *Mulembe* FM are the only ones with national coverage reaching Uriri Sub County. One can tune in using their mobile phones or actual portable radio set. They argued that it helps them learn new words, re-learn and remember folklores and narratives, and even call in live to talk in Lullogoli. By doing so, they are able to maintain Lullogoli.

### **Parents/Elders teaching Lullogoli**

It was clear that this strategy was also popular among the young respondents who filled the questionnaire. Many of them 61 (74.4%) agreed that parents play a pivotal role in sustaining Lullogoli in their daily communication. To corroborate this statistics, some of the youth who responded positively claimed that parents and elders are the repertoires of their language and culture and they are their role models. These findings confirm what Iseke (2013) found that one of the best ways of maintaining indigenous language is by teaching it at home. Kuncha and Bathula (2004) on the other hand argues that mothers are best placed to pass a language to their children as they interact with them from childhood to adulthood than the fathers. Among the respondents, 57 (69.5%) are already married and have been passing the language to their children as compared to 25 (30.5%) who are yet to marry or get married.

### **Traditional/Cultural Festivals**

Among the respondents, 40 (48.8%) agreed that practicing cultural rights and festivals has helped to propagate Lullogoli. Cultural rights and practices include circumcision, burials, commemorations, and child baptisms. While in the field, the researchers attended

circumcision ceremony that involved naming of an age-set. This was an elaborate rite where Maragoli circumcision songs are sung by both male and female attendees to praise the young men for undergoing the cut with bravery. The young men are also adorned with traditional regalia to differentiate them from “children”. From our observation, it was also evident this was more than just an onomastic ceremony. It included cultural teachings from the elders on various topical issues like marriage, history of circumcision, economic lifestyle, and cultural instruments used in farming but now overtaken by modern technology among other issues. Everything was conducted in Lullogoli language except when Migori County Governor and his entourage arrived for the ceremony. The photos below show some of the elders teach the young men and other people who attended the ceremony:

**Plate 1: Maragoli Cultural Day at Mukuyu Primary School**



Photo 1 shows an elder teaching about history of Maragoli circumcision, photo 2 from the right shows one of the circumcisers talk about the rite, importance, dos and don'ts after circumcision. Photo 3 shows an elder giving the name of the initiated group, photo 4 is the researcher and assistants, photo 5 is an elder teaching about agricultural tools used by Maragoli ancestors, photo 6 is a retired church elder justifying Maragoli circumcision from

the Maragoli Bible. Photo 7 is an elder talking about maturity, marriage and raising families according to Maragoli culture.

### **Maragoli Socio-economic meetings**

40 (48.8%) of the respondents agreed that socio-economic meetings involving women and men have been integral in maintaining Lullogoli language. Some of the meetings include agricultural associations, merry-go-rounds, and Luhya Council of elders meetings. One respondent who is of Luo decent, explained that merry-go-round meetings played a huge part in acquisition of Lullogoli:

Mama 2: *Koveye na Wamama karibu 20 wa Kijaluo kwadeka mu Varogori. Koveye mu tsimbega ihare ni ihare na kare kwarange ni mikutano gya merry go-round but madiku ganu gyageha sana kigira kwakera. Rwa kwadeka, kwari nu vudinyu kwiga Llogori navutswa kwamanya sasa. Inzi mu manye ku nu Mjaluo da. Mikutano yigyi gyakokonya sana kumanya miima gya vasaza vitu.*

[We are about 20 Luo women married to Maragoli men. We are spread in various regions of Uriri. Initially, we used to have merry-go-round meetings but nowadays they have reduced because of age. When we got married here, it was hard for us to learn Lullogoli but now, we know. Now, you cannot say am a Luo. These meetings helped us understand the culture of our husbands.

The above excerpt underscores the importance of socio-economic meetings in learning and maintaining a language. The woman further argued that knowing Lullogoli has enabled her create a positive environment where her children could easily learn and maintain it throughout their stay at home. The children are perfect bilinguals of Lullogoli-Dholuo. Lullogoli was used in her house between her and the husband and the other in-laws who stay within the same compound. The outcome of this study is validated by the findings of Okpanachi and Abuh (2017) who found out that the more the speakers of Igala, Bassa-Nge and Bassa-Komo used their languages in meetings, they more they maintained them.

### **Intragroup Visitations**

In any African setting, visitations by relatives and friends is a sign of respect, honor and social warmth. In such settings, usually, the indigenous languages takes precedence in communication unless the visitors do not speak the indigenous language. Such visitations, when they happen habitually, help propagate the life of a language. This explains why 33(40.2%) of the respondents agreed that visitations have helped maintain Lullogoli. The respondents claimed that visitations included relatives coming from their ancestral land in current Vihiga County or (them) going to visit their relatives in Vihiga County. They also said to have visitations within Uriri Sub County and the larger Migori County where they have relatives and friends who speak Lullogoli. However, in an interview with one elderly woman in her early 80s, meetings between Lullogoli speaking relatives in Vihiga and Uriri are becoming rare because their immediate brothers, sisters, uncles and aunties have passed on. The remaining relatives do not recognize them hence most intragroup visitations take place within Uriri and larger Migori. According to Ehala (2009), when network structure is intense with such meetings, possibility of keeping the dominant language is high. Theory of Contact linguistics argues that the more intense and stable intragroup relations become, the more the speakers protect their language from attrition and death.

### **Lullogoli in Religious Worship**

Various scholars in Africa and other parts of the world have debated on the relationship between religion and language maintenance. For instance, Hamde (2005) discusses how Blin language in Eritrea was revitalized and maintained through religious activities like Bible

translation, songs and preaching. Thomasson (2001) describes how Greek language was maintained through teaching it in church and even using the Greek Bible to preach. This study wanted to find out if using Lullogoli in religion was one of the strategies of language maintenance. 29 (35.4%) of the respondents gave an affirmative response. Those who responded in affirmative were further asked to name the church activities that use Lullogoli. The following table indicated their responses:

**Table 2. Lullogoli patterns in Church**

<b>Church activity</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Singing	2	100
Committee meetings	26	87
Announcements	21	72.4
Preaching/Teachings	20	69

From the above table, the youth agreed that Lullogoli is regularly used in singing gospel songs (100%), committee meetings (87%), making announcements to various groups (72.4%) and preaching or teaching (69%). They said that every time they attend church, they sing in Lullogoli. They argued that most committee meetings that use Lullogoli are those of church elders and village meetings. Church announcements can be in any language depending on the target audience. For instance, children will have their announcements made in Kiswahili or Lullogoli; youth make their announcements in English or Kiswahili and occasionally Lullogoli while the elders have them in Lullogoli. While observing language use patterns in Friends Church Youth Conference held in Thim Jope Ward, the study realized that Lullogoli was dominant in songs, exhortations, group meetings while Kiswahili dominated preaching, and teaching. English was rarely used while Dholuo was not used at all.

### **Chief's administrative meetings**

This strategy was less popular among the respondents with 10 (12.2%) supporting it. The biggest reason why the statistics are low is that this group was born in 1980's when the use of Lullogoli in administrative meetings was on the decline. However, it has been in use since 1940s when the first Lullogoli speaking group settled in Uriri. In an interview with one elder, the study found out that Maragoli speakers were given their own administrative domain where they were allowed to farm, live and interact with their own language. They even established their own schools, churches, markets and ultimately local administrative positions. The initial settlement scheme put a geographical boundary between the Luo speakers and Lullogoli speakers hence establishing a stable isogloss where the two languages maintained their boundaries without eating into each other's domains. Whenever the Lullogoli speakers wanted to have social meetings, they engaged their own language. This later would make it strong. However, with changes in local and national politics, social setups and education system change, Lullogoli and Dholuo speakers began to interact and eat into each other's language domains. They began attending same schools, churches, common markets and worked in same offices. The use of Lullogoli in chiefs meetings began to decrease, giving way for national language, Kiswahili. In late 1990's the use of Lullogoli lost traction among Maragoli leaders who had to serve Dholuo speakers that had settled in their administrative locations and villages. However, occasionally, whenever leaders are meeting Lullogoli speakers, they speak their local language. According to Okpanachi and Abuh (2017), use of indigenous languages by administration helps maintain the language as it creates a positive attitude among the speakers.

## Teaching indigenous language in Schools

Teaching of indigenous languages in Kenya was an implemented policy until late 1990s when primary schools began moving away from it. The indigenous language lessons were replaced with various programs supported by international communities like USAID, DFID, and RTI International. These programs included Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGMA), Primary Math and Reading (PRIMR) and currently, Early Grade Reading Activity (TUSOME). The implementation of these programs affected young Kenyans born in late 1990s who did not have a chance to learn their indigenous languages within the school system across the nation. This explains why 3 (3.6%) respondents agreed that it was a strategy they used to propagate Lullogoli in early days but now defunct. In an interview with Elder Y, he confirmed the same view:

Elder Y: *Vakitangira hee... Umanyi hee, vakitangira venyaa ndio. Vandu venya vahiri vaana vavo mu tsisukuru zyavo. Vavoo vahira vaana mu tsyavo, na Varogoori valla ndi, kari kuyi kokore ndio. Kari vitabu, vyigiziru, administration na supervisors wa masomo, vatura evorogori. Ku mihigya gyene yigyo, vavoo vatanga kuzaa mu tsisukuru zya varogori, na vivuli na vigidzi valaa ndi kunyara kuvakunga dave. Ku rigyiza Llogori mu tsiskuru zindala zyatanga kureka kwigiza Llogori. Valaa ndi, Kulazimisha Vavoo kwiga Llogori, variruka vazye mu tsiskull zindii.*

[When they began, it was that way. People wanted to take their kids to their indigenous schools. Dholuo speakers took their kids to Luo schools and Maragoli took their to Maragoli schools. Maragoli schools acquired administrators, teachers, teaching and reading materials and other things from their ancestral Kakamega District. This made sure our kids learnt language from schools just like others. However, the situation changed. Maragoli schools began admitting Dholuo speaking kids. They had to be embraced at a cost: abandoning teaching Lullogoli. They thought it would not be wise to force Dholuo speaking kids to learn Lullogoli when they had their own language. They feared losing these new kids to other schools.]

Such situations have littered the nation including villages, towns and suburbs. With parents seeking better economic lives and social amenities, they moved with their kids to other linguistic regions. This made it hard to teach local languages. The kids could only speak their languages outside the school environment, as it became punishable offence to talk Lullogoli in school vicinities. Overtime, school environments stopped supporting language maintenance efforts.

## CONCLUSION

Language maintenance is a process that requires a myriad of strategies. An analysis of data collected from 82 male and female youth indicates that maintenance of Lullogoli language since late 1930s has succeeded due to various strategies including speaking Lullogoli at home, listening to Lullogoli radio stations, parents/elders teaching youth at home and traditional/cultural ceremonies. Other strategies include socio-economic meetings, intragroup visitations, using Lullogoli in religious worship, using Lullogoli in Chiefs' administrative activities and being taught in schools. This indicates that language maintenance efforts require the speakers to carefully plan and to be conscious of their language.

The degree of positivity to each strategy depends on regularity of use. This explains why some strategies like speaking Lullogoli at home, listening to radio stations, and parents and elders teaching Lullogoli to young men and women were more popular than others. When youth speak Lullogoli daily at home, it enhances the chances of language survival. The same can be unequivocally said about elders and parents teaching the language at home, as this constitutes a daily process. Teaching does not necessarily mean they have to sit in a normal



classroom environment to acquire requisite competence and performance. In African context, interacting with radio is a daily occurrence hence its popularity among the young men in Uriri Sub County.

It may also be important to recommend to the Kenyan government to go back to indigenous language teaching as it created an environment where children at a tender age could acquire and enrich language skills. Kenyan lower grade school environment even though it insists on literacy and numeracy skills and competencies at early stages of education, indigenous language skills should not be abolished in totality. Indigenous language should be made part of measuring intellectual abilities among children within their environment.

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