

# Ogiek and Akie: How many peoples for how many languages? What is their future?\*\*\*

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## Abstract

Ogiek and Akie are the names of two African endangered languages belonging to the Nilo-Saharan, Kalenjin family, originally spoken by scattered groups of hunters and gatherers in a region stretching from southern Kenya to Northern Tanzania. These languages are now in danger due to the loss of their habitat caused by climate change and to an unbalanced diglossia with majority languages (Kikuyu and Swahili in Kenya, Maa and Swahili in Tanzania). Despite their close familiarity and possible common origins, the two languages and speaker communities followed different paths, at least it was so during the last 200 years. This paper aims to investigate how the two different historical, ecological and political contexts impacted the two languages and cultures. On the basis of the fieldwork carried out by the authors in the two areas, the authors aim to point out the extent to which projects of cooperation for the promotion and safeguard of the local languages and cultural intangible heritage have the potential to slow down or reverse the tendency towards languages decline and possible demise.

*Keywords:* African linguistics, Kalenjin and Southern Nilotic, Endangered languages, Ogiek, Akie, Cooperation.

## I

### Introduction

Ogiek and Akie are the names of two endangered languages from East-Central Africa that belong to the Kalenjin family of the Nilo-Saharan phylum. According to the Rottland (1982) classification, Ogiek and Akie, together with Sogoo and Kinare make up the c. group of the Kalenjin continuum. Other branches of the family are:

- a. Nandi Markweta (comprising the Nandi, Markweta, Tugen, Keyo and Kipsigis languages),
- b. Elgon (grouping the Sapiny, Kony, Bong'om, Pok and Terik languages) and
- d. Päkot (isolated).

At present, Ogiek is spoken in Nakuru district in Kenya, between the Mau Forest and Mount Elgon, while speakers of Akie have been traced in a few small villages in the central region of Tanzania stretching still northwards. A comparative analysis

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of the two languages confirms their common origins<sup>1</sup>. Obviously, when the Maasai settled in southern Kenya towards Mount Elgon and further southwards in what is now the Manyara and Tanga Regions of Tanzania approximately 200 years ago a single hunter-gatherer community started splitting, and settled down in the regions where they are found today – see Micheli (2019) and, Legère (2018). Since 1992, the endangered status of the Akie community and language has been emphasized<sup>2</sup>. From a linguistic perspective, the Akie community was studied in 2009/2010 within the framework of LoT (Language Atlas of Tanzania) cooperation project, which was carried out by Gothenburg University together with the University of Dar es Salaam.

Research activities on the Akie language were then implemented thanks to a five year grant obtained from the Volkswagen Foundation aimed at its documentation. The linguistic research results were finally deposited at the Max Planck Institute in Nijmegen (Netherlands), and inserted in the DoBeS (Documentation of endangered languages) collection by Karsten Legère and Christa König, including Ogiek files, contributed by Iliaria Micheli<sup>3</sup>.

The ethnonyms Ogiek and Akie encompass all those groups that in the past were identified by the Maasai as *Ol-dóróboni* (sing.)/*Il-Tóróbo* (pl.), literally ‘people without cattle’, ‘dwarfs’ or ‘servants’, and treated by them as inferior beings. From the Maa language, the derogatory term passed into Swahili as *Mndorobo/Wandorobo* and into English as (*N*)*dorobo*.

Always considered inferior throughout the colonial period, even after the birth of independent Kenya and Tanganyika/Tanzania, to this day Ogiek and Akie continue to be marginalized and denied the minimum of human rights. They are still victims of evictions from their ancestral lands, not having their way of life and languages guaranteed any special protection. Nevertheless, in recent years various researchers and activists, as well as local and international NGOs, have cast a light on them, which the authors hope will be difficult to switch off.

The main objective of this paper is to discuss to which extent projects of cooperation for the promotion and safeguard of the local languages and cultural intangible heritage have potential in the two areas, considering the historical, ecological, economic and socio-political specificities of the two groups’ current habitats along with the sociolinguistic and cultural background of both communities.

The data reported here derive from long periods of qualitative research, based on the collection of oral texts, songs, riddles, semi-structured interviews, audio and video recordings, as well as lexicographic material.

In Kenya, the research by Iliaria Micheli (University of Trieste), partly funded by MIUR (Ministry of Education, University and Research) in the framework of the FIRB ATRA 2012 project, was carried out between 2013 and 2015. It was part of a set of cooperation projects carried out in partnership with the Italian NGOs Ethnorêma, ManiTese, SlowFood, the Province of Bolzano (Italy), and the local NGO NECOFA (Network for Ecofarming in Africa) Kenya.

Both in the case of Ogiek and in the case of Akie, the research objectives were twofold. On the one hand, given the degree of erosion of the two languages, the immediate goal was their documentation, that had to end up with the production of two basic grammatical descriptions<sup>4</sup>, collections of orature, with a focus on folktales<sup>5</sup> and the like. On the other hand, the long-term aim was to enhance a process of self-recognition, resilience, and language empowerment as well as maintenance among the local communities.

In the following paragraphs, important aspects of what has been done in the two areas will be presented separately. Section 2 will focus on Ogiek, while section 3 will be devoted to Akie.

## 2

### **Situation of the Ogiek language and the Mariashoni Ogiek communities (Nakuru District, Kenya)**

In Kenya, the Ogiek of Mariashoni, living in the region of the Eastern Escarpment of the Mau Forest between Molo (Elburgon), Nakuru, and Narok, represent a group of traditionally encapsulated (mainly ex)hunters and gatherers. Although the 2019 census reports a figure of 52,596 people<sup>6</sup> for the Ogiek community, those who truly preserve their language and traditions are no more than 15,000.

This figure represents a very small minority within the continuum of the Kalenjin peoples, who with their 6,358,113 individuals, constitute the third largest ethnic group in the country after the Kikuyu (8,148,668) and the Luhuya (6,823,842)<sup>7</sup>.

Until the 1970s, before the beginning of a catastrophic era for the Mau forest characterized by reckless deforestation and continuous attempts to evict people from their ancestral lands for profit, the Ogiek of Mariashoni had maintained their traditional way of life. As it is preserved in their traditional tales and stories, they related mainly with Maasai only for necessary exchanges (skins and honey *versus* milk and metals – see Micheli 2014b) and considered other Kalenjin peoples like Tugen and Terik as enemies, avoiding contact with them as much as possible.

During the last 30 years, the forest-cover extension shrunk by more than 70%, many species of flora and fauna left the region, and contact with the outside world increased by leaps and bounds, thanks to the building of new roads. This was accompanied by the entry of commodities into the Ogiek market networks, the opening of schools, and the work of Christian preachers who penetrated further and further into the once pristine territories.

By 2014, when the the first sociolinguistic report on the Ogiek of Mariashoni<sup>8</sup> was published, more than 95% of the local population was already bilingual in Swahili.

Revisiting the data from that report, it is interesting to point out two elements here:

1. At that time, despite the presence of 4 elementary schools in the area, the spread of English, unlike that of Swahili, was still very low (only 6 people out of 142 respondents

could speak English), and between 8 and 10% of people aged 25+ were still totally illiterate (see Micheli 2014a, p. 154).

2. With regard to other local languages, although Ogiek and Kipsigis are very similar, and although 134 out of 142 people had stated that Kipsigis was inter-comprehensible with Ogiek, only 14 respondents had confirmed that they could speak Kipsigis, while only 3 people declared their ability to speak Maa.

These two observations testify on the one hand to the relative isolation of the region from institutional networks and, on the other hand they confirm the situation of encapsulation of the Ogiek communities within the Mau forest. In that region, in fact, the Ogiek were historically involved only in sporadic contacts with people of other languages/cultures, probably only out of necessity. Therefore, they developed a strong sense of identity that drove them to contradict themselves regarding the mastery of Kipsigis, that is *de facto* a “sister” language, even though spoken by communities totally different from the Ogiek in terms of their lifestyle. The Kipsigis are, in fact, horticulturalists and cattle farmers.

As early as 2014, Ogiek was classified by Ethnologue as an endangered language and placed at level 7 “shifting” on the EGIDS (Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale). Recently, 8 years later, the same website places Ogiek at level 8, towards the “Moribund” category<sup>9</sup>. The many efforts put in place by local activists, together with the undertaking in 2016 of the translation of parts of the Bible (excerpts from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke<sup>10</sup>) did not lead to particularly brilliant results.

Regarding the level of endangerment of Ogiek, it should be added that Githiora, as early as 2011 referred to it as “nearly extinct,” probably basing this assumption on his observation of what was already taking place in those Ogiek communities living outside the Mau forest, near Molo or Nakuru, close to the Kikuyu and Maasai people, whose lifestyles they had adopted alongside with their languages<sup>11</sup>. Ogiek is also reported in Batibo to be among the endangered languages of Kenya<sup>12</sup>. As it is well known<sup>13</sup>, the work of language revitalization is extremely painstaking and cannot have any effects if one of the following two main conditions is missing: 1) the commitment of the local population and 2) the commitment of the local authorities.

These conditions may be absent despite article 44 of the 2011 Kenyan Constitution which stipulates that:

(1) Every person has the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of the person’s choice. (2) A person belonging to a cultural or linguistic community has the right, with other members of that community-(a) to enjoy the person’s culture and use the person’s language; or (b) to form, join, and maintain cultural and linguistic associations and other organs of civil society.

In the case of Ogiek, at the moment there is no evidence of a real institutional commitment to its safeguard and/or promotion.

In fact, during the fieldwork in 2013 and 2014, several attempts were made to find a shared and usable spelling for the production of fairy tale booklets to be included in the school curricula of the four elementary school around the Mariashoni area (see Micheli, 2016a), but the inability to find an interested interlocutor on the issue within the Ministry of Education contributed to soon dampening the timid enthusiasm of the directors of the schools involved. As a result, the project ended up in oblivion.

The institutional inertia in safeguarding the Ogiek language and culture is unfortunately also apparent when considering another, and far more serious, issue, that is the lack of protection of their territory, or the lack of an ethical approach to joint preservation of land and local communities.

The Ogiek language of Mariashoni has survived because its speakers have been able to pass on their language to their children by having lived, until a few years ago, in a sort of a bubble, nearly isolated from the rest of the world. They spent their lives in total harmony with the forest, their natural habitat, through absolute respect of their ancestral lands.

Unfortunately, toward the end of the last century and well into the first decade of the 2000s, the Kenyan government not only fostered the collapse of the Mau forest ecosystem by allowing deforestation and replacement of local trees with exotic ones that ensured faster production of timber for sale, but also supported a strong policy of eviction of forest-dwelling people and their relocation to other areas of the country, effectively advocating ethnolinguistic assimilation of the Ogiek among the Maasai and Kikuyu peoples.

The issue had already been brought to the attention of the United Nations in 2010 by the then special rapporteur who addressed the human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people, James Anaya<sup>14</sup>. Again, the cooperative interventions of international NGOs committed to the defense of indigenous peoples' rights, such as Survival International, played a central role in limiting the damage, supporting local activists in their struggle to protect their independence and accompanying them in their legal battles. Only as recently as June 2017 did their efforts lead to a landmark decision of the African Court that ruled the government of Kenya violated the rights of the Ogiek tribe by repeatedly evicting them from their ancestral lands. The court found the government had broken seven articles of the African Charter and ordered it to take "all appropriate measures" to remedy the violations. Last but not least, on June, 23, 2022, the Court ruled on reparations following the 2017 decision<sup>15</sup>. The Court ordered the Government of Kenya pecuniary reparations (KES 57,850,000 for material prejudice for loss of property and natural resources, and KES 100,000,000 for moral prejudice). In addition, the Court ordered also nonpecuniary reparations, including the restitution of Ogiek ancestral lands and recognition of the Ogiek as an indigenous people. The Government of Kenya was also required to take necessary legislative, administrative, and any other measures to recognize, respect, and protect the right of the Ogiek to be consulted with regard to development, conservation, or investment projects in their ancestral lands<sup>16</sup>.

## 2.1. Some data from the analysis of the first short vocabulary of the Ogiek language of Mariashoni<sup>17</sup>

Considering the picture sketched out in the previous paragraph, it is clear that two main factors regarding the ecological niche in which the Ogiek community of Mariashoni lives are likely to greatly affect the resilience and viability of the language.

The first, is related to the reduction of the forest cover and the consequent loss of traditional habitat and, therefore, traditional domains. From this point of view, analyzing the (few) entries related specifically to wildlife, some interesting, even alarming data emerge.

Regarding the indigenous fauna, in a corpus of 35 words for wild animals, it was impossible to find an English or a Swahili equivalent for 13 of them, mainly because the species the words refers to are currently extinct in the area, and it is impossible, on the basis of linguistic data only, to identify them. In some, more lucky cases, even though the referent is extinct in the area, it refers to such a renowned species that it is impossible to identify it incorrectly, e.g., *pèèlyót*, the elephant.

Table 1 contains all the names of animals that could not be identified, divided according to the following groups: insects, antelopes, small birds, deer, monkeys, and rodents:

TAB. 1

Insects	chéptìgige (black bee); sómòseryet (red bee)
Antelopes	jèrangànet; sòròtét; puyeyotig
Small birds	kipràskó (enemy of bees); mèregwét; wachewet
Deer	mbòòlet; pèchenit;
Monkeys	sóìret; tísyet
Rodents	nyàsiryat

For the Kenyan flora, in a corpus of 53 Ogiek names for plants, trees, and herbs, it was impossible to identify the corresponding species either in Swahili or in English for 29 Ogiek terms. As for the animals, the deterioration of the habitat caused many species to become extinct, which, sadly, is true above all for medical plants.

Table 2 contains all the names of trees, herbs, and plants that could not be identified, divided according to the following groups: trees for honey; medicinal herbs, plants, and trees; vegetal fibers; others with the indication, where possible, of their traditional uses.

TAB. 2

Trees for honey	mərɔrta; tebengwét; tekwoyo
Medicinal herbs, plants, trees	chéb'ndorwet (plant, tonic for children); chépkòlogolyo (tree whose leaves are used for malaria); (i)ngòlogit (plant, tonic); karabwet (bush for malaria); nɔnɔjɛg ak kàràbàryét (tree-stomach problems); sìmeitɔ (plant-malaria); sítòtig (plant- worms); sùgùmèryet (plant- worms); chélumbut
Vegetal fibers	kùrògùryét (vegetal fiber used for smoking hives); kwòmèreryét; píšinda; sèlèkwét (for containers)
Others	chémururiét (leaves used as an envelope for meat); isòjɔt (plant, cooking); kalukchaat (tree); kelyeg (herbs, cooking); télechuèt (tree-wood for arrows); ndrɔyeg (wild tuber-cooking); ðunít (tree for hives); ròrínig (vegetal ingredients for beer); tɛɛgàt (tree for wood); tóbòkwé (kind of a cedar tree); kéélyɔt (tree for poison); sèrérét (envelope for meat); sòsɔnɛt (envelope for meat)

The second risk factor that could greatly affect the already fragile balance of Ogiek is the condition of unstable diglossia (see Batibo, 2005, fig. 6) in which the speakers live. The Ogiek, as noted above, are 95% bilingual in Swahili. The traditional habitat reduction is leading to an internal collapse of the language in those domains related to such traditional activities as hunting and gathering; at the same time, the reduction of the forest cover implies the forced choice of many speakers to abandon their traditional lifestyle in order to survive, devoting themselves to other, more remunerative activities, such as agriculture or animal rearing, which are typically practiced by Kikuyu or Maasai.

Deviating from traditional activities is among the first steps that can lead, even unconsciously, to the adoption not only of foreign cultural habits but also, consequently, foreign languages equipped with a vocabulary that is functional to the new needs of production and exchange.

An analysis of the lemmas contained in the short vocabulary of the Ogiek of Mariashoni reveals, however, that borrowings from languages of neighboring peoples, such as the Kikuyu or Maasai, in 2014 were almost irrelevant. In fact, only one word of Nandi origin and two of Kipsigis origin were recorded, whereas words borrowed from Swahili, including words of English or Hindi origins, probably passed through Swahili numbered at least 43, accounting for 6.6% of the total (646 words).

As far as Kipsigis and Nandi are concerned, it is true that in the absence of written documentation, since they are all Kalenjin languages, it is difficult to actually understand where the term originated, and speakers' statements are often taken at face value. For the analysis of the examples given below, anthropological criteria were applied. In fact, the only word defined as being of Nandi origin by my interlocutors was *tumdò*, which is the name of the girls' excision celebration, thanks to which young Ogiek girls become brides, ready to go to the outside communities, Maasai, Nandi, and Kikuyu, to be married. It would be most curious, to say the least, that a word related to an originally Ogiek cultic practice would be disavowed today. Instead, it seems more likely to think that it entered Ogiek as a loan of necessity along with the practice itself.

As for the two words defined as being of Kipsigis origin, the issue is quite more complicated. Concerning the first one, *seregütyét*, a term that indicates a type of tree, it seems indeed impossible to determine the direction of the loan. The fact that the same word is used in both languages does not tell us anything about its origin, since the same tree is, in fact, indigenous in both territories.

The second word, *mattanda*, “chicken,” is much more likely of foreign origin in Ogiek, and in this case, a Kipsigis origin sounds acceptable, given the recent introduction of chicken farming among the Ogiek communities.

Finally, the following is a list of words borrowed from Swahili (or English – from now on EN –, or Hindi via Swahili), some of which, as will be seen, correctly adjusted to the Ogiek phonology: *Chai* (chai – tea); *chògv* (jogoo – cock); *chùmátátó* (jumatatu – Monday); *chumbig* (chumvi – salt); *chùmóbílí* (Jumapili – Sunday); *chùmómùs* (Jumamosi – Sarurday); *jágetít* (EN jacket); *imbya* (-pya – new); *ingànu* (ngano – wheat); *káraat* (EN carrot); *kirààga* (kiraka – patch); *kitándét* (kitanda – bed); *màt* (moto – fire); *kóótít* (EN coat); *kùgjót* (kuku – hen); *kwéjót* (kiatu? – shoe?); *màájat* (mayai – egg); *magasít* (mikasi – scissors); *màgatyat* (mkate – bread); *máama* (mama); *màarakwat* (haragwe – bean); *màtundeg* (matunda – fruit); *máawat* (maua -flower); *mètít* (mhenga – skull?); *pìlipìlì* (pilipili – chili pepper); *pugut* (EN book); *pùsít* (EN pussy – cat); *kéngalì* (unga flour – *to grind* flour); *pyásyét* (kiazí – potato); *sáàít* (saa -clock); *shátít* (EN shirt); *shíwas* (EN slippers); *sògísyot* (EN shock?); *sòndugu* (sandugu – box); *sùgùl* (EN school); *sút* (EN suit); *swétet* (EN sweater); *tágitári* (EN doctor); *tàngáwisíg* (tangawisi -ginger); *tùmótít* (? EN tumbacu – tobacco); *kíraigo* (EN? Cigar); *pùlanét* (EN pullover); *sùgáru* (EN sugar).

## 2.2. How much Ogiek is endangered?

Based on all the above, an attempt will now be made to determine how endangered Ogiek actually is, and how far its ultimate extinction can be avoided by implementing enlightened linguistic and preservation policies while, simultaneously, acting in a timely, productive, and intelligent manner through targeted language revitalization cooperation projects.

TAB. 3

Feature	No	Yes	Maybe
Less than 5,000 speakers	X		
High degree of bilingualism in the dominant language (Swahili)		X	
Socio-political conditions that suffocate the language		X	*
Socio-economic disadvantages of the community		X	
Prevalence of a negative attitude of the speakers toward their language	X		
Poor intergenerational transmission	X		*
Prevalence of elderly people among the speakers	X		



Table 3 summarizes the situation of Ogiek, considering the 7 characteristics indicated by Batibo as distinctive of languages at high risk in Africa<sup>18</sup>:

Of these seven characteristics, the Ogiek of Mariashoni in 2014 only had three, namely, the high degree of bilingualism, adverse sociopolitical conditions, and socioeconomic disadvantages of the community.

Intergenerational transmission of the language remained alive however, and most crucially, speakers still felt a strong attachment to their traditions. Based on recent informal conversations I had with members of the community, it appears that both of these factors at the moment remain unchanged.

Nevertheless, an increasing number of young people are deciding to continue their studies, moving to the city and abandoning the hard life in what remains of the ancient Mau forest, bringing a *de facto* decline in the intergenerational transmission of the language.

Even so, however, the recent victories of the Ogiek in their claims regarding their indigenous rights against the Kenyan Government, the reparations obtained, and the excellent results obtained in the preservation and promotion of traditional lifestyles have allowed the Mariashoni community to remain almost encapsulated. Further, thanks to international cooperation projects, such as those of the University of Trieste and NECOFA Kenya, and the Italian NGOs ManiTese, Ethnorêma, and the Province of Bolzano, it seems that in this region all conditions exist to succeed in the difficult goal of avoiding the death of another endangered language, which represents a precious part of the intangible heritage of the world.

### 3 Akie

#### 3.1. The Ndorobo background and the move southwards

As already stated above, the Akie splitting from the Ogiek started approximately 200 years ago. In this respect, Sutton (1993, p. 51) wrote: “One Ogiek (‘Akie’) has migrated much further afield, to the southern extremity of the Maasai Steppe [...] with a section of the Kisongo Maasai, [...] up to two hundred years ago”.

As far as the Ogiek and Akie languages are concerned, various authors have pointed out the close linguistic relationship, which transpires from comparative studies of selected lexical items such as i.a. in Rottland (1982). Similarly, since both communities have been and are still widely in contact with neighboring communities – in the case of Akie mainly with the prominent Eastern Nilotic Maasai, but also with Bantu peoples like the Zigula and Ngulu – a linguistic impact is also reflected language wise. In addition, in Kenya and in Tanzania the prominent role of Swahili as the national/official language is obvious in various borrowings, as listed in König *et al.* (2020).

The close relationship between Akie and Ogiek was also confirmed by Akie resource persons who went through some Ogiek text samples that were copied

from Kratz (2010). Most Ogiek lexical items in the texts were also available in Akie. Accordingly, understanding the texts was not a problem, except for loanwords from Kipsigis or Nandi, the meaning of which, however, could be identified in the context. Judging from these results, both languages which have been spoken far from each other, have maintained substantial grammatical and lexical features after the split by those Ogiek who accompanied the Maasai groups on the latter's move southwards in search of pastures for their cattle. For the Maasai, as stated earlier, they were *Il-Tóróbo* in the sense of not owning cattle.

So far, the linguistic aspect of the Ogiek southwards movement has not been properly studied. As a consequence, within the context of the Akie documentation, due attention was also paid to the area on the Tanzanian side that is close to the current Ogiek settlements. It had been assumed that traces of the southwards movement may still be identified there, since the corridor between what is now the Kenyan/Tanzanian border and the Akie pockets in Tanga and Manyara is mainly inhabited by the Maasai for whom *Il-Tóróbo* were herding the cattle.

Initially in 2015 within the framework of the Akie focused research project (funded by the Volkswagen Foundation) L. Ole-Wanga alone went to Kakesio (Ngorongoro District, Arusha Region, close to the Serengeti)<sup>19</sup> for identifying resource persons who could describe Ndorobo history, traditions plus linguistic aspects. Subsequently, he had with P. S. Mkwán'hembo another field trip which aimed at linguistic data collection. The latter's focus was on making audiovisual text recordings of the language spoken by Ndorobo elders. These elders also played a substantial role as resource persons who facilitated a small lexical item study (approximately 100 entries) organized by Daudi Peterson of Dorobo Safari in Mwiba, close to Ngorongoro National Park<sup>20</sup>.

What follows are some results of the contacts that Ole-Melubo (a Maasai project resource person from Loliondo) had gathered in three places situated in this corridor, again in Ngorongoro District, as follows:

- a) Oldonyo Soitsambu (Latitude: -4.71313 Longitude: 37.15127);
- b) Esilalei (Latitude: -3.458043 Longitude: 35.968798)<sup>21</sup>;
- c) Oloipiri (Coordinates: S 02°02'565", E035°26.097"), Latitude: 2° 5' 4.8" (2.0847°) south, Longitude: 35° 24' 40.9" (35.4114°) east.

*Il-Tóróbo* related fieldwork was also conducted by P. S. Mkwán'hembo and L. Ole-Wanga in 2019, but much more southward in Manyara Region, Simanjiro District: Longiporo S. 04.19.205', E.037.15.968', Longai Village.

It goes without saying that the interviews in Oloipiri and Soitsambu have been important for illustrating the southward spread of Ogiek people who have been (and still are) called *Il-Tóróbo* by their Maasai neighbors. Below are some details that illustrate the knowledge of the few Ndorobo interviewees who stem from the Ngorongoro area regarding their origin, traditions as well as their lack of an all-round picture that is relevant for the Ndorobo identity, such as described by Ole-Kintae<sup>22</sup> from Oldonyo Soitsambu (1a):

I don't know the Dorobo language, and yet other Ndorobo and I only speak the Maa language. Originally the Ndorobo came from Engare Nanyuki (Arumeru, Arusha) in Siringet (Serengeti). They used to live by eating wild animals; they also had no specific residence. They only lived in the wild and had no housing. We are called Ndorobo, because we are hunters. We still make arrows, which we sell to the Maasai.

We still know many Ndorobo activities. Some of us don't farm, but we still harvest honey. Especially those who are circumcised among Maasai are Ndorobo. The Maasai look down on us, because we don't keep cattle, and we eat game. Ndorobo don't want cows, even if you tell a boy to herd cattle, he leaves the cattle in the wild, and goes hunting. There are some clans of Ndorobo origin whose tradition is – when a girl gets married, she should go into the marriage with a piece of dried game. It is believed that she gives birth thereafter<sup>23</sup>.

The Ndorobo resource persons made statements similar to what above Ole-Kintae said about his Ndorobo language competence. None of them could speak the language (whatsoever) to which they were raised in childhood. But it was possible for them to remember various lexical items that they associate with Ndorobo linguistic identity. The following table shows the distribution of Ndorobo words (central column) that three resource persons who live close to the border area presented. In this list some Akie related words used as hunting calls (HC) were traced in König *et al.* (2020, p. 297) referred to in the Ndorobo column as (Dic).

Swahili/English	Ndorobo	Place recorded plus contributor
Binadamu/Human being	Tire	Oloipiri – Ole-Parkati, Akie: <i>chii</i>
Choma nyama nene/Fry fat meat	<i>Koor</i>	Soitsambu – RP 2, Akie: <i>koor</i> (Dic 183)
Chui/Leopard	Parakwe Loolndiil	Oloipiri – Ole-Parkati, Akie: <i>máilila</i>
Erukunyi (Maa)	Akwah'	Oloipiri – Ole-Parkati
Faru/Rhino	Kukule	Oloipiri – Ole-Parkati, Akie: <i>nyítyee</i>
Kiboko/Hippo	Olembei	Oloipiri – Ole-Parkati, Ak.: <i>mákaita</i>
Kongoni/Hartebeest	Sót (HC)	Soitsambu – RP 2, Akie: <i>rópou</i> , HC <i>sót</i>
Swala/Kudu, Greater ~	Púlót (HC)	Soitsambu – RP 2, Akie: <i>sarááme</i> , HC <i>púlót</i>
Swala/Kudu, Lesser ~	Cháiko (HC)	Soitsambu – RP 2, Akie: <i>cháiko</i> (Dic 146)
Mbogo/Nyati-Buffalo	<i>Lop</i>	Oloipiri – Ole-Parkati, Akie: <i>sááe</i>

Mbogo/Nyati-Buffalo	<i>Loop</i>	Soitsambu – RP 2, Akie: <i>sááe</i>
Nyuki/Bee	Mulejo	Oloipiri – Ole-Parkati, Akie: some names (Dic 272)
Nyumbu/Mule, Hartebeest	Sinte	Oloipiri – N. Kurata, Akie: <i>rópou</i>
Pofu/Eland	<i>Kumbe</i>	Oloipiri – Ole-Parkati, Akie: <i>sing'óita</i>
Pofu/Eland	<i>Kombe</i>	Soitsambu – RP 2, Akie: <i>sing'óita</i>
Pundamilia/Zebra	<i>Hab'</i>	Oloipiri – Ole-Parkati Akie: <i>sikíríee táá timta</i> 'Forest donkey'
Pundamilia/Zebra	<i>Haaa</i>	Soitsambu – RP 2 Akie: <i>sikíríee táá timta</i> 'Forest donkey'
Simba/Lion	Parakwe	Oloipiri – Ole-Parkati, Ak.: <i>ng'etúúnta</i>
Paa/Gazelle	<i>Korr</i>	Oloipiri – Ole-Parkati, Akie: <i>teweréita</i>
Paa/Gazelle	<i>Kurr</i>	Soitsambu – RP 2, Akie: <i>teweréita</i>
Tembo/Elephant	<i>Kopio</i>	Oloipiri – Ole-Parkati, Akie: <i>pééliantee</i>
Tembo/Elephant	<i>Kopuo</i>	Soitsambu – RP 2, Akie: <i>pééliantee</i>
Tembo/Elephant	<i>Kópchóo</i> (HC)	Soitsambu – RP 2, Akie: <i>pééliantee</i> , Dic <i>kópchóo</i>
Tembo/Elephant	Pakalu	Soitsambu – RP 2, Akie: <i>pééliantee</i>
Twiga/Giraffe	<i>Swónte</i> (HC)	Oloipiri – Ole-Parkati, Akie: <i>tiankáánye</i> , Dic <i>santééé</i>

In the table above, in the Ndorobo column, out of 25 entries, five hunting words (HC) plus another lexical item (i. e. *koor*) are identical or very close to Akie lexical items. All entries come from several places south of the Kenyan/Tanzanian border, far away from the area where the Akie community now lives. Even if the resource person's spelling varies and is non-phonetic, it is assumed that the Akie and Ndorobo linguistic overview is really impressive. In any case, regardless of deficiencies, for the first time linguistic data not previously available at all, are presented here, awaiting further analysis for origin, relationships and more. In the case of Ndorobo, this data represent another contribution that is part and parcel of a specific approach to the description of

a language which has been neglected with the purpose of the social downgrading of its speakers. More fragmentary manuscripts include Ndorobo specific wordlists, such as the Mwiba file as the result of Daudi Peterson's initiative of expanding earlier Ndorobo vocabularies. Against this background, it is worth taking into account also the video and sound recording of Ndorobo use in Kakesio (S 3° 22' 30.68" , E 34° 59' 19.97") of Ngorongoro District within the vws project.

What has been discussed so far has to do with groups of people who had split from Ogiek, as well as with the southwards migration across the actual TZ/Kenya border. The focus has been on those who are identified by the Maasai neighbors as *Il-Tóróbo* or Ndorobo which is also used by those people who were met south of the Kenyan border.

The following section deals with the current distribution of the Akie community and their language, *i. e.*, *khúúti ta Akie*, from a sociolinguistic perspective.

### 3.2. Akie speaker numbers and more

In Section 2 above, the current position of the Ogiek was described. In connection to this, the extent to which the Ogiek language is threatened was assessed. Far more depressing and complicated is the overview of the distribution and maintenance of the Akie language. Thus, on the one hand, there are quite a number of Akie who speak Maa and identify themselves as Maasai. In spite of their linguistic competence they are not recognised as Maasai. The derogatory term Ndorobo, *Il-Tóróbo*, is still used for this not insignificant population group in the corridor and probably even elsewhere. However, this manuscript does not deal further with these Ndorobo.

On the other hand, information on those who call themselves Akie is quite extensive and accurate, since registration by name was mostly carried out as part of extensive field studies (2009 to 2019). This concerns, for example, even Akie who no longer speak the Akie language or only speak it rudimentarily. Special attention is paid here to those Akie who still speak their mother tongue. However, their linguistic competence varies ranging from semi-speakers to medium quality speakers as well as language experts and guardians. The accuracy is ensured by the fact that, due to the small number of 250 Akie speakers, it has been possible to draw up lists of Akie names related to villages and settlements even in the vast remote residential area in Tanga and Manyara Regions of Central Tanzania. However, the map below (drawn by Monika Feinen, Cologne in 2019) can't take into account all places that were visited by the research team in search of Akie speaking people. Thus, the map focus is on settlements where a reasonable number of Akie people were met and mostly interviewed with respect to language competence as well to identify interview partners, storytellers, singers, area specialists, and more.



been instrumental facilitating the documentation of a multitude of topics that tap into the rich heritage of oral traditions, especially orature, customs and beliefs of the Akie community. His talented and constructive role as a resource person is widely reflected in the documentation, including in sound and video files.

Place/village	speakers	average	zero Akie
Gitu, Apr 14	39	2	6
Olmoti, Aug 14	20	7	0
Kitwai A, March 10	19		
Loorrwatin, Aug 2018	19		1
Napilukunya, Aug 14	16	10	
Loolera, March 10	11		
Olping'wa, Sept 13	11		4
Seuta (<Jungu), May 14	11	7	21
Ngapapa, Febr 15	10		
Engeju, Aug 14	8	12	102
Kwekinkwembe, Dec 13	8	3	2
Mkombora (Jungu), Dec. 13	8	2	6
Chang'ombe (Mafisa), May 13	7	4	
Lalasa, May 14 (earlier Ole-Wanga)	7		5
Munimuni, Kijiji cha Kwekikwembe, Sept. 13	7	1	3
Ndilikihi, Aug 14	7	10	25
Sisimita, May 14	7	15	32
Kwa Hondohondo, Dec 13	6	1	

Of particular importance is BN's contribution to the development of Akie into a written language, for example in the elaboration of orthographic rules, which he has then applied consistently in the transcription of Akie texts. Of similar high quality are his translations into the Tanzanian national language Swahili, that has in effect opened up to the Tanzanian population a wide range of texts, which originate from such a small community like the Akie.

Further, when updating the selected samples of Akie distribution above, BN established quickly contacts with fellow Akie people, regardless of the fact, whether somebody spoke the Akie language or had already given it up by switching to Maa.

An overview of valuable research results, which may be consulted at the DoBeS collection of the MPI Nijmegen<sup>24</sup>, follows in the next section.

### 3.3. Samples of the Akie language documentation – sound and video recordings as well as text collections

Seen from a status perspective it is worth noting that the Akie entry as well as all other 67 languages listed as bundles of the DoBeS archive are recognized by UNESCO under the designation of “Memory of the World”. Below is a short list of priorities and subject areas that were dealt with in the Akie documentation process:

a) The Akie as hunter-gatherers – this section deals with the close relationship of the Akie to nature, the responsible and optimal use of the available resources such as game and useful plants, the latter as food ([Linguistic Data](#) • Food), medicine (see [Linguistic Data](#) • Medicine), manufacturing tools, etc. The list of plants (Akie as the source language and botanical identification of the Akie entries, see Documentation > Plants) contains more than 400 entries plus a large collection of pictures<sup>25</sup>. This file depicts the thorough Akie knowledge of wild plants that grow not only in their immediate environs but also beyond across their traditional territory. The detailed and lengthy plant use description in a Akie-Swahili manuscript currently awaits final editing.

b) Similar to a) is a bundle of hunting related recordings and texts, which comment on game features, hunting techniques, and poison production, etc. to name only a few. In addition, the importance for the community of honey and the harvesting events are outlined. In this respect, the thorough knowledge of bee types related to honey quality and more is perfect<sup>26</sup>.

c) Akie elders are responsible for maintaining contact with the ancestors. Various digital documents based on video recordings illustrate the sophisticated approach by e.g., Lesakat in Napilukunya and in Ngababa who verbally establishes an imitated dialogue with ancestors whose names he quotes inviting them to the gathering. For details see the paper Legère *et al.* (2022), especially the Akie ritual texts that are partially reproduced with an English translation. For more ritual texts see • [Linguistic Data](#) • Ritual Ceremonies.

d) Folk stories and tales, songs – • [Linguistic Data](#) • Tales (and further) songs • [Linguistic Data](#) • Traditional Songs related to men as well as women. Other songs that were sung e.g., at a funeral or wedding were also recorded as video and sound files, that have been uploaded to the Akie collection as • [video files](#) • [Stories and conversation](#) • [recordings](#) • Gitu recordings, or exist still as a manuscript version. In this respect, the expert ethnomusicologist Prof. Gerhard Kubik (Vienna) produced a transcription of 10 Akie songs that demonstrate the particular style of the melodies sung by a selection of language guardians.

e) The Akie community also includes minorities that are either linguistically related to it such as the Kisankare, or share the Akie lifestyle like the Kinyalang’at who speak a variety of Maa. In the latter case, long interviews of Kinyalang’at speakers in Mtambalo are available both in the source language Maa as well as transcribed in Swahili, see • [Documentation](#) • [video files](#) • [Stories and conversation](#) • [recordings](#) the file • MTAMBALO Akie\_Nyalang’at\_Mtambalo\_conversation\_plusMaa.



f) The most comprehensive text collection, which covers the widest range of topics that have been touched upon by Akie storytellers and resource persons is included in the Akie dictionary – see König *et al.* (2020, pp. 10-139).

g) From a linguistic perspective (in particular vocabulary development) are BN's descriptions of his stay in Dar es Salaam as a resource person or, to quote another example, a visit to the historical part of Bagamoyo extremely interesting. He uses the Akie language, his mother tongue, for summarizing his views regarding urban life descriptions. In so doing he creatively adapts the Akie vocabulary to the given situation, which cannot be compared to life in rural places. A similar observation can also be made after the Bagamoyo visit, where he was exposed to an area and situation that was typical 500 years ago in Kaole. Other Akie texts deal *inter alia* with BN's visits to meet hunter-gatherer fellows in the Hadza area close to Lake Eyasi. For him it was a challenge to observe Hadza men and women who were of shorter, physical stature than he. For example, he tested Hadza bows and arrows, which were smaller than his own hunting equipment.

As far as the Akie lexicography is concerned, the documentation project contributed substantially to the development of the Akie lexical stock. This process was also a stimulus for improving the status of the Akie language as well as a step towards empowering Akie community, as documented by widely eliminating the stigma term Ndorobo which was earlier used by neighbors and even at the national level in official documents.

### 3.4. The critically endangered Akie community and language

The two languages covered here differ greatly in the number of those who identify themselves as Ogiek and Akie respectively. For the Ogiek, in section 2 the figure of 52,596 members of this ethnic community was taken from a 2019 official Kenyan document. However, it is estimated that in fact only around 15,000 Kenyans belong to the Ogiek community using its language.

Official statistics are lacking for the Akie, as ethnic affiliation has no longer been recorded since the 1967 census in Tanzania. In this respect, the information presented in 3.2, which was obtained through direct contacts with Akie in 56 settlements, is used here. Accordingly, the total number of Akie recorded by name is about 350 individuals. Thus, there is a decisive difference between the Ogiek number and that of the Akie. This is also of great significance in assessing the survival chances of both languages.

It is an indisputable fact that in terms of numbers alone the Akie are an extremely endangered ethnic community in Tanzania. In addition to this, there are other factors and events that accelerate the marginalization of the Akie and the latter's change of ethnicity. This is the result of the increasing expansion of neighboring population groups such as the cattle-herding Maasai and in the east the Ngulu and Zigula. These neighbors seize land traditionally inhabited and controlled by the Akie to graze their own cattle or to cultivate fields. This means that in those places the Akie can no longer hunt or gather bush food as they used to.

Quite recently, ethnic clashes took place in the Kibirashi – Gitu area, where larger Akie groups live. In this respect, BN’s wife Nevumba told people in Dar es Salaam February 17, 2022, in Swahili (see footnote) as follows:

People used to go to every family and kill, if there was a man. Bahati and his brothers and other Akie have fled for almost a month now and their whereabouts are still unknown... The government has sent soldiers to Kibirashi, they are patrolling to stop the killing. For now, the situation has been fine, but Bahati and his colleagues do not know if they are safe or not<sup>27</sup>.

It goes without saying that such an event is detrimental to the small Akie community. It should also be borne in mind that the Akie are an ethnic group whose traditional territory has not yet been recognized by the regional administration in the context of land right allocation.

In this context, attention is drawn to a text passage found in the draft of a new Tanzanian constitution published in 2013. It is to be noticed that this constitution was never proclaimed. However, there it says in paragraph 45 (page 25) “Haki za makundi madogo katika jamii” (Minority rights in society) under (c) (makundi madogo) “kutengewa maeneo ya ardhi ambayo kwa desturi makundi hayo kuitumia kama eneo la kuishi na kupata riziki ya chakula”<sup>28</sup>.

Prof. Kabudi, the then Secretary to the Council, University of Dar es Salaam, drew attention to this fact at a meeting with BN a few years ago. Incidentally, for several years until January 2022, Prof. Kabudi was Minister for Constitution and Legal Affairs.

As far as the legal and social status of the Akie is concerned, the community is obviously much less empowered than the Kenyan Ogiek. This affects also the Akie language whose empowerment, maintenance, use and more rests mainly with those few 250 Akie who are linguistic protagonists.

It is a matter of fact that the number of Akie speakers is extremely small. But even if there are still various Akie who have not been recorded in the places visited or elsewhere, the number of speakers remains far too low to ensure the survival of the Akie language. At minimum, the future of the Akie language depends on at least maintaining the current low number of speakers. Even better, of course, would be an increase of the number of speakers, but such a hope is hardly to be expected. The trend in the years since 2009, when contact was established with the Akie in Napilukunya, has been downward. This relates, for example, to prominent Akie speakers such as Elders Lesakat, Nekitolia and Tiyango, all of whom have passed away, leaving substantial gaps in the comprehensive coverage of oral traditions, customs and practices. The qualitative differences between the group of experts, fixed at 50, and other speakers with average linguistic competence are considerable, especially so in the choice of words and grammatical diversification.

In an earlier paper – see Heine *et al.* (2016) – on Akie as an endangered language, attention was drawn to various details of the endangerment process. A reference to this will also be made here. However, due to the lack of substantial contacts with reliable contact persons, exact explanations have become very rare. Even with BN, who is

sometimes available by phone, the changing linguistic situation cannot easily be discussed. In addition, there is a lack of funding to assign experienced fieldworkers such as Peter Mkwanihembo to tasks regarding Akie language use and language dissemination.

The aforesaid 2016 paper discusses in detail various criteria that are substantial for evaluating the actual position of the Akie language. In any case, judging from the 2018 data update, it seems that the language will soon disappear. However, the generational divergence of language competence is a key aspect that has not changed. Still, the number of children who are socialized via the Akie language remains low, as the Akie are not able to compete with the Maasai dowry approach. Thus, Akie women are hardly of childbearing age, keeping the offspring of young speakers low.

The social status of the Akie *vis-à-vis* the Maasai may have improved to some extent, including the increased use of the prestigious Maa language. Neighboring Bantu languages such as Ngulu and Zigula continue to play a role as a means of communication, mainly because Akie people work as laborers in the fields of these ethnic groups.

There is no current information on the knowledge and use of Swahili, but it can be assumed that with the involvement of the Akie people in certain economic processes, the knowledge and use of Swahili is spreading.

Ultimately, it is pointed out here that neither the actual Akie language endangerment nor its empowerment can be assessed from a distance. Accordingly, this is a poor summary of the linguistic situation in the Akie area that, however, in the absence of reliable up-to-date information must suffice here.

#### 4

#### Final remarks

With regard to both Ogiek and Akie, this manuscript estimates that the degree of language loss is advanced. The reasons why in Kenya, despite the number of Ogiek estimated at 15,000, their language is considered to be under threat was substantiated by a questionnaire adopted from Bouquiaux & Thomas (1992) and Batibo (2005). This has not been done for the Akie language, but language loss remains similarly a fact.

What should play a significant role in the documentation and (possibly) revitalization of both languages is that instead of focusing on hypothetical endangerment criteria and discussion, greater attention be paid to the existing text collections, sound and video files. Their processing, analysis and editing are urgently needed. In this sense, there is a perspective for both languages to further increase the Ogiek and Akie prestige after the publication of top quality dictionaries for both languages.

Ultimately, reference should be made here to the decoupling of the Ndorobo group from neighboring ethnic groups. Attention should be paid to linguistic elements that are related to the Ndorobo language for the latter's linguistic descent, which has obviously been neglected until now. This was discussed in 3.1. However, data from Kakesio and recordings made in Makao and elsewhere some time ago are available. Unfortunately, they have not been adequately analyzed in relation to the Ndorobo/Omayo people. Finally, there is no evidence of where a number of Ndorobo lexical elements come from.

## Acknowledgements

The authors hereby express their gratitude to the Italian Ministry of University and Research (MUR), the Province of Bolzano, the Italian NGO's Ethnorêma, ManiTese, SlowFood and the Kenyan NGO NECOFA (Network for Ecofarming in Africa) for their financial, logistic and personal support during the activities of field research among the Ogiek people of Mariashoni in Kenya.

Special thanks also go to the Volkswagen Foundation, which has generously supported and funded two Akie documentation projects from 2012 to 2019. Similarly, the SIDA support for fieldwork in 2009/10 is acknowledged with thanks. In this regard, the University of Dar es Salaam had authorized the Endangered Languages in Tanzania research project (as part of LoT cooperation) and granted permission for the field research among the Akie (Ref. No.: AB3/3(B)). At the grassroots level, the cooperation with Ogiek and Akie language experts, speakers and other Ogiek and Akie community members was excellent. The commitment shown by the local resource persons in Kenya and Tanzania plus various research assistants as well as their initiatives were impressive and are greatly appreciated. Language-wise this paper was checked by Christian Haussmann, Claire Zimmerman and Louise von Walter. Their language revision and paper comments were substantial and stimulating. Many thanks to all. However, the views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the authors.

## Notes

1. See Micheli (2020).
2. See Brenzinger (1992) and UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing (Wurm, 1996; 2010).
3. Cf. [https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/islandora/object/tla%3A1839\\_00\\_0000\\_0000\\_001A\\_D484\\_2](https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/islandora/object/tla%3A1839_00_0000_0000_001A_D484_2) – [14/1/2023].
4. See Micheli (2019) for Ogiek and König, Heine, Legère (2015) for Akie.
5. See König, Heine & Legère (2020) for Akie. Researches in this direction are still ongoing for Ogiek.
6. Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2019 National Housing and Population Census, vol.IV, p. 423. To give a measure of the consistency of the data reported in the 2019 census, it is interesting to note that for the population residing within the Mau forest, the number "32" is reported, of which, 28 men and 4 women (sic!), all over the age of 5, none of whom were disabled or albino. Only 2 people at that time were reported to be enrolled in school, 1 was reported to have an elementary school degree, 22 a secondary school degree, 7 a TVET degree, and 2 a bachelor's degree. There is no data on the number of households in the report, nor is there any data on the materials used for construction. Yet at the same time it is reported that all 32 people intercepted lived in Group Quarters. For those, the census also reports no data regarding water and energy sources, waste production or the like, even though at the same time it reports that there are 32 cell phones in the Mau forest region for 32 residents. Also the source does not detect, among the 32 residents of Mau forest, any livestock breeder, small livestock, nor any farmer.
7. *Ibid.*
8. See Micheli (2014a).
9. Cf. <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/oki> – [14/1/2023].
10. Cf. [https://www.btlkenya.org/our-work/bible-translation/](https://www.btlkenya.org/our-work/bible-translation/ogiek-translation/) – [14/1/2023].
11. See Githiora (2011, pp. 237-9).
12. See Batibo (2005, p. 76).
13. Cf. for example Grenoble & Whaley (2006).
14. UN Report by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of the Human Rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people, p. 102 (15/9/2010).

15. Cf. <https://www.african-court.org/cpmt/storage/app/uploads/public/62b/aba/fd8/62babafd8d467689318212.pdf> – [14/1/2023].
16. See also <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/07/kenya-un-expert-hails-historic-ruling-awarding-reparations-ogiek-indigenous> – [14/1/2023].
17. See Micheli (2019).
18. See Batibo (2005, chapter 5).
19. Cf. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kakesio> – [14/1/2023].
20. The data that relates to a Ndorobo variety which is obviously being spoken by people scattered in Serengeti. A short text sample in Baumann (1894).
21. For details of this village see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esilalei> – [14/1/2023].
22. He spoke in the Maa language with the interviewer who wrote his comments down in Swahili that was subsequently translated into English.
23. There are many more details in the field work reports regarding Ndorobo life and traditions which are not included here for dealing with aspects which are rather insignificant in the context of this paper.
24. The link is – [https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/islandora/object/tla%3A1839\\_oo\\_0000\\_0000\\_001A\\_D484\\_2](https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/islandora/object/tla%3A1839_oo_0000_0000_001A_D484_2) – [14/1/2023].
25. Cf. [https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/islandora/object/tla%3A1839\\_oo\\_0000\\_0000\\_0020\\_CBBA\\_B](https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/islandora/object/tla%3A1839_oo_0000_0000_0020_CBBA_B) – [14/1/2023].
26. See Linguistic Data – Hunting, Imitating animals, Link i.a.: [https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/islandora/object/tla%3A1839\\_oo\\_0000\\_0000\\_001A\\_D56A\\_D](https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/islandora/object/tla%3A1839_oo_0000_0000_001A_D56A_D) – [14/1/2023].
27. Kuna watu walikuwa wanapita katika kila familia na kuua, kama kuna mwanaume. Hali iliyopeleka wanaume wa Kibirashi na Gitu kukimbia nyumba zao kwa kuhofia mauaji hayo... Bahati na ndugu zake wa kiume na Waakie wengine wamekimbia inakaribia mwezi sasa na hawajulikani walipo mpaka sasa. Ila mwisho serikali imetuma wanajeshi, wamekuja Kibirashi, wanaendesha doria ili kukomesha mauaji hayo. Kwa sasa hali imekuwa sawa, ila Bahati na wenzake hajajua kama wako salama wala nini. See also <https://youtu.be/emxE-n12UDU>, which comments on the end of the hostilities.
28. The allocation of land that traditionally these groups use as an area to live and earn a living.

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